Guest Editorial

Subjectivity (2012) **5**, 1–14. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.29

During the Summer of 2009, some comrades, thinkers and poets decided that we would like to hold a gathering, an intense seminar, to engage with the ideas raised by the writings of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. It was only in that year that much of his work, spanning four decades and a wide variety of topics, had begun to be translated into English in a substantial way. But that is not to say that Bifo was unknown to us. Over those decades, his numerous shorter essays and commentaries were translated and circulated. Within a certain political and artistic milieu, Bifo was indeed quite a well-known figure, often associated with – and even held to be emblematic of – a certain kind of Italian radical politics, post-workerism (or autonomism, as it is often referred to in the English-speaking world), that mixed together an analysis of class focused on the primary of social struggles with an engagement with language, culture, media, subjectivity and the arts. It might be said that Bifo enjoyed the somewhat unfavourable status of being well known for his association with certain eruptions of social movements, and less so for his actual writing and analysis – although it is perhaps debatable whether that is a bad thing after all.

The publication of several books thus seemed to provide an excuse and reason for putting together an event. And with this in mind, a small group of us started planning to hold a 4-day seminar at the arts and political discussion venue 16 Beaver, located auspiciously in the heart of the financial district in Lower Manhattan.[1] Introducing presentations on the first night of the seminar, Bifo began with what he described as a very personal problem, but one that ended up being quite useful for framing the ongoing development of his thought, as well as this special issue of *Subjectivity*. Bifo started by saying that when addressing his friends he has a great difficulty of saying 'I'. Rather than speaking in terms of 'I', he speaks in terms that relate to a collectivity, to a 'we', and more particularly a relationship to a 'we' formed through politics of social movements. From there, he proceeded to elaborate an analysis of Rekombinant,[2] a project that he had coordinated with Matteo Pasquinelli for a number of years but had decided to end not long before.

Over the next few days, Bifo made presentations on a number of different subjects, ranging from the anti-globalization movement to the

psychopathological nature of labour in contemporary capitalism.[3] He also focused on developing an analysis of the subject in contemporary philosophy and political thought, moving from a framework of autonomist analysis of class to the schizo-analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, and finally exploring the dynamics Bifo claims are blocking off the emergence of a new radical subjectivity within the present. Bifo's presentations were interwoven with presentations and discussions from other thinkers (McKenzie Wark, Jackie Orr, Claire Pentecost, Stephen Duncombe), engagement with collectives focused on media and subjectivity (MayFirst, The Icarus Project[4]), and a visit to the Coney Island Museum (which was, coincidentally, showing an exhibition about the 100th anniversary of Freud's visit to Coney Island) (Figure 1).

Underpinning all the topics and discussions was an in-depth consideration of the nature of collective becomings, whether manifest in the eruption of new political movements, within the workings of the economy, or in the artistic sphere. In that sense, describing the collective process that led to the planning of such a seminar, and following that, this special issue of *Subjectivity*, is not to describe something incidental to the subject at hand, but rather its quite integral part. Bifo's ideas and work are very much formed through an engagement with the forms of collective becomings in projects and movements that he has been immersed in. Bifo's work has become known not just for its analytical value divorced from any context, but precisely through ways in which he expresses and develops, in theoretical terms, the issues raised within the collective becomings of movements he has been involved in, most notably the currents of Autonomia in Italy during the 1970s.

Although it is difficult to summarize succinctly a complicated and rich history of social struggles, one could try to describe the experience of Italian autonomism as follows: whereas in many parts of the world the student-worker revolts of 1968 seemed to peter out relatively quickly, in Italy they

Figure 1: Bifo at Coney Island.

continued to burn on for nearly a decade, proliferating into a multitude of different forms.[5] Although they started as the self-organized contingent outside of the unions and political parties, and thus were still roughly focused on the problems of industrial labour and factory production, the mutation of autonomist politics through the 1970s broadened to include a much wider mutation of society.[6] There was a progression, as it would have been described at the time, from the movement to society, from the bounded factory to all throughout the social factory, and from a focus on particular labours to the socialized forms of labour found through everyday life. This broadened focus came to include a politics of gendered labour (through an emergence of autonomist feminist currents),[7] self-organized spaces of squatting and cultural spaces, and a bringing together of what elsewhere would have been thought of under the category of 'counter-cultural' and artistic avant-garde topics with that of militant resistance. It is in this conjecture that Bifo's thought and politics emerged and were shaped, from his involvement in the early workerist currents in the 1960s to attempts to create mass media forms of avant-garde aesthetic interventions, such as in the founding of Radio Alice, the first pirate radio station in Italy.

This issue of *Subjectivity*, which could be thought of as the first major engagement with Bifo's work in English, reflects this. It is not just a collection of essays that take Bifo's ideas as their starting point, but rather a collection of essays that all start from the conjuncture of Bifo's ideas, the issues and conditions raised by them, with forms of collective becomings in the present. The purpose then is not to consider Bifo's work in isolation, but rather to develop it as a tool, one that is explored through continued usage and application. One of the most common, and most unfortunate, ways in which academic analysis tends to treat the knowledges and ideas produced by social movements, and by collective creativity more generally, is to find a proper name or two that diffuse creativity can be attached to and associated with. This strategy creates a kind of intellectual enclosure, individualizing ideas into forms more amenable to management and historification. This seems to be the case, especially, when we indeed find ourselves at a moment in which, as Matteo Pasquinelli (2011) claims in a recent article, 'Italian theory' has achieved a certain kind of hegemony within certain academic discussions, much the way that 'French theory' did in the 1980s. The problem with this is that in addition to focusing on a limited number of individual authors and attributing everything to them this often runs the risks of cutting off the more radical forms of analysis that have been developed in favour of a few concepts that can endlessly be circulated shorn from the circumstances and concerns that gave rise to their formulation in the first place.

This conjunctive approach is perhaps the most productive and valuable feature of Bifo's writing, and autonomist analysis more generally: its ability to act as a kind of crossroads for bringing together different forms of political

analysis and social theory, to act as a bridge between them. Although autonomism is most widely known through the success of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* (2000), as well as the subsequent follow-ups *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), the autonomist 'tradition' of thought circulated within various social milieus well before the success of that book, and continues to do so into the present. In the English-speaking world, this has been seen mainly as a way to bring together a Marxist analysis of class, although one that is greatly expanded from a more narrowly oriented focus on industrial labour and its politics, with the conceptual tools of post-structural analysis of subjectivity and culture. The same can be said of the broader constellation of autonomist social theory and analysis, which has opened up a very productive re-conceptualization of a wide variety of areas including immigration and borders (Mezzadra, 2004; Papadopoulos *et al*, 2008), the production of subjectivity (Read, 2003; Thoburn, 2003), finance (Marazzi, 2008; Mezzadra and Fumagalli, 2010), politics within the university (Moten and Harney, 2004; EduFactory Collective, 2009), gendered labour in capitalist governance (Federici, 2004; Driscoll, 2010), networks and media politics (Terranova, 2004) and subtraction from networked control (Galloway and Thacker, 2007; Bratich, 2008) among many others.

This collection is also one that involves the collaboration of, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's phrasing, the conceptual personae from different traditions. And, as with the engagement of a distinct set of authors and/or tradition of analysis, a number of new conceptual terms appear, which are used in specific, occasionally idiosyncratic, but ultimately illuminating ways. A number of these are explained in the glossary section that follows the editorial. But there is one term that is perhaps most central for the overall theme of this issue – the notion of class composition, particularly in relation to ways in which Bifo's work is involved with the project of rearticulating the idea of class composition for present conditions. Class composition is most closely associated with forms of unorthodox Marxist thought developed in the 1960s, particularly in the writing of Mario Tronti and Raniero Panzieri (Wright, 2003). The argument they made was that for too long analyses of capitalism and class dynamics had focused too much on how history was shaped by economic and political elites, which is to say how it was shaped by Capital. Rather, Tronti and Panzieri suggested that analysis should begin from looking at moments of revolt and insubordination, from wildcat strikes and the refusal of factory discipline, or in other words a reversal of perspective from which analysis begins.

According to this argument, the history of capitalist development is determined not by the internal logic of capital or its contradictions, but rather the necessity of dealing with working-class insubordination and refusal, and finding ways to turn these antagonistic energies into new forms of accumulation. The classic example illustrating this is how the revolt against factory discipline and working conditions in the 1960s and 1970s led to the

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341 **Subjectivity** Vol. 5, 1, 1–14

development of more highly automated, flexible and decentralized post-Fordist production methods. Or, how the desire for a greater flexibility in work contracts and living conditions were transformed into precarious and insecure labour. The concept of class composition is useful in understanding the relationship between the powers of revolt and refusal found within radical political movements, or their political composition, and the ways in which these capacities are territorialized within the shifting of the overall production process, understood as technical composition.

To take this argument into a more specifically subjectivity and media-oriented direction, one could relate the above to the rise of more participatory forms of media production and interaction. A class composition analysis with regard to the rise of participatory media would look first towards developments in participatory media practice coming out of movement organizing, marginal art practices and so forth. This would include, for example, looking at the rise of zine production, pirate radio production, such as the role of Radio Alice in the so-called 'diffuse creativity' of the Metropolitan Indians and related current in 1977 (Berardi, 2009), pirate television production, as well as open source production and the hacking of other media forms. An autonomist approach to understanding the rise of participatory media would focus on two major themes. First, how many of these practices emerged as politically antagonistic forms of interaction before they became integrated into the workings of a capitalist media assemblage. Second, although the increasing reliance of forms of capitalist valorization on participatory media practice makes it necessary to reconsider its potentials as part of a radical politics today, it does not mean that its potential has been compromised because of this process. An excellent example of this kind of autonomist analysis is Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter's work (2009) on video games and empire, which draws out these very elements: from turning the dispersed labour of coders and hackers into a resource for capital and military training, to the possibility of turning these dispersed labours into tools for an emergent gaming multitude.

This issue picks up on themes that have appeared through the entire publishing history of *Subjectivity* as a journal, from the editorial in the first issue, through various essays that have appeared then exploring areas such as self-valorization and the common (Harrison, 2011), neoliberal subjectivity (Burkitt, 2008; Layton, 2010), austerity and anti-consumerism (Bramall 2011), contemporary media culture (Gill, 2008), radical subjectivity after hegemony (Pitcher, 2011), the entanglements between affect and technology (Clough, 2008), as well as many others that touch on related themes. It is not so much that the articles contained ask totally new questions, but rather that they approach the questions that underpin continued enquiry into the nature of subjectivity today from different angles and perhaps through that to see something that was not perceived before. Having introduced the general conceptual approach of the issue, let us now turn towards the particular

contributions. Much like the work of Bifo, this issue moves in a broad conceptual arc from a focus on labour and subjectivity, broadening out to a consideration of aesthetics, through to the question of the recomposition of political subjectivity.

'Angels of Love in the Unhappiness Factory' by Dave Eden, situating Bifo in relation to several other key autonomist thinkers, namely Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and John Holloway, opens the issue. Although all these thinkers analyse the relationship between capitalism and subjectivity and employ many of the same conceptual tools, they often end up coming to significantly different conclusions. If Marxist thought is traditionally based on a particular conception of the relation of the proletariat and capital, and how the emergence of revolutionary struggles holds the potential to transform both the objective conditions of production and the subjectivity of the working class as political actors, this relation has been radically transformed by shifts in the production process. Subjectivity, it is argued, has taken on a central role in the labour process itself. Eden teases out the differences in Bifo's approach to this question as compared with other autonomist thinkers, pointing out how his argument could lead to a politically more pessimistic set of conclusions, or perhaps a more measured assessment of the potential for revolt in present conditions of labour.

Following on from that, Abe Walker takes up the question of 'The Labor of Recombination'. He begins by recalling on an often-ignored passage on unions in Deleuze's essay on control society. What role could the union, as an organizational form, play in the vastly transformed conditions of labour? Whereas the work of Deleuze does not give much indication on this question, Walker argues that Bifo's writing takes up a very similar question, pointing both towards the potential and pitfalls of a labour politics in which many of the assumed categories of analysis appear to prove no longer tenable, from solidity of forms of value production to the argued dissolution of the worker as discrete subject and the main site of exploitation. Bifo argues that capitalism today is less concerned with exploiting the labour of individuals' lives than it is with harvesting compartmentalized amounts of labour that have become highly abstracted and dispersed through informational and communication technologies. The disappearance of the worker as a discrete subject undercuts the possibility of any politics based, whether or not explicitly, on the continued existence of the worker as a discrete subject. Rejecting the idea that this analysis leads to pessimistic conclusions, Walker takes up and works with elements of Bifo's work and the broader autonomist tradition to look at the concept of *subjectivation* as an open, molecular *becoming*, as it relates to labour. If the labour movement, even if drastically redefined, remains an important site of struggle, what strategies become possible within the dispersed circuits of immaterial production?

Moving on deeper into the question of subjectivation of the labour force, we turn next to Anja Kanngieser and her essay 'Collaboration, competition,

aspiration: creative labour in Shanghai'. If Bifo's work and autonomist tradition in general are marked – as they surely must be – by the social, cultural and historical conditions of their emergence, how do they fare when employed under entirely different circumstances? Following the work she has done as part of the 'Transit Labour: Circuits, Regions, Borders' project,[8] Kanngieser engages with the complex and ambivalent conditions encountered by the emerging creative labour force in Shanghai. Although the conditions faced by young Chinese creative workers are in some ways quite similar to those affecting creative and immaterial workers in other countries, the differences in political and technical composition raise important questions about the limits of an autonomist framework for analysing labour in such a context. Kanngieser works through the productive tensions of these questions, focusing on processes of subjectivation, collaboration and individuation among these creative workers, in order to reconsider the kinds of political registers that resonate with the conditions of their labour.

In a shift from an analysis of cultural labour to aesthetics, Michael Goddard develops an analysis of Bifo's usage of film aesthetics in his essay 'Cinematic and Aesthetic Cartographies of Subjective Mutation'. In his more recent writing, Bifo has focused heavily on the role of technology and communication in the shaping of subjectivity through the workings of technological automatism. Whereas Bifo has carried out this analysis focusing on how it affects the domains of labour and politics, in this essay Goddard investigates how Bifo's analysis also operates through aesthetic categories, in particular the usage of film and media art. Goddard argues that Bifo's work is shaped around a kind of artistic cartography generated through the examples Bifo employs, and that a consideration of these mutating terrains of subjectivity can provide a way to further deepen the analysis of labour and subjectivity within post-Fordism. Goddard further suggests that a consideration of how these artistic works are used can lead to conclusions and analysis different to those developed by Bifo. Although Bifo's analysis often seems to lead to a quite pessimistic conclusion that within the present there is no possibility for an emergence of a new form of social recomposition, Goddard suggests that the aesthetic works Bifo engages with can point towards an emergence of new forms of antagonism, modes of expression and collective becomings.

Finally, we turn to Giuseppina Mecchia and her essay 'Politics of the Subject in the Postmodern Novel. The Case of Giuseppe Genna'. Mecchia addresses the question of subjectivity and collective becomings as explored in the writings of several young Italian novelists, most notably Giuseppe Genna. She looks at Genna's novels *In The Name of Ishmael*, *Dies Irae* and *Italia De Profundis* to examine ways in which Genna described the technological, political and cultural formations shaping the emergence of subjectivity. Mecchia shows that changes in the novel form provide a unique way for framing and narrating a certain kind of desperation of the present moment, but in a way that also

reconstructs the present moment and opens up new spaces for freedom and imagination. In many respects, this is exactly the work that Bifo's analysis itself performs, embodying a kind of pessimism of the intellect paired with an optimism of the will. Similarly, an analysis of Genna's novels can provide a set of relevant questions through the very form they take, namely the detective novel. If the present is characterized by a state of desperation, a murder of hope, then the detective is obliged to ask 'whodunnit'? Similarly, the loss of any sort of stable centre of narrative still begs the question of the kind of narrative we might want to compose in such circumstances. To pose the question through the novel form brings to mind the rise, in the last 2 years, of the 'Book Bloc', where individuals have defended themselves from police attack at protests by using shields decorated as the covers of novels and political tracts. Wu Ming, an Italian collective of novelists, described the book bloc as 'culture itself that's resisting the cuts' to social spending as the 'books themselves are fighting the police'.[9] If books and culture are taking to the street, what kind of sensibility can be animated through and against the changing conditions of aesthetics, labour and politics? And what could the role of cultural production play in answering these questions? (Figure 2).

Bifo's work, perhaps unsurprisingly, does not provide any set or definite answer to these questions, as much as it raises deeper and more troubling questions: although an interrogation of those questions concerns a more solid foundation for a flourishing of new forms of collective becomings. Although Bifo's analysis has tended to be quite sceptical about the possibility for an emergence of new forms of collective subjects within the present – precisely because of how overwhelming flows of communication, information and digital labour overwhelm the capacities of subjectivation – it may very well be that present conditions only serve to disprove the outcomes expected by theory. In both *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009) and *After the Future* (2011), Bifo concludes

Figure 2: Bifo with concept chart.

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

with an analysis of how political art is only capable of registering the drastic and irreversible changes occurring within collective psychic conditions. Sitting here, writing this editorial in the Fall of 2011, having witnessed the amazing uprising of the Arab Spring, ongoing revolts in Greece (and other parts of Europe), and the massive proliferation and building of the Occupy Wall Street movement (with its most visible manifestation in the United Kingdom situated outside St Paul's Cathedral, a stone's throw away from London Stock Exchange),[10] it seems that the suggestion that collective subjectivation is blocked off might be bit premature. Even if this is so, then Bifo's work and those engaging with similar concepts and problematics raise issues that are well worth considering.

Acknowledgement

As with any publication project this was a labour of love that depended on the ideas, contribution and support of many people. In particular we would like to extend our thanks to everyone from 16 Beaver, especially Ayreen and Rene, and everyone who participated in the 'Connective Mutations' seminar in 2009. Thanks to the University of Essex for the research funding that supported this project. Thanks to Dimitris Papadopoulos and John Cromby for their ideas and encouragement. Special thanks to Catherine Guy for all her assistance in producing the issue.

Notes

1 Over the past 10 years, the 16 Beaver space had hosted an almost uncountable number of lectures, debates, film screenings, discussions and events otherwise related to an ongoing analysis of art and politics. Events taking place at 16 Beaver frequently went hours longer than expected when the discussion proved sufficiently compelling. It is certainly a space marked more by a spirit of intense conviviality rather than marking of academic or artistic prestige. More of a common project and a space of collective becomings itself, rather than the often-sterile space of the gallery, classroom or archive. For more information on 16 Beaver: www.16beavergroup.org.
2 http://rekombinant.org.
3 One perhaps unfortunate element in Bifo's writing is the way that he takes up Deleuze and Guattari's unfortunate and very 1970s tendency to use terms such as 'psychosis' without due concern for shades of meaning. This needs careful handling because of course whatever psychosis is it is on a continuum with everyday experience. Although Bifo employs this, as well as his arguments about the pathological nature of labour in semiocapitalism, there is a risk that doing so potentially negates experiences and critiques of service users, for whom such language has very different connotations.
4 For more information: https://mayfirst.org.
5 The best history available of this period is still Wright (2003). See also Gun Cuninghame (2007).
6 For a discussion of the relation between autonomia and Eurocommunism, see Morris (1978).
7 Although one possible angle to approach Bifo's work could be through his relation to autonomism, feminism and gender politics, this would be quite complicated. For a more general overview of these issues and debates, a good starting point would be the 'Italian Feminisms' issue of the *Feminist Review* (Andall and Puwar, 2007), as well as the *Italian Feminist Thought* (Bono and Kemp, 1991) collection.

8 transitlabour.asia.
9 Wu Ming (2010).
10 It is important to note that Occupy Wall Street is only the most visible, mediatised face of the US movement: it is said that there are now occupations in over 700 US towns and cities. The first UK occupation began in Manchester during the Tory Party conference, almost a month before Occupy London. And according to Indymedia, there are now 15 UK occupations, many of which started on the same day as the London occupation.

References

Andall, J. and Puwar, N. (eds.) (2007) *Italian Feminisms*, Volume 87, Issue 1.

Berardi, F. (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. London: Minor Compositions.

Berardi, F. (2011) *After the Future*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Bono, P. and Kemp, S. (eds.) (1991) *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bramall, R. (2011) Dig for victory! Anti-consumerism, austerity and new historical subjectivities. *Subjectivity* 4(1): 68–86.

Bratich, J. (2008) *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Binghamton, NY: SUNY Press.

Burkitt, I. (2008) Subjectivity, self and everyday life in contemporary capitalism. *Subjectivity* (23): 236–245.

Clough, P.T. (2008) (De)Coding the subject-in-affect. *Subjectivity* (23): 140–155.

EduFactory Collective. (ed.) (2009) *Towards a Global Autonomous University*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Gill, R. (2008) Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity* (25): 432–445.

Gun Cuninghame, P. (2007) 'A laughter that will bury you all': Irony as protest and language as struggle in the Italian 1977 movement. *International Review of Social History* (52): 153–168.

Driscoll, M. (2010) *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895–1945*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dyer-Witheford, N. and de Peuter, G. (2009) *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Federici, S. (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Galloway, A. and Thacker, E. (2007) *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harrison, O. (2011) Negri, self-valorisation and the exploration of the common. *Subjectivity* 4(1): 29–46.

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Layton, L. (2010) Irrational exuberance: Neoliberal subjectivity and the perversion of truth. *Subjectivity* 3(3): 303–322.

Marazzi, C. (2008) *Capital & Language: From New Economy to War Economy*, Translated by G. Conti. New York: Semiotext(e).

Mezzadra, S. (2004) The right to escape. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 4(3): 267–275.

Mezzadra, S. and Fumagalli, A. (eds.) (2010) *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotexte.

Morris, M. (1978) Eurocommunism versus semiological delinquency. In: P. Foss and M. Morris (eds.) *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*. Sydney: Feral.

Moten, F. and Harney, S. (2004) The university and the undercommons: Seven theses. *Social Text* 22(2): 102–115.

Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N. and Tsianos, V. (2008) *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century*. London: Pluto Press.

Pasquinelli, M. (2011) The so-called Italian Theory and the revolt of living knowledge. *UniNomade* 4 April, http://uninomade.org/italian-theory-en.

Pitcher, B. (2011) Radical subjects after hegemony. *Subjectivity* 4(1): 87–102.

Read, J. (2003) *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Terranova, T. (2004) *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto.

Thoburn, N. (2003) *Deleuze, Marx, and Politics*. London: Routledge.

Wright, S. (2003) *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.

Wu Ming. (2010) Our novel Q clashes with the Italian police. *Wu Ming Foundation* 24 November, http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/wumingblog/?p=1515.

Glossary

Cognitariat

In the industrial age, the word ‘proletariat’ designated the social class of those who held no property apart from the *prole* (the sons) and the strength of their arms. Owning no property, the proletarians were forced to accept a condition of waged labour, that is, a condition of lifetime service and systematic exploitation. In the sphere of semiocapital, the class of producers is composed mostly of people who have no property apart from their own cognitive capacity: nervous energy expressed in form of creativity and language. When the cognitive capacities are set to work, their concrete function and their use value (knowing, expressing and communicating) are submitted to the economic function of increasing capital. Information technologies transform every process into an exchange of signs, and the cognitarian is the one who produces goods through the act of language. This involves the expropriation of what is most intimately human: language. Language is therefore separated from daily life, from

corporeality and affectivity, and becomes a captive of capital. Cognitive activity is separated from its social function and its corporality. This separation constitutes the specific form of alienation of cognitive labour. The cognitariat is 'cognitive proletariat': a social class of those who live this separation.

Composition and compositionism

How can a group of individuals become a conscious collective subjectivity? Imaginary flows, world expectations, ritual habits and mythologies are diffused as if they were chemical agents in the psycho-sphere, and this diffusion makes possible a transformation of formless aggregates in conscious collectivities that are able to identify themselves more or less temporarily in a common intentionality. This formative process of the collective resembles much more a chemical composition than the mechanical accumulation of organizational forms. It is implicitly a critique of the political subjectivism in the concept of composition (and re-composition), and, at the time same, a critique of empirical sociology. The social process comes to be understood as a heterogeneous *becoming* where technological segments, cultural sedimentations, political intentions, ideological representations, and mechanical and communicating concatenations intervene, and escape the voluntaristic and mechanical reductionism of politics and sociology.

Precarity

The word precarious comes from Latin and means something obtained by prayer, entreaty or a mere favour, something uncertain. Precarity is a state of not being able to know anything about one's own future, being hung by the present. We speak of precarious labour when labour is subordinated to a form of flexible and unregulated exploitation, subjected to daily fluctuations of the labour market and forced to endure the blackmail of a discontinuous salary. The precarious worker is not formally dependent, but his/her existence is not at all free, the waged relationship is discontinuous and occasional, but the dependence is full of anxiety and continuous.

In the 1970s and 1980s when the dismantling of the Fordist system and guaranteed wages tied to industrial production began, precarious working conditions appeared as a marginal and temporary phenomenon that concerned above all the young workers that entered into the labour market. At present, it is clear that labour precariousness is no longer a marginal condition, but it is the black heart of the process of global capitalistic production. Precarization is the consequence of the de-territorialization of all the aspects of production. There is no continuity in the work experience: one does not go to the same factory, does not pass along the same paths and does not meet the same people everyday, as in the industrial age. Therefore, it is almost impossible to implement forms

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

of permanent social organization. As labour became precarious thanks to a cellular and reticular transformation, the problem of the autonomous organization of labour must be completely rethought. We still do not know how this organization can be constructed: this is the main political problem of the future.

Psychosphere

Psychosphere is the soft face of infosphere, the field where the recording and the psychical elaboration of the info-stimuli occurs. The consequences of 'info-vasion', nervous overload, psychopharmacology penetration, and fractalization of working and existential time, are manifested in the psychosphere. The psychosphere is the unpredictable effect that info-vasion devices produce in the interconnected global mind. The acceleration and intensification of nervous stimuli on the conscious organism seem to have thinned the cognitive film that we can call sensibility. As the mass of info-stimuli increases, the time available for the elaboration of the nervous stimuli reduces. The conscious organism accelerates the cognitive, gestural and kinetic reactivity. As a consequence, our empathetic capacity seems to decrease.

Recombination/recombinant

The recombination concept emerges as a result of the discovery of the DNA in biological and specifically biogenetic fields. Even before manifesting itself on the epistemological level, the recombination concept circulated in literature from the experimentations of OuLiPo to the writings of Raymond Roussel, the *cadavre exquis* of the Surrealists and the novels of Nanni Balestrini. Recombination is a cognitive and operative method that crosses the more dynamic fields of research and action. Passing from the analogical to the digital, the flows of speech, image and sound perform like the activity of cutting and sewing, dissembled and assembled to increasingly narrow scales. If we accept the idea that the recombinant principle is the key of post-mechanical technologies, and if we assume this principle as an interdisciplinary epistemic paradigm, we can notice that it delineates a common field to the phenomena of life and language. Informatic and biogenetic technologies are funded by the logic of recombination, that is, a meaningless and not dialectic logic: recognizable forms and meaningful ensembles emerge from pure informational sequences (0 and 1, which the image on the computer screen emerges from, the four components of the DNA that the living organisms emerge from). Deleuze and Guattari say in *Anti-Oedipus* 'I don't care at all about my mum and my dad, Oedipus, the original trauma and so on. I am interested in knowing how the language dismantles and rearranges reality, I am interested in knowing

how to recombine signs and gestures and bodies in order to find a way out, in order to free desire from its labyrinth'.

Semiocapitalism

Semiotics is the science that studies signs. We call capitalism a social system founded on the exploitation of labour and finalized to the accumulation of capital. We can talk of semiocapitalism when informational technologies make possible a full integration of linguistic labour with capital valorization. The integration of language in the valorization process involves obviously important consequences in both the economic field and in the linguistic sphere. It is possible to calculate the working time that is necessary to carry out a mechanical operation, but it is not possible to calculate the time of average labour socially necessary to elaborate signs and to create new forms in a precise way. Therefore, linguistic labour is hardly reducible to the Marxian law of value, and consequently the economy imports new factors of instability and indefiniteness within itself as the valorization becomes dependent on language. Besides this, language imports economic rules of competition, shortage and overproduction within itself. That is how an excess of signs (supply) is generated that cannot be consumed and elaborated in the time of social attention (demand). The consequences of semiotic overproduction are not only economic, but also psychical, as language acts directly on the psychosphere.

Stevphen Shukaitis
University of Essex, Colchester, UK

Joanna Figiel
City University London, London, UK

Original Article

Angels of love in the unhappiness factory

Dave Eden
University of Queensland, Political Science & International Studies, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia.

Abstract The connections between the social relations of capitalism and the creation of subjectivity have always been of interest to anti-capitalists and rebels. Two questions are interlaced here: How does capital achieve popular support and what is the possibility of a revolutionary subject? The second question attempted to pierce the reality of the first. Following Marx, the answer was found in the proletariat: that the expansion of the employment of labour-power would lead to a class encased in radical chains. This class would then yell, 'I am nothing and I should be everything'. However, today it can be hard to find in the exploitation of labour-power the force that can end this exploitation, and subjectivity seems to be more a product of increasingly mystifying flows and mutations that tend towards the crassly conformist or the theologically suicidal. Yet, various post-workerist theorists argue that if we look at the contemporary labour-processes – which now escape the workplace proper – we find a key insight to the creation of subjectivity.
Subjectivity (2012) 5, 15–35. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.23

Keywords: cognitariat; immaterial labour; exploitation; Negri; Virno

As we are constantly reminded the normality of today is crisis, yet the political meaning of crisis is obscure. For materialists, much hinges on a difficult question: in the crisis *within* capitalism, can we find the crisis *of* capitalism? The crisis of capitalism is the appearance of another world: the creation of another series of relations between people, another series of hopes and desires and another accumulation of processes of creativity. Many of us who come after Marx think this problem under the name of the proletariat: that the exploitation of labour-power is not just the accumulation of value and abstraction, but also of combativity and rebellion. The appeal of the *post-operaismo*, and the reason that we can forgive them so much, is that they remain partisans of the problem of the proletariat, even

when they reject the label and generate new names. Here I wish to walk through the work of Antonio Negri, Paulo Virno and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, and show how their explorations of subjectivity are attempts to locate the possibility and force of emancipation in the materiality of the contemporary labour-process. I will unpack each one, as too often the readings of these theorists in English-speaking parts of the world collapses them into one mixed bag and thus effaces important difference.

The stakes of this is that each attempts to discern the political possibilities of the present through examining the emotional qualities of labour – emotional qualities that they argue arise from the nature of the labour-process today. Each one describes key elements of our condition, but they all share a linked limitation. This limitation is that they all see labour as being a singular, *historically specific*, substance rather than possessing a dual and contradictory character, something I will draw out through mobilising the work of another perhaps wayward child of *operaismo* – *Negative Autonomism*, particularly the work of John Holloway.

As Hardt and Negri note, the question of subjectivity is most often associated with debates of the 1980s and 1990s, where the dismissal of the pre-formed and solid social subject meant the disappearance of robust politics and its replacement with 'a weak notion of freedom based on play and contingency'. They, and Virno and Berardi too, reject both sides of these debates, and rather draw on a 'third approach' associated with 'Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari', who see 'the production of subjectivity rather as the primary terrain on which political struggles takes place. We need to intervene in the circuits of the production of subjectivity, flee from the apparatuses of control and constrict the bases for an autonomous production'. (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 172) As such, subjectivity is for them a profoundly materialist and communist question.

For all three, the question of subjectivity is the question of labour's conflictual existence in capitalism and its ability to create communism. Negri and Virno take this up under the name 'multitude' and Berardi the 'cognitariat'. What is striking is that each of the three authors presents different emotional qualities to their new proletarians. These different emotional qualities demonstrate three different readings of the present and three different notions of rebellious subjectivity. The root cause of these differences is different conclusions drawn from a shared understanding about the material nature of production in contemporary capitalism. They are three different explorations into the problem of the proletariat.

The Problem of the Proletariat

There are probably few concepts that appear as exhausted as the proletariat and which seem to be so encased in the zombie ideologies of the twentieth century.

Despite the generalisation of wage-labour, in the societies like the one I sit in, Australia, the concept of class itself seems irrelevant to most people's experiences. The cultural climate of mass consumption, despite being premised on the exploitation of labour, abolishes the most obvious indicators of class. Indeed, class most often is only evoked by authoritarian ideologies to conjure an image of loyalty and hard work to pose against anything that might seem progressive.

Class is commonly used to describe differences in wealth and power. There are endless ways that these demarcations can be made. Marx's use of class is more complex: it is an attempt to think both the nature of unjust relations and exploitation within capitalism and also the force that can abolish them. Most commonly in Marxism, Marx's proletariat is presented as an answer. But perhaps it is more fruitful to think of it as unsolved, as a problem Marx wrestles with, an attempt to examine the contradictions and hopes that we inhabit. It says 'We are more than we appear to be. We are not what we are'. It is essentially this concern that animates the *post-operaismo* explorations of subjectivity.

What is so interesting in Marx's exploration is that exploitation and emancipation orbit the same axis: labour. Marx famously made a distinction between a class in and for itself – a distinction that is most often taken to mean one between the working class under capitalism and against it. Perhaps, though, this is Marx underplaying a division that is actually more extreme. This is a division between proletariat as the emancipatory force and labour–power as variable capital (the well-spring of abstract labour, which is the fetishised substance of value).[1] Despite Marx's best attempts, these two narratives struggle to be reconciled.

In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right Introduction,* Marx theorises a proletariat that is a force of universal emancipation because it exists in abjection. Here he is concerned with politics in Germany, but we get the outline of a larger global force. This is the class that yells 'I am nothing and I should be everything' (Marx, 1992, p. 254). This nothingness is that the condition of the proletariat is a focus point and intensification of a society in decomposition.

> In the formation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a particular wrong but wrong in general … and finally a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from – and thereby emancipating – all the other spheres of society which is in a word, the *total loss* of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the total *redemption of humanity.* This dissolution of society as a particular class is the *proletariat*. (Marx, 1992, p. 256)

However, even more than this, this class that is the ruin of one world and the emancipator of all is simultaneously the actor that brings critique into reality. 'Just as philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds it *intellectual* weapons in philosophy; and once the lightning of thought has struck deeply into this virgin soil of the people, emancipation will transform the *Germans* into *men*' (Marx, 1992, p. 257). This wonderful monster, this emancipator and destroyer is for Marx a real living possibility, a material force that takes up thought. '… theory also become a material force once it has been gripped by the masses' (Marx, 1992, p. 251). Marx works to excavate and locate the possibilities of this monster in the concrete and the real. At this point, in Marx's writing, the proletariat is explosive refuse. The formation of capitalism has created this leftover, which is crucial to its existence, and offers the possibility of its destruction.

As Marx's work progressed, the proletariat is no longer the refuse outside of society, but rather both deep inside capital and also external to it. It is brought into capital as the source of value, but its exploitation, which is the alienation of humanities' historical and biological attributes, means a deep antagonism is also generated. The development of capitalism then is the development of the social force that will destroy it, and also a social force that due to its very exploitation can be the liberator of all of humanity. This is what Marx, with Engels, traces out in works such as the 1844 Manuscripts (1988), *The German Ideology* (1973) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1983). Marx and Engels write that communism is 'a real movement that abolished the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from premises now in existence' (1973, pp. 56–57, 94). These premises are the development of a mode of production whose form of exploitation creates a class of emancipators. They are emancipators because of the kind of conflictual subjectivity that is developed as a result of the antagonistic relations that constitute their material conditions and them as a class.

In these descriptions, Marx does give the proletariat different emotional tonalities in his presentation of them – but unlike Negri, Virno and Berardi, it is not clear that he sees this element of proletarian subjectivity as key to understanding its subversive potential.

However, Marx's critique of political economy also develops another narrative of labour. This story is equally a story of exploitation, but it is a story about the constant accumulation of the abstraction of labour. In *Capital*, Marx presents capitalism as 'self-valorising value' (1990, p. 255). Value that finds its expression in exchange-value and thus in prices and the money-form is created by abstracting labour. Against those interpretations of Marx that see abstract labour as a generalised biological category, it is probably more useful to understand it as a fetishised property of commodities. Commodities only have value in relationship to each other; value is a social average of how much of the abstract labour time of society a specific kind of commodity is seen as being

worth in relation to all other commodities. The substance that it is made up of is an abstraction, an abstraction done in relation to the actual material and concrete potentials of society, but one that is worked other than through the reified vicissitudes of exchange. As Marx puts it: 'The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers' (1990, p. 135). Thus, the variety of human activities that produce commodities is abstracted into the same substance. The magnitude of this substance that is embodied in the commodity is not determined by the nature of the concrete labour-process, but by the fetishised relations of commodity exchange.

There are only ever concrete labour-processes that produce a specific piece of wealth, but that wealth is commodified: wealth is produced for and then distributed through exchange for the purpose of accumulating value; the relationships of exchange abstracts that labour. Thus, labour labours under the domination of value, under the abstraction of the concrete. Marx then follows this through in his exploration of capital in *Capital*. The picture that Marx then creates is that value, in the money form, organises and dominates society on a whole and appears as the animating force.

If it is the alienation of labour that is the kernel of exploitation that makes a worker potentially a rebel, then it is also the fetishisation (a term that can be understood as an extension of alienation) of labour into value that is accumulated within capital (cf. Holloway, 2010, p. 90). In addition, this is the problem of the proletariat. On the one hand, we have an accumulation of a force of emancipation; on the other, we have its exploitation and its subjection to abstraction. This leads to both optimistic readings where capital is torn about by rebellious potentiality (cf. Holloway, 2002, 2010) or pessimistic ones where labour is dominated by its own reified creation, such as the Frankfurt School.

But what about Marx, does he solve this? There is of course the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx quickly explains this contradiction (and this was written before *Capital*) by the immiseration thesis, a deterministic prediction that capital's contradictions would propel the exploited into becoming their own liberators. It is obvious to us that this was wrong, this is not what happened. Crisis, as the breakdown in the accumulation of capital, does not automatically produce anything. Indeed, by the time Marx is writing Volume 3 of *Capital* he has rethought the nature of crisis. On the one hand, crisis does illuminate the *possibility* of another form of society, yet simultaneously it can be simply the method through which, at great cost and suffering, capitalism renews itself (Marx, 1991, p. 364). Indeed, as Guy Debord notes, Marx himself parodied his own work on the basis of the distinction between objective understandings and subjective conclusions (Debord, 1967, pp. 45–46). While joking to Engels about how to hoax some political opponents, he makes the observation that it could be said of his own political conclusions 'the ultimate outcome of the present

movement, of the present social process, bears absolutely no relation to its real development' (Marx, 1967). It is not obvious from *Capital* that the accumulation of capital leads to the accumulation of its negation. This is what we wrestle under the problem of the proletariat: that in the material relations of capital is it possible to grasp the living possibilities of communism?

Multitude(s) and Cognitariat

All this may as well be in Aramaic, there is probably the feeling of something ancient, something biblical to it. While the shuddering of capital might have taken the shine off the end of history, the possibility of the proletarians storming heaven has been effaced by dominant thought. Exploitation or inequalities are most often thought of through the name of the victim – those who must be saved (cf. Badiou, 2002).

Hardt and Negri joke (echoing Kent Brockman's challenge to Homer when he is a union leader) that 'we will speak not only of labor, exploitation, and capitalism, but also of class conflict, proletarian struggles, and even communist futures. Do dinosaurs still walk the earth?!' (2003, p. 3). And they are right. Their question is profoundly out of time with the thought of the present. And this is its worth. The *post-operaismo* draw on the most contemporary forms of thought to revitalise and open up this older debate. Most noticeable is their radical use of post-structuralist thought. A school of thought which in that part of the world which speaks English is most often understood (and it is most often understood by those in universities and galleries) to signal the end of social transformation. A school of thought that emerged from the failure of '68. But wait, when the *post-operaismo* talk about subjectivity, when they sincerely draw on concepts and formulations that in that part of the world which speaks English are most often welded onto a cultural liberalism, what they are talking about is how labour can destroy its old enemy. It is their lens for grasping the interrelationship between the material conditions of capital, labour's experience and the politics of emancipation. The different emotional qualities they see in today's subjectivity are products of different readings of these coordinates. 'Subjectivity must be grasped in terms of the social processes that animate the production of subjectivity …. When we look at the new qualities of laboring processes in society and examine the new instances of immaterial labour and social cooperation in their very different forms, we can begin to recognize the alternative circuits of social valorization and the new subjectivities that arise from these processes' (Hardt and Negri, 2003, p. 12).

Negri, Virno and Bifo all share the same general historical narrative, something that is probably an inheritance of their generally common experience in communist struggles in Italy. This narrative is well known but worth refreshing. Berardi names this common perspective ' "compositionism", since its

essential theoretical contribution consists in the reformulation of the issue of political organisation in terms of social composition' (2009b, pp. 33–34). The key element of this understanding is that social composition is driven by the antagonism of labour against capital. The shift from the organisation of capitalism from the Fordist and Keynesian model to its post-1970s forms hinges of the assaults and rebellions of labour. The very transformations hang on the qualities that labour developed in its self in rebellion against capital. These new compositions of capital are typified by the increasing importance of immaterial and cognitive forms of labour and exceed the boundaries of wage-labour proper. Negri, Virno and Berardi all pay special attention to Marx's use of the 'general intellect' in the *Grundrisse*. Negri, with Hardt, names this phenomena 'biopolitical production', Virno 'post-Fordism' and Berardi 'semiocapitalism'; these are all variations of what Marazzi simply calls 'biocapitalism' (2011, p. 49). In these new forms of capitalism, intellectual or cognitive capacities are the core of capitalist valorisation and these same capacities are the core of the rebellious subject. Crucial to both is that these capacities exceed the individual. They are social competencies. The different emotional modalities that each author gives their depictions of subjectivity speak to their evaluation of the relative strengths and possibilities of labour in relation to its exploitation.

Angels of Love

Negri has explored the question of subjectivity through numerous names and metaphors. His work is full of socialised workers, cyborgs, barbarians, the multitude. Negri's work has attempted to produce a wide-ranging vista of the transformations that typify capitalism today and the conflicts that animate it. For Negri, love is the force of the multitude because exploitation is exploitation of the *common*. The common is the name for the ever-increasing capacities and qualities of the multitude. The common is both exploited by capitalism and the point for the multitude's resistance. The common is that which allows the multitude to function as the 'flesh' of capitalist exploitation and that which allows the multitude to become a 'body' that can move beyond capital (Negri, 2007, p. 302). This ever-expanding bundle of capacities does not exist in singular bodies of individual labourers, but rather is shared and internal to the collective relationship among the multitude on a whole. Its origin is within labour, within the historical constitution of labour and within labour's conflictual relationship with capitalism.

The understanding of the common as being internal to labour is crucial, for Negri's typification of capitalism today is of a mode of production in which production is *organised* by labour. Capital, while saturating society with its methods of control, stands external to production even though production and society are now inseparable. *The common is the sum of everything that the*

labor force (V) produces independently of C (constant capital, total capital) and against *it* (Negri, 2008, p. 67). Marx's classic formulation of the relations between capital and labour in the form of constant and variable capital is reversed.

'Capital – although it may constrict biopolitical labor, expropriate its products, even in some case provides necessary instruments of production – does not organize *productive cooperation*' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 140). In Negri's narrative under Fordism (and one that assumes capital's proceeding stages), it was capital that organised production, as constant capital, that is, machinery and it was capital that was the cohesive force of creativity. In contemporary capitalism, biopolitical production, it is the common as the attribute of living labour that is the wellspring of creativity. Negri shifts the sight of production from the factory to the metropolis. 'The metropolis is the site of biopolitical production because it is the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 254).

In Negri's characterisation, the factory is a form of production, where constant capital, that is, machinery, brought together through the entrepreneurship of the capitalist, organises production. Revolt then is pitted against this organisation, against work. In contemporary capital, Negri argues that the paradigmatic space of work is the metropolis, the city itself. 'And in the biopolitical economy there is an increasingly intense and direct relation between the production process and the common that constitutes the city. The city, of course, is not just a built environment consisting of buildings and streets and subways and parks and waste systems and communications cables but also a living dynamic of cultural practices, intellectual circuits, affective networks, and social institutions … the city is the source of the common and the receptacle into which it flows' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 154). In the metropolis, creativity is organised within the sinews of the flows and relationships of people (the role that the *commodity-form* plays in this theorisation is opaque at best), which capital then attempts to capture. In this story, it is variable capital that organises production; in the life of the city, the multitude organises production internally. 'In contrast to large-scale industry, however, this cycle of biopolitical production is increasingly autonomous from capital, since its schemas of cooperation are generated in the productive process itself and any imposition of command poses an obstacle to productivity' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 254).

What is being produced in the metropolis is actually subjectivity itself. Rather than posing a distinction between the process of the creation of subjectivity and the process of valorisation (the former perhaps enabling the function of the latter), the two have become internalised within labour. The kinds of work that *typify* biocapitalism are those that are the re/creation of socialites and life.

This brings us to another crucial part of Negri's reading of subjectivity and the problem of the proletariat. In capitalism today, Negri argues that

accumulation is an external imposition of value through political means that actually retards the full-development of productive capacities (this is a *profound* misreading of Marx's argument on value and is a considerable weakness in *post-operaismo* work) (cf. Eden, 2012). Here capital is ultimately a thing of command, an imposition, but as such it is exterior to its object that it wishes to put to work, and exterior to the creativity it tries to capture. Such a reading sees communism to be already alive, not just as potential, but something more. Hence, at the end of *Multitude* the following description of our present: 'We can already recognise that today time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living …' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 358).

These then lead to a characterisation of subjectivity with an optimistic emotional quality. After *Empire* (2000) (and possibly due to the critiques it received as being too focused on the conditions of the North), Hardt and Negri began to typify the multitude as 'the poor', the poor being those 'excluded from wealth and yet included in its circuits of social production' (2004, p. 152). Poverty then is not an absence, but an abundance that is excluded. The resonance with Marx is clear, except here the dissolution of society found in the proletarian condition is not an emptiness that will emerge in negation, but an abundance that will erupt through affirmation. The poor are not those simply and literally immiserated, but rather their immiseration is a denial, by the imposition of capital, of the full ability to realise autonomously their own collective creative capacities in their own name – in the very historical moment when it is these creative capacities that are already organising production. Struggle then is not a struggle against production, but rather a struggle to extend production, for production is the multitude. This kind of affirmative struggle is named by Hardt and Negri as *love*.

Love, for Hardt and Negri, is greater than how we most often think of it; rather, it is 'a motor of association' (2009, p. 189). The love that arises from the condition of the poor is the love of creating relations. Here we can see that in Negri's project all these different concepts fold into each other and express the same phenomena from different angles. 'The real essence of the poor, in fact, is not their lack but their power. When we band together, when we form a social body that is more powerful than any of our individual bodies alone, we are constructing a new and common subjectivity. Our point of departure, then, which the perspective of the poor helps reveal, is that love is a process of the production of subjectivity. This process is not merely a *means* to producing material good and other necessities but also in itself an *end*' (2009, p. 180).

Not only is love what the multitude does, but the struggle of the multitude is love. Even the violence that might be necessary to overcome capitalism is subordinated to the creativity of labour, to an ever-increasing density of interconnections, to the increased volume of the common. And this is because of the material structure of capitalism, because of the relationship between

variable and constant capital. ‘Love may be an angel, but if so it is an angel armed’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 196).

The Animal Open to the World

Paulo Virno’s work also looks for the potential of anti-capitalist struggle in the question of subjectivity in relationship to the labour-processes today. Key to his investigation is the elucidation of the emotional. He writes: ‘An examination of the emotional situation of recent years constitutes neither a light-hearted literary diversion nor a recreational hiatus amid otherwise rigorous research. On the contrary, such an approach aims at the most pressing and concrete issues, at relations of production and forms of life, at acquiescence and conflict’ (Virno, 1996a, p. 13).

As noted, Virno poses another thinking of biocapitalism under the name ‘post-Fordism’, where for the ‘multitude every qualitative difference between labour time and non-labour falls short’ (Virno, 2004, p. 102). Virno shares largely the same historical narrative, but his characterisation of the way that subjectivity is put to work is very different. And thus the emotional modality is also very different. For Virno, subjectivity is profoundly ambivalent: meaning that it is open to either being formed as an emancipatory force, or collapsing into destruction and violence. He describes the ‘emotional situation of recent years’ and finds in this an ambivalence. To understand this, we must grasp that ‘the *ambivalence* of these modes of being and feeling, to discern in them a “degree zero” or neutral kernel from which may arise both cheerful resignation, inexhaustible renunciation, and social assimilation on one hand and new demands for the radical transformation of the status quo on the other’. The reason for this ambivalent emotional condition is that these emotions are created and put to work by capital: ‘the post-Fordist productive process itself demonstrates the connection between its own patterns of operation and the *sentiments of disenchantment*’ (Virno, 1996a, pp. 13–14).

How does this work? For Virno, the multitude is able to be put to work, and revolt against itself being put to work, because the general intellect functions as an axis, a ‘common place’ that holds a vast diversity of separate concrete labour-processes together (Virno, 2004, p. 37). Despite the prevalence of scientific knowledges in contemporary capitalism, Virno does not see the general intellect as being typified by this. Rather, ‘post-Fordism is characterised by the co-existence of the most diverse productive models and, in another way, by essentially homogenous socialisation which takes place outside of the work-place’. There is a proliferation of a vast variety of labour-process that within themselves seem irreducibly different. ‘We may well ask what the software engineer has in common with the Fiat worker, or with the temporary worker’. What allows this variety of work to function is the general intellect: ‘knowledge

and language' have become the 'principal productive force', because they hold together all the different tasks, and they make the proliferation of labour-process function (Virno, 2004, p. 105). In this sense again, we can see that variable capital, that is, living labour, is seen as being the organising force in this reading of biocapitalism.

Virno uses Debord to argue that this general intellect is increasingly produced by the forces of the spectacle (note: this understanding reduces Debord's work to an elaboration of the spectacle as the culture industry, rather than a phenomenon that arises from the extension of commodity-fetishism. In this sense, it is an interesting *misreading* of Debord). Thus, he writes 'What presents the spectacle, so to speak, are the productive forces themselves of society as they overlap, in ever greater measure, with the linguistic-communicative competencies and with the *general intellect*' (Virno, 2004, p. 60). What this shows is both the character of the general intellect and the centrality of living labour – and it also opens the way to understanding Virno's typification of the subjectivity of labour today and the interrelationship between its emotional tones and its political possibilities.

Perhaps one way to see this is to look at how Virno reworks two interesting sections of Marx's work, the 'Fragment on Machines', from which he gets the notion of general intellect, and Marx's work in volume 3 of *Capital* where Marx explores the development of the joint-stock company. In both these writings of Marx, Virno finds the idea that the development of technical and social relations that are created in the desperate search for the accumulate value may perhaps point to a world beyond capital. It is, as Marx writes, 'the abolition of private capitalist industry on the basis of the capitalist system itself' (Marx, 1991, p. 572). The social cooperation that arises to exploit labour and realise value undermines a system based on labour and private ownership. On the basis of the *operaismo* insight that the struggle of labour is the driving force of capitalism, Virno sees these developments to be in the qualities of living labour. The vast cooperation unleashed by capitalism is not organised or coordinated through technological apparatuses, despite the ubiquity of mobile phones, iPods and so on. Rather, it is the general intellect as the cultural abilities of people that coordinates production.

This gives labour the characteristic of being virtuosic. A virtuoso is the type of worker for whom there is no separation between activity and end product. 'Within post-Fordist organisation of production, activity-without-a-finished-work moves from being a special and problematic case to becoming the prototype of wage labour' (Virno, 1996b, p. 193). The qualities of this kind of labour resonate with what could be called 'idle talk' or 'chatter' and operate under a regime of 'opportunism' and 'cynicism' (Virno, 1996a, pp. 16–17). This means that as living labour is coordinating vast arrays of labour-processes, but it is doing it *for capital*, in conditions of extreme subordination, it expresses a terrified sense of being lost. For what is required of it is the ability to move and

coordinate quickly in a world that is increasingly fluid yet trapped, subjected to demands and instruction that are dominating; but rather than being placed within the ordered hierarchy of the Fordist workplace, this takes place in the networked stratifications of power of late capitalism. 'Fears of particular dangers, if only virtual ones, haunt the workday like a mood that cannot be escaped' (Virno, 1996a, p. 17).

Virno's later work draws out this danger (and the ambivalent character) the more he stresses the linguistic nature of the general intellect. If it is language that is being put to work, then what is language? For Virno, language expresses the dangerous ambivalence of the human animal. Human beings are a 'dangerous, unstable and (self) destructive animal' and it is language that makes us so dangerous (Virno, 2008, p. 14). Human beings are dangerous, Virno argues, because they are not clearly contained by a correspondence of instinct and environment. We are in this sense, and here Virno draws on Plessner, 'open to the world' possessing a 'virtually unlimited species-specific aggressiveness' (Virno, 2008, p. 17). This corresponds with our capacity for language. And it is language that is truly ambivalent. 'The biolinguistic conditions of so-called "evil" are the same biolinguistic conditions that animate "virtue" '. It is language that allows us to carry out horrific violence and cruelties by designation of someone, or a group of people, as 'non-man', but equally our only recourse against this violence is linguistic too. The only way that humans can exist together is not through linguistic convention. 'The public sphere consists, in short, of a *negation of the negation*: "non non-man" ' (Virno, 2008, pp. 20–21).

What happens when this capacity is what is put to work and becomes the driving quality of labour in post-Fordism? Virno argues that through most of human history, the ambivalent capacities of language are contained by relatively stable cultural practice, but this falls away in our period. 'Today the prevailing forms of life do not veil but rather flaunt without any hesitation the differential traits of our species' (Virno, 2009, p. 141). Thus, our times take on the form of a 'cultural apocalypse', in that the relatively stable forms that in previous societies contained and gave stability to these dangers have melted away (Virno, 2009, pp. 138–141).

These ambivalent capacities of the multitude express their potentially destructive capacities under capital, which are also the very attributes that allow the multitude to resist capitalism. More than this, the general intellect, as collective property of living labour, gives the multitude as it exists now the capacities to produce forms of political life that are both radically democratic and asymmetrical to state power. 'The salient characteristics of the post-Fordist experience (servile virtuosity, the valorisation even of the faculty of language, the necessary relation with the "presence of others" and so forth) postulate a conflictual response nothing less than a radically new form of democracy' (Virno, 1996b, p. 197). Virno thus resolves the problem of the proletariat as

being within the very things that typify the subjectivity of labour today. The general intellect is either contained within capital by apparatuses of control, 'the hypertrophic growth of the administrative apparatuses', or can be disconnected from wage-labour and the state (Virno, 2004, p. 67). Indeed, these points flow back and forth into each other. The general intellect allows the possibility of a radically democratic practice of the multitude and the radically democratic practice of the multitude allows the general intellect to escape the limits of capital.

The Unhappiness Factory

It is Berardi's version of biocapitalism, semiocapitalism, which develops the most depressing reading of the present and of the subjectivity of labour. It is important to note that Berardi *does not* use the concept of the multitude, but rather deploys the concept of the 'cognitariat'. The cognitariat is the 'social corporality of cognitive labour', a force that is far narrower than the multitude; it is those forms of labour involved directly in the world, whether digital, immaterial, intellectual and communicative forms of work, which we associate with the new economy in the metropolis (Berardi, 2009b, p. 105). Indeed, in Berardi's dark vision, the vast majority of the globe is excluded from the ranks of the cognitariat, and thus is denied almost any political agency. 'The great majority of humanity remains excluded from the cabled circuit of hypermodern cosmopolitanism, and is gripped by its obsessions with identity' (Berardi, 2009a, p. 92). The possibilities of communism hang in his work on the activity of cognitive labour: 'it is a matter of creating *movements* capable of organising cognitive labourers as a factor of transformation for the entire cycle of social labour' (2009a, p. 65). This possibility exists because there is a convergence of two distinct moments of unhappiness. 'I am simply saying that these are two convergent pathologies, two different manifestations of the unbearable pain affecting both the hyper-stimulated and competitive psychologies of those who see themselves as winners, and the rancorous ones of the humiliated'. These unhappinesses arise from the subsumption of part of the globe into the networks and flows of semiocapitalism and the rejection and dispossession of the vast remainder of humanity. 'The mass production of unhappiness is the topic of our times. The talk of the day is the extraordinary success of the Chinese capitalist economy; meanwhile in 2007 the Central Committee of the communist party had to deal with wide-spreading suicides in China's countryside' (Berardi, 2009b, p. 168). The successes of today's capitalism lead to the production of a punishing and savage sadness.

Again like the rest of the of the *post-operaismo*, Berardi sees that which is productive for capital as generative of the abolition of capital, yet his reading of the experience of this labour in contemporary capitalism is significantly

different: a significance that is highlighted by the dark emotional shades in which he paints the contemporary subjectivity of labour. Two other distinctions are important from Negri's and Virno's theories of biocapitalism. Berardi seems to re-emphasise the power of constant capital in the organising of labour, and he investigates the effects of the new forms of work on the bodies and psyches of cognitive workers.

Unlike Negri and Virno, Berardi starts with the individual body, and its obliteration, in semiocapitalism. 'Today, what does it mean to work? As a general tendency, work is performed according to the same physical patterns: we all sit in front of a screen and move our fingers across a keyboard. We type' (2009b, p. 74). Berardi does not dispute that work today is profoundly different from work under Fordism. However, the transformation is not the reversing of the polarity of constant and variable capital. If anything, in semiocapitalism, constant capital, which has taken new technological forms, reaches further into people's lives. It is constant capital, not just living labour, which escapes the workplace.

The dispersal of the mass workplaces does not mean the end of the dominance of constant capital/dead labour over variable capital/living labour:

> The digital transformation started two different but integrated processes. The first is the capture of work inside the network, that is to say the coordination of different labour fragments in a unique flow of information and production by digital infrastructures. The second is the dissemination of the labour process into a multitude of productive islands formally autonomous, but actually coordinated and ultimately dependent. (Berardi, 2009b, p. 88)

What allows this intersection of capture and dissemination is the digital infrastructure: that is, constant capital. However, this constant capital finds its form in new technologies. Berardi writes 'a device is needed, capable of connecting the single segments, constantly coordinating and localising in real time the fragments of info production. Cellular phones, the most important articulate of consumption of the last decade, provide this very function at a mass level' (Berardi, 2009b, p. 89). In semiocapitalism, the cognitariat are subjected to a greater level of exploitation by capital – greater because it expands across time and then invests more deeply into their personalities and capacities, and it does this because of the way the decentralised and mutating forms of constant capital enmesh people's lives. (If we do consider the proliferation of cellular phones, iPads, Blackberrys and so on to be forms of constant capital, then this could lead to some very interesting investigations in that, as Marazzi points out, the current mode of capitalism 'externalises' labour-power to the consumer) (Marazzi, 2011). The consumer is often involved in the work of constructing the commodities of the new economy, then

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

so too does capital externalise the elements of constant capital onto labour. There would be strange alliances here between the roles that money-capital and debt play in the operation of this – constant capital both in the 'hands' of the capital and labour are often financed by debt.

These transformations in the labour-process transform the subjectivity of labour. Berardi compares this to the experience of labour under Fordism. Confronted by the apparatuses of capital in the factory, workers attempted to realise themselves *against* work; in semiocapitalism, labour involves an increasing investment of desire in its very process of exploitation as labour.

> 'The workers' disaffection for industrial labor, based on a critique of hierarchy and repetition, took energies away from capital, towards the end of the 1970s. All desires were located outside of capital, attracting forces that were distancing themselves from its domination. The exact opposite happened in the new info-productive reality of the *new* economy: desire called new energies towards the enterprise and self-realization through work. No desire, no vitality seems to exist anymore outside the economic enterprise, outside productive labor and business. Capital was able to renew its psychic, ideological and economic energy, specially thanks to the absorption of creativity, desire, and the individualistic libertarian drives for self-realization'. (Berardi, 2009b, p. 96)

Berardi's work then tries to trace out in multiple different arenas the nature of the subjectivity produced by this absorption and investment in the info labour-process. The pictures he paints for us are ones where experience is typified by panic, neurosis and unhappiness. The endless demands for energy made on labour, and its subsumption in the network, exhaust and depress us. Labour, says Bifo, is depressed. He remarks that Prozac is in many ways necessary for semiocapitalism to function. The kinds of hyperactivity and enthusiasm that was typical of the dot-com boom could only be sustained by the meeting of pharmacology with digitalisation. The crisis we live in, Berardi argues, is the moment of the failure of pharmacology to keep us working as the demands on us increase (Berardi, 2009a, p. 121).

We are thus left depressed – but this depression as much as love or ambivalence contains communist possibilities. It is depression that is the basis of a future communist praxis. 'Depression allows us to see what we normally hide from ourselves through the continuous circulation of a reassuring collective narrative. Depression sees what public discourse hides. Depression is the best condition to access the void that is the ultimate truth' (Berardi, 2009a, p. 118). Just as depression is what is caused by being engulfed in the flows of semiocapitalism, by its endless demands for investments of energy and desire, depression is what allows us to de-invest from it. Subjectivity, once again, expresses the problem of the proletariat.

Dark Shadows

Negri, Virno and Berardi's work all depicts elements of our lived experience that narrate changes that we can see going on in the world that we inhabit. Their shared tactic of attempting to see the political in the emotional tonalities of subjectivity is profoundly materialist – in that it hopes to unearth in the here and now the evidence of the possibility of a transformative subject, regardless of the nuances and caveats their presentations include. The proletariat becoming multitude or cognitariat is not a theological force to come, but rather a living possibility whose outlines we can trace through a wide-angled examination and theorisation of common behaviour. Excellent, all good.

In this sense, they seem to have sidestepped our original difficult problem – the different and seemingly contradictory narratives of proletariat and variable capital. All three collapse these two stories. There is one story now: a story of how labour exists in this world and thus what it can do. This leads to a generally similar political position, a typification of communism as *exodus*, although the different intensities of this exodus reflect the different readings each author gives of biocapitalism.

Negri's depiction of the multitude being a political force of love fits with his optimistic understanding of the possibilities of communism. This is the basis of the political programme he suggests. Indeed, much of Negri's politics has a decidedly reformist slant; owing to the fact that capital is viewed as being so weak because the labour-process is autonomous from it, the multitude can accumulate increasing amounts of power within capital. 'And when the accumulation of powers crosses a certain threshold, the multitude will emerge with the ability autonomously to rule common wealth' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 311). Berardi's sad cognitariat can at best only carry out a far more modest political project. 'We should not expect a swift change in the social landscape, but rather the slow surfacing of new trends: communities will abandon the field of the crumbling economy; more and more individuals will abandon their job searches and will start creating extra-economic changes' (Berardi, 2009b, p. 219). Virno for his part hopes that language animated by the multitude can become a *katechon* to ward off the disastrous possibilities that inhabit contemporary life – and simultaneously free ourselves from capital (Virno, 2008, pp. 56–65).

Yet this politics of exodus, which in the case of Negri and Virno is also a politics of democracy, has two shared flaws: periodisation and an absence of contradiction (Holloway *et al*, 2009, pp. 5–7). All three say that labour at a *specific given historical moment* has a specific character and certain solidity. This then limits the possibilities of a critique of labour, of communism as the self-abolition of the proletariat. Rather, it is labour escaping from its entrapment. For Marx, the proletariat would disappear with capitalism (or better yet vice versa), yet the politics of the *post-operaismo* seem to suggest that labour in the form of multitude or cognitariat would live on after

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

capitalism. In this sense, it is a limited critique of our existence under capitalism. As Holloway writes, such a perspective 'is rather like a prisoner in a cell imagining that she is already free' (Holloway, 2002, p. 167). It is a critique of the cell, not of the role of being imprisoned.

Holloway typifies another path from the original insights of Tronti, one we may want to call Open Marxism and or Negative Autonomism (Bonefeld *et al*, 1992; Holloway *et al*, 2009). Do not get hung up on the names, things are always messier and bigger than labels. The importance is that this is a different orientation – one that places the self-activity of workers inside and against the categories of capitalist society.

Holloway attempts to understand the radical possibility of labour in capitalism not by collapsing the two narratives that Marx provides, but rather seeing them as crucial to both understanding and critiquing capitalism. Labour has a *dual character* under capitalism. Holloway points out that such an understanding has been largely ignored within Marxism, yet for Marx it was one of the sections he considered to be 'the best points' in *Capital* (Holloway, 2010, p. 87).

What is this dual character? It is the argument that in capitalism there is both the concrete labour that goes on within the labour-process, and then the *abstract* labour that is the social form that this labour takes, a social form that arises from the fetish character of the commodity (cf. Rubin, 1973; Marx, 1990). Value, which is both the very stuff of capitalist social relation and its endless desire (capital is 'self-valorising value'; it is the subject of its own process that has the 'occult ability to add value to itself'), is constituted of this abstract labour (Marx, 1990, p. 255). What Marx explores in the three volumes of *Capital*, and what we can see as the main animating force of daily life, is the constant reshaping and discipline of the concrete labour-process and the revolutionisation of society, in the search for the constant accumulation of value. Abstract labour plays little role in the work of *post-operaismo*, and when it does it is reduced to a quality of concrete labour. For example, Berardi writes 'Industrial labour was generally abstract since it specific quality and concrete utility was completely irrelevant compared to its function of economic valorisation' (2009b, p. 75).

This must force us to think how labour exists, and thus what struggle is, in capitalist society. As Holloway argues, it is through the abstraction that the 'social cohesion' of capitalism is generated and maintained, and how some moments of creativity get to become counted as labour, this is after all what Marx meant by 'socially necessary labour time' (Holloway, 2010, p. 93). He continues to argue that 'Abstraction is the peculiarly capitalist weaving of social relations' and that 'The totality of social relations woven by the performance of abstract labour is the social synthesis …' is what maintains the apparent solidity of social relations (2010, p. 95). It is because the products of concrete labour are exchanged that this abstraction takes place, that they have value, but the operation of abstraction, the operation of the law of value, remoulds the

labour-process itself. Indeed, the long chapter in *Capital* 'Machinery and Large-Scale Industry' can be seen as unveiling the vast transformation in technical nature of the labour-process, and the organisation of societies and the globe through the operation of abstraction, through the coercive functions of value (Marx, 1990, pp. 492–639).

This then has to influence how we consider social classes and the *class struggle*. Holloway's argument amplifies the antagonism in Marx's work between use-value and value, between concrete labour and its abstraction. Marx constantly identifies in *Capital* how capital is a social relation, and that to be a member of a class (specifically in his description of capitalists) is to be *Trager* [bearer] or personification or part of this social relation. Holloway continues this point: as much as labour, the working class, exists within capitalism, it exists as part of these social relations, as a category of capitalist society. 'Whatever our personal inclinations, we are forced to adopt a role, a persona, to don a "character mask" ' (Holloway, 2010, p. 115). It is common that those who make similar arguments therefore see class as a closed category, as something through which we cannot think struggle (cf. Postone, 1993). However, Holloway goes a step further. He implants the rebellious tensions of the proletariat inside this category: class struggle is the struggle within labour, against its role as being labour.

Holloway argues that within daily experience, there is a continual antagonism between the concrete labour that we carry out, subjected to and organised through the circulation and accumulation of value, and a series of other desires and possibilities to create better, to create differently or to stop working altogether.

> If we are teachers, we feel the tension between teaching well and grading or producing the necessary number of graduates. If we are carpenters, we feel the contradiction between making a good table and producing a commodity that will sell. If we work in a call centre, we feel the tensions between the possibility of having a friendly chat with someone on the telephone and the disciplines of the job. If we work on an assembly line, we feel the push of other-doing as an unbearable frustration. (Holloway, 2010, p. 172)

Holloway's argument then is about subjectivity. The antagonism that goes on in capital is one that we feel has an emotional content, because it is about the living material relations that we have with one another. However, the tonality of this experience is left open. Owing to the variety and specificities of the exploitation of labour by capital, we cannot say that there is one emotional quality either to our experiences of exploitation, or in our efforts to attempt to exist differently and against capitalism. At most, Holloway says that there is a possibility of being different, 'a shadowy figure', a *mulier abscondita* (2010,

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

p. 216). However, this is just to identify the possibility of something other and different from our lives of exploitation; Holloway elucidates a world of rebellion as ‘cracks’, as moments of creation and disobedience rather than a who of revolt. (2010, pp. 21–26).

Such a reading is superior to Negri, Virno and Bifo’s on a number of grounds. These three examples of *post-operaismo* all contain great value, in that they generate narratives with powerful descriptive elements. Yet their collective inability to properly address the subversive content of the proletarian condition, to grasp an understanding of the dual character of labour (which itself is only a subset of a greater problem relating to confusions over value), means that they try to construct a politics out of what labour *is*. This prevents the level of critique that Holloway as an example of Open Marxism/Negative Autonomism allows us to reach. It also means that they are compelled to over-emphasise a certain emotional tonality of proletarian experience of the labour-process in an attempt to generate a force that can slide from capital’s grasp. Thus, although they all help communists to understand particular elements of the composition of capitalism, they are limited in elucidating the subversive critical theory that can perhaps help us create lives worth living.

Yet it is probably worth noting that Holloway’s work does not solve the problem for us. The vast variety of cracks that he might help reveal to be erupting (whatever their volume) against capitalism present the possibility of communism, but not necessarily the praxis needed to realise communism. Without being able to fall on some form of ‘prole in the machine’ through some form of immiseration thesis, or a belief in a singular substance to labour, all we are left with are open questions of experimentation.

About the Author

Dave Eden works at the University of Queensland and Griffith University in a variety of sessional academic and research roles. He is a participant in the Red Thread Study Group and is committed to communism as the real movement that abolishes the present state of things. He is currently involved in research into the relationship between state provision of welfare and the reproduction of labour-power specifically and capital as a social relation generally.

Note

1 For an exploration of recent debates on the nature of abstract labour see Bonefeld, 2010.

References

Badiou, A. (2002) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London & New York: Verso.

Berardi, F. (2009a) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. London: Minor Compositions.

Berardi, F. (2009b) *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Bonefeld, W. (2010) Abstract labour: Against its nature and on its times. *Capital & Class* 34(2): 257–276.

Bonefeld, W., Gunn, R. and Psychopedis, K. (1992) Introduction. In: W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn and K. Psychopedis (eds.) *Open Marxism. Vol. 1. Dialectics and History*. London: Pluto Press.

Debord, G. (1967) *Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.

Eden, D. (2012) *Autonomy: Capital, Class & Politics*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2003) *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in The Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Holloway, J. (2002) *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*. London: Pluto Press.

Holloway, J. (2010) *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Holloway, J., Matamoros, F. and Tischler, S. (2009) Negativity and revolution: Adorno and political activism. In: J. Holloway, F. Matamoros, and S. Tischler (eds.) *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*. London: Pluto Press.

Marazzi, C. (2011) *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Marx, K. (1967) Marx to Engels in Manchester: [London] 7 December 1867, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867/letters/67_12_07.htm, accessed 15 November 2010.

Marx, K. (1990) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1. London: Penguin Classics.

Marx, K. (1991) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3. London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review.

Marx, K. (1992) *Early Writings*. London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1973) *The German Ideology Part One*. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1983) *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1988) *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Negri, A. (2007) What to do today with *What Is to Be Done?* or rather: The body of the general intellect. In: S. Budgen, S. Kouvelakis, and S. Zizek (eds.) *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Negri, A. (2008) *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Postone, M. (1993) *Time Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. New York, NY: University of Cambridge Press.

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Rubin, I.I. (1973) *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. Montreal, Canada: Black Rose Books.

Virno, P. (1996a) *The Ambivalence of Disenchantment. Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Virno, P. (1996b) Virtuosity and revolution. In: M. Hardt and P. Virno (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Virno, P. (2004) *A Grammar of The Multitude*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext (e).

Virno, P. (2008) *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Virno, P. (2009) Natural-historical diagrams: The 'new global' movement and the biological invariant. In: L. Chiesa and A. Toscano (eds.) *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*. Melbourne, Australia: re.press.

Original Article

Labor of recombination

Abe Walker
Queens College, City University of New York, Powdermaker Hall 252,
65–30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, New York 11367, USA.
E-mail: awalker@qc.cuny.edu

Abstract Much of Marxist theory rests on the assumption that workers experience exploitation as individuals, and that the rate of exploitation (as a unit of time) can be calculated on a per-worker basis. Yet this calculation breaks down when dealing with cybertime and post-human bodies. Even as capital restructures the mode of production, labor continues to resurrect the ghosts of an idealized past that may or may not have actually existed. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari view subjectivity principally as a molar event or a form of closure, Bifo elaborates on their concept of subjectivation as an open, molecular becoming, which no longer hinges on the subject. Drawing upon both Bifo and his intellectual forbears, I will expand upon the idea of subjectivation as it relates to labor. Beginning with the assumption that the labor movement, broadly defined, remains an important site of contestation, I will ask the question: What strategies and political (non)-forms become possible as immaterial, acorporeal labor becomes the dominant mode of production?
Subjectivity (2012) **5**, 36–53. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.26

Keywords: labor organizing; immaterial labor; Deleuze; strikes; recombination

Introduction

At the end of his famous 'Postscript on Societies of Control', Gilles Deleuze (1996) poses an open-ended question about the future of the labor movement: 'One of the most important questions will concern the ineptitude of the unions: tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control'? While the 'Postscript' has been dissected and analyzed by numerous commentators and critics, the fleeting mention of trade unionism has gone almost unnoticed. The question is left unanswered, and

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

Deleuze abandons this line of inquiry almost immediately, so the reader is forced to speculate. Yet its characterization as 'one of the most important questions' indicates that Deleuze believed a labor movement – or something like it – would be a crucial mode of resistance in the emergent society of control.

To be sure, Deleuze is not considered a theorist of the labor movement, and like most of the post-1968 generation, regarded actually existing trade unionism as ideologically and politically moribund. As is well known, the French trade unions initially sought to destroy the popular uprising of May 1968 before halfheartedly lending their tentative support, only to withdraw it again when the situation reached a breaking point. Thus for many, the Parisian 1968 and subsequent the Italian Hot Autumn seemed to sound the death knell for unions as authentic organs of struggle. Indeed, Deleuze's two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, co-written with Felix Guattari in the immediate aftermath of May 1968 (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), might be read as an effort to reinvent a radical politics outside of the conventions of the Old Left. But unlike some of his contemporaries, Deleuze never fully abandoned his Marxist training – even if he espoused an extreme heterodox Marxism – and remained convinced that the mode of production would remain a fundamental site of contestation under late capitalism (c.f. Thoburn, 2003).

To reframe the question: Can unions adjust their tactics for doing battle a new enemy – the modern corporation – that often appears as a 'spirit' or a 'gas'? Can unions shed their molar skins and metamorphose into new creatures adequate to the contemporary world? Or should they be consigned to the dustbin of disciplinary society, to be replaced by new (non)-forms better suited to the vicissitudes of the society of control? This essay will explore this question and sketch out some possibilities. These will not take the form of concrete programmatic recommendations, or worse, policy prescriptions, but rather some general observations on the relationship of the labor movement to the changing mode of production. In this sense, it speaks in a different register than most academic writing on the labor movement, whose narrow policy-orientation confines it to a myopic presentism.

Beyond the Disciplinary Analog(ue)

For Deleuze, disciplinary society is comprised of the institutions of enclosure – principally the prison, the hospital, the factory, the school and the family. These sites are homologous but largely self-contained, and impose order from above. Interestingly, Deleuze does not include the labor movement on this list, even though he later claims it is bound up in this regime. He could easily have made the case – as others have done – that labor unions are *themselves* disciplinary institutions (see, for example, Zerzan, 1974). In contrast, control societies are characterized by diffuse power, which is distributed rather than embodied in

fixed organizations. The walls of the beleaguered institutions of discipline have been torn down, but their ghosts have colonized civil society. The object of control is no longer the human body or even an amalgamation of individuals, but the population itself, which is called into being through statistics. If disciplinary power was exacting and precise it was at least intelligible. Control society may be less blatantly repressive, but its power operates in ways that are both more totalizing and less legible, and therefore more insidious. The society of control exercises its power 'thanks to the technologies of the action at a distance of image, sound and data which function like machines to modulate, to crystallize electromagnetic waves and vibrations or to modulate and crystallize packets of bits' (Lazzarato, 2006, p. 185). Yet crucially, as Deleuze took pains to point out, control society does not completely replace disciplinary society even as the former becomes dominant, rather, disciplinary possibilities persist under the surface of control. Obviously, the institutions of discipline remain alive and well, but they are declining in *relative* importance as control society redistributes power in new ways.

Yet this model hinges on a crude historiography – a simple periodization of social time into epochs that are more or less distinct and asynchronous. But it may be illuminating to reimagine an achronological history, where each era already contains the incipient beginnings of those yet to come – and the carcasses of those that preceded it. If the Fordist factory was the paradigmatic disciplinary institution of the modern era, it coexisted alongside decidedly non-Fordist assemblages: timber camps, migrant farmwork, domestic labor. In this sense, the conventional labor union, which found its symmetrical antagonist in the Fordist factory – has always been inadequate to industries characterized by heavy turnover and dispersed or mobile production. And these non-Fordist work relations portended the abandonment of the only regime the unions were capable of contending with.

If labor unions are products of disciplinary society and remain wedded to its institutions, how will they fare as the discipline becomes obsolete? Franco 'Bifo' Berardi takes up this question where Deleuze left off. For Bifo, the decline of the mass worker has rendered any 'permanent social organization' obsolete. Hence, the question of organization must be taken up anew. Under a regime of precarity, 'the problem of the autonomous organization of labor must be completely rethought' (Berardi, 2009, p. 148). True to form, Bifo offers few practical recommendations in this regard, consigning the movement, like Deleuze, to an open-ended and indeterminate future: 'We still do not know in which way this organization can be constructed: this is the main political problem of the future' (ibid.). At times, he appears impossibly pessimistic about possibilities for worker resistance under control society:

> … the forms of resistance and of struggle that were efficacious in the twentieth century no longer appear to have the capacity to spread and

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

> consolidate themselves, nor consequently can they stop the absolutism of capital. An experience that derives from workers' struggle in recent years is that the struggle of precarious workers does not make a cycle. Fractalized work can also punctually rebel, but this does not set into motion any wave of struggle … In order for struggles to form a cycle there must be a spatial proximity of the bodies of labor and an existential temporal continuity. Without this proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for the cellularized bodies to become community. No wave can be created, because the workers do not share their existence in time, and behaviors can only become a wave when there is a continuous proximity in time that info-labor no longer allows. (Berardi, 2009, p. 34)

Following Marx, Bifo here suggests that a physical contact and networks of communication between laborers is a necessary precondition for collective action. If precarious workers lack this interpersonal engagement, they are incapable of constituting a movement. Yet at other moments in the same text he appears far more enthusiastic, positioning a re-purposed labor movement as uniquely capable of resisting the capitalist offensive. 'Only a movement of researchers, a high tech labor movement of the cognitariat that is autonomously organized can stop the dictatorship of financial corporations' (2009, p. 59). How to explain this apparent discrepancy?

The easiest explanation is that 'the cognitariat' and 'precarious workers' refer to two distinct groups, of which only the cognitariat is capable of organization. Bifo never fully explains the relationship between the cognitariat and precarious labor, but it seems clear that these groups are somewhat distinct, if overlapping. The other, more interesting explanation is that Bifo believe the labor movement of the future will require a re-imagining of collective action *as such* – thus his insistence in the first passage that 'fractalized work … does not set in motion any wave of struggle'. It is this second possibility that I wish to examine more closely.

Post-Collectivist Futures

Unions typically imagine themselves as collective entities that are constitutive of, but greater than, the sum of their parts. For the labor movement (and most twentieth-century social movements), collective action requires a coming-together at the supra-individual level, and the concomitant subordination of individual desire to the collective will of the group. Almost as soon as the individual emerged as a distinct ontological entity in Western political thought, it had been subsumed within various versions of 'the collective', whether through its liberal permutations (Nation, Citizen, Public) or its radical

manifestations (Party, Union, Masses, Proletariat, People). For some, this constant and unresolved tension between the individual and the collective is the essential condition of the social world.

Yet a close reading of Deleuze suggests a different path. For Deleuze, control society replaces the individual with a new entity – the 'dividual' – which resides *below* the level of the individual, on a sub-individual plane. Dividuals are deeply encoded masses, samples, data or markets that exist *immediately* at the level of mathematically constructed populations (as opposed to individuals, which, as conventional thought would have it, exist in the first instance as corporeal entities and only secondarily as statistical algorithms). Crucially, the dividual is not a mere representation or mediation, but offers direct access to the social. While the collective is reducible to the sum of its parts (individuals), the individual is never reducible to dividualism, nor is there a one-to-one correspondence between the individual and the dividual, because the two exist on separate ontological planes.

The implications for labor are tremendous. Under traditional employment relations, capital purchased fully embodied labor power via the corporeal worker for fixed lengths of time, which were known in advance and precisely measured. Yet this Apollonian calculus immediately confronts the Dionysian chaos of informal worker resistance, which shatters the working day and renders the time–motion study useless. But under post-Fordism, this drive has been partially recuperated. Today, 'capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers […] who make it available to the recombinative cyber-productive circuit. The time of work is fractalized, that is, reduced to minimal fragments that can be reassembled, and the fractalization makes it possible for capital to constantly find the conditions of minimum salary' (Berardi, 2009, p. 32). There is a long-standing debate over whether the switch to fractalized work and micro-labor invalidates the Labor Theory of Value. Much of Marxist theory rests on the assumption that workers experience exploitation as individuals, and that the rate of exploitation (as a unit of time) can be calculated on a per-worker basis, even if in the famous section from the *Grundrisse* (1974) known as the Fragment on Machines, Marx apparently calls into question his own theory. This is not the place to rehash the terms of this debate, except to note that the fragmentation and disembodiment of work renders the calculations that would affirm the labor theory of value highly complex, and in some cases, mathematically impossible. Significantly, for Bifo, this trend applies not only to the high-tech industries or those who work with computers, but everywhere.

Just as time is divided into tiny units, the worker experiences dissolution as a bounded subject. As Bifo writes, 'The worker does not exist anymore as a person. He is just the interchangeable producer of microfragments of recombinant semiosis which enters into the continuous flux of the network'

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

(2009, p. 38). While Harry Braverman and other labor process theorists long ago pointed out that capital regards employees as interchangeable components in the machine of production, Bifo moves far beyond the Braverman thesis in suggesting that the worker-as-person has already been written out of the equation. Cultural theorist Alexander Galloway recently asserted with no hint of exaggeration, 'the mode of production [under post-Fordism] is math' (Galloway, 2010). Today, living labor is folded into minute mathematical calculations to the point that the two are inseparable. To be sure, mathematics has always been integrated with production, but if the Fordist-Taylorist regime was characterized by elementary school math (counting, measuring and averaging), post-Fordism is based on higher-order statistical manipulations (probability, algorithms and code). If the age-old dream of the labor radicals was to rescue the worker from wage slavery (understood as an imposition from above), how to free a population that has already been constituted as a set of data points on a logistic curve?

To imagine a movement of dividuals is to imagine a politics beyond subjectivity. While Deleuze and Guattari view *subjectivity* principally as a molar event or a form of closure, Bifo elaborates on their concept of *subjectivation* as an open, molecular becoming, which no longer hinges on the bounded subject. As Bifo writes, 'the formative process … resembles much more a chemical composition than the mechanical accumulation of organizational forms. There is an implicit critique of political subjectivism and, at the same time, a critique of empirical sociology' (2009, p. 143). If subjectivity is inextricably linked to the individual-collective dyad, and thus largely incompatible with dividuals, subjectivation is free from the fetters of mainstream political thought, and thus fully compatible with the sub-individual level. But at a practical level, few actually existing formations have embraced the post-collectivist imperative. The vast majority of workers in the high-tech sectors remain unorganized, and info-laborers have never organized successfully. The Communication Workers of America has sponsored a marginally successful campaign to organize programmers at Microsoft, but this is the exception that proves the rule. A movement of dividuals will likely make a sharp break with the past, and may bear little resemblance to what we today understand as a labor union.

Insecure Attachments

As info-labor becomes the dominant mode of production, the worker experiences an increase in precarity. For Bifo, 'Precariousness is no longer a marginal and provisional characteristic, but it is the general form of the labor relation in a productive, digitalized sphere, reticular and recombinative' (2009, p. 51). This is not to say that all workers experience precarity equally, or that

precaritization is the dominant trend in all workplaces, but that becoming precarious is the emergent future of the global labor market, taken as a whole. Just as Hardt and Negri argued that immaterial labor represents the 'cutting edge' of capitalist restructuring even if many jobs are not yet immaterial, a similar argument could be made about precaritization. But as previously noted, info-labor is not confined to computer technicians or employees of technology firms. Increasingly, the primary site of info-labor is not the high-tech workplace, but the Internet itself, where websites draw upon 'micro-labor', which generates surplus value primarily through advertising revenue.

But faced with increasing precarity and insecurity, the labor movement can do nothing but look backward. The rallying call of the labor movement in the face of the segmentation and disruption of continuous labor time has been 'We Want Job Security!' This is a grave mistake. Unlike much of the Left, Bifo is crystal clear on one point: those who oppose the worst effects of precarity should not demand its opposite. Reflecting briefly on new political forms, he asks rhetorically, '… what would our proposed objective be? That of a stable job, guaranteed for life? Naturally no, this would be a cultural regression …' (2009, p. 31). Capital has reneged on its end of the social contract; to wish it back is futile at best, reactionary at worst.

Nonetheless, the response of the labor movement, in all too many cases, has been to cling to what is left of the social guarantee. As Bifo argues, the demand for job security is a conservative demand, in both the political sense and in the sense that it is inherently backward looking. To demand security is to demand the reterritorialization of the employment relation. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that job security has everywhere disappeared. Job security persists, and not only for the most privileged workers in the professional strata. Indeed, the demand for job security persists precisely because it remains – at least for some workers – winnable. But there is a generalized slippage toward precarity, even for the most privileged of workers. As Guattari and Negri (1996) predict, in the near future 'the guaranteed workers will be placed under the same regime as the non-guaranteed, and everything will be nuances, minute non-empirical transitions'. For many, job security seems to be the last remaining hope for avoiding this nightmarish endgame.

The turn toward job security has at least two deleterious effects on the labor movement. First, job security is often a *de facto* replacement for wage, hour and benefit demands. Unions that might otherwise win tangible improvements for their members instead find themselves clinging to the life raft of employment stability during moments of economic crisis. Second, the 'threat' of layoffs causes unions to negotiate abnormally long contracts. Speaking to the American Council on Education in 1995, no sharper a social critic than former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan noted 'workers have increasingly forgone

wage hikes for job security. Moreover, labor contracts … are now sometimes going out five and six years, as people try to lock in job security …' (quoted in Cutler, 2004). Most labor specialists agree that long contracts severely undermine labor's power by eliminating the possibility of job actions during the interim. (In the United States, most collective bargaining agreements include a no strike clause for the duration of the contract.) Job security is nothing more than an anti-concessionary demand, since by definition a union's members already have jobs. At best, job security is a purely defensive demand. At worst, it is the precursor to givebacks, since job security is often tied to concessionary bargaining.

Precarity also operates at the subconscious level. Even workers who do not experience precarity directly often feel threatened by the specter of precarity, and fear they may soon become precarious themselves. Even when the economic cycle turns in workers' favor, the *perceived* threat of layoffs leads to decreased militancy. Whether this fear has any relationship bearing on the 'actual' stability of the workers is irrelevant; it is the fear itself that is productive for capital. The calculus is simple: the precarious worker is less likely to rebel or unionize for fear of retribution and if unionized is less likely to make aggressive demands. The ideal worker believes each working day may be his last. From the standpoint of capital, it matters little whether precarity is real or imagined – in fact, an imagined precarity is usually preferable because high turnover incurs significant retraining expenses.

Still, the demand for job security is rooted in the collective imagination, which has a notoriously long phase cycle. For a period of about 30 years (roughly, from the end of World War II through the oil crisis of the 1970s), job security was a reality for many workers in the highly industrialized countries of the Western world. In the United States, this took the form of a *de facto* agreement under which capital would grant steady if modest wage increases in exchange for relative labor peace. This arrangement, often called the post-war social contract, substantially improved the quality of life for significant segments of the working class, to the point that by the 1960s it was possible to speak of a post-scarcity society in parts of Western Europe. But this is a historically and spatially unique phenomenon; precarity has been the lived reality for vast majority of workers since the advent of capitalism. Even the post-war deal was extended only to a privileged sector of the working class; workers outside of major factories and portions of the managerial/professional strata typically endured precarity. (Incidentally, pre-capitalist and primitive accumulation economies typically offered some degree of job security.) As Bifo writes, 'Only for a short period at the heart of the twentieth century, under the political pressures of unions and workers, in conditions of (almost) full employment and thanks to a more or less strongly regulatory role of the state in the economy, some limits to the natural violence of capitalist dynamics could be legally established' (2009, p. 32). With the decline of the labor movement

globally by the 1980s, the violence of capital could no longer be held in check, and the guarantee was replaced – perhaps permanently – by precarity. But this 30-year exception looms large in the memories and collective imagination of the contemporary workforce. The baby-boom generation is the last to have experienced relative security. What Bifo calls the video-electronic generation (born after the late 1970s) and the connective generation (born in the 1990s) have no direct knowledge of secure employment, even if they desire it for themselves. Even workers born as early as the 1960s know security only vicariously, through their parents. Yet workers and their unions continue to relive the collective memory of an experience they have never known.

The reaction of French unions to the threat of precarity is instructive here. In 2006, French workers and students revolted against a law that would have allowed firms to fire young workers without reason during the first 2 years of employment. This anti-CPE (*Contrat Première Embauche* or 'First Employment Contract') movement involved a broad cross-section of society and represented one of the largest and most militant demonstrations in France since 1968. In typical fashion, unions resisted precaritization by resurrecting the ghosts of job security. Unions led the chant 'CPE, no, no, no', and 'CDI, yes, yes, yes'. (CDI is the Contrat â Durée Indéterminée or 'Undetermined Duration Contract', the typical mode of employment in France.) For these unions, the reterritorialization of the employment relation was the only possible response to precarity. But others had a different slogan. A banner above the occupied College of France read 'CPE or CDI, it's all just forced labor (STO)' (*Service du Travail Obligatoire or* 'Obligatory Labor Service'). A communiqué from the occupation committee declared the union's slogan was 'an expression of the servile desire to be exploited for 8 hours every day like everybody else', and the occupiers slogan 'a refusal to let work define us, a refusal to let it penetrate to ever further depths of our being' (Anonymous, 2006). Caught between the Scylla of an uncertain future and the Charybdis of unending labor, the occupation committee demanded a third option.

As this example shows, the labor movement may find it necessary to develop a new subjectivity beyond work. But unions, like most large bureaucracies, are often characterized by outright resistance to change. As Maurizio Lazzarato observes, French unions actively opposed including unskilled workers among their ranks as late as the 1980s (2006, p. 187). In the United States, no union has mounted a real campaign to organize Wal-Mart, even as numerous studies have shown the company has a disproportionate downward influence on wages across multiple sectors of the economy (Kelber, 2011). According to Lazzarato (2006, p. 190), 'the labor movement … can't imagine a process of constitution of the world and self which is not centered around work'. But this is the crucial condition for labor's reinvention.

Suicide is Painless

This emergent movement will not be a new form of activism, but a strategy of radical passivity. In the first instance, the strategy is predicated on the abandonment of preassigned subject-positions: the rejection of work by the worker, the rank-and-file's withdrawal from the trade unions, and the rebel's escape from the role of ascetic militant – in short, a strategy of desubjectivation. As Bifo writes, 'the path towards the autonomy of the social from economic and military mobilization [is] only possible through a withdrawal into inactivity, silence and passive sabotage' (2009, p. 127). This will draw upon what I might call Frederick Taylor's Fourth Law of Thermodynamics: the general tendency of workers to perform as little work as possible, in a closed system, in the absence of an external force. While unions seek to cement workers' identities *as workers*, most workers identify with a non-worker subjectivity, which is ironically far more compatible with the contemporary mode of production (Of course, some unions recast their members as citizen-consumers or embrace identity politics in the name of diversity, but ultimately seek to realign difference in the service of worker-identity.) (Schwartz-Weinstein, 2010). Thus, if the refusal of work was the cause of precaritization, it also represents a path forward. Elements of knowledge, already the province of the General Intellect, can be reassembled for uses that undermine the capitalist profit-generating prerogative. For Bifo, the primary tactic of the labor movement of the future will be a form of sabotage that he calls the *recombinant function*: 'The problem of our time is the creation of a recombinant function … Recombining does not mean to subvert or to overthrow … but rather means assembling elements of knowledge according to criteria other than those of profit and the accumulation of value' (2009, p. 66). The conventional mode of struggle, where capital and labor constituted themselves as frontal opponents, is no longer possible, because the enemy has become more totalizing. The recombinant function is guerrilla warfare for labor, hearkening back to the refusal of work, sabotage, stealing time and other tactics of Italian autonomist left. The immediate objective is not to seize the means of production, but to carve out a space for freedom from within through a radical re-purposing.

Bifo suggests that this political subjectivation will occur at the boundary of cyberspace and cybertime, which exhibit different and fundamentally incompatible characteristics: 'cyberspace is conceptually infinite, cybertime is not infinite at all. I call cybertime the ability of the conscious organism to actually process (cyber-spatial) information. This ability cannot be indefinitely expanded, because it has limits that are physical, emotional, affective. Time becomes the primary battlefield, as it is the space of the mind: mind-time, cybertime'. For the labor movement, the 'battlefield of time' has traditionally taken the form of the shorter hours movement, which by the mid-twentieth century had largely succeeded in reducing a virtually limitless workday to 7 or 8 hours in

North America and Europe. But this movement achieved its greatest success in the manufacturing sector, where the employment relations remained relatively stable and the labor theory of value appeared unshakable. In the service sector, where employment relations have always been more tenuous, the hours question is rarely broached. For cognitive and high-tech workers, for all intents and purposes, there is no hours question. Yet the beauty of the shorter hours movement is that its internal logic is not dependent on the labor theory of value (Cutler and Aronowitz, 1998). Tech workers need not be able to calculate the portion of their working day that is converted into relative surplus value to reduce the amount of time they spend doing their jobs.

But importantly, the objective of the recombinant function is not 'to bring to the surface a hidden social authenticity' lurking beneath the oppressive conditions of the modern workplace (Berardi, 2009, p. 66). As far as Bifo is concerned, there is no essential authenticity to be uncovered. In contrast, the early shorter hours movement was often justified on Neo-Luddite grounds – by freeing himself [sic] from the emasculating roar of the factory, the worker could reclaim his 'essential humanness' and achieve complete human development. At certain moments, Bifo's writing appears as a faint echo of the early shorter hours movement: 'It is only by freeing the cognitariat from the subordination to its virtual dimension, it is only by reactivating a dynamic of slow affectivity, of freedom from work, that the collective organism will be able to regain its sensibility and rationality, its ability to live in peace' (2009, p. 71). But Bifo is careful to note that he is not seeking to recapture the purely erotic *à la* Marcuse and the Marxist humanists. The molar/corporeal/individual subject cannot be 'reclaimed' outside of and in opposition to technology. As Bifo has argued, not only is this path undesirable, but it may well be impossible. Humanity has already been so deeply transformed by and through technology that the 'authentically human' can no longer be neatly separated from the 'purely technological'.

Instead, Bifo outlines three possible responses to capitalist restructuring: *deceleration, upgrading* and *subtraction.* Deceleration would involve a reduction of complexity, perhaps for the purpose of reclaiming the 'authentically human'. As already indicated, Bifo believes this is not a viable option. Upgrading, or 'mechanical adjustment of the human body and brain to a hyperfast info-sphere' through use of computer prostheses and drugs is technically possible, though not necessarily desirable (2009, p. 43). This leaves subtraction – 'distancing from the vortex', or what Bifo calls suicide. At times, this refers to actual suicide, at other points, it operates at the level of metaphor. Bifo explains, 'Since September 11th, 2001 suicide is the decisive political act of our times. When human life is worthless, humiliation grows until it become intolerable and explosive. Perhaps hope can only come from suicides' (2009, p. 55). It is important to distinguish this strategy from deceleration, for if the former represents a weary retreat, the later represents a purposeful

withdrawal. The difference is subtle but critical. Arguably, the recombinant function is a form of suicide, for by killing off his worker-identity, the employee-cum-saboteur invites an indeterminate future of collective becomings. Although the valorization of work and the cultivation of worker-identity has been the lifeblood of the twentieth-century unions, it may soon be possible to speak of a labor movement without workers. But this desubjectivation can never be a pure negativity, a mere *not*-subject, for it is accompanied by an unpredictable and always contingent subjectivation (even if only becoming-autonomous). This resurgent subjectivation is asymptotic, never settling into a new subject-identity, but constantly remaking itself through continual experimentation.

However, under late capitalism it is no longer possible to propose a mode of resistance that exists outside of capital. One of the dominant features of control society is its resiliency. If disciplinary society was able to contain dissent by forcing it to the margins, control society embraces and consumes its opposition. For Lazzarato, in olden days, the goal was confinement of the outside and the disciplining of whatever subjectivities now they can be seized only through modulation. Even the politics of anti-identity, which at one point seemed deeply threatening, have been wrapped in plastic and sold in the supermarket, to borrow liberally from Hardt and Negri. The paradox here is that as capitalism constantly reinvents itself to include whatever subjectivities, exploitation only becomes more intense. Or as Deleuze writes (here with Guattari), '… capitalism is always capable of adding to its axiomatic in terms of an enlargement of its limits: let's create the New Deal; let's cultivate and recognize strong unions; let's promote participation, the single class; let's take a step toward Russia …' (2004, p. 137). The limits of capitalist innovation are bounded only by the pretensions of labor.

Dé(class)é Struggle

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the history of unions' relationship to precarity. If unions today are overwhelmingly against precarity, workers' movements have historically had a deeply ambivalent relationship with precarity. As Bifo recalls, 'one of the strong ideas of the movement of autonomous proletarians during the 1970s was the idea "precariousness is good". Job precariousness is a form of autonomy from steady regular work, lasting an entire life' (2009, p. 77). Autonomists regarded 'secure' employment as something of a death sentence, preferring short-term work with no contractual obligations. But this was possible only during a moment of extreme historical specificity characterized by near full employment and expansive social protections. Today, with unemployment much higher and social protections everywhere undermined, precarity has a much more ominous tone. But if the movements of the 1960s and 1970s demanded autonomy, the refusal of work,

sabotage and dissent, precarity was capital's perverse response. 'Workers demanded freedom from the life-time prison of the industrial factory. Deregulation responded with the flexibilization and the fractalization of labor' (Bifo, 2009, p. 76). As Deleuze warned, under control society, capital reacts to demands not through exclusion, but through an inclusion that is all the more insidious.

But not all is lost. While capital has a unique capacity to co-opt out of consume insurgencies, it also constantly generates new sites of struggle. The increasing connectivity of the modern economy generates new potentialities for resistance. For example, just-in-time production, which allows escape from the traditional problem of overproduction by pushing goods down the supply chain on an as-needed basis, has created nodes of power at distribution centers. Even as the Castellsians celebrate the flattening of social space, these distribution centers exhibit a particular vulnerability since their disruption would adversely impact all downstream nodes. Likewise, the 'logistical' sectors – roughly, those industries that transport goods, people and information – have only grown in importance.

Still, unions have largely proven incapable of taking advantage of these opportunities. Their deficiencies are both strategic and structural. Unions today take the form of bloated bureaucracies, only slightly different in form from the businesses they claim to oppose. As arbiters of the employment relation, their social role is to negotiate the terms under which they will sell their members' labor power to potential employers. Writing on the adaptation of worker assemblages to capitalist restructuring, Bifo counterposes the *conjunction* to the *connection*: 'Conjunction is the meeting and fusion of round and irregular shapes that are continuously weaseling their way about with no precision, repetition or perfection. Connection is the punctual and repeatable interaction of algorithmic functions, straight lines and points that overlap perfectly, and plug in or out according to discrete modes of interaction that render the different parts compatible to a pre-established standard' (2009, p. 99). Of course, Bifo is referring to the requirements of capital, but he might as easily be writing about the expectations of the labor movement. Trade unions allow little space for round bodies, they flatten variation and render social space smooth. Unions demand that their members subordinate disparate subjectivities to a master subjectivity – that of the worker. (The existence of officially sanctioned 'constituent groups' in the AFL-CIO such as Pride at Work, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women only underscores this point; many of these groups began as oppositional caucuses that were later co-opted.)

Yet there are some exceptions. Labor is not a monolithic bloc. It might more accurately be described as a 'movement of movements', to borrow a term from the anti-globalization movement. While the official labor movement tends to speak in a monotone, it has a rich tradition of both inter-union competition and

intra-union resistance. In the years since the 'Postscript' was penned, France has seen the explosive growth of the new militant union alliance 'Solidarité, Unité, Democratie' (SUD) which refuses to offer its allegiance to the five 'major' federations and political parties. The SUD was one of the major forces behind the October 2010 general strike against pension reforms, and among the last holdouts when the strike was eventually called off. In the United States until the 1980s, rank-and-file members formed powerful oppositional caucuses that proved capable of holding their leaders' feet to the fire. However, union dissidents typically remain within the confines of disciplinary society, and stop well short the type of aggressive re-imagining Deleuze seems to recommend.

Precarization will force a reinvention not only of unionism but of traditional theories of social class. If critical race theory, post-second wave feminism and queer theory have partially succeeded in destabilizing and dismantling categories of race, gender and sexuality, respectively, most scholars persist in maintaining the relative fixity of class categories. The twin projects of 'queering race' and 'queering gender' are beginning to make inroads into the academic mainstream, but class remains decidedly 'un-queered', even at the margins of the academy. (There has been some writing at the intersection of class and sexuality, but this is a somewhat different project than the one that I am suggesting.) As Mauricio Lazzarato has written, 'classes do not manage to contain multiplicity, in the same way that heterosexuality no longer normalizes the thousand sexes' (2006, p. 177). Toni Negri's 'social worker' formulation represents a bold move away from traditional class categories, but most theorists of class fail to make that move, to put it mildly. For Bifo, 'Social class is not to seen as an ontological concept, but rather as a vectorial concept' (2009, p. 74). Rather than posing classes as fixed categories, or even the Lukascian formulation class-in-itself/class-for-itself, we might think of becoming-class.

Yet Lazzarato believes *becoming* is absolutely incompatible with the institutions of disciplinary society: 'institutions, which are either those of power or those of the labor movement, do not know becoming' (2006, p. 180). In contrast, the labor movement of the future must aspire to a pure becoming, in the temporality of the event. While institutions know only inertia and homogeneity, pure becoming follows an evasive line of flight that eludes capture by the present and exudes difference. This may require style of *organizing* that does not have as its goal the creation or maintenance of an (properly sociological) *organization*, that is, a stable entity with a fixed membership. This is not to necessarily suggest that the labor movement should strive toward absolute spontaneity or the rejection of organization *as such*, but that it must meticulously avoid the calcified stagnancy that inevitably accompanies the drive toward institutional permanance.

In other ways, the traditional labor movement is inadequate to the current historical moment. As Hardt and Negri write, 'the old trade unions are not able

to represent the unemployed, the poor, or even the mobile and flexible post-Fordist workers with short-term contracts, all of whom participate actively in social production and increase social wealth … Second, the old unions are divided according to the various products and tasks defined in the heyday of industrial production' (2004, p. 136). If the traditional labor movement was invested in techniques of confinement, segmentation, regimentation and exclusion, the incipient 'dangerous classes' (Hardt and Negri's term) know only the opposite – variation, intermingling, and above all, constant motion. On the one hand, the isolation of info-labor seems to preclude any collective action, as traditionally conceived. On the other, technological interdependence creates lines of intersection that far exceed the Taylorized factory worker. As Hardt and Negri write, 'at each intersection of lines of creativity or lines of flight the social subjectivities become more hybrid, mixed and misceginated, further escaping the fusional powers of control' (2004, p. 136). While the info-laborer is physically isolated, his virtual community of resistance is unbounded by the walls of the workplace and therefore potentially limitless.

Here the figure of the nomad takes on a new meaning. Hardt and Negri made explicit their Deleuzian influence (and incurred no shortage of wrath from orthodox Marxists) by presenting the 'nomadic revolutionary' as the new subject of history. As inspiration, they turn to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which was the first to organize nomadic workers (lumberjacks in the American Pacific Northwest and migrant farmworkers in the Southwest), and whose organizers were often transient themselves. Moreover, the IWW in its early history had quasi-autonomous chapters that identified with the spirit of the group but had little or no contact with the central leadership or the organization proper. A labor movement in a society of control will be nomadic in two senses of the word: it will not be place-bound, given that work is no longer confined to determinate locations, but neither can it be ideologically bound to the Nation or to the Party. Some unions have recently begun to experiment (very tentatively) with *trans*national alliances, but the labor movement of the future will go much further – it will be resolutely *anti*-nationalist. That is, it will be anti-parliamentarian, impervious to the political process, and unwilling to submit to the logic of the State.

Workers, for their part, may be willing to build new forms, including abandoning and actively opposing existing unions as necessary. After all, France in 1968 was a rebellion against the PCF (French Communist Party) and the CGT (General Confederation of Labor, the largest trade union federation in France) as much as against the DeGaullist state. If unions have tended to regard movements of the unemployed and the marginally employed as adjunct or secondary to their central objectives, these movements will soon take center stage. If the whole of human existence has been folded into labor, a strike can only take the form of complete withdrawal of one's active and complicit

participation in the bio-political and neo-political spheres. (Some in France have called for replacing the 'general strike' with the 'total human strike'.) The labor movement of the future will not organize workers exclusively or even primarily in their capacity as workers. Hardt and Negri trace the lineage of work through progressively larger social spheres, from the specialized professional worker to the unskilled mass worker and finally to the social worker, whose total activity has become productive. Today, there is no 'outside' to work, as all human activity, except non-voluntary functions are rendered productive. Any movement of social workers will organize through the entire cycle of social labor.

Moreover, the labor movement of the future will have a deeply ambivalent relationship with the contract. The labor movement is deeply wedded to contractualism as its primary organizing tool, even as corporations and governments have reneged on their end of the bargain. Three large US states (New York, Illinois and California) and two out of the three major US auto companies demanded that unions 're-open' their contracts in the recent recession. Yet contracts, with their requisite no-strike clauses, remain the norm in the public and private sectors.

Struggle Beneath the Plane of Intelligibility

In an interview conducted independently from his sometime collaborator Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari seems to respond to the question that opens this essay. While answering a question about his analytical technique, Guattari claims, 'in certain periods, institutions of the labor movement have produced new subjectivities, and, to force the issue, I would even say different "human races" … A certain type of worker of the Paris Commune became so "mutant" that there was no choice but for bourgeoisie to exterminate this type. They are perceived as a diabolical menace, as insupportable' (1996, p. 124). While nobody yearns for the fate of the Paris Commune, it represented a sharp break from the guilds and fraternal societies that had dominated the fledgling workers movement up to that point. One hundred and fifty years later, it may be time for another mutation on this scale.

What (non)-forms will these mutant workers take? In the United States, the IWW has an active organizing drive at Jimmy Johns, a medium-sized US fast food sandwich chain, with about 1000 retail outlets in the American midwest. Fast food workers are the iconic exemplars of the precarious economy, and the IWW's campaign to organize these workers was the first of its kind in the United States. Members designed a logo for their campaign featuring anthromorphized cats making sandwiches, referencing a coded symbol (the black cat represents sabotage). While officially the IWW no longer endorses sabotage, the black cat remains an important figure in their symbolic vocabulary. But this image stands in marked contrast to the difference-effacing collectivism of traditional unions.

The cats' round, furry bodies form a conjunction, not a connection, they retain disparate subjectivities, and significantly, they are not even human.

Emergent non-union formations like worker centers have generated considerable interest among the self-appointed intellectuals of the working class. But even if they break with the mainstream labor movement in a formal sense, they often cling to familiar tropes of family, community, identity and state-centered 'rights discourse'. Rarely do they differ significantly from conventional unions in terms of their structure, tactics, rhetoric, encoding, analytical frame and styles of self-presentation.

Some of the more interesting struggles are those that have attracted comparatively less attention. In New York City, a group of contract workers at MTV staged a series of rolling strikes in 2007 to protest the lack of employer-paid healthcare coverage. Through the job action coincided with a strike by the Writers Guild of America, some of whom were also employed by MTV's corporate parent Viacom, the freelancers themselves had no union representation at all (Stetler, 2007). In China, where non-state-sanctioned union activity is illegal, and virtually all independent political formations are officially banned, scholars estimate there are about 50 000 work disruptions per annum, almost entirely beyond the purview of any formal organization. Self-employed Internet workers have organized virtual job actions via the open-source and antisec movements. These emergent struggles will likely be tentative, and they not be immediately perceptible, particularly to those observers steeped in the convalescent logic of twentieth-century unionism. While these movements will face immediate pressure to reorganize along traditional lines and re-present themselves in ways that mimic old forms, their opacity may be their greatest virtue. These formations may not immediately be recognized as political speech-acts, and they may not even seek to be recognized as such. Already, there have been efforts to map these struggles onto known coordinates. But despite the challenge of *Autonomia*, the expressive vocabulary of the labor movement (the work stoppage, the contract, the workday) survives only as an afterimage of a distant memory. Even the hourly wage itself, as both measure of exploitation and object of collective bargaining, is being reconfigured as technological and affective labor increasingly reverts to a piece-rate system. Eventually, the emergent movements may produce a new semiotic system of meaning that exceeds the limits of language or even surpasses the political speech-act itself.

And what of the possibility of adaptation? In Negri and Guattari's co-authored essay 'Communist Propositions', they leave no doubt as to their position: 'Let a thousand machines of life, art and solidarity sweep away the stupid and sclerotic arrogance of old organizations!' (1996, p. 250). Under a regime that already prizes continuous retraining, innovation and adaptation, only a monstrous movement of recombinant mutants is capable of disruption.

About the Author

Abe Walker is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, an adjunct instructor in sociology at Queens College, and a rank-and-file agitator in AFT Local 2334.

References

Anonymous. (2006) Final Communiqué from the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, http://libcom.org/blog/an-update-by-the-sorbonne-occupation-committee-in-exile/03/22/2006, accessed 1 November 2010.

Berardi, F. Bifo (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semi capitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Cutler, J. (2004) *Labor's Time: Shorter hours, the UAW and the Struggle for American Unionism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Cutler, J. and Aronowitz, S. (1998) Quitting time: An introduction. In: S. Aronowitz and J. Cutler (eds.) *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation*. New York: Routledge.

Deleuze, G. (1996) Postscript on societies of control, http://www.n5m.org/n5m2/media/texts/deleuze.htm, accessed 1 November 2010.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2004) *Anti-Oedipus*. New York: Continuum International Publishers.

Galloway, A. (2010) Unpublished talk on Quentin Meillassoux. The Public School, New York City, 28 October.

Guattari, F. and Negri, T. (1996) Communist propositions. In: G. Genosko (ed.) *The Guattari Reader.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Hardt, M. and Negri, T. (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press.

Kelber, H. (2011) Why can't our unions organize any wal-mart or target stores? http://laboreducator.org/lt110628.htm, accessed 1 July 2011.

Lazzarato, M. (2006) The concepts of life and the living in the societies of control. In: M. Fuglsang and B.M. Sörenson (eds.) *Deleuze and the Social*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Marx, K. (1974) *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Virginia, PA: The Dietz Press.

Schwartz-Weinstein, Z. (2010) The limits of work and the subject of labor history. In: D. Haverty-Stacke and D. Walkowitz (eds.) *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756–2009*. New York: Continuum.

Stetler, B. (2007) Freelancers walkout at MTV. *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/11/business/media/11mtv.html, accessed 5 July 2011.

Thoburn, N. (2003) *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*. New York: Psychology Press.

Zerzan, J. (1974) Organized labor versus the 'revolt against work', http://libcom.org/library/organized-labor-versus-revolt-against-work-john-zerzan, accessed 1 November 2010.

Original Article

Creative labour in Shanghai: Questions on politics, composition and ambivalence

Anja Kanngieser
RMIT University, School of Media and Communication, Building 9, Level 5, City campus, 124 La Trobe Street, Melbourne, Australia.

Abstract This article introduces and opens discussion on some of the conditions and ambivalences encountered by the rising creative workforce in Shanghai, through engagement with theories of immaterial labour. Drawing from conversations with several Chinese creative workers, the text aims to provoke thought on the potential for political organisation and resistance within fractalised creative sectors mobilised by high levels of innovation, entrepreneurialism, competition and aspiration. By focusing on processes of subjectivation and desire, it calls for considerations of what might constitute political registers in the Shanghainese creative fields.
Subjectivity (2012) **5**, 54–74. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.25

Keywords: creative labour; subjectivation; Bifo Berardi; Shanghai; young workers

Introduction

In *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation*, Bifo Berardi poses a question that has engaged political philosophers and organisers since the turn of the millennium. How can we organise labour within a current capitalist paradigm typified by flexibilised and so-called immaterial and cognitive forms of production? 'How can we oppose', asks Berardi, 'the … slavery that is affirmed as a mode of command of precarious and depersonalized work?' 'The answer', he continues, 'does not come out because the form of resistance and struggle that were efficacious in the twentieth century no longer appear to have the capacity to spread and consolidate themselves, nor consequently can they stop the absolutism of capital' (2009a, pp. 33–34).

These forms are no longer efficacious, contends Berardi, in great part because fractured and disparate working conditions mean that workers

no longer share a common spatio-temporal existence. While these kinds of workers can, and do, rebel, it no longer catalyses sustained activity. The demise of a common spatio-temporal context is not the only hindrance, however. When the productive capacities of the soul itself, defined by Berardi as 'intelligence, sensibility, creativity and language' (2009b, p. 192), are put to work, the question of organisation intersects with questions of relationality and desire. Even more so when the worker begins to 'value labor as the most interesting part of his or her life', and seeks not to escape the 'prolongation of the working day but … to lengthen it out of personal choice and will' (ibid, p. 79).

What we see in this condition are regimes and conjunctures in which the social, biopolitical and psychic-emotional are productive of, and produced by, economies of labour and capital. In these regimes it becomes harder and harder to distinguish work time from leisure time, private from public, state from corporate and so forth. It has been widely argued (Lazzarato, 1996; Martin, 2002; Virno, 2004; Mitropoulos, 2005; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Vanni and Tari, 2005; de Angelis, 2007) that such regimes are now the tendency rather than the exception; a tendency that has seen an increase in creative, networked, informational and innovative forms of labour in Western capitalist systems.

Similarly, over the past several years, great efforts have been made to integrate invention, innovation and creativity into the core of China's economy, inspired by industry developments in the United Kingdom, Australia and the USA. This has witnessed not only shifts in manufacturing and production technologies, but also in forms of labour organisation. In Shanghai a mass workforce has begun to aggregate in the creative and cultural labour sectors, including the arts, design, fashion, advertising and also software development, IT, logistics and service industries. As in Europe, this burgeoning workforce is one predominantly typified by a relatively low labour-to-wage ratio, high contact hours, flexible contracts and spatial fragmentation. It is also one deeply invested in aspirationalism.

The conditions composing, and composed by, these labouring subjects pose many questions for discussions on the self-valorising possibilities for the creative worker in Shanghai, but also more generally. The processes of subjectivation that give rise to this workforce are complex. They are entangled in currents of desire and self-organisation, governance and entrepreneurialism. Within radical European political discourses on such labour configurations, reference is made to a particular trajectory of praxes and concepts predicated on collective and common struggle and agitation, such as strikes and refusals. Regardless of the vastly different historical, geopolitical and cultural context, this traditional assemblage of strategies fails to resonate within Shanghai's creative sectors in similar ways that it fails to resonate within the contemporary West. This common failure, along with the appropriation of affective and inventive sensibilities by the creative sector, both in Europe and Asia, is precisely why conceptual trajectories such as that offered by Berardi become interesting, despite the socio-cultural and political difficulties for translation posed by the Shanghainese context.

Given these difficulties, how might it be possible to think about subjectivation and self-valorisation in contemporary Shanghainese creative and knowledge labour practices? What kinds of social and political compositions might be present in the creative industries from within which to make claims about living and working conditions? How do these navigate the ambivalences thrown up by the importation of Western labour models and discourses? What does it mean for discourses of immaterial and info labour when these mostly singular and minor compositions escape or contradict them? How might we begin to think of vocabularies more sensitised to agitational, messy, aspirational and individuated gestures that are both autonomous and complicit? And how might such theoretical pathways be put to the task of translation in a radically different context?

It is my intention with this article to open a space for consideration and further enquiry into such questions, and not to lay claim to an exhaustive survey or a comprehensive analysis of the current Chinese situation. My objective is to preliminarily look at some of the conditions and desires underpinning creative workers' experiences and aspirations in Shanghai at the present moment, with the hope that this will connect into other analytical research. Much important scholarship has already been done on the creative industries (Hartley, 2005; Rossiter, 2006; Mosco and McKercher, 2008; McKinlay and Smith, 2009; Ross, 2009; Flew and Cunningham, 2010), creative work and industry in China (Wang, 2004; Flew, 2006; Hartley and Keane, 2006; O'Conner and Xin, 2006; Keane, 2007, 2009; Ye, 2008; Pang, 2009) and socio-political analyses of China's post-socialist labour and cultural history (Wang, 2001; Hui, 2003; Chun, 2006; Arrighi, 2007; Ngai and King-Chi Chan, 2008; Kwan Lee and Friedman, 2009; Ngai and Huilin, 2010); for this reason I will not reiterate this material here.

Instead I would like to suggest that discussions of these sectors require re-conceptualisations of vocabularies used to speak about the political registers, which address the opportunistic leverages produced in the spaces of capital without immediately dismantling them as apolitical. This is not to negate the ambivalences of class composition and the privileges associated with the info sectors. But it is to consider some of these experiences from the perspective of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986, 1987) refer to as 'becoming-revolutionary' on the local or sub-political level, to look at those 'forms of resistance to subjectification which, in producing novel alliances and connections, are also creative of new possibilities of life, new modes of existence and types of practice' (Armstrong, 2002, p. 49).

Asking Questions: Mappings and Conversations

Even when speaking about open and experimental forms of scholarship such as in calls for new (in this case, anglophonic) vocabularies, the translation of

a conceptual framework tied to a historical geographical, cultural and economic paradigm to another that is radically different may well prove conflictive. One may encounter further criticism when employing discourses that have arisen from European and American intellectual, academic and managerial/policy systems on creative labour, social reproduction and precariousness to look at the rising creative sector in China. Indeed, it has already been noted that creativity in China has a profoundly different connotation to that in Europe (Keane, 2009), and that the notion of the 'creative class' as posited by Florida (2002) does not necessarily help to understand the dynamics of economic development in some Asian cities (Mok, 2006); both observations signal problems to the translation of the creative industries in this way point blank. But it must be emphasised that such attempts at scholarship do not necessarily imply a cultural and intellectual imperialism, and nor should they be polarised through sociological or anthropological tropes of 'authenticity' or 'expertise' in knowledge production.[1] In this case, given the increasing interest in Asian capitalist development and labour organisation from the European university cohort, this kind of uneasy relationship invigorates a questioning – an invitation for reflection and debate – rather than a definitive analysis.

The necessity for such a questioning model is best illustrated through two seemingly unrelated points made by Brett Neilson (2008) and Jing Wang (2001). First, in 'Labour, Migration, Creative Industries, Risk' Neilson comments that when one studies the makeup of the creative industries workforce one simultaneously looks at how subjectivation occurs in an environment depoliticised by the hegemony of economics. He states that asking questions such as 'if the productive power of subjectivity in the creative industries is reduced to the power to produce wealth, what are the terms of this reduction?' opens new avenues of research, specifically with regard to the crucial task of current political enquiry, namely 'the need to reassess and redefine the concept of exploitation under current global conditions' (2008).

Second, Jing Wang, in 'Culture as Leisure and Culture as Capital', argues that the traditional dichotomies of socialism versus capitalism, high versus low culture 'are inadequate conceptual tools for our task of capturing the "transitional" or transformational logic at play in contemporary Chinese society' (2001, 69–70). This is because, argues Wang, 'binaries are dissolving' (ibid.).

Together, what these two comments enunciate is the need for analyses that address creative labour systems while negotiating the fetishisation and orientalism risked by much of the current Western academic fascination with China. As Wang critically notes, the prevalent dichotomous mode of thought traps many Marxist dialecticians into believing that they are 'instant China experts' when pitting socialism against capitalism (2001, p. 70). This, however, ignores the complex social, nationalistic and cultural systems at play in contemporary China.

The methods experimented with through 'Transit Labour: Circuits, Regions Borders' (2009–2012) – the larger project through which my research was enabled and contributed to – attempt to navigate (not avoid) these complexities.[2] Adopting a self-reflexive, processual 'platform' method combining sustained online and offline discussions, events and ethnographic and conceptual analysis, in close conjunction with local researchers and institutes embedded in Shanghai, Kolkata and Sydney, the project seeks to investigate the 'changing patterns of labour and mobility in the whirlwind of Asian capitalist transformation' (Transit Labour, 2010).[3] It aims to examine precariousness and mobility in Shanghai, Kolkata and Sydney, with respect to creative labour. Creative labour here does not simply refer to creative and cultural industries, but also to the forms of service and info labour that feed into and enable those fields. Transit Labour thus explores the supply chains and migratory movements that generate creative economies in Asia.

In 2010 I worked with Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter to coordinate the Shanghai platform of the Transit Labour project, and over the 3 months that I spent in Shanghai between March and August I undertook, in collaboration with two local researchers Liu Yi and Cai Ming,[4] interviews with 18 workers and interns in fields such as design, art, advertising and administration/management, as well as in recycling, second-hand electronics and Printed Circuit Board production. Drawing from themes associated with contemporary modes of immaterial labour production, these conversations ranged across issues of organisation and work, remuneration, psycho-somatic effects, bio-politics of welfare and living conditions, tactics of contestation and differential mobilities within cities and regions. Each interview took place in English, Shanghainese and Mandarin and lasted around 1–2 hours. They included broad questions on why the interviewee came to Shanghai, *hukou* (residence permits), work history and background, and migration, as well as more specific questions such as: How do you feel about yourself in this profession? How much of your day do you spend networking and socialising for work? How important is this to your job? Where do people come from that you work with? What kinds of economic, social cultural backgrounds do they predominantly have? What do you do if you have a problem with your working conditions? How do you feel about creating culture for commerce? What impedes/helps your mobility here: your work, living zone, race, class, income, family status and so on? Do you feel that your work impacts on your health/mind/body?

In July 2010, Manuela Zechner and I further initiated a series of conversations with eight young interns, students and workers in media and creative fields through the 'New Media Workers across Asia and Europe: Research Platform for Interregional Collaborations' project. The group that we spoke to, aged between 18 and 24, were all at the early stages of their planned career, having just finished their studies, being about to complete their studies, or recently having entered the job market. Each conversation

was undertaken in English with two participants at a time and lasted up to 2 hours. A method used to open dialogue was a constellation of five graphical mappings.[5] First, a hexagram on which participants were asked to scale their level of fun, learning, income, professional recognition, social value and health in relation to their current occupation. Second, a time budget breaking days/weeks/months into hours spent on sleep, work, transit, computer/phone, collaboration, (self) education, pleasure, eating, friendship, love and care, and at home. Third, a diagram of social relations, based on who participants undertake paid work, unpaid work, celebrations, eating, intimate conversations, and the sharing of resources with. Fourth, a map of Shanghai in which participants were asked to trace out their daily transit rhythms and places they spent time in. And finally a body map, upon which participants were asked to indicate sites on their bodies where they felt tension, pain, wear and tear, touch, excitation and underuse.

These mappings, while recalling social science techniques of data collection, were expressedly oriented towards the facilitation of exchange rather than the collation of quantitative information. The stimulus provided by the maps and diagrams afforded a point of reference that helped to invigorate conversation through questioning and seeking clarification. This allowed for a mode of interaction that was not founded on assumed premises but on a dialogic and open communication without expectation of answers, which may shift depending on the particular conversational constituencies. For some of the young people we engaged they served a quasi-therapeutic function, giving space for reflection on their own past and future processes of subjectivation as students, interns, workers, 'creatives' and as civil and socio-cultural subjects.

What became apparent through the process of the mapping conversations with younger workers and interns and the earlier interviews with mid and later career 'creatives' was that the conditions described by the discourses around cognitive and immaterial labour, working conditions and precariousness, resonated. While the vocabularies employed in Western conceptualisations did not translate seamlessly owing to differences not only in language and communication but also socio-cultural and economic histories, the materialities and sensibilities they spoke to were identified by our interviewees as being shared at the present time within the creative sectors. This was especially true in terms of the psychic, somatic and emotional affects of contemporary labour modes. As one designer, Li Wen, commented to me on 24 March 2010, 'sleep disorders are the illness of the creative worker, it doesn't matter where you are'. In such ways, the expropriation of creative passion, affect and communicational ability by capital, the aspirationalism tied to creative and cultural economies, can be seen to signal points of connection through industry across significant geopolitical, social and cultural terrains.

Creative Labour, Life and Organisation

Western discourses on the reconfiguration of labour and social systems through capitalism have become sensitive to what has been termed by proponents of autonomist theory as the rise in cognitive, info or immaterial labour, typified by the creative and knowledge sectors. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, immaterial labour can be thought of as that which 'produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (1996, p. 133);[6] the making of the 'intellect, perception, and linguistic communication as the principle resources of production' (Virno in Costa, 2004). This understanding is taken even further by Berardi when he observes that 'social culture, contrasting imaginaries, expectations, and disappointments, loathing and solitude, all enter to modify the rhythm and pace of the productive process' (2007, pp. 58–59). According to Virno, 'saying that work today has become communicative means that it absorbs the generic human capacities that, until recently, unfolded during time outside of work' (ibid.). What follows then is that through the convergence of labour and 'aesthetic tastes, ethical decisions, affects, and emotions', it becomes ever more difficult to differentiate 'work' from 'leisure', 'producer' from 'consumer', 'public' from 'private' (ibid.).

The ambivalence for Virno lies in the way that intellect, language and emotions now function as the cornerstones of labour systems, as 'productive "machines"' (2001). Here the general intellect, quite literally 'intellect in general: the faculty and power to think, rather than the works produced by thought [including] formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and "language games"', has become the central productive attribute of living labour (ibid.). In this sense, writes Virno, the fundamental attitudes of cognition become the possibility for production: language, the capacity to learn, memory, and so forth. What Virno sees in this transfiguration is what he takes from Marx's conception of 'general intellect' in 'Fragment on machines' in the *Grundrisse* (1974); namely the exteriorisation, collectivisation and socialisation associated with intellectual activity when it becomes 'the true mainspring of the production of wealth' (Virno, 2004, p. 38). Virno's ambivalence is underscored by an acute awareness of those opposing directions that can develop out of the public or common intellect, something made very clear in the creative sectors. Because the public or general intellect is the unifying base, these developments have significant consequences. On the one hand it can catalyse a genuine public sphere, a *republic*, 'a political space in which the many can tend to common affairs' through the dissolution of its bond to capitalist modes of production, commodification and the wage labour system (ibid, p. 40). On the other, if it is removed from the public sphere or a political community as such, it can become a conduit for the further manifestation of capitalist massification, of subservience and false reassurance. This is captured perfectly by Virno in his example of the *sharing* of linguistic and cognitive

operations, an attribute that is the lynchpin of much creative work: 'sharing', says Virno 'in one way characterizes "the many", seen as being many, the multitude; in another way it is itself the base of today's production' (ibid, p. 41).

It is within the ambivalence borne by the imbrications of social and capitalist forms of life that it becomes possible to see how Virno critically composes the potentiate elements of such new architectures of the public. Virno writes that these can 'manifest themselves in opposite ways: as servility or as liberty', that is to say, either in 'opportunism, cynicism, the desire to take advantage of the occasion in order to prevail over others', or in 'conflict and insubordination, defection and exodus from the present situation' (in Costa, 2004). The ambivalences described by Virno must be considered in discussions of labouring subjects within contemporary capitalist systems, which need to either find ways to maneuver through them, or translate them into radical intensities, into new ways of organising, relating, being, in the present rather than in some utopian vision of the future. Clearly this poses significant challenges, to which I will later return, especially in the creative fields. Even more challenges arise when we take into account the wider permutations of creative labour into service, logistics and waste sectors, where, as Berardi writes, 'precariousness is no longer a marginal and provisional characteristic, but it is the general form of the labor relation in a productive, digitalized sphere, reticular and recombinative' (2009a, p. 31).

In the creative sectors the precariousness and competitiveness that may accompany the general intellect, the collectivity and mutability of labour power, as well as its decimation of conventional labour roles and contracts, can lead to a silence and aspiration rather than contestation. This is partly because, as Berardi has pointed out, the dislocation of sites and temporalities in which struggle has traditionally assembled. But it is also because, as Gina Neff *et al* emphasise,

> 'Hot' industries and 'cool' jobs not only normalize, they glamorize risk, and the entrepreneurial investment required of individuals seeking those jobs leads to a structural disincentive to exit during difficult economic times. The image of glamorized risk provides support for continued attacks on unionized work and for ever more market-driven, portfolio-based evaluations of workers' value. (2005, p. 331)

This is where the planes of organisation, precariousness, subjectivation and desire intersect and it is precisely at this intersection that class composition becomes problematised in the creative sectors, as I will now show.

The Creative Class in Shanghai

The process of China's industrialisation accelerated with the turn of the twenty-first century. The last decade has seen the advance of a 'new economy'

of creative discourses and industries, perfectly captured by the shift from 'Made in China' to 'Created in China' (Wang, 2004; Hartley and Keane, 2006; O'Conner and Xin, 2006; Carriço *et al*, 2008; Ye, 2008; de Kloet, 2009; Keane, 2009; Pang, 2009). This was in part to do with the increased promotion of non-manufacturing and service sectors in many of the more developed cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, Suzhou, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Changsha and Guangzhou (Keane, 2007; Ye, 2008; IVCA, 2010). Within this shift, creative industries were framed as a means by which to 'upgrade the economic structure' (Li and Zhang, 2008), coinciding with state development of commercial creative industry zones and public spaces (O'Conner and Xin, 2006). The past 10 years have also witnessed an expansion in creative and culturally focused higher education, with hundreds of thousands of students majoring in fields like animation, game design and advertising, aggressively encouraged by the Chinese government. This was supported by positive perceptions of the economic viability of entrepreneurial ventures, towards an ideological conviction of strong Chinese socio-economic growth through what Perry Anderson calls 'the benefits of private enterprise' (2007).

Despite stringent censorship on internet communications by the state, the access to pirated software, peer 2 peer and social networking sites played a large role in the explosion of the creative fields, not only in the distributive capacities for creative talent and marketing, but also in the production, circulation and consumption of creative subcultural life worlds, for instance the independent music and arts, design and fashion industries.[7] This is hardly surprising given the extent to which social networking and online sites function as digital platforms for the constitution of different civil and public communities in China, as both Shubo Li (2010) and Zixue Tai (2006) have argued. According to Lisa Li and Zafka Zhang writing on the blog China Youth Watch, which sells itself as 'catching the pulse of China youth',

> China sees not only a growing supply of creative products/contents but also a huge size of creativity-seekers in the young generation. There's the saying all the artistic youth in China gather on Douban. Whatever 'cool stuff' you are talking about, you are assured to find at least one group on it. (2008)[8]

Obviously there are commonalities in the commodification of social labour regardless of its sites of articulation. Whether in Asia or Europe what is primarily capitalised upon is artistic innovation in the form of imaginative and affective relationalities. This is what drives consumer desire, made visible through social networks and communicative faculties – the becoming labour of language and empathy, as we have seen (Virno, 2004; Berardi, 2009a, b). Michael Keane has noted, however, that while creative fields in the West are imbued with histories and fantasies of the liberated artist and the

transcendence of aesthetics, this is not the case in China (2009). Furthermore, as Wang points out, peculiar also to the development of the cultural and creative fields in China is an intense symbiosis of state and corporate apparatuses (2004). The tension between, on the one hand, mass collective labour and economic expansion and on the other, individuation and self-expression, is also worthy of note given the historical conditions of Chinese socialist labour regimes. These aspects grate against European understandings of creative labour, and antagonise any easy translation of political vocabularies trans-contextually.

Within China, Shanghai is claimed to have 'by far the most ambitious creative industries programme' and as 'the most "Western" city in China on its own admission, is thus set to take the lead in the creative industries' (O'Conner and Xin, 2006, p. 281). As Li Wu Wei and Hua Jian propose, the potential for the creative industries in Shanghai is particularly high for a number of reasons: first, its pre-existing industry infrastructure; second, its 'historical industrial heritage' (2006, p. 168); third, its cultural diversity and mix of Eastern and Western influences; and fourth, its desirability to 'talent' boosted by China's 'open door policy' (ibid.). Unique to Shanghai is also a distinctive combination of 'industrial clustering, government agency promotion, and policy support' (ibid.). The impact of the creative markets has been most clearly evinced by the sharp increase in arts infrastructures: according to a UNESCO report, Shanghai now features the largest territory of creative clusters worldwide, with over 6110 creative enterprises originating from more than 30 countries and regions, employing over 114 700 people (2011). By the end of 2010 the creative industries were expected to be generating around 10 per cent of Shanghai's GDP (Yu, 2007). Given this staggering escalation of the field since its 2005 inception, what is of interest are the new kinds of social assemblages arising from these recent labour constellations, and the modes of organisation and regulation that they have engendered.

The social and class assemblages and subjectivities arising from Shanghai's new creative sector are complex, and there is an uneven distribution of labour, despite a propensity to label creative workers as the burgeoning elite class. First, this is because of the wide array of work and working conditions that fall under the category of 'creative' in China. As Zhang (2007) shows, this ranges from advertising, IT, media and science research to hairdressing, agriculture and textiles. Second, the supply chains consolidating these industries are also imperative to acknowledge. As the Transit Labour project illustrates, this includes the processing and assemblage of raw materials and components, traditionally factory labour, to waste collection and recycling, comprised of both formal and informal economies and structures. The inclusion of service labour to this category is also imperative.

This is what troubles any meta-analysis of the economic and social composition of the living labour that populates innovation and creative work.

Two contrasting perspectives seem to dominate – common to both is an aspirationalist desire. This can be both de-politicising and politicising in unconventional ways, as will later be discussed. On the one hand, as Jing Wang comments,

> the rising 'creative class' … have deep pockets, networking capital with the state, and a lifestyle characteristic of the nouveau riche. Totally indifferent to public issues concerning the truly socially dislocated (i.e. rural migrants) those twenty- and thirty-somethings are a species that even the most enthusiastic advocates of creative industries would find difficult to romanticize. (2004, p. 17)

The stereotype identified by Wang is certainly not exceptional. A brief scan of online materials cites the same glamorous, vertiginously successful lifestyle criticised by Wang (Chen, 2007; Keenlyside, 2008; Fringe Shanghai, 2010; Tian, 2010). What must be acknowledged with regard to this stereotype, furthermore, is its connection to the expatriate community, which comprises in large part the management hierarchy and contributes to the unevenness in labour and economic distribution. The influx of Western and more broadly transnational businesses and entrepreneurs, and the workforce comprising the professional classes, impacts the shaping of aspirations of young people for hyper-consumer capitalist culture.

On the other hand, a number of the young Chinese creatives we spoke with described their background, and those of their friends and peers, as working or middle class, often migrating from rural territories either with their families or alone for the pursuance of higher education. This is obviously not to suggest that all of those within the creative sectors come from working-class demographics, but simply to note that each industry contains diversities that cannot be easily homogenised. Many of the young workers we spoke to articulated a struggle within the job market, both their own and their peers, and an apprehension around future job security. On a national scale, this seeming precariousness is supported by the growing awareness (Agencies, 2010; Crowley, 2010; Jennings, 2010; Madariaga, 2010) of what has been termed 'ant tribes': the flexible and low-waged aggregation of young graduates without job contracts or social security living in highly condensed diasporas on the metropolitan outskirts. Similarly, there has been documentation of factory labour in Chinese provinces, such as Dafen, where the manufacture and mass production of aesthetic objects occur (Paetsch, 2006). In a telling gesture one graduate from the prestigious Peking University even posted on the Chinese Ganji (online used goods trading website) 'I am willing to sell my Peking University diploma for one yuan'. According to Paolo Do, this was because since 2003 the graduate had not found employment paying more than 1500 yuan per month, less than that offered for much unqualified work (2010).

From these contrasting perspectives it is hardly surprising that Pang cautions that it is necessary to address the complexities within the constituencies of the creative fields and to understand such complexity as 'politically confounding because it constantly incorporates and interjects different kinds of labor and different ways of thinking, although it also means that workers are exposed to exploitation on different fronts' (2009, p. 72). The composition of this workforce from a socio-economic standpoint is even more layered when one takes into account China's national history over the latter half of the twentieth century. Chris Connery proposed during an interview on 3 August 2010 that the broad sweep of Chairman Mao's cultural revolution and the attempted rehabilitation of the bourgeoisie meant that class composition was fundamentally altered, thus making the tracing out of class history one that needs to refer back to serial generations rather than only to the most recent. As Yanjie Bian (2002) asserts, the post-1978 reforms under Deng Xiaoping led to an evolving class system, the effects of which may contribute to the searching out for a different kind of relationship to social and familial reproduction, and capitalist accumulation by the younger generations.

The composition of this labour force must be seen from within this history, but without negating present labour conditions that inherently challenge conventional Marxist conceptions of class constitution and the international division of labour.[9] The determined aspiration and idealism – along with cultural narratives around knowledge, experience and work – that underpins young worker's 'acceptance' of unsatisfactory labour situations must not be necessarily dismissed as a de-politicisation through privilege and elitism. This is not to deny ongoing inequality, class analysis and conflict in China, especially between rural and metropolitan regions as Pun Ngai and Chris King-Chi Chan (2008) emphasise. Nor is it to undermine the recognition of a rising elite in such creative and innovative sectors, to deny the commercial and capital potential in these industries, or to negate the class privilege inherent to education. Rather it is to acknowledge the wide disparities and complex array of material conditions and wages within the sector that complicate readings of class formation.

Reconsidering Politics and Organisation

Widespread and collective labour disputes are still common in China. The early half of 2010 especially attracted global media attention with high-profile struggles at foreign-owned factories in China's southeast provinces, for instance the suicides at consumer electronics factories such as Foxconn, and strikes at Honda auto plants. As Ngai and King-Chi Chan (2008), Ngai and Huilin (2010), and Ching Kwan Lee (2007) have shown, labour unrest is particularly strong in manufacturing, textile and agricultural industries with a large rural

migrant workforce. This is the face of migrant determination most visibly associated with worker organisation. In the creative techno-social fields, however, there is little political volatility, which makes it understandable that scholars concentrate on the more established registers of political articulation by the exploited working and peasant classes than the seemingly manageable conditions of 'middle-class' creative workers.

Given the ostensible lack of self-organisation within the creative fields in Shanghai, once described to me as a politically conservative wasteland, why is it interesting to speak about young workers in these fields when there are more prolific and obvious sites of contestation elsewhere? To my mind there are two primary reasons. First, if, as the Transit Labour project does, we take into account the chains of labour feeding into and fed into by the creative sectors, we see a much more complex constellation of labour fields. Second, if we examine actual material conditions, we recognise that a significant number of these creative workers fall into the 40 per cent of the urban workforce who are 'self-employed, part-time, temporary and casual' and who possess 'little bargaining power' (Kwan Lee and Friedman, 2009, p. 22).

It is also not surprising that this workforce, whether in China or elsewhere, confounds the conventional strategies of self-organisation and hence visibility, a crucial point connecting to Virno's conceptualisations of radical publics and the ambivalences associated with the capitalisation of the 'general intellect'. The challenges confronting self-organisation in these fields in China are not dissimilar to those in Europe. There is no framework for unionisation in the independent and freelance creative workforce, and in areas where there is a salaried system, for instance advertising or design, there appears to be minimal desire for union participation, in part owing to the collusion of trade unions and the Communist government. This lack of framework may have informed the tone of responses given in Shanghai around the possibilities for collective forms of action. When asked 'what would a strike mean to you' during an interview on the 24 March 2010, Li Wen, a graphic designer and artist, responded,

> there is no strike here, so if you are on strike you are like, hey sorry I cannot do that, and you end up probably like the clients say fuck you there's tonnes of people that we can ask for, so that's the problem I think there's no work unit and those kinds of concepts here.

The fragmentation spoken of by Li was echoed across the interview spectrum. Similarly this was reflected in the unanimous puzzlement over popular European forms of occupation and appropriation, which had in the United Kingdom and Germany resurged over the past years within political creative networks.

Another Shanghai-based artist, Huang Zhi, during an interview on 19 March 2010 recounted an event that had occurred in February 2010 in Beijing, which

to him resonated the most with such practices. He explained that a few years back an artist's village had been established on a long-term contract of 5–10 years. After a period of 1 or 2 years the artists were served with eviction papers. The artists, having invested much time and energy in the space, refused to leave. The owners responded by cutting off power and water for 4 months during the winter. The artist was unsure whether many of the artists were actually inhabiting the premises, but did know that they spent a considerable amount of time there. Through this experience they were, he said, united. One night around 200 organised thugs came to the premises and attacked the artists. Some of them were badly injured. One of China's most prolific and outspoken artists Ai Weiwei then organised a march on Tiananmen Square, which was interrupted by police. The march had the effect, however, that attention was drawn to the crime and the thugs were arrested. The artists were also compensated in the sense that they received funds to move out of the studios.

'This', commented Huang 'is a protest basically, it's not a strike right but this is something'. He then went on to talk about a website where artists design logos for competitive auction, getting paid between 100 and 500 RMB per design. What this illustrated for him was the combination of fierce individualisation and atomisation, cheap labour and self-exploitation that nullified the possibilities for collective action on an everyday level. 'Maybe strike is not working here', he concluded, 'there's no strike concept because they don't care about strike, but I think it would be great if there was a service or organisation that can deal with these issues'.

From conversations with several creative practitioners in Shanghai, it seemed that despite, or perhaps because of, the infrastructural degeneration of Beijing's arts scene, it maintained a greater renown for the kinds of radical assemblages more recognised from a European perspective. What also became clear was that it was commonly held that Shanghai itself lacked a critical political consciousness. At the same time, however, some arts practitioners were far more ambivalent. One instigator of the self-organised creative space Xindanwei – a Shanghai collective 'workspace' and meeting place for independent and freelance creative workers (Xindanwei, 2010) – Ling Ya, pinpointed this so-called political lack as something deeply historical and structural. She highlighted the problems of a direct translation or comparison with Western systems, stating during our interview on 12 March 2010,

> I wouldn't say that Shanghai is politically indifferent, it's just those people compared to the West are still quite small. I mean this is quite normal when you have a country that's been censored for a long time and has a planned economy and people don't really have too much of a sense of expressing ideas, but it's coming, definitely. If you check twitter you have many followers from Shanghai and every day they are talking about politics.

This consideration is not omitted by Wang though, who also reflects 'how do we begin to envision a … discussion of something like creative industries in a country where creative imagination and content are subjugated to active state surveillance?' (2004, p. 17). The issue raised by both Ling and Wang here is central as it lays bare this symbiosis of state, capital and creativity so prevalent in China and especially in Shanghai, which antagonises Eurocentric vocabularies of self-valorisation and refusal. The Xindanwei space, for instance, describes itself as self-organised and makes associative claims to underground activism. At the same time it maintains a biometric access system and defines itself as a social enterprise, a socially driven organisation that uses market strategies and structures to achieve a social goal. Ling was candid about its operation. When we asked about the intersections between culture and commerce, she recounted a story concerning the model of organisation they desired. 'A meeting', she told us 'was held with supporters of the space to gauge their opinions. Half of the group recommended the discourse around co-working and collaboration be dropped to limit confusion in favour of positioning the space as a service or business centre. The other half recognised the 'competitive advantage' of the space being its uniqueness and its distinction from conventional models. 'This difference', she continued, 'is what allows Xindanwei to fill a niche in the market, because such spaces are almost non-existent in Shanghai and this is why it attracts interesting discussion and debate not found elsewhere'.

The ways in which politics and organisation, as well as subjectivation, are conceived of and play out in these scenarios speaks directly to the ambivalences at the heart of Virno's conceptions of the general intellect and the possibilities for radical publics (Virno, 2004). In China, with its long history of enforced socialism and collectivism, the importation of Western ideals of collaboration and creativity is a tense one, as our conversations with Chris Connery and Chen Hangfeng edify (Kanngieser and Zechner, 2010). For Virno the putting to work of creativity and communication, of social relations, can lead to either servitude or emancipation. For the creative workers we spoke to, perhaps because of the current permutation of capitalist socialism, the trajectory of 'opportunism, cynicism, the desire to take advantage of the occasion in order to prevail over others' intersects and infects that of 'conflict and insubordination, defection and exodus from the present situation' (Virno in Costa, 2004). What this means for any engagement with the refrain of 'what is to be done?' today is the need for an acute sensitivity to the complexities and gradations in the composition, strategies and self-conceptualisations of the so-called creative class, especially one with a history like that in China.

Conclusion

To emphasise this final conjecture: the majority of creative workers that we spoke to described themselves as politically engaged. Given the events recounted

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

here, what kinds of social and organisational assemblages are occurring in these fields? How do these navigate the ambivalences thrown up by the importation of Western labour models and discourses? The intense capitalisation of social, linguistic and affective relations means self-organisation and self-governance are mechanisms for both autonomy and complicity. In China where the state colludes so thoroughly with capital, the scene is even more fraught. If the above situations sit awkwardly within our formulations of political criticality, do they become void? Where might we see potential in ambivalence? Is there a way to read aspiration beyond capitalist accumulation? And how might we begin to think of vocabularies more receptive to agitational, messy, aspirational and individuated gestures that are both autonomous and complicit? These are but some of the questions that need to be asked when considering the modes of subjectivation producing, and produced by, China's creative, knowledge and innovative workers.

In asking such questions in this article, I have framed and proposed the conditions of creative labour in terms of the conflicts and connections that are produced through, and produce, what has been identified by Virno, Berardi and others as the colonisation of the social and biopolitical realms by capital and labour. I want to stress this aspect of conflict and ambivalence. In doing so, I emphasise that rather than fully rest on the point, as Berardi does, that what is inevitable is a depressive phase, in which 'hope can only come from suicides' (2009a, p. 55) we might also consider the less visible or less recognisable gestures of self-valorisation and opportunistic leverages produced – despite the spaces of capital – by affective relations, which may require new vocabularies for their enunciation.

What is required are new ways to observe and articulate emerging social and labour mobilisations from perspectives that accommodate the microcosms of the everyday and that traverse macro-political, visible, common expressions, paying attention to those sites usually forgotten or dismissed by political activisms. At the same time, the multiplication of autonomies and complicities through the multiplication of different kinds of labouring roles and subjects need to be accounted for. So do the difficulties these entail, for instance the appropriation of self-organisation by capital, and a willing absorption of technologies of valorisation into all spheres of social and bio-political life.

About the Author

Anja Kanngieser is a cultural geographer, communications scholar and self-taught radio maker working at the intersections of labour self-organisation, migration, radical politics, the voice and radio. She is the author of *Creative Experiments in Making Worlds* (forthcoming 2013), http://transversalgeographies.org/.

Notes

1 There have been, in recent years, new considerations of what comprises ethnographic method; especially interesting are the debates coming from George Marcus's (2008) comment that recent ethnography has produced 'no new ideas'. Scholars such as Maximilian Forte (2008) contest that such proclamations ignore 'new forms of doing, producing, and writing ethnography, especially with reference to cyberspace ethnography'. Furthermore, anthropologists of distributed phenomena such as Christopher Kelty (2008) argue that the breadth of study need not negate its depth. Such debates feed into the understandings of contemporary ethnography taken up by the Transit Labour project. For more on this see Kanngieser *et al* (forthcoming).

2 The Transit Labour project comes from the ARC Discovery Grant funded project 'Culture in Transition: Creative Labour and Social Mobilities in the Asian Century'. Departing from much of the recent China-oriented scholarship, Brett Neilson *et al* (2010) write that Transit Labour's 'initiation of research in China is not part of a search for alternative modernities that articulate post-war geocultural visions', but rather seeks to 'attend to the multiple processes of bordering that internally divide and connect the continent to wider and differentially scaled circuits of labour, capital, technology, culture and life' (2010, pp. 1–2). By exploring conflictive and complicit conjunctures, it becomes less about opposing geographical regions and more about the intersections of logistics, labour, governance and subjectivation.

3 For a list of participants see http://transitlabour.asia/shanghai/. Research partners on the project include Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, University of Nottingham, Ningbo, Lingnan University, Dipartimento di Politica, Istituzioni, Storia, Universita di Bologna, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group and Tsinghua University.

4 All names of interviewees and Shanghainese collaborators have been changed or omitted to protect anonymity. This is necessarily because of very actual instances of political and cultural repression.

5 For maps see http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/Mapping_Shanghai.

6 While this labour still 'involves our bodies and brains as all labour does', the products of this labour, rather than the labour itself, have become immaterial (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 109). At the same time, as Berardi explains, while cognitive activity and intelligence has always been at the heart of human production, whether mechanical, agricultural, artisan or reproductive, in the contemporary scenario, cognitive capacity has become the central resource. 'Today', writes Berardi, 'the mind is at work in so many innovations, languages and communicative relations' (2009a, p. 34).

7 Issues of intellectual property, piracy and counterfeiting also need to be mentioned here, especially given the massive hardware and software production industry in China, an industry fraught with labour unrest and exploitation of workers. The new regulations in China requiring tech firms to submit proprietary information (algorithms, source codes, design information) to government agencies are reconfiguring not only where such products are designed and assembled, but also how the economies around innovation are distributed. Ongoing issues around hacking and censorship in China, seen most dramatically in the recent Google relocation of its Chinese servers to Hong Kong, illustrate some of the conflicts being faced in this negotiation between economics and securitisation. Because this text is necessarily limited in its focus I do not have the space to extrapolate this theme here, but scholars such as Cheung (2009), Nie (2006), Keane and Montgomery (2006) and Zhang (2006) further discuss these issues.

8 Douban is one of the largest online communities in China with about 10 million registered users, as of late 2009.

9 Extensive research has yet to be done on what affect the socialist history of enforced collectivism has had in terms of new collective and collaborative modes of labour and whether this makes out a significant deviation from ideas of collectivism in European creative sectors. These themes were addressed during our conversation with Chen Hangfeng and Chris Connery, see Kanngieser and Zechner, 2010.

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341 **Subjectivity** Vol. 5, 1, 54–74

References

Agencies. (2010) Young college graduates toil in ant 'tribes'. *People Daily* 28 June, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7042410.html, accessed 12 September.

Anderson, P. (2007) Jottings on the conjecture. *New Left Review* 48, http://newleftreview.org/?view=2695, accessed 4 August 2010.

Armstrong, A. (2002) Agency reconfigured: Narrative continuities and connective transformations. *Contretemps* 3: 42–53.

Arrighi, G. (2007) States, markets, and capitalism, East and West. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15(2): 251–284.

Berardi, F. (2005) Biopolitics and connective mutation. *Culture Machine* 7, http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/27/34, accessed 2 May 2006.

Berardi, F. (2007) Technology and knowledge in a universe of indetermination. Trans. G. Mecchia *SubStance* 36(1): 57–74.

Berardi, B. (2009a) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation*, In: E. Empson and S. Shukaitis (eds.), Translated by A. Bove, E. Empson, M. Goddard, G. Mecchia, A. Schintu and S. Wright. London: Minor Compositions.

Berardi, B. (2009b) *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Bian, Y. (2002) Chinese social stratification and social mobility. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 91–116.

Carriço, M., de Muynck, B. and Rossiter, N. (eds.) (2008) *Urban China: Counter-mapping the Creative Industries*, http://orgnets.net/publications/urban_china/contents, accessed 1 February 2010.

Chen, A. (2007) The next cultural revolution. *Fast Company* 1 June, http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/116/features-the-next-cultural-revolution.html, accessed 3 November 2010.

Cheung, G.C.K. (2009) *Intellectual Property Rights in China: Politics of Piracy, Trade and Protection*. London: Routledge.

Chun, L. (2006) *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Costa, F. (2004) *'Between Dsobedience and Exodus' Interview with Paolo Virno*, Translated by N. Holdren. *Generation Online*, http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno5.htm, accessed 6 May 2005.

Crowley, V. (2010) (Re)producing gender: The ant tribe. Women in and Beyond, 10 March, http://www.womeninandbeyond.org/?p=627, accessed 21 March.

de Angelis, M. (2007) *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. London, Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto.

de Kloet, J. (2009) Abandoned factories, artistic fantasies: Creative labour and urbanity in a 'new' China. Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam: Paper for ASSR staff seminar, 10 November.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1986) *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Translated by D. Polan. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Translated by B. Massumi. London: Athlone Press.

Do, P. (2010) Take back our future. Living Knowledge, 27 October, http://livingknowledge.net/2010/10/27/take-back-our-future/, accessed 28 October.

Flew, T. (2006) The new middle class meets the creative class: The Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and creative innovation in 21st-century China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(3): 419–429.

Flew, T. and Cunningham, S. (2010) Creative industries after the first decade of debate. *The Information Society* 26(2): 113–123.

Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Forte, M. (2008) George Marcus: 'No New Ideas' (2.0) and the After-life of anthropology (1.1). Zero Anthropology, 4 April, http://zeroanthropology.net/2008/04/04/george-marcus-no-new-ideas/, accessed 4 July 2011.

Fringe Shanghai. (2010) http://www.fringeshanghai.com/guanyuyisuishuangzhou-e.htm, accessed 3 November.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2005) *Multitude: War and Democracy in an Age of Empire*. London: Penguin Books.

Hartley, J. (ed.) (2005) *Creative Industries*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Hartley, J. and Keane, M. (2006) Creative industries and innovation in China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(3): 259–262.

Hui, W. (2003) *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, In: T. Huters (ed.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

IVCA. (2010) The Creative Industries in China. *Report*, March, http://www.ivca.org/ivca/live/news/2010/develop-your-business-in-china-join-the-ivca-trade-mission-to-shanghai/IVCA_Report_-_The_Creative_Industries_in_China.pdf, accessed 15 May.

Jennings, R. (2010) China's 'ant tribe' poses policy challenge for Beijing. *The Star* 18 February, http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/2/18/worldupdates/2010-02-18T055227Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_-462560-1&sec=Worldupdates, accessed 21 March.

Kanngieser, A., Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. (forthcoming) Platform as method. In: B. Winter and K. Grewal (eds.) *Transcultural Mappings: Re-interrogating the National in the Context of the Global*. London: Routledge.

Kanngieser, A. and Zechner, M. (2010) Interview with Chris Connery and Chen Hangfeng. *Transit Labour* 8 July, http://transitlabour.asia/blogs/future, accessed 6 October.

Keane, M. (2007) *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward*. New York: Routledge.

Keane, M. (2009) Creative industries in China: Four perspectives on social transformation. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(4): 431–443.

Keane, M. and Montgomery, L. (2006) Learning to love the market: Copyright, culture, and China. In: P.N. Thomas and J. Servaes (eds.) *Intellectual Property Rights and Communications in Asia: Conflicting Traditions*. New Delhi, India and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications India.

Keenlyside, S. (2008) Shanghai surprise. *Telegraph* 9 March, http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG3364733/Shanghai-surprise.html, accessed 21 March 2010.

Kelty, C. (2008) *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kwan Lee, C. (2007) *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kwan Lee, C. and Friedman, E. (2009) The labor movement. *Journal of Democracy* 20(3): 21–24.

Lazzarato, M. (1996) Immaterial labour. In: P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Li, L. and Zhang, Z. (2008) Creative industry and 'creative generation' in China. *China Youth Watch* 10 November, http://chinayouthology.com/blog/?p=355, accessed 12 January 2010.

Li, S. (2010) The online public space and popular ethos in China. *Media Culture Society* 32(1): 63–83.

Madariaga, J. (2010) Ant tribe: Sociology with Chinese characteristics. *Chinayouren* 22 March, http://chinayouren.com/en/2010/03/22/3305, accessed 12 September.

Marcus, G. (2008) The end(s) of ethnography: Social/cultural anthropology's signature form of producing knowledge in transition. *Cultural Anthropology* 23(1): 1–14.

Martin, R. (2002) *The Financialization of Daily Life*. Philadephia, PA: Temple University Press.

Marx, K. (1974) *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Virginia, PA: The Dietz Press.

McKinlay, A. and Smith, C. (eds.) (2009) *Creative Labour: Working in the Creative Industries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mitropoulos, A. (2005) Precari-us? *Republicart*, http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/mitropoulos01_en.htm, accessed 18 October 2006.

Mok, P. (2006) Asian cities and limits to creative capital theory. In: L. Kong and J. O'Connor (eds.) *Creative Economies, Creative Cities: Asian-European Perspectives*. New York: Springer.

Mosco, V. and McKercher, C. (2008) *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Neff, G., Wissinger, E. and Zukin, S. (2005) Entrepreneurial labor among cultural producers: 'Cool' jobs in 'hot' industries. *Social Semiotics* 15(3): 307–334.

Neilson, B. (2008) Labour, migration, creative industries, risk. In: N. Rossiter, B. de Muynck, M. Carriço (eds.) *Urban China: Counter-mapping the Creative Industries*, http://orgnets.net/urban_china/neilson, accessed 4 August 2010.

Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. (2005) From precarity to precariousness and back again: Labour, life and unstable networks. *Fibreculture* 5, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson_rossiter.html, accessed 17 September 2006.

Neilson, B., Rossiter, N. and Zehle, S. (2010) From flows of culture to the circuits of logistics: Borders, regions, labour in transit. In: K. Craig, B. Neilson, N. Rossiter, S. Zehle (eds.) *Transit Labour: Circuits, Regions, Borders Digest* 2. Sydney: Blood and Thunder Publishing Concern.

Ngai, P. and Huilin, H. (2010) Unfinished proletarianization: Self, anger, and class action among the second generation of peasant-workers in present-day China. *Modern China* 36(5): 493–519.

Ngai, P. and King-Chi Chan, C. (2008) The subsumption of class discourse in China. *Boundary* 2(35): 75–91.

Nie, J. (2006) *The Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights in China*. London: Cameron May.

O'Conner, J. and Xin, G. (2006) A new modernity? The arrival of 'creative industries in China'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(3): 271–283.

Paetsch, M. (2006) China's art factories: Van Gogh from the sweatshop. *Spiegel Online*, 23 August, http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,433134,00.html, accessed 1 February 2010.

Pang, L. (2009) The labor factor in the creative economy: A Marxist reading. *Social Text* 27(2): 55–76.

Ross, A. (2009) *Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. New York: New York University Press.

Rossiter, N. (2006) *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Tai, Z. (2006) *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. New York: Routledge.

Tian, G. (2010) Enter the dragonfly. *China Daily* 16 August, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2010-08/16/content_11158869.htm, accessed 12 September 2010.

Transit Labour. (2010) About, http://transitlabour.asia/about/, accessed 27 July.

UNESCO. (2011) 10 things to know about Shanghai: UNESCO city of design, unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001917/191772e.pdf, accessed 8 June 2011.

Vanni, I. and Tari, M. (2005) The life and deeds of San Precario, patron saint of precarious workers and lives. *Fibreculture* 5, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/vanni_tari.html, accessed 6 June 2006.

Virno, P. (2001) General intellect. Translated by A. Bove. Generation Online, http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm, accessed 22 September 2007.

Virno, P. (2004) *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles, CA, New York: Semiotext(e).

Wang, J. (2001) Culture as leisure and culture as capital. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9(1): 69–104.

Wang, J. (2004) The global reach of a new discourse: How far can 'creative industries' travel? *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(1): 9–19.

Wei, L.W. and Jian, H. (2006) Shanghai's emergence in the global creative economy. In: L. Kong and J. O'Connor (eds.) *Creative Economies, Creative Cities: Asian-European Perspectives*. New York: Springer.

Xindanwei. (2010) About, http://xindanwei.com/, accessed 15 July 2010.

Ye, Z. (2008) China's creative industries: Clusters and performances. Cambridge University: Annual Conference of the Chinese Economist Association.

Yu, J. (2007) Creative industries in Shanghai turn to abandoned industries. *HKTDC*, 6 February, http://www.hktdc.com/info/mi/a/imn/en/1X005I6C/1/International-Market-News/Creative-Industries-In-Shanghai-Turn-To-Abandoned-Industries.htm, accessed 2 March 2010.

Zhang, J. (2007) *Development of Creative Industries in China*. Beijing: China's Economy Publishing.

Zhang, Y. (2006) China's efforts for international cooperation in copyright protection. In: P.N. Thomas and J. Servaes (eds.) *Intellectual Property Rights and Communications in Asia: Conflicting Traditions*. New Delhi, India and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications India.

Original Article

Cinematic and aesthetic cartographies of subjective mutation

Michael Goddard
School of Media, Music and Performance, University of Salford, University of Salford Media City UK, Salford M50 2HE, UK.

Abstract This essay examines Franco Berardi's use of cinema as a minor, yet significant, aspect of his work. His most recent work has suggested a profound mutation of human subjectivity under the pressure of the imposition of a range of technical automatisms of which the digital is the latest and the one which has the most profound effects. What is less frequently remarked on in Bifo's work is that the diagnosis of these mutations of subjectivity are frequently carried out in relation to the artistic cartographies generated by both film and media art, with a tendency to favour the former. For example, there are frequent references in his work to Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* (1977) and Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), to give only two examples. This article will focus specifically on his use of cinematic cartographies, by which I mean the ways cinematic works provide spatio-temporal mappings of particular political, subjective and affective conditions.
Subjectivity (2012) **5**, 75–94. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.24

Keywords: cinema; cartographies; symptomatologies; Guattari; automatisms; subjective mutations

Introduction

The recent works by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, especially *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009a), suggest a profound mutation of human subjectivity under the pressure of the imposition of a range of technical automatisms of which the digital is the latest and the one which has the most profound effects. Berardi proposes that 'video-electronic' and 'digital-connective' generations have emerged whose affects and perceptions have been profoundly disturbed by the implantation of digital technologies in all spheres of life. What is less

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

frequently remarked on in Berardi's work is that the diagnosis of these mutations of subjectivity are frequently carried out in relation to the artistic cartographies generated by both film and media art, with a tendency to favour the former. For example, there are frequent references in Berardi's work to Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* (1977) and Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), to give only two examples.

This article will focus specifically on Berardi's use of cinematic cartographies in his work, by which I mean the ways cinematic works provide spatio-temporal mappings of particular political, subjective and affective conditions. The term cartography is used because Berardi is very much following the wake of Gilles Deleuze and especially Félix Guattari for whom aesthetic works provided elaborate mappings of subjective and mental processes, of equal if not greater validity than psychoanalytic mappings of the unconscious. In this essay I aim to look more closely at the cinematic examples cited by Berardi in his work, and how they function as cartographies mapping the transformations of both labour and subjectivity under emerging post-Fordist conditions. I then aim to extend this through an engagement with the recent film, *The Social Network* (2010), which can be read as cartography of contemporary affective mutation in the context of twenty-first century cognitive capitalism. I will argue that there are elements of these cinematic cartographies that call into question some aspects of Berardi's diagnosis of contemporary mutations of subjectivity, particularly the idea that they are necessarily associated with logics of technical acceleration and the destruction of affective relations with others. This diagnosis seems both predicated on ideas of cyberspatial disembodiment and to contain a latent humanism (the idea that a catastrophe will result from children learning language from a machine rather than from their mother epitomises this humanist dimension), that are complicated by the contemporary socialisation of digital culture in the so-called Web 2.0 era. This is not to say that the relations between humans and machines are not prone to the multiple pathologies diagnosed by Berardi but rather that these relations have taken on new forms and therefore will have different effects on subjectivity, than those attributed by Berardi to acceleration and disembodiment. It might be more fruitful in this context to follow other lines in Berardi's work such as the ideas of the intensive implantation of technical automatisms, following market logics directly within quotidian subjectivation processes. I will argue that these films suggest these other tendencies of contemporary subjective mutation, potentials that may lead not only to new pathologies but also to new social antagonisms, subjectivities and modes of expression.

Cinema as Symptom Versus Deleuzian Symptomatology

It is a truism of film theory, especially of a psychoanalytic or structuralist variety, that cinema functions as a cultural symptom. This goes back to Freud's

initial readings of works of art as the symptoms or sublimations of their creators' pathologies. While Freud's approach to aesthetics is generally admitted to be naive and reductive, his initial treatment of the work of art as symptom remains in psychoanalytic approaches to cinema, even if they follow in the wake of Lacan's more complex and structuralist-inflected theories of the unconscious. Christian Metz, for example, treats the cinema as an 'imaginary signifier' (Metz, 1982), which the theorist must take a distance from, and this was later elaborated by more politically engaged theorists who saw the cinema as a gigantic machine for the production of capitalist subjectivity. Similarly in Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, 1989, pp. 14–29), the cinema is an apparatus that, in an Althusserian sense, interpellates subjects according to the binary of sexual difference and which is directly tied to the reinforcement of patriarchal values and power relations. In both these cases cinema in general and individual films are treated as the sick patient to be cured by the superior knowledge or discursive strategies of the analyst who refuses to be seduced by cinema's wily pleasures. This approach, not only to cinema but to aesthetic texts in general, extends well beyond psychoanalytic approaches and constitutes a generalised 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in relation to cultural objects that is merely intensified in relation to the mass semiotic machinery of the cinema, whose mass appeal to popular audiences rendered it that much more suspect in the eyes of many critical theorists.

It is against this kind of approach that Deleuze developed the idea of the work of art as a symptomatology rather than symptom, by means of which the artist diagnoses both him or herself and the world. First developed in Deleuze's presentation of Sacher Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (Deleuze, 1989b), this idea can be seen as the first principle of the collection of essays entitled *Critical and Clinical Essays* (Deleuze, 1997). In both these instances what is challenged is the medicalisation of art and the artist in favour of an affirmation of what Félix Guattari would call aesthetic cartographies. In the case of Sacher-Masoch and de Sade, these authors were taken at face value by Krafft-Ebing and subsequent psychologists and their works seen as transparent windows onto the world of sadomasochism. Deleuze's critique of this medicalised reading practice is twofold: firstly, any full attention to the texts of the two authors will reveal that their works present entirely different universes rendering it illegitimate to conflate them into a single sadomasochistic syndrome (Deleuze, 1989b, p. 13). More importantly, what this reading strategy demonstrates is the medical treatment of works of literature as symptoms that are then projected onto their authors who are seen as prime sufferers of the syndrome they present in their works. Instead, Deleuze argues that they should rather be seen as clinicians who identify and diagnose signs, that is to say symptoms, 'the physician of themselves and of the world' (Deleuze, 1997, p. 3). This not only reiterates the well-known defence of de Sade from charges of sadism by Bataille and others since, as Deleuze points out, a true sadist would rather conceal the dynamics of

sadism by using 'the hypocritical language of established order and power' (Deleuze, 1989b, p. 17), but also argues against the reduction of Sacher-Masoch's work to a mere clinical curiosity. Turning the medical gaze against itself, Deleuze claims that these authors present to us an exalted 'pornology' (p. 18), a form of knowledge that doctors and psychoanalysts should learn from, instead of reducing these works and their authors to mere symptoms. A truly 'critical and clinical' approach to aesthetic works would then treat them less as pathological symptoms than as the critical diagnosis of forms of subjectivity or subjectivation processes. This does not mean that these authors do not have any experience of the pathologies that populate their works but rather that by going to the end of confronting and mapping these symptoms, they express what Deleuze calls the 'great health' of the artist (or philosopher since he includes Nietzsche and Spinoza in this), who returns from his visions with 'bloodshot eyes and pierced ear-drums' (Deleuze, 1997, p. 3), like Kafka's 'swimming champion who does not know how to swim' (p. 2). The importance for this article of this reversal of perspective in the critical and clinical analysis of aesthetic objects is that it informed not only Deleuze's project but also the work of Félix Guattari and later that of Berardi. While Deleuze's apparent auteurism can be seen as a type of shorthand for identifying particular arrangements of cinematic signs, it was in the work of Félix Guattari, who had a much greater practical and theoretical predisposition towards groups, that the possibilities of cinema as a 'minor', symptomatological art are further developed.

Cinema as a Guattarian Aesthetic Cartography

As Gary Genosko has indicated (Genosko, 2009, p. 134), Guattari devoted frustratingly few pieces of writing to the cinema or individual films, yet what he did write is exemplary in its use of a symptomatological approach, relatively free of Deleuze's vestigial auteurism. This is particularly apparent in the short essay, 'The Poor Man's Couch' (Guattari, 1996, pp. 155–166), in which Guattari claims that cinema provides a type of mass equivalent of the psychoanalytic cure. For this reason psychoanalysts are singularly unable to grasp cinematic symptomatologies since the cinema constitutes 'a normalisation of the social imaginary that is irreducible to familialist and Oedipal models' (p. 155). The shift from the reductive Freudian readings of semantics to the Lacanian structuralist readings in terms of the signifier are, for Guattari, no great advance in psychoanalytic attempts to diagnose the cinema. Disputing especially Metz's approach to the cinema as being structured in a similar manner to the Lacanian unconscious 'like a language' through an assembly of syntagmatic chains, Guattari argues that cinema's 'montage of a-signifying semiotic chains of intensities, movements and multiplicities fundamentally tends

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

to free it from the signifying grid' (p. 161). This is not to say that Guattari has a utopian view of cinema, which he in fact says is just as repressive as psychoanalysis, only in a completely different manner. What cinema, at least in its commercial forms, offers is a machinic, 'inexpensive drug' (p. 162), that in its own way works on the unconscious. Instead of paying for a professional witness as in psychoanalysis, at the cinema, the audience pays less money to be 'invaded by subjective arrangements with blurry contours … that, in principle, have no lasting effects' (p. 163). In practice what is enacted *does* have effects in that it models forms of subjective mutation, which remain as traces of the cinematic session, just as do other narcotics. As a machinic narcotic, cinema is a giant and much more effective process for the production of normalisation than the psychoanalytic cure but paradoxically it does this via a process of complete subjective deterritorialisation. For this reason, cinema is both 'the best and the worst' that modern capitalist societies offer their subjects and contains within its machinic production of subjectivity liberating potentials: 'a film that could shake free of its function of adaptational drugging could have unimaginable liberating effects on an entirely different scale to those produced by books' (p. 164). This is because cinematic language is a living language that while for the most part turned towards repressive ends is uniquely able to capture and express processes of psychic semiotisation and therefore could become 'a cinema of combat, attacking dominant values in the present state of things' (p. 165).

Elsewhere, Guattari develops his own conception of minor cinema, related to but distinct from Deleuze and Guattari's elaboration of the minor in *Kafka: Towards and Minor Literature* (1986), as well as Deleuze's treatment of the minor in *Cinema 2: The Time-image* (1989a). The three key aspects of the minor, or more specifically minor language as Deleuze and Guattari defined it in their book on Kafka, are 'the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 18). Put more simply the minor is defined as a mode of expression that is collective, even when produced by an individual, directly political, and that subverts and interferes with the normative functions of language. Despite the differences between textual and cinematic modes of expression, such a description is clearly applicable to cinema and especially those modes of cinema that interfere with the norms of cinematic expression in order to directly express a political condition or potential, in direct relation to a collectivity. For this reason it is hardly surprising that Deleuze refers to the concept of the minor in his discussion of what is usually referred to as Third Cinema (Deleuze, 1989a). As Gary Genosko has pointed out (2009, p. 134ff.) with both authors this conception of the minor has both similarities to and differences from theoretical and practical elaborations of third cinema and in Guattari's case certainly takes a distance from doctrinaire positions and narrow definitions of worthwhile modes of militant cinematic production.

Guattari's examples range from obscure anti-psychiatric documentaries, to the works of nascent American auteurs like David Lynch and Terence Malick, an eclecticism that also informs Berardi's use of cinema. What Guattari's cinematic examples share is that in his reading of them, they all elaborate non-normative processes of desire, capable in principle of countering the normalisation processes of both commercial cinema and psychoanalysis. For example, Guattari indicates several examples that could constitute a cinema of anti-psychiatry or sees in a film like Malick's *Badlands* (1973), a profound process of 'amour fou' or schizo-desire worthy of the best productions of the surrealists (Guattari, 1996, pp. 167–176). But perhaps the most interesting reading of cinema as a symptomatology that Guattari presents is in relation to the compendium film, *Germany in Autumn* (1978); since Berardi also engages with this film it is worth looking at Guattari's reading of the film in more detail before passing onto Berardi's more telegraphic account of the film.

Guattari's piece on the film is entitled 'Like the Echo of a Collective Melancholia' (Guattari, 1996, pp. 181–187). This title already indicates that this is not at all a question of even multiple authorship but of a collectively produced work that furthermore expresses wider collective affects and subjective responses to the events surrounding the Baader Meinhof/Red Army Faction's actions, the 'murder-suicides' of its leaders in prison and the corresponding intensification of state repression and policing. Guattari points out that the collective dimensions of the film go beyond being the work of multiple directors but was the result of common elaborations and was made in the heat of the moment under the impact of the 'terrorist events' themselves.[1] What Guattari especially admires in the film is the attempt on the part of its makers to resist the media intoxication surrounding the events, that the 'terrorists' themselves also contributed to as well as what he calls the media's 'infernal machine of guilt-inducement' (p. 182). For Guattari, rather than dealing with the sphere of ideology in which positions and opinions have already become hardened, the film 'questions the collective emotional context in which these opinions take shape' (p. 183). In relation to the abhorrent media spectacles engineered by the RAF from the inane replication of bourgeois justice to staging skyjackings as a media event to the (mis)treatment of fellow travellers, the film *Germany in Autumn* gives a symptomatological response, critical of all sides of this situation (the RAF, the state, the media) even if for Guattari, the film is still too timid in its critique of the actions of these self-appointed vanguard movements. This kind of symptomatology is presented by Guattari as a powerful weapon and an essential one if any really profound political change is going to occur, since it is a singular expression of desire that acts directly on subjective mutations, rather than relegating subjectivity to a mere epi-phenomenon of conflicting ideological positions. In the remainder of the article, I will present Berardi's main uses of cinematic cartographies in his recent work which sometimes function as symptomatologies and sometimes are

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

more symptomatic readings. This, of course, does not mean that I am claiming to present my own symptomatological readings of these works, which would require a much more lengthy engagement with each film. Rather I am interested in presenting the ways in which these cinematic cartographies, whether symptomatological or not, function as a minor dimension in Berardi's writing, a dimension that I would argue is essential for a full, critical appreciation of both its arguments and especially its poetics.

Berardi and the Cinema of 77: Cinematic Late Modernism, *Germany in Autumn* and *The Serpent's Egg*

In *Precarious Rhapsody*, Berardi also deals with *Germany in Autumn* if only very briefly, along with a range of other events taking place in 1977, including the explosion and repression of the Autonomia movement in Rome and Bologna, the punk phenomenon, the beginnings of Apple, the already mentioned terrorist events and even such events as the death of Charlie Chaplin which takes on the implication of the death of modernity itself. For Berardi, the film 'tells of the widespread perception of the coming end of social solidarity' (2009a, p. 16). He sees in the film a type of fog descending on political life, and a situation in which Stammheim becomes a metaphor the 'everyday jail' that is spreading throughout social life (p. 16). Apart from its extreme brevity, this reading of *Germany in Autumn* contrasts with Guattari's approach to the film in many respects: in the place of a courageous project in common that diagnoses and resists a contemporary condition, in other words a symptomatology, we have the film being treated as a symptom, a metaphor of the hardening of political life begun in 1977 and continued subsequently with the dual implementation of Neoliberal economic policies and digital technologies. Berardi's reading seems a Foucauldian one of seeing in the film an emblem of carceral society at the very point in which form of power and control were transforming themselves, while forms of resistance were becoming exhausted. No doubt the differences between hindsight and a contemporary response are part of the explanation and surely Guattari's view of the film, after the 'years of winter' of the 1980s would also have been reconfigured. Nevertheless, in Berardi's treatment of this film, telegraphic though it is, it is hard to see anything other than a quite conventional account of it as a symptom of its time rather than a symptomatology capable of explaining it.

It is a little unfair to concentrate on this example, however, since there are other instances in which Berardi's approach to cinematic cartographies does indeed attain the level of symptomatology. There is a definite continuity here with Deleuze and Guattari's interests in minor cinema, in Berardi's work often associated both with minor works by major directors, as well as with films produced in non-Western, mostly Asian, locations. Berardi's examples, unlike

Guattari's, tend not to be forms of militant, documentary or anti-psychiatric cinema, which is partly explicable because of the disappearance and marginalisation of these cinematic practices. However, what Berardi is interested in are films that map subjective mutations in relation to digital technologies, post-Fordist transformations of labour and the implantation of cognitive capitalism, which tend to be located in more mainstream forms of art cinema.

In the third chapter of *The Soul at Work*, 'The Poisoned Soul' (Berardi, 2009b, pp. 106–183), cinema is first introduced as a corollary to Berardi's treatment of alienation as a now surpassed or reconfigured problem of modernity. Two films, which could be seen as exemplary of late cinematic modernism, namely Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) and Bergman's *Persona* (1966), are used as diagnoses of subjectivity in the last years of the industrial era. Nevertheless, the treatment of these films is as more than mere symptoms but as complex readings of the times of the 1960s in which they were produced. In *Red Desert* what Berardi admires is that the film not only depicted the malaise associated with industrial spaces and alienated social relations but that it succeeded in 'representing a passage that is not simply related to culture and politics but first of all to the sensibility and quality of emotions' (Berardi, 2009b, p. 110). This is not unlike Deleuze's characterisation of Antonioni as the filmmaker of the 'chronic' in the double sense of both a transformation in the experience of time and a chronic experience of spiritual malaise. Berardi situates this rightly in the bourgeois milieu before 1968 in which the diagnosis of the coldness of private relations was one of the factors leading to the public explosion of 1968. What Antonioni shows, through his use of flattened pop art 'flat interiors and desolate industrial exteriors' (p. 110) is an industrialisation not only of exterior spaces but also of subjective existence, which undergoes a similar flattening and homogenisation.

In a different yet related way, Berardi sees in Bergman's *Persona* a similar study of contemporary alienation that goes beyond any individual psychopathology to a deep cultural malaise. Again it is a presentation of cultural incommunicability and reification in which the person is submitted to the thing (p. 111). In this respect it is surprising that no mention is made of the machinic elements in *Persona* such as the child's hand on the giant screen at the beginning of the film or the burning through of the film-strip later in the film which are highly suggestive of a reflexive interpenetration of cinema, technology and subjectivity. Nor does Berardi refer to the scenes watched on television related to the Vietnam war, specifically of the Buddhist monks' political acts of self-immolation, which not only situate the subjective drama in relation to political movements to come but also serve to extend its presentation of silence and aphasia beyond a strictly personal and into a world-historical context. Much of this is, however, implied when Berardi treats the rarefying of human communication in the film as a 'cipher of the human ambience that was brewing in those years' (p. 110). While both these films are acknowledged as

symptomatologies of their time, in which their authors use their own sense of personal malaise to tap into a collective cultural condition, their treatment remains unsatisfyingly condensed and still on the borders of being a mere illustration of a cultural condition of reification and subjective malaise rather than a full symptomatology of these conditions. They are, however, presented as sowing the seeds for the new forms of post-1968 social relations that would render their depictions of (bourgeois) alienation almost obsolescent.

There is a far more interesting treatment, however, of another Bergman film, *The Serpent's Egg* (1977), again in the context of the year 1977 as a crucial axis of transition between Fordism and post-Fordism. As Berardi acknowledges, this film is generally considered an unimportant one in Bergman's career and even Bergman himself refers to it as an artistic failure: 'I [previously] wrote that the artistic failure of *The Serpent's Egg* was due mainly to the fact that I set the film in 1920s Berlin … now I believe the failure lies much deeper' (Bergman, 1995, p. 190). Interestingly, given Berardi's theses on the digital era as being characterized precisely by the excess of stimuli, messages, pharmaceutical intake and demands for constant attention to multiple data flows, Bergman further qualifies the failure of the film not as lacking something but in terms of a similar perceptual excess, 'It is overstimulated, as if it had taken anabolic steroids' (p. 190). For Bergman there was 'too much' in the film meaning that the story he wanted to tell about two trapeze artists who are stranded because the death of the third member of their act has died was contaminated by taking place in the actual historical city of Berlin on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power. Nevertheless, it is this contamination between these interpersonal relations and their decay and the historically situated decay of Berlin in the 1920s that makes this 'minor' Bergman film so interesting and connects up its affective dynamics with world historical forces. In *Precarious Rhapsody*, Berardi states that viewing *The Serpent's Egg* at the end of 1977 seemed to speak directly to his generation's political experiences and provided 'a very interesting insight in[to] the construction of the totalitarian mind' (2009a, p. 15). The film's reference in the title to the serpent's egg of Nazism 'slowly opening' (p. 16) seemed highly relevant in a context in which the repression of Radio Alice and the Autonomia movement was similarly accompanied by 'the smell of a new totalitarianism in the making' (p. 16). In other words, rather than seeing the film as an accurate or otherwise portrayal of the proto-Nazi era in Germany in the 1920s, the film functioned for Berardi as an accurate symptomatology of the present, precisely because it traced the emergence of totalitarianism on a virtual, affective plane, at once abstract and concrete, that was not limited to a specific historical representation. This perhaps echoes what Bergman had originally hoped from the film and yet paradoxically it only works this way because it is grounded in an actual historical period from which it is able to extract the signs of a more general process, relevant also to the present, that is it functions precisely as a symptomatology.

In *The Soul at Work*, this approach to the film is expanded and Berardi goes as far as to claim that the film 'opens the way to a new definition of historicity … redefining alienation as a material, chemical, or rather neuro-chemical mutation' (p. 112). In other words, something happens to Bergman's earlier diagnoses of alienation and incommunicability in films like *Persona* which is more than the mere fact of placing the affective relations in a specific historical context. *The Serpent's Egg* operates on a chemical or molecular level before the actual emergence of fixed ideologies or even emotions, instead tracking their processes of constitution as a type of chemical pollution of the collective mind. What is crucial about the film is that precisely because it operates at this molecular level, the processes it discerns are applicable to other types of mental pollution such as by consumerism, competitive conformism or religious fundamentalisms. It is perhaps surprising that Berardi makes no reference to Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* which not only attempted a similar analysis of the mental processes that enabled the emergence of Fascism but was also a key reference point for Deleuze and Guattari's concept in *Anti-Oedipus* of the co-extensiveness of desire with the social field, albeit one that they claim has some shortcomings (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 31). If Berardi prefers Bergman's 'artistic cartography' of this phenomenon to Reich's psychoanalytic one it is perhaps precisely due to the retreat on Reich's part from the full implications of this co-extensiveness of the fields of desire and the social, which in some respects the film presents in a better way as a poisoning of affective relations at a molecular level rather than as a mass ideological process. As with Guattari preferring artistic cartographies like those of Kafka or Proust over psychoanalytic ones, Berardi here turns to Bergman's film as a superior critical symptomatology of the emergent conditions of Fascism. Berardi refers especially to a crowd scene in the film in which 'the social body is transformed by Nazism into an amorphous mass … ready to be led' (p. 112). But this is shown in the film via slow motion and expressive deformations of colour, less as the actions of a persuasive ideology than as a growing environmental toxicity that leads the social over a pathological threshold in the manner of a chemical reaction.

The title of the film refers to a speech by Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which the latter is likened to a serpent's egg in order to justify his killing not for the evil that he had already committed but for what he would do, given absolute power; in other words as a type of pre-emption. On a simplistic level then the film might imply the situation in which Hitler and Nazism could have been resisted before the seizure of power made any such resistance much more difficult if not impossible. But the film does not focus on this level at all but rather on the symptomatology of this virtual process of the poisoning of social relations before their political or ideological results. As such it treats incommunicability and alienation not as a metaphor but as a psychopathological process 'spreading on a social scale' (p. 113). This is what renders the

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

film's presentation of alienation as at once psychic and social, material and affective with a direct relationship between these spheres. This is precisely the operation of a symptomatology since symptoms experienced by individual characters are not presented as disconnected individual symptoms but as signs of an emergent social psychopathology that a more historicist or even psychoanalytic analysis would mask through processes of representation and metaphor. Again Berardi insists that this film was not primarily about the past but the present or rather the future that was emerging at its time of production in 1977 and that is now *our* present, the complete inter-penetration of subjective life by market forces, info-productive stimulation and the languages of advertising and consumerism that operate on us 'like a nerve gas' (p. 113). Berardi is not equating contemporary Neoliberalism with Nazism but rather insisting that the subjective mutations it has unleashed are even further reaching and more profound, since it operates directly on the virtual level of modulating affect and sensibility or what Berardi calls 'the biological and cognitive texture of society' rather than on 'superficial behaviours' (p. 113). This is already quite a lot to find in a film considered even by its director as a failure but it is this very failure that perhaps allows the film to operate on a minor register that is able to directly link up affective and historical processes, the material and the immaterial, in a similar manner to Kafka's work to whom the concept of the minor was first applied by Deleuze and Guattari.

In a similar vein, Berardi turns later on in the same chapter to a 'minor' work by Wenders, *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), in which he sees as indicating a possible artistic or even therapeutic approach to the contemporary situation of enchained desire, the emergence of which was so well diagnosed in *The Serpent's Egg*. Like Bergman's film, *Tokyo-Ga* is usually considered as an insignificant work of its director but Berardi situates it as a key point of transition between the 'dreamy, slow and nostalgic narration' (p. 143) of Wenders's 1970s cinema and his later 'conflicted but fascinated use of electronic technologies' (p. 143), especially in *Until the End of the World* (1991). The real precursor, however, to *Tokyo-Ga* is *Lightning over Water* (*Nick's Film*) (1980), a film in which Wenders acted out his attachment to the work of the dying director Nicholas Ray by making a documentary on him whose production is shown to be possibly detrimental to Ray's health or even precipitating his death. In *Tokyo-Ga*, these dynamics are reversed since it is not merely a matter of calling up the dead but also the disappearance of an entire world of which nothing remains except Ozu's films and some of his collaborators.

The search for Ozu then becomes the chronicle of a disappearance that at the same time presents contemporary hyper-modern Japan in the old-fashioned form of a journal of impressions, thoughts and emotions. For Berardi, Ozu's cinema not only belongs to the now vanished society of pre-war Japan but also involved a human use of technology whereby it was able to extend traditional modes of perception and experience while at the same time respecting them,

hence the stationary shots of traditional environments that seem to relegate modernity to an unobtrusive backdrop. Wenders's camera, however, reveals a totally transformed world in which these human technology relations have been reversed so much so that human sensory perception becomes the effect of a global panoptic gaze in world of generalised simulation, in line with contemporary theories of the time such as Baudrillard's. For Berardi, the Japan presented by Wenders is one in which an 'artificial mutation has occurred: the world is nothing but a simulation effect' (p. 144). Included in Wenders's inventory are simulated objects like the artificial food that is created to advertise the wares of restaurants, to simulated social activities such as rooftop golf driving ranges in which the imperial open-air sport is transformed into a solipsistic leisure activity for salarymen for whom both space and free time are limited. Even more than this the game pachinko is singled out as a reified activity, at once individual, isolating and collective which, as Barthes had already pointed out, resembles nothing so much as working on a production line. While all of these accounts run the risk of a residual Orientalism, what justifies it in Wenders's film is a shared experience between Germany and Japan of a traumatic, unassimilable war-time past, from which some kind of escape route needs to be found: in West Germany via rock music and American movies, in Japan via pachinko (even if American popular culture played a decisive role in both contexts).

For Berardi, Wenders's film presents hyper-modern Japan under the sign of the void which is 'not the void that Zen Buddhism talks about, or not only that' (p. 146). Rather, using film history as a cartographic tool, Wenders is able to point to the emergence of a new kind of void, not at all like the emptiness and space for meditation in Ozu's films provided by the famous 'pillow shots' or still lifes that Deleuze discusses in *Cinema 2* (1989a). This new type of void, according to Berardi, belongs no longer to the world of Ozu but to 'the Demiurge of simulation' (p. 146). In other words what Wenders discerns in contemporary Japan is precisely the world of simulation and derealisation as described by Baudrillard and this is precisely what Berardi goes on to discuss. At this point, however, a question could be raised as to whether Wenders's film was the most useful cinematic cartography to use either for its presentation of contemporary Japan or the derealised world of simulation in general. Chris Marker's *Sunless* (1982), for example, is a much more nuanced engagement with the same context and one that is far less tainted by European romantic Orientalism or such a Manichean view of the mutations brought about by simulation technologies. In Marker's film, for example, there is the idea of multiple co-existing temporalities as a way of understanding cultural differences as expressive of different rhythms that may render seemingly bizarre or inexplicable observations if not understandable then at least referable to a different temporality which one must approach with sensitivity before simply interpreting in a western framework. While Wenders acts as if he somehow

knows Japan via the films of Ozu, Marker foregrounds his position as an outsider, a traveller, who can only assemble and reflect on images, rather than gain direct access to an ontological truth. From this perspective, Marker tracks the technologisation and implantation of simulation technologies, focusing on fairly similar phenomena to Wenders, but he is more prepared to follow their different rhythms rather than constantly comparing them to the ideal presented by Ozu's cinema, an ideal which after all has never existed as such even in pre-war Japan. This becomes apparent in Marker's fascination with the inventions of new modes of video imagery which are being developed in Japan, a far more fruitful area of engagement than simulated food or golf, since it refers to the imminent transformation of visual regimes that Wenders would later investigate in *Until the End of the World*. There is a kind of self-indulgent perversity in *Tokyo-Ga* in Wenders's drive to find traces of the world of Ozu in Tokyo, as if such a world ever existed except in a Western cinephile fantasy of Japan, an Orientalist approach that is entirely lacking in Marker's film. Instead, Marker sees in Japan a new constellation of both innovation and tradition, of old and new forms of temporality, which he locates on a global plan that also takes in Africa and Europe, as well as Japan. The post-human dimension diagnosed in Wenders' film is at the very least a problematic one, at least partially generated by cinephile projections of an idealised nostalgic past and the assimilation of Japanese post-war experience to that of an exoticised Germany. This is brought out especially in the conversation between Wenders and Herzog in which the latter maintains that it is not only impossible to make films in Europe or America but virtually anywhere on the globe since everywhere has been ruined by the civilisation of the image. For these reasons, while Berardi is able to bring out what the film does, despite its limitations, show of the mutation of subjective experience under post-industrial conditions, neither Wenders's film, nor Berardi's treatment of it, provide as rich a symptomatology as his treatment of *The Serpent's Egg*.

Contemporary Cinema as Symptomatology: *Elephant* and *Still Life*

Berardi's engagement with cinematic cartographies are not, however, confined to the works of European auteurs or to what is now part of film history but instead have engaged with several contemporary examples of both film and video art. Among these examples, Gus van Sant's *Elephant* is one that is treated as a contemporary symptomatology of Neoliberal societies under the implementation of digital technologies in the affective realm but he also significantly refers to several films of an Asian provenance as similarly tracking contemporary affective and cognitive mutations, particularly Zhang Ke Jia's *Still Life* (2006) and Kim Ki-Duk's *Time* (2006). These contemporary cinematic examples are accompanied by engagements with video art, advertising, digital

pornography and even the uses of the media on the part of homicidal/suicidal killers, sometimes but not always on a similar symptomatic rather than symptomatological plane.

Elephant is discussed in the 'Frail Psychosphere' chapter of *Precarious Rhapsody* as providing a much better account than Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) of the psychopathological conditions capable of generating Columbine style murder-suicide events, among what Berardi refers to as the digital-connective generation. While the discussion of the film is brief it is very significant since the chapter will go on to elaborate the mutations or even destruction of sensitivity and sensibility that for Berardi characterise the digital era, as expressed in the symptomatic forms of digital pornography, 'torture porn' and killer videos. Like *The Serpent's Egg*, *Elephant* probes beneath the surface of contemporary destructiveness, avoiding ready-made answers to the questions of the mental conditions facilitating the eruption of mass murder in an ordinary high school. In *Elephant*, the banal events of an 'ordinary' day are followed until it is revealed that this day is not so ordinary and that two of the teenagers shown are about to kill as many as possible of their classmates and teachers. However, the brutality is not limited to these acts but pervades all the relations shown in the film through a generalised atmosphere of disconnection and malaise that effectively updates the one shown in Bergman's films. Berardi gives the example of the 'relational incompetence' shown in the dialogue of three female friends intent on quantifying the amount of time required to spend with a 'best friend' when one has a boyfriend, thereby enacting a total reduction of social relations to a banal algorithm. Admittedly there would be some counter examples, such as the creativity represented via the interest in several of the teenagers in photography, but this is presented as a weak resistance to the general atmosphere of disconnection. More poignantly the seemingly endless corridors of the high school are shown as a non-space in which relations are reduced to the judgements of 'looks' in the sense of both appearances and a vacant gaze in which those of the prospective killers are not so different from those of their classmates. For Berardi this is a symptom of a transition from what he calls conjunction to connection in which direct, imperfect and unmediated contact has been replaced by virtual connections at a distance so that the difference between playing a violent video game and playing it out in real life with one's neighbouring human beings is only a difference in degree not in kind. This decline in the contact with the other results in what Berardi calls 'a peripheral massacre-reproducible, replicable, contagious' (p. 86), not so much a tragedy or exceptional event as an index of a world in which images of sexuality and brutality circulate as an everyday banality with little distinction between them. What Berardi admires in *Elephant* which is lacking in *Bowling for Columbine* is the symptomatology of the cognitive mutation gripping the video-electronic generation in which the functionality of connection leads to an atrophy of affect and sensitivity

to the other which are the pre-conditions for such an everyday massacre to occur.

Berardi's discussion of *Still Life* takes place in a different context, that of a discussion of twenty-first century dystopian art in which the late twentieth-century literary dystopias of Burroughs or Phillip K. Dick have now occupied the entire space of artistic imagination in film, video art and literature but now without any sense of an outside or any alternative future. In this dystopian context, *Still Life* stands out as a unique depiction of the effects of Chinese capitalism, in its presentation of the main character Huo, who is searching for his family amid the architectural and social wreckage caused by the three gorges dam project. Not only has his riverside town been destroyed but so has the entire social fabric so that the only available form of employment is to participate in completing the destruction of the villages initiated by the building of the dam. The film therefore provides a portrait of 'submerged life' that is at once surreal and the most realistic portrayals of the operations of contemporary Chinese capitalism, through the destroyed environment unleashed by the dam, itself a microcosm of the violence of neoliberal capitalist transformation. If the dystopian aesthetics of Zhang Ke's film are still treated as symptomatologies they are nevertheless seen as powerless ones.

Conclusion: *The Social Network as Twenty-first-Century Symptomatology*

This bleak account of contemporary cinematic production in the context of digital media is the direct result of a dualistic approach to the subjective mutations unleashed by digital processes that proceeds by abandoning the symptomatological approach that had been accorded to earlier cinematic works, instead seeing these later works more as symptoms of their dystopian times. This can be seen in the strong distinctions Berardi makes between conjunction and connection and between the modern, cinematic order of expression and reproduction and the contemporary order of simulacra and synthetic images. This is a recapitulation of Baudrillard's (anti) postmodern stance that may be similarly blind to the more nuanced aspects of contemporary subjective mutations in the digital-connective era. Relegating artistic cartographies to a position of powerlessness may reflect a relative decline in the belief in their effectiveness or subversive powers, relative to the twentieth-century avant-gardes but it is too drastic to see in contemporary cinematic practices nothing more than futile gestures of temporary survival.

A final cinematic counter-example can be given that calls for a fully symptomatological reading, namely David Fincher's recent film, *The Social Network* (2010). Just as his earlier film *Fight Club* (1999) gave a depiction of the Millennial affective unease that seemed to prefigure events as diverse as the alter-globalisation movement and the 9/11 attacks, *The Social Network*

provides a visualisation of a ‘history of the present’ that is so far yet to be adequately represented. The fact that the film is largely based on the sensational novelisation of an at best partial account of the events leading to the formation of Facebook is of no consequence since the film is less concerned with this history as such, as much as what it is able to reveal about contemporary social existence and the implementation of its mediation via technical networks.

Since the original writing of this article, I have come across a piece of writing by Berardi that does indeed address this film and in terms very similar to parts of my own analysis. Berardi writes, in a post entitled ‘Facebook or the Impossibility of Friendship’ (Berardi, 2011), appropriately enough on Facebook itself, of the ways the film presents, via the figure of Mark Zuckerburg, ‘the substitution of friendship and love with standardized protocols’ (Berardi, 2011). There are several key insights in this post about the ways in which the film sheds light on the condition of precarity in digitally mediated work and life and especially the fragmentation and virtualization of affective relations. Yet, in my own reading of the film, I would like to suggest a different emphasis to one that would see it as documenting ‘the intensification of the rhythm of the infosphere surrounding the first generation which learned more words from a machine than from [their] mother’ (Berardi, 2011). Certainly this symptomatology of precarity and the automatization and virtualization of affective relations is clearly apparent in the film, but I would argue that there is more to this subjective mutation than the mere loss of real connection with the human other and that it extends into a cartography of the machinic social automatisms we currently inhabit and are complicit with. This immanence and complicity is attested to by the fact that Berardi’s harsh diagnosis of precarious subjectivation in the era of Facebook, as presented in *The Social Network*, itself appeared in a Facebook post.

In the opening scenes, Mark Zuckerberg is presented as at once highly relationally dysfunctional and hyper-functional cognitively as he seems to be simultaneously processing four or five distinct data streams in what should be a straightforward conversation. Clearly this embodies the dynamics of Facebook and other forms of technical social networking in which the modulation of multiple data streams comes to replace focused attention on a specific interlocutor. Mark continues throughout the film to experience problems of attention although often this is less a problem for him than for those seeking his attention, as when, for example he is far more concerned with a note condemning him for his FaceMash Website than a computing problem that he nevertheless casually solves as exiting the class-room, or tells a lawyer at one of the litigation hearings exactly how miniscule an amount of attention he is affording his questions.

The relations in the film are grounded in the elite context of Harvard and shown as a clash between the old moneyed elite and the predominantly Jewish or otherwise ethnically other geeky programmers who seem universally to aspire

to the social status of the former. However, whereas Mark's best friend Eduardo aims to infiltrate this closed world via perfected competitive conformity, Mark thinks that his powers of invention will provide a shorter route via notoriety: a conflict in subjective adaptation that structures the entire film with Sean Parker, played by Justin Timberlake at the extreme of the unconventional pole and the Winklevoss twins at the extreme end of a competitive conformity whose extremity shocks even their peers. This is far from constituting anything like class conflict given that at issue on level is merely a question of who gets access to being part of an economic and cultural elite, as seen through the desires of already privileged college students. However, this internecine conflict at the heart of the constitution of contemporary social networks is precisely captivating because its effects so far outstrip their causes. What the film shows is how from entirely banal motivations a process of invention is unleashed, beyond the wills and intentions of any of its contributors, that ends up capturing the entire field of social relations. That this is done as blankly as possible is both a reflection of Mark's asociality and a kind of genius for abstraction that was no doubt the key to Facebook's success, humorously dramatised in the film when Sean gives the advice to drop the 'the' of Facebook so it will be 'cleaner'. The result is a film that resembles in many respects Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), in its demonstration of the ruthless development of a media empire that ends up betraying any initial idealism it might have had to become a pure expression of capitalist forces. Except between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries media have become both globalised and miniaturised, so that in the place of the gigantic figure of Kane, shot from below in the manner of a great dictator, there is only a small geeky innovator whose social incommunicability is only transcended for the occasional brutal put-down and for whom non-technically mediated communication is presented as a painful experience.

While this account of the film might seem to confirm Berardi's dystopian view of the powerlessness of contemporary artistic cartographies to counter the acceleration and disembodiment enacted by digital technologies, the sheer joy and energy of the film acts against this; it is as if, despite everything shown in the film, as well as the later darker aspects of Facebook such as its intensive use for data mining and other modes of surveillance and the very commercialisation which it was supposed in the beginning to escape, what the film is really about is the power of invention itself and more specifically the socialisation of contemporary digital technologies. It implies both a critique of all sides of the conflicts over the ownership of the site and their respective subjective modalities and hints that the actual use of Facebook and similar tools might and should go beyond the limitations of its creators. As with Berardi's reading of *The Serpent's Egg*, it is on the level of the affective tonality of the film, the way it gives both a cognitive and affective texture to contemporary modes of social relation, that makes it a symptomatology of the present rather than a mere symptom; it is if Fincher and the other creators of the film were trying to answer the question of

where the twenty-first century world of Facebook (or the enclosure and articulation of social relations via that world), came from and in doing so open up potentials for critical and collective resistance to that world. At the very least it provides a convincing genealogy of one aspect of contemporary communicative capitalism, a symptomatology of the present that might open up new possibilities for subjective, cognitive mutation beyond a purely capitalist, competitive framework. As such, the problem it poses around Facebook is not one of disembodiment but rather of capture, and it presents a more complex account of the co-implication of human beings and technical machines than that presented by Berardi's account of the transition from conjunction to connection. There is definitely mutation, stimulated by processes of technical and social invention, as well as capitalist capture and exploitation but these relations take place in a complex assemblage, both human and technological. Paradoxically, a much more complex account of the relations between humans and technologies can be found in Berardi's more extensive treatment of what he calls 'Technical Automatisms' (Berardi, 2009a, p. 141), especially in some parts of his work *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero* (2004) that were not translated into English in *Precarious Rhapsody*. In this work, Berardi argues that 'Automatisms have taken the place of political decisions and today govern the social concatenations on which socialised life, the techno-linguistic, techno-financial, techno-administrative interfaces depend … Potential has grown beyond the possibility of control by power but at the same time has become abstract human power, the mere reproduction of non-human automatisms' (Berardi, 2004, p. 147). Such an approach of discerning the implantation of multiple technical automatisms in the very interstices of social relations in the digital era is highly resonant with the world presented in *The Social Network* and a much sharper, critically symptomatological tool than the stark oppositions between warm human conjunction and cold technical connection, or anxieties over the pathological effects on children of inhabiting technically mediated environments.

This article has explored the idea of cinematic cartography as a form of symptomatology and shown its operations in Berardi's recent work. As such it deals with an admittedly 'minor' aspect of Berardi's work, but an aspect that is very much tied up with the concept itself of the minor, in the sense of cinema constituting a minor art as Deleuze, Guattari and Berardi have all, in different ways, proposed. This minor perspective on Berardi's work is an illuminating one, both in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, the former especially evident in his brilliant reading of Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg*, and the latter most apparent in his more cursory engagement with contemporary cinema in the context of digital culture. One can only hope that we will see more use of cinematic and other forms of media art cartographies in the full symptomatological sense both in Berardi's future work and in those who find the inspiration to carry this work further and into other domains.

About the Author

Michael Goddard is a lecturer in media studies at the University of Salford. His current research centres on Polish and European cinema and visual culture and he is reviews editor of Studies in Eastern European Cinema (SEEC). He has just completed a book on the cinema of the Chilean-born filmmaker *Raúl Ruiz*. He has done research into Deleuze's aesthetic and film theories, which has resulted in a number of publications. He has also been doing research on the fringes of popular music focusing on groups such as The Fall, Throbbing Gristle and Laibach. Another strand of his research concerns Italian post-autonomist political thought and media theory, particularly the work of Franco Berardi (Bifo). He is now conducting a research project, *Radical Ephemera*, examining radical media ecologies in film, TV, radio and radical politics in the 1970s.

Note

1 For a more detailed treatment of this film and Guattari's treatment of it in relation to Fassbinder's relation to 'terrorism', see Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan (2010).

References

Antonioni, M. (dir.) (1964) *The Red Desert*. Italy: Film Duemila *et al*.

Berardi, F. (2004) *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero: dal rifiuto del lavoro all'emergere del cognitariato*. Rome, Italy: DeriveApprodi.

Berardi, F. (2009a) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. E. Empson and S. Shukaitis (eds.) Translated by A. Bove, E. Empson, M. Goddard, G. Mecchia, A. Schintu and S. Wright. London: Autonomedia/ Minor Compositions.

Berardi, F. (2009b) *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by F. Cadel and G. Mecchia. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Berardi, F. (2011) Facebook or the impossibility of friendship. Facebook posting reproduced on 16 Beaver: Mondays, www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/ 003245.php, accessed 30 November 2011.

Bergman, I. (dir.) (1966) *Persona*. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri (SF).

Bergman, I. (dir.) (1977) *The Serpent's Egg*. West Germany, USA: Bavaria Film *et al*.

Bergman, I. (1995) *Images: My Life in Film*. Translated by M. Ruuth. London: Faber and Faber.

Brustellin, A. *et al* (dir.) (1978) *Germany in Autumn*. West Germany. Filmverlag der Autoren *et al*.

Deleuze, G. (1989a) *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. (1989b) Coldness and cruelty. Translated by J. McNeil. *Masochism*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 7–138.

Deleuze, G. (1997) *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by D.W. Smith and M.A. Greco. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1986) *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by D. Polan. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2004) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.

Fincher, D. (dir.) (1999) *Fight Club*. USA, Germany: Fox 2000 Pictures *et al*.

Fincher, D. (dir.) (2010) *The Social Network*. USA: Columbia Pictures *et al*.

Genosko, G. (2009) *Félix Guattari: A Critical Introduction*. London, New York: Pluto Press.

Goddard, M. and Halligan, B. (2010) The autumn in Germany: A dialogue on Fassbinder and terrorism. In: F. Vighi and A. Nouss (eds.) *Pasolini, Fassbinder and Europe: Between Utopia and Nihilism*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 151–170.

Guattari, F. (1996) *Soft Subversions*. S. Lotringer (ed.) Translated by D.L. Sweet and C. Weiner. New York: Semiotext(e).

Ke Jia, Z. (dir.) (2006) *Still Life*. China, Hong Kong: Xstream Pictures *et al*.

Ki-Duk, K. (dir.) (2006) *Time*. Japan, Korea: Happinet Pictures.

Malick, T. (dir.) (1973) *Badlands*. USA: Badlands Company *et al*.

Marker, C. (dir.) (1982) *Sans Soleil/Sunless*. France: Argos Films.

Metz, C. (1982) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. Translated by B. Brewster, C. Britton, A. Guzzetti and A. Williams. London: Macmillan.

Moore, M. (dir.) (2002) *Bowling for Columbine*. Canada, Germany: Dog Eat Dog Films *et al*.

Mulvey, L. (1989) *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reich, W. (1997) *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. London: Souvenir Press.

Van Sant, G. (dir.) (2003) *Elephant*. USA: Fine Line Features.

Welles, O. (dir.) (1941) *Citizen Kane*. USA: Mercury Productions *et al*.

Wenders, W. (dir.) (1980) *Lightning over Water (Nick's Film)*. Sweden, West Germany: Road Movies Filmproduktion *et al*.

Wenders, W. (dir.) (1985) *Tokyo-Ga*. USA, West Germany: Chris Sievernich Filmproduktion *et al*.

Wenders, W. (dir.) (1991) *Until the End of the World*. Germany, France, Australia: Bavaria Filmstudios *et al*.

Original Article

The Novel Form in Italian Postmodernity: Genna's Day of Judgment

Giuseppina Mecchia
Department of French and Italian, University of Pittsburgh, 1328 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260, USA.
E-mail: mecchia@pitt.edu

Abstract In Italy, where the reflection about forms of subjectivity has been particularly lively thanks to the legacy of autonomist and post-communist thought, several young writers have taken the challenge of reconstructing the subject of postmodern society through narrative forms. As case in point, I examine the work of Giuseppe Genna (b.1969), and his novels *In The Name of Ishmael* (2003), *Dies Irae* (2006) and *Italia De Profundis* (2008). In these works, the technological, political and cultural exteriorities determining the functioning of contemporary subjectivities are fully integrated and deployed – lexically, stylistically and narratively. However, I argue that the novel's ability to frame the desperation of the present within a reconstruction of past history and future resolution provides an essential mean for maintaining a space for freedom and imagination.
Subjectivity (2012) 5, 95–110. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.27

Keywords: Giuseppe Genna; time; postmodernity; novel

Introduction

> It is idiotic to consider, as it currently happens in Italy, that the Present lasts forever. The crack is widening. The deflationary horizon is the waiting room to a decisive transformation, a quantum leap abolishing all existing paradigms.
>
> Giuseppe Genna, *Italia De Profundis*

It might seem incongruous to talk about Italian contemporary novels in a context focused on the psycho-ontological conditions of postmodern forms of subjectivity and their neo-humanist critique on the part of Franco Berardi aka Bifo. Isn't the novel a literary form, and as such, doesn't it belong to an

© 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

altogether different critical register? And what kind of relation is to be established between the kind of audiovisual media intervention and sociological analysis practiced by Bifo in the last 40 years, and the new incarnation of the Italian novel proposed by the Italian novelist Giuseppe Genna?

This article rests on the premise that the novel has been picked up again by postmodern subjects, as a form of resistance against the new techno-psycho-social imperatives of contemporary capitalism. Italy, in this respect, has been at the forefront of a stunning transformation with its establishment of a media-driven cultural and political apparatus – now largely known as the 'Berlusconi Republic' – that has been extraordinarily successful in absorbing and redirecting creative and organizational impulses. The subjective transformations that this 'regime' has caused are not only deep, but irreversible. In an interview that I conducted with him in 2005, Bifo said:

> We have to rethink the issue of subjectivity … I really think that there is a fundamental philosophical issue at stake: technological and anthropological mutations are forcing us to rethink subjectivity. The subject is no longer a historical or a natural datum, but the product of a psychological and social process. (Berardi, 2005, p. 148)

Bifo's indebtedness to the phenomenological tradition, from Hegel to Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, is manifest in this kind of remark which as it often happens in his work, combines a keen awareness of external determinations and the subjective spaces that they leave open to cognitive processes. As Michael Goddard points out in one of the essays contained in this special issue of *Subjectivity*, it is only natural that 'the diagnosis of these mutations of subjectivity are frequently carried out in relation to the artistic cartographies' (Goddard, 2012) of a certain time-space. While this is true of all aesthetic forms, from painting – let's not forget that it is as a painter that Bifo started his career in media experimentation – to cinema, the novel is particularly apt to expound on different historical forms of psycho-social subjective expressions, and Bifo himself has recently wondered about the improbable survival of the historical novel on the Italian contemporary cultural arena. I will argue that this survival is in fact an act of opposition to the 'anthropological mutations' imposed on us by the new techno-political imperatives, and that the revival of this aesthetic form is rooted in the fictional construction of a subjectivity that can finally reclaim the Sense of an otherwise despairing temporal experience.

Time for Writing: Toward a Phenomenology of the Novel Form

The novel form is deeply embedded in historical temporality, and from its very beginning it problematizes Time and the three main categories that, as human

beings, we use to think of it: the present, the past and the future. The biological facts of being born and aware of having to die clearly introduce in our consciousness the notions of 'before' and 'after' in relation to a foundational event. Birth and death are both biological and psychological realities for us, but an evental quality is often attributed to different 'discursive events' occurring within the trajectory going from birth to death. We are also aware of cosmic, inhuman Time (the Greek Aiôn); however, it is harder for us to express it through language. As radically temporary beings, we make of temporality a necessary, although often painful dimension not only of being but also of understanding: what unfolds in human Time is not only experience, but Sense. As Gilles Deleuze says in *The Logic of Sense*, 'biophysical life' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 259) is always only the 'co-sense' of what will be produced 'on another surface … but we have to wait for this result that never ends, this other surface … if we want to be able to say "everywhere", "every time", "eternal truth"' (p. 272). In other words, if the historical and personal vicissitudes narrated in a novel want to acquire a meaning other than narcissistic complacency or the tautological re-presentation of one's more or less degraded condition, a conscious construction needs to take place: 'sense is never a principle or an origin, it is produced. It is not something to discover, restore or re-employ: it needs to be produced by new machinery'(Deleuze 2004, p. 72).

The novel is one of these sense-producing 'machineries', and in the pages that follow I will propose that it is precisely its unique relation to time and sense that make of the novel – and especially of the Bildungsroman – a literary genre still capable to speak to postmodern audiences, notwithstanding the great cultural and social shifts characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will see that other, more explicitly commercial genres, such as the detective story and science-fiction, also are an integral part of Giuseppe Genna's narrative project. However, a few remarks about the most classic of nineteenth-century narratives will allow me to clarify the function that the novel can play within the contemporary Italian landscape, and why Genna went back to that model after a successful career as a genre writer.

The very term of 'bildung' – construction, composition – resonates with the constructivist autonomist program of 'resisting by making'. For Bifo, the issue is to take the degraded subjectivity constructed by external determinations and 're-compose it' through a shift in the way we construct our temporal and spatial modes of being. The goal of schizoanalysis, but also, I argue, of the novelistic form, is the creation of a 'discipline that involves creating percepts and affects through the deterritorialization of obsessive frameworks' (Berardi, 2010, p. 217). In *Dies Irae*, the novel of Giuseppe Genna that I will analyze in some detail, we will see that the 'discipline' of creating a science-fiction narrative serves precisely to deterritorialize and redirect the 'obsessive frameworks' imposed by historical contingency, in a way that 'recomposes' both the subject and his temporal and spatial determinations. The most recent works by other

Italian thinkers and sociologists whose work is still rooted in their autonomist upbringing, such as Christian Marazzi and Maurizio Lazzarato, have also conceptualized the changes that have occurred in the way the postmodern subject experiences human time and thereby constitutes itself: in this context, the recent novels of Giuseppe Genna can be considered as exemplary in the trajectory of this literary genre, as they bear witness to the permanence of the desires that it expresses, and most of all of the persistence of mechanisms for the temporal construction of Sense even in what Genna calls the 'degraded and vilified' historical time of Italian postmodernity.

In the modern European tradition, one of the most enduring and influential models of the novel's relation to Time and Sense is to be found in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) (von Goethe, 1989), a novel that was first published in 1796 and is still considered both the prototype and the full realization of the Bildungsroman form. To resume briefly its plot, we will simply say that the young Wilhelm, who was born to a good bourgeois family, follows a theatre troupe and evolves through innumerable encounters and adventures in his contemporary German landscape, finally reaching full adulthood only when he learns that his adventures were neither the fruit of chance, nor of his free choices. A benevolent secret society – The Society of the Tower – had been constantly watching over him, making sure that, in due time, the 'right' kind of experiences would bring him to self-consciousness through the full acceptance of human ethics and responsibility.

From a temporal point of view, what seemed a linear plot bringing the young Wilhelm from birth through childhood to adulthood while engaging in activities such as art, friendship, love and paternity, becomes infinitely more problematic when we learn that Wilhelm's adventures had in fact already been both Future and Past: Future insofar as they had been carefully predisposed by the Society of the Tower, and Past as they needed to be conceived from the very beginning as the bearers of a predisposed Sense. Furthermore, Goethe's stratagem makes us believe that the collapse of these temporal dimensions is in fact necessary if the young protagonist is to undergo the process of a truly novelistic 'apprenticeship'. Sense has to be embedded in the structure of the novel itself, and therefore it is always present in the events narrated, even if the protagonist is not immediately aware of it. This is why prophecies and premonitions abound in this sort novelistic structure, inserting both past planning and future revelations in the present of the event: the satisfaction experienced by protagonist and readers alike when the plot is finally unveiled is profoundly intellectual in nature, and trumps all residual emotional and affective upheavals. Familial conflict, love's misunderstandings, friends' unexpected and apparently inexplicable betrayals: all experience is both oriented toward and predisposed by a Sense that fills it up entirely, endowing subjectivity a maximum of intellectual and temporal reach into personal and social history. The *time* of the hero's peripatetic wandering had never been *lost*: in the end – and since the

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

beginning – everything 'makes Sense' to a restored human subject. To a certain extent, it is quite clear how this kind of novelistic experience is profoundly 'phenomenological', as it confirms Bifo's thesis about the Hegelian philosophical perspective, which cultivated the idea of an 'original truth to be restored, both on the level of the self-realization of the spirit and of the self-assertion of radical Humanism' (Berardi, 2010, p. 52).

During the nineteenth century, this unabashedly un-realistic teleological scheme arguably became the blueprint for much of the novels produced in the Western tradition, whether or not they conceived of themselves as *realist*: the hero travels through Time painfully weaving together his present both with his past and his future, getting ready to achieve the vision of the destiny that was waiting for him from the very beginning. The absence of a secret society explicitly declaring responsibility for that destiny was filled in various ways, through the mobilization either of chance or of social conspiracy, sometimes in very tragic ways. The hero – or, less frequently, the heroine – can be driven to suicide or dramatic death (as happens in *Red and Black*, or *Madame Bovary*). Others – admittedly less often – can ultimately find like Wilhelm the path to a more reconciled fate leading to inner peace and self-understanding (as happens to Renzo and Lucia in Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* and even to Marcel in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*). In both cases, however, the novelistic relationship to Time and Meaning is basically left unscathed: the Present of the narrative accident is always carefully framed both in terms of past determinations – national, familial, social – and of future realization. The highly abstract rendering of the novelistic form by Georg Lukacs is therefore justified by the novel's peculiar relation to immanent forms of being. Since, 'as form, the novel established a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being … the novel, by transforming itself into a normative being of becoming, surmounts itself. "The voyage is completed: the way begins"' (Lukacs, 1971, p. 73).

It is only too easy, of course, to deconstruct the particular 'normative being' presented by the novel, and to demystify the improbable mechanisms of premonition and revelation that it contains: the fact that the manipulation of the temporal dimension of understanding is fundamental to their creation and integral part of their appeal is not altered in the least by the denunciation of the ideological or theological residues retraceable under their more or less polished or realistic surfaces.[1] What is important is that the 'machinery' works: the reader is satisfied by a successful constitution of meaning in the face of otherwise senseless or even despairing events.

The Novel and the Postmodern Subject

The need to go back to the novel in its more canonical, modern European examples when approaching the work of postmodern Italian writers can appear

gratuitous or at least superfluous. However, such a critical move is necessary if we want to understand the persistence of the 'novel form' in the expression of contemporary subjects in their relation to personal and historical Time. In particular, the novelistic preoccupation with the temporal unfolding of Sense lets us understand why the authors of the first generation of writers entirely raised in postmodernity – which I would consider the one whose members were born between roughly 1955 and 1970 – have found it necessary to have recourse to this quintessentially modern form.

First of all, we have to recognize that they are not particularly interested in distancing themselves from the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition: on the contrary, faced with the domination of mass culture and with the increasing homologation of subjectivities that it produced, the highly individualized and often marginalized heroes of the Romantic and Realist novels seem to be a last hope for escaping an irreversible trend toward personal, historical and political insignificance. While for the previous generation the need for a formal 'avant-garde' was still a major concern, writers such as Giuseppe Genna don't spend much time on issues of formal originality: rather, they explicitly refer to previous models of narrativity. In the case of Giuseppe Genna, they often come from the nineteenth-century tradition of the novel, from Dostojevski to Alessandro Manzoni.

The terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernity', in this context, have to be understood primarily in a historical sense, while still bearing the different nuances that they have acquired in the theorization of thinkers such as Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and of course Bifo – among others – during the 1980s and 1990s. In this perspective, far from representing a clean break from modernity, postmodernity can be understood as a progressive intensification and acceleration of modern forms of economic and social organization. This acceleration has been such that a true transformation in forms of life has ensued, causing what has recently been recognized as a psychological and even anthropological crisis. In the words of one of Bifo's recent books, the web-related communication models introduced at the dawn of the Third Millennium have radically transformed the cognitive and affective subject, creating new forms of alienation:

> Putting the soul to work: this is the new form of alienation. Our desiring energy is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital. (Berardi, 2010, p. 24)

The rise of the virtual sphere, after having been hailed as the unleashing of creative and political freedoms, is now increasingly been questioned as leading to a catastrophic decomposition of the ethical and political subject.

This kind of assessment, of course, is far from unanimous, but several thinkers of postmodernity would agree that the most important mutations characteristic of postmodern societies have been heavily determined by the developments undergone by the capitalist mode of production from the late 1950s onwards. One of the prophets of the apocalyptic implications of contemporary forms of production was of course Jean Baudrillard, who already in the late 1970s diagnosed the traumatic impact that the irrevocable loss of the Real was having on the contemporary world and the subjectivities that it created. Starting in the late 1980s, younger scholars started to theorize what the Italian sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato has defined capital's third stage – the first being the financial and the second being the industrial – that he proposed to call 'cognitive'. What does it mean to be part of cognitive capitalism? According to Lazzarato and others, what Capital is now producing for its own exploitation are no longer physical goods, such as real money or actual commodities: what is now produced and exploited is 'thought' itself, 'cognition' in the sense of how a subject apprehends and 'modulates' his or her own existence in the world:

> Contemporary capitalism … transforms creative activity in brain pollution. The capitalist way of actualizing audiences, perceptions and the collective intelligence acquires an anti-productive function. By subordinating the constitution of desires and beliefs to the imperatives of capitalist valorization, it leads to an impoverished, formatted subjectivity. (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 149)

According to this kind of sociological analysis, in a rapidly accelerating process dating approximately from that first intrusion in the familial and individual space represented by the television, we are now living in a universe completely determined by models of subjectivation determined by technical and economical exteriorities.

In this new era, traditional vertical hierarchies still functioning at least in the most rural parts of France and Italy in the 1950s and early 1960s progressively lost their ability to reproduce themselves. At the same time, other social stratifications have emerged, although apparently more horizontal in nature and less constrictive – no more patriarchal authority either in sexual or in generational terms, no more institutional credit attributed to Universities than to forms of peer-based knowledge production, from Wikipedia to tweets – in terms of traditional repressive imperatives (mostly in terms of sexuality and expressive speech, although residues of the old repressive systems are constantly reintroduced by reactionary forces). New 'apparatuses of capture' have been organized by Capital's amazing ability to inscribe material energies into decoded flows of money, and all is not good in our 'brave new world'.

It is precisely the Italian instantiation of this 'new world' that Giuseppe Genna, who was born in Milan, Italy, in 1969, explicitly critiques in his novels, which

are rendered all the more powerful by the fact that he himself, just as his semi-autobiographical heroes, inhabits it in all of its technologies and virtual apparatuses. Genna not only has a constantly updated webpage, where a stream of new content is featured daily, but also makes use of tweets and videos in order to further construct and make public his complex authorial persona. Incidentally, that these supposedly 'expressive' venues are in fact imposed on their authors by publishing companies is of course a well-known fact. However, we have the impression that coercion and contract clauses are not needed in this kind of relation: our very constitution as postmodern subjects might very well lead us to adopt these forms of communication without any prompting. As Gilles Deleuze said back in 1995 in *Postscript on Control Societies*, we are witnessing 'the widespread progressive introduction of a new system of domination' (p. 182).

From this point of view, the 'vile and devastated time' of contemporary culture is explicitly assumed by Genna, and this is why we have to ask the question of the novel and of its status in the contemporary cultural and political arena. What can the novel do, what can its 'new machineries' introduce in the wasteland of postmodern insignificance?

Dies Irae: Judging Italian Postmodernity

The rest of my discussion will focus on two recent novels by Giuseppe Genna: *Dies Irae*, published in 2006, and *Italia De Profundis*, which came out at the end of 2008. In the context of my larger argument, it is important to remark that many of the landscapes and characters described in these two novels were already present in the short stories and essays published originally in *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile*, that originally came out in 1999 and was recently re-issued with the addition of new texts (Genna, 2010). For the time being, I will draw our attention on the fact that 'Time' is indeed at the very core of this title – which translates as *Assault on a Vile and Devastated Time*. This reinforces my basic assumption that it is the relation to the novel to Time, and its capacity to reclaim it and violently confront it in a symbolic 'assault', that continue to lend to this apparently outdated 'genre' its lasting appeal.

From the socio-economical point of view of the new form of domination created by 'cognitive capitalism', the constitution of Giuseppe Genna's authorial persona is also worthy of mention. Giuseppe Genna became known in the 1990s for his 'noir' novels, which belong to the quintessentially Italian revival of the detective story, the so-called 'giallo'. Genna wrote a successful series of political/criminal intrigues, centered around Guido Lopez, a former-leftist-extremist-turned-cop. Often, Lopez's cases lead him to uncover stories of political corruption and environmental degradation taking place in Milan's underbelly, on the margins of the new suburban developments promoted by the burgeoning Berlusconi's financial empire. One of these novels, *In the Name of Ishmael*, was translated into English and published in the United States by Hyperion Press (Genna, 2003).

 © 2012 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341

However, a heavily promoted, translated and televised Genna soon felt the need to abandon not only Guido Lopez, his melancholic sleuth, but the very model of the investigation plot, where a solution is eventually found for the crimes perpetrated, albeit one rooted in national corruption and personal failure. His non-genre novels will be constructed as semi-autobiographical fictions whose protagonist is a contemporary Italian writer called Giuseppe Genna. We should not forget that the narrative genre of the 'autobiographical novel' has a long tradition in European literary modernity, the most obvious example being of course Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. In the context of my argument this reference, of course, is far from coincidental: as Gilles Deleuze noticed already in *Proust and Signs* (1972), what is truly essential in Proust's narration is not the simple recuperation of past memories, but the construction of Sense within a subjective becoming: 'memory intervenes only as the means of an apprenticeship that transcends recollection both by its goals and its principles. *The Search* is oriented to the future, not the past' (Deleuze, 2000, p. 4).

Re-collection, in all of its forms, clearly designates the aim and means of the detective story, but Giuseppe Genna has found that in what I will provisionally call 'Italian postmodernity', both the events described and the affects that they inspire cannot be reduced to an investigation scheme, whose focus is, by definition, the Past. The Sense of *Dies Irae* can no longer reside in the discovery of the perpetrators of the numerous crimes that occur in it, and this is true for several reasons, some purely historical and others more tied to theoretical considerations.

From the historical point of view, I will argue that contrary to much that has been written about the revival of this genre, the investigation scheme has become popular in Italy precisely because of its *utopian* character with respect to the actual [dis]functioning of the Italian juridical system. Notoriously, an appalling number of crimes go unsolved there, as investigations are irreparably marred by manipulations and omissions, especially but not only if political figures are involved. The 'giallo' remains, in this respect, an imported item in Italian national culture, at least in its classic format, just like the western or the spy-story: only an ironical or cynical adoption of the genre can be 'realistically' adopted, like for instance in the works published by Carlo Emilio Gadda and Leonardo Sciascia in the 1950s and 1960s. But to stick to this genre in the Third Millennium is, to a certain extent, to succumb to the logic of the *simulacrum*, of the commercial reproduction of a completely empty signifier. Being an Italian writer of detective stories meant, to a certain extent, participating in a vast cultural imposture. This is how the Giuseppe Genna portrayed in *Dies Irae* talks about his past work:

> This fake voice of fiction, that imprisons, that presumes to know how to regulate facts. This continuous equation that, once it's

> solved, creates pleasure, and even when it's not solved, it's calculated in a way that creates pleasure … And if you sold well, if the television lights, always independently from the text, illuminated some kind of cattle, everybody was convinced that we had either a bull or a cow in the pen: a 'readable writer', one of those who defecate linear fiction, who shrink television in the pages of a book. (Genna, 2006, p. 52)

What Giuseppe Genna also realizes, and this from a more theoretical, even philosophical point of view, is that in Italian postmodernity the precious time carved out for narration in our 'vile and devastated' present can no longer be devoted to a simple intellectual game, to the investigative puzzles of factual reconstruction. The besieged 'postmodern soul', constantly polluted by the parasitical residues of capitalist strategies of subjectivation, actually looks at the novel as a way of constructing the very subjectivity of both writer and reader. In the entry dated April 2002, Giuseppe Genna the character records in his journal a repudiation of his identity as writer of thrillers, and seriously contemplates – not for the first time – the idea of suicide: 'what should I do? Should? Do? I see the idea of suicide invading my space, traversing the black waters of my mind …' (Genna, 2006, p. 688). However, buoyed by anti-depressants and tied to his contract, Giuseppe keeps writing his Guido Lopez series for several years.

This is how the manuscript of *Dies Irae*, the science-fiction novel that the character of Giuseppe Genna has been working on for years, comes into the picture. It is this manuscript, whose fragments we have been reading all through the narration, which will redeem the writer, guaranteeing a space of appearance for the ethical subject, a figure that is otherwise barred from contemporary Italian culture. Furthermore, it is only after refusing the authorial *ersatz* created for him by the book industry that Giuseppe Genna, both as an author and a fictional character in his own novel, can lay claim to judging his own Time. Significantly, it is this ethical stanza that pushes him explicitly to insert his work in an older tradition: from Petrarch to Giacomo Leopardi, 'traditional' Italian writers share Giuseppe's frame of reference with international postmodern novelists such as Roberto Bolaño, David Foster Wallace, or Michel Houellebecq. As for these last writers, the adoption of the novel form becomes, in Genna's work, the very sign of the conundrum represented by postmodern modalities of expression and subjectivation.

Apocalyptic in tone and content, with its 760 pages of tightly packed prose, *Dies Irae* retraces 25 years of Italian history as it is witnessed by a dejected narrator and a full cast of vividly portrayed, dramatic characters. The violence, sexism, corruption and political desperation of contemporary Italy are rendered by Genna with stunning directness. While the more largely cultural and not specifically Italian aspects of the postmodern condition are often evoked in the

novel, the national specificity of Italian postmodernity is an essential part of the book.

The character of Giuseppe Genna, the Milanese son of Sicilian immigrants, has witnessed one of the most dramatic struggles for power ever to be waged in a Western country, a struggle that is still going on and that has profoundly inflected the cultural and political destinies of the Italian people. Giuseppe is portrayed as a fully Italian postmodern subject, a successful writer who is involved in charitable and promotional appearances and who, for a few years, has even had the chance to work for the Secret Services. His alcoholic father is a former militant of the now defunct Italian Communist Party; his mother, the traumatized witness of her own mother's suicide: Giuseppe comes, quite literally, from an orphaned ancestral background, unable to provide him with any meaningful framework for interpreting his own existence.

In this respect, of course, Giuseppe is the perfect stand-in for his historical time and space of emergence. First as a functionary in the secret police, and then as a writer of historically based thrillers, Giuseppe has been able to voyeuristically constitute a supplemental existence for a self otherwise already irrevocably compromised: 'I look, observe, memorize. I have an identity. I am the writer Giuseppe Genna' (Genna, 2006, p. 36).

The crumbling of what we now start to call the 'First Republic' in the wake of the terrorist politics of the mid- to late 1970s, the corruption scandals of the 1980s,the end of the Cold War and the consequent suicide of the Italian Communist Party, the death of the Christian Democrats, the progressive revelation of the financial and moral corruption of the Catholic Church, and finally, the reign of sexual, cultural and political vulgarity brought about by the meteoric rise of Silvio Berlusconi: this is the ultimate framework for understanding the necessity of radically reforming the contemporary forms of life expressed by the novel. Writing, as therapy and method, becomes an essential part of this project, although it does not pretend to be able to repair what is broken.

Among all the historical events that have marked Giuseppe's dejected existence – starting with the scary coincidence of his birth date in Milan, which was the day of the infamous bombing of Piazza Fontana – the fictional restaging of the hyper-Italian, media-constructed story of Alfredino Rampi becomes exemplary, and in fact highly symbolic. In 1981, Alfredino was a five-year-old boy who fell in an artesian pit near his house in the Roman countryside. The child remained trapped for several days and the rescue operation was televised in its entirety, in a melodramatic spectacle that saw the Italians glued to their television screens. After several attempts and many emotional reversals of fortune, the little boy could not be rescued, and after two days of hope the boy grew tired, stopped talking and slipped into unconsciousness and death. Giuseppe, who at the time was 11 and had watched the spectacle like the vast majority of his fellow Italians, seems to be thoroughly traumatized by the boy's

ordeal. When, as an adult, he has a chance to work for the Italian Secret Services, Giuseppe collects information on this incident with particular eagerness. The semi-autobiographical construction of Giuseppe's character allows us to mention the fact that already in previous fictions, and in particular in *In the Name of Ishmael*, the case of Alfredino Rampi occupied an important part of Genna's narrative universe.

In *Dies Irae*, Giuseppe Genna gives full credit to a more or less accredited conspiratorial version of the facts that slowly started to emerge only during the late 1980s, according to which Alfredino's death had not been an accident at all. A victim of sexual abuse, the boy would have been lowered into the pit in by his abuser, a family acquaintance whose name, as a mysterious 'uncle Ivo', was made several times by the 5-year-old boy during his ordeal. There was no 'Ivo' in the Rampi's family, but at the time the public simply thought that the boy was hallucinating. Genna intimates that if the investigations didn't go any further it was because the presumed Ivo was in fact a functionary of the Vatican deeply connected with the Italian Secret Services and the CIA, and as such benefited from impenetrable protections.

While this version of the facts appears to be quite far-fetched and difficult to prove, its adoption on the part of Giuseppe Genna is extremely significant. In perfect agreement with the fears and fascinations of our day, the abuse of children is a founding block in the reconstruction of Italian postmodernity that Genna proposes to us. The symbolic rewriting of Alfredino's ordeal is parallel to the vicissitudes of the main female character of *Dies Irae*, Paola, a young therapist that Giuseppe meets in 2005 but whose story we slowly discover through deeply disturbing and shockingly graphic scenes. The young girl starts to be sexually abused by her own father at the age of eight, with the silent knowledge of her utterly impotent mother. Even more shockingly, at 11 she is 'rented' by her father to a man of wealth and power who rapes her so brutally – in the terrifying presence of a black, barking Doberman – that her hip breaks, leaving her with chronic pains and nightmares. The sexual scenes are described by Genna in semi-pornographic detail, while the novel slips into the gory techniques of the horror genre.

The inadequacy of the crime fiction in the evocation of the profound traumas experienced by the protagonists of *Dies Irae* becomes increasingly evident: the designation of a specific individual legally responsible for such crimes is either impossible or ultimately irrelevant. The system of power and the kind of vulgarized subjectivation that it brings into being demands new forms of overcoming, from the dance therapy that Paola tries to share with the chronically depressed Giuseppe, to all sorts of shamanic forms of exorcism and expiation. There is no rational outside for the violence of postmodernity: reason, in fact, has been more or less expelled from the public domain, and in Italy more than anywhere else, since a whole system of political and economic power has consciously decided to exploit the cultural shifts typical of our time.

This is why in the later novel *Italia De Profundis* (Genna, 2008), the same semi-autobiographical protagonist is not happy about *Dies Irae*'s success: the public identified too much with it, and did not feel pushed beyond the self-indulgent pleasure of recognition. This is also why Giuseppe, for a time, denounces the novel form itself, as being too easily assimilated into a reassuring, 'algebraic', re-presentation of the present:

> The novel is accepted only for its algebraic component: if it is an equation, if it can be understood by the reader, then it is recuperable, it becomes just another instrument of human self-expropriation. But even so, what kind of narration can we look forward to? (Genna, 2006, p. 71)

What the Italian readers were not able – or maybe not willing – to understand was precisely the fact that what was invoked at the end of the book was not the melancholic complicity brought about by a common Past, but the imperative call to a Future liberation. In the vacation resort where Giuseppe takes refuge after his latest sentimental flop, a fellow tourist and aspiring writer– a shallow, pathetic character – tells him:

> 'You are Giuseppe Genna, I read you. I read *Dies Ira*e, it is a masterpiece … Alfredino, the 1980s, Moana Pozzi, I remember everything. It really was like that …' This is why *Dies Irae* is a half failure. Because it has created identification thanks to shared memories. (Genna, 2008, p. 310)

Back to the Future?

Giuseppe Genna, however, had inserted in *Dies Irae* a powerful obstacle to this kind of reading, with the insertion in its apparently 'realistic' narration of a strong science-fiction subplot. Giuseppe, the young writer who is the protagonist of both *Dies Irae* and *Italia De Profundis*, has also been writing, for many years, a manuscript situated at various stages of the future. The title 'Dies Irae' is, in fact, the title of this other, unpublished novel, one that can only be presented in tandem with the wider, realistic plot. In the science-fiction manuscript, we read about several visits to outer space of human and post-human crews. These trips start in 2038 and come to an apocalyptic end in a futuristic '*annus incalculabilis*': at that point the last ship, appropriately called '*Finis Terrae*', is found by two new forms of life, called BP12 and BP17.

Significantly, this last ship contains a metallic bar able to decipher the inscription situated on the golden statue of a child, whose name 'Al.Re.Ino', can finally be deciphered by the post-humans. After a few seconds, the child

starts speaking, and in an oracle-like manner expresses an actualization of knowledge and meaning that eluded his own time:

> What is Old is in fact New. The Newest is the Oldest. Which illusion and affliction can touch he who sees the One? 'I AM' everywhere. I salute that Being that is simple … This is the end, this is the beginning … True Being is the true Father, who is the simple internal Sense of being present … Peace, peace, peace. (Genna, 2006, p. 760)

Thus *Dies Irae* comes to a close. For those who, like Alfredino but also Giuseppe and Paola, have suffered through a dark and unforgiving Present, only a revelatory, redeeming narrative future can intervene as provider of Sense. The question of realism and of realist reification has needed to be surpassed by the compression of human Time made possible by the novelistic form.

In this respect, the adoption of a science-fiction plot is only the postmodern, pop-culture version of what was contained in the novelistic form from its very beginning. If we go back to my initial evocation of Wilhelm Meister and of the Society of the Tower, it is clear that Genna's ending is scarcely less verisimilar than Goethe's. The novel, by definition, has always surpassed and recreated itself in relation to human time and meaning, it has always been the 'unidentified narrative object' recently theorized by *Wu Ming*, the Italian authorial collective writing postmodern historical novels.

This is why a reference to specifically Italian incarnation of the historical novel and of essayistic forms of reflection, from Alessandro Manzoni and Giacomo Leopardi to Elsa Morante and Pierpaolo Pasolini, is particularly relevant in this context. It is not by chance that Genna uses as epigraph to *Italia De Profundis* the following quote by Pasolini himself, taken from his last, posthumous novel, *Petrolio* (Pasolini, 1997):

> In the planning and initial writing of my novel, I actually did something else than planning and writing the novel itself: I have organized in myself the sense or the function of reality; and once I did that, I tried to master that reality … In the creative act that all of this implied, I also wanted to get rid of myself, that is, to die. (Genna, 2006, p. 7)

Pasolini wrote *Petrolio*, itself a dark, graphically sexual novel, in 1973, but apparently, Genna could appropriate his words more than 30 years later, without any reservation or qualification. As Félix Guattari had already said at the end of the 1990s, what is most needed in postmodernity is in fact a discourse able to address our relation with ourselves and our surroundings, since 'it is a question in each instance of looking into what would be the dispositives of the production of subjectivity' (Guattari, 1989, p. 34).

At the dawn of the third millennium, the novel seems one of the few mechanisms for self-liberation and reconstruction for contemporary subjectivity, beyond all realistic or mimetic cover. In the degraded language of mass culture, there is still a place not only for the *Bildungsroman,* but also for the Mallarmean, high-modernist ideal of the Book, of the 'roman total', the 'total novel' that would be able to use language in a semi-esoteric recovery of sense. In all of its stylistic impurities, in all of its graphic violence, which are both inescapable cultural and political realities of our present, the novel seems still able to conceptualize and open a Future horizon for an otherwise utterly desperate and disempowered historical and psychological subject.

About the Author

Giuseppina Mecchia is Associate Professor of French and Italian and Director of the Graduate Program for Cultural Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. She has published essays, edited volumes, translated monographs and given lectures on political and gender issues in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and Italian literature, political philosophy and cultural politics, and in particular on Biopolitics, Félix Guattari, Maurice Blanchot, Marcel Proust, Jacques Rancière, Michael Haneke and Antonin Artaud. Her current manuscript is entitled *Reinventing the Wheel of Dissent: Stateless Thought between France and Italy at the end of the 20th Century.*

Note

1 Starting in the 1950s, this critique will be made explicit, for instance, in the novelistic practice of the French New Novelists, and in particular in the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor: however, it is arguable that the Sense of these novels is the illusory nature of human time and understanding when faced with immense complexity of the real. The novel's structure, however, clearly mimics the traditional 'apprenticeships' of the modern novel, although what is learned is precisely the inadequacy of human learning.

References

Berardi, F. (2005) Interview with Franco Berardi 'Bifo'. 11 July 2005; G. Mecchia. In: F. Bifo (ed.) *Félix Guattari: Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography*, (2008) eds. and trans. G. Mecchia and C.J. Stivale. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Berardi, F. (2010) *The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Deleuze, G. (ed.) (1995) Postscript on control societies. In: *Negotiations 1972–1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G. (2000) *Proust and Signs*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. (2004) *The Logic of Sense*. London: Continuum.

Genna, G. (2003) *In the Name of Ishmael*. New York: Hyperion.

Genna, G. (2006) *Dies Irae*. Milan, Italy: Rizzoli.

Genna, G. (2008) *Italia De Profundis*. Rome, Italy: Minimum Fax.

Genna, G. (2010) *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile*, Versione 3.0. Rome, Italy: Minimum Fax.

Goddard, M. (2012) Cinema, cartographies, Symptomatologies, Guattari, Bergman, Van Sant, automatisms, subjective mutations. *Subjectivity* 5(1): 75–94.

Guattari, F. (1989) *The Three Ecologies*. London: Athlone Press.

Lazzarato, M. (2002) *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond.

Lukacs, G. (1971) *The Theory of the Novel*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Pasolini, P. (1997) *Petrolio: A Novel*. New York: Pantheon Books.

von Goethe, J.W. (1989) *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Commentary

Reassessing recomposition: 40 years after the publication of *Anti-Oedipus*

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi
Associazione SCEPSI, European School of Social Imagination, via delle Tamerici, I/A – 47895 Domagnano, Republic of San Marino.
E-mail: bifo@scepsi.eu

Subjectivity (2012) 5, 111–119. doi:10.1057/sub.2011.28

Introduction

In this response to the materials included in this issue of *Subjectivity*, I'm not so much trying to punctually answer the various and interesting remarks that I find in the papers of my friends (and I thank them for their attention), as much as trying to reconfigure my present vision of the process. But I do not want to be ungrateful, for attention is indeed one of the most precious substances in today's world, and thus I will respond to some particular points in the essays before working from them to reconsider some broader issues.

In 'Labor of Recombination' Abe Walker comments on a discrepancy between two different attitudes towards cognitive labor in my writings. He's right that there is a discrepancy, but this discrepancy is not in my description: it's a real contradiction inscribed inside the forms of life and work of cognitariat. As he comments:

> Following Marx, Bifo here suggests that a physical contact and networks of communication between laborers is a necessary precondition for collective action. If precarious workers lack this interpersonal engagement, they are incapable of constituting a movement. Yet at other moments in the same text he appears far more enthusiastic, positioning a re-purposed labor movement as uniquely capable of

> resisting the capitalist offensive. ‘Only a movement of researchers, a high tech labor movement of the cognitariat that is autonomously organized can stop the dictatorship of financial corporation.’ How to explain this apparent discrepancy? (2009, p. 59)

In this text I want come to terms with this discrepancy, to look for a solution. But the solution cannot be merely conceptual, cannot be a better description of the present composition of labor. It has to be change – a political transformation, but also an affective and cultural transformation – in the relation between the expanding brain that Marx calls general intellect and the suffering body of the workers as living beings.

Similarly, the depression that David Eden finds in my writings is actually there, and Eden is right in pinpointing it: ‘It is Berardi’s version of biocapitalism, semiocapitalism, which develops the most depressing reading of the present and of the subjectivity of labor. It is important to note that Berardi *does not* use the concept of the multitude but rather deploys the concept of the “cognitariat” ’. But this depression is not a static or unchanging condition. This point is made by Michael Goddard when he observes that this depressive perception is linked with my reluctance to use the word ‘multitude’. Actually, I think that this concept is misleading in the present condition, because while it is rightly emphasizing the irreducibility of social unconscious to capitalist power, it denies and forgets the internal weaknesses and the suffering of the ‘non-reduced’ social life. I’m interested in the dark side of the multitude, and I think that the word cognitariat is more suited to grasp the intrinsic contradiction between intellectual potency of cognitive cooperation and the pathologies of the psychosphere, and also the effect of desolidarization that these pathologies bring.

In her essay, Giuseppina Mecchia remarks that the pathologies of post-modernity need to be seen as effects of the intensification and acceleration of tendencies inscribed in modernity:

> The terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘postmodernity’, in this context, have to be understood primarily in a historical sense, while still bearing the different nuances that they have acquired in the theorization of thinkers such as Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Franco Berardi ‘Bifo’– among others – during the 1980s and 1990s. In this perspective, far from representing a clean break from modernity, postmodernity can be understood as a progressive intensification and acceleration of modern forms of economic and social organization.

Actually, I think that the problem of the present is the inability to exit from the modern paradigm of unlimited growth and a constantly expanding future. Modern dogmas are impeaching the full deployment of cognitive potency.

I acknowledge that Michael Goddard is totally right when he underlines the insufficiencies in my examination of movies like Bergman's *Persona*:

> …It is surprising that no mention is made of the machinic elements in *Persona* such as the child's hand on the giant screen at the beginning of the film or the burning through of the filmstrip later in the film, which are highly suggestive of a reflexive interpenetration of cinema, technology and subjectivity. Nor does Berardi refer to the scenes watched on television related to the Vietnam war, specifically of the Buddhist monks' political acts of self-immolation, which not only situate the subjective drama in relation to political movements to come but also serve to extend its presentation of silence and aphasia beyond a strictly personal and into a world-historical context.

My references to films in *The Soul at Work* (Berardi, 2009a) and in *Precarious Rhapsody* (Berardi, 2009b) were only intended to examples of the different forms of alienation in the 1960s and today. What I have done is not a critique of the critiques deployed in these films, but rather using them as a way to reframe the discussion. And with that in mind I shall now attempt to do just that, moving from some of these considerations to a broad reassessment of the politics of social recomposition today.

Post-Oedipal

The process of subjectivation is based on conditions that have dramatically changed in the 40 years since the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983 [1972]). Reading that book was a defining moment in my intellectual and political experience, in the first years of the 1970s, when students and workers were fighting and organizing spaces of autonomy and separation from capitalist exploitation. Forty years after the publication of that book the landscape has changed so deeply that very concept of desire has to be re-thought, as it is marking the field of subjectivation in a very different way.

The proliferation of sources of enunciation in this age of the networks, the globalization of the economy and the media, was predicted and in a sense pre-conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari, but they could not know in advance the effects that global capitalism has produced on the unconscious and the dynamics of desire. As production, media and daily life have been subsumed into the sphere of semiocapital we need to reconsider the unconscious from this transformed position.

My starting question is thus: what is capitalism and what is schizophrenia after the psychosocial landscape has been reshaped by the tendencies described

by Deleuze and Guattari? *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) described, or better yet, mapped in advance the waste and proliferating land of rhizomatic capitalism that we see now deployed in the forms of neoliberal deregulation and financial semiocapitalism. They also mapped the formation of the schizo-psychosphere, in which today the psychosis is taking the central place of neurosis as prevailing clinical condition.

Shortly after its publication *Anti-Oedipus* encountered and inspired a movement that was the expression of the first generation of precarious cognitive workers, a movement that, while continuing the legacy of May 1968, was opening a post-ideological wave, based on the concepts of desire and autonomy. In the streets of Bologna in the year 1977 students yelled 'anti-Oedipal' slogans rather than celebrating Che Guevara and Mao Zedong. Those students found in that book the joy of unleashing desire as energy of social solidarity and creation.

When we first read that book in the 1970s we understood it as a claim of liberating desire from the chains of industrial work, from sexual and social repression. This was a legitimate reading, but it was also too narrow, too simplistic. Now the chains of capitalism have become immaterial and semiotic, and psychic suffering does not come so much from repression but mainly from the hyper-expressive compulsion, from competition and acceleration of the infosphere.

In the 1970s we did read that book as a critique of the Freudian reduction of the unconscious to the theatrical dimension, and a critique of Lacan's reduction of the unconscious to language. This was a legitimate way to read the book, and a good political starting point.

Quelque chose se produit: des effets de machine, et non des metaphores – 'Something is happening: machine effects, not metaphors', we read in the first page of the book, and this was a good introduction to a critique of the logocentrism implied in the Freudian and Lacanian cult of interpretation. But beyond that today we should understand what has changed in social imagination and in the collective psychosphere in the decades that come after the publication of this book, which has to be read today as a prefiguration of the new phenomenology of precarious work and the new pathologies of psychic suffering.

We identified desire as a force, and rhizomes as revolutionary models, as we tried to fully develop the liberation of collective life from the repressive tangles of industrial capitalism, and simultaneously from the centric and authoritarian model of the disciplinary state. In my opinion that interpretation was politically legitimate, particularly in the context of unemployment, the precariousness of young people, and persisting political power of the working class, but it was narrow and reductive from a philosophical point of view. Forty years later, in my opinion, we have to abandon the emphasis on the liberating potential of desire and of schizoid expressivity, and replace the

assumption of infinite energy of desire with a new consciousness of exhaustion, a consciousness of the limits of living organisms.

Desiring expressivity and rhizomatic proliferation, the processes that the book conceptualized have been strong factors of change, dismantling the repressive and neurotic form of capitalist domination in its industrial phase. But in the meanwhile, the features of a new model of economic power have emerged, and this new model is based on the topological structure of the rhizome, and is acting as a powerful attractor for the economic investment of desire.

In the 1970s we emphasized the liberating force of desire, and movements deconstructed the neurotic cage of alienated labor and sexual repression. In the 1990s, as language was captured in the process of semiotic production and desire invested in the creative economy and in the financial abstraction, we have to face the ambiguity of desire, which is not a unilaterally progressive force, liberating and joyous. Strictly speaking desire is not even a force, but a field, and the field where the most important action of social communication occurs. The basic processes of disaggregation and re-aggregation for power and social movements are happening in the field of desire. This is the fundamental discovery of that book. But this discovery has turned into a misunderstanding.

We translated the words of *Anti-Oedipus* into the idea that desire is in itself a force of liberation, and thus we did not see the pathogenic effects of the acceleration and intensification of the info-stimuli, that are linked to the formation of the electronic infosphere and to precarization of work.

Limit

1972 was also the year of publication of a book titled *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al*, 1972) produced by a group of scientists assembled by the Club of Rome. Asserting that physical resources of the planet are not boundless, the book contained an important conceptual intuition: economic growth cannot be infinite because basic physical resources are doomed to run out. The Arab-Israeli war of 1973 seemed to confirm this. It showed that the fundamental assumptions of capitalist ideology needed to be rethought and a new political culture developed based on the idea of un-growth.

Similarly, the psychic energies of cognitive work are not boundless, as the organic, psychic and cultural limits of the social body are limits to the potency of the general intellect, and a limit to desire itself. The core of clinic and political attention needs to shift: from the field of the expanding potency of the general intellect and desire to the field of psycho-pathologies of the first generation of precarious cognitive work. The acceleration of the infosphere, the unceasing intensification of mental work, that semiocapital is constantly

stimulating, has to be seen as factors of the fragilization of the psychic fabric of social composition. This was foreseen by Deleuze and Guattari in the last part of their lives. In their last book *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), particularly the last chapter, dedicated to 'Chaos and the brain', Deleuze and Guattari write:

> We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master.

What Is Philosophy? is a book on aging, as the authors state in the introduction. Aging, suffering, physical and psychic decay – the continent of exhaustion – that were hidden in the triumphal emphasis of our political reading of *Anti-Oedipus*, emerge here as a new perspective for imagining and conceptualizing the process of subjectivation in the sphere of semiocapitalism.

The schizo-strategy outlined in the pages of *Anti-Oedipus* was a way to escape the Freudian phenomenology of neurosis. The psychotic explosion of the high-speed semiocapital is changing the landscape. Neoliberal deregulation and network proliferation have deterritorialized the process of subjectivation, and opened the door to the explosion of the repressive cage of industrial labor and of paternal power of interdiction. As the repressive borders of unconscious and labor explode, precariousness becomes the social form of indetermination and uncertainty in the psychogenesis.

In his recent book, *L'uomo senza inconscio* (Man without the unconscious) (2010), Massimo Recalcati (an Italian psychoanalyst and philosopher who is trying to redraw the conceptual relation between Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari) lists the emerging diseases of our time: panic, food disorders, dependence on toxic substances, attention deficit disorders: pathologies that cannot be easily referred to the Freudian analysis, and demand a new context of interpretation, the context of post-Fordist, postindustrial deterritorialization, the context of labor precariousness. I call this context semiocapital because the general product is no more the physical good but the immaterial semiotic products: information, affection and aesthetics. Countless users can consume these products without exhausting them, circulating in the market of attention, invading mental space, and producing effects in the cognitive, but also affective and psychic spheres.

In the sphere of semiocapital the production of semiotic goods provokes an expansion and acceleration of the infosphere, directly affecting the psychosphere, that is the affective, sexual and imaginary dimensions. Consequently the relation between the production process and unconscious comes to be much more immediate and complex than in the industrial age, where production and consumption involved the collective psychic sphere only in an indirect way. Freud's psychoanalysis was intended to bring the plague into the

disciplinary space of conformist bourgeois society, opening the door to the vision of unconscious abysses. The bourgeois society, which tried to deny and remove the disturbing features of sexuality, was obliged to look at itself in the mirror of sexual psychogenesis.

Now we inhabit a totally different condition marked by the explosion of imagination, by the hyper-sexualization of media imagery, and the precarization of social connections. Psychosis is no longer confined to the separated sphere of institutionalized madness, but is exploding in the daily dimension as a factor of constant deterritorialization of the activity of imagination and desire.

We cannot face this new situation with the conceptual tools of the Freudian analysis, but at the same time also the categories of schizoanalysis need to be rethought.

Free from the neurogenic cage of the disciplinary society, the unconscious exploded and is proliferating in full daylight, naked and provocative in the dimensions of advertising, pornography and popular diffusion of psychopharmacology and cocaine, and the media hyper-stimulation of attention. Should we reclaim the restoration of the old moral order, of the slow family life, of the hierarchical territorialized system of the Protestant bourgeoisie in the old industrial cities? Obviously not, because this claim would be reactionary and ineffective. But we should not insist on the mere exhibition of the plague, on the mere emphasizing the infinite potencies of desire. Constantly mobilized by the economic machine, shifting from a simulation to the next under-promise of immediate pleasure, desire is turning to panic. The precarious generation is haunted by countless contradictory injunctions: enjoyment and acceleration, expression and competition, freedom and anxiety, creativity and exploitation. What is the way towards subjectivation in these new conditions?

Body

In order to imagine paths of social recomposition in the poet-oedipal condition that I have tried to sketch out in these pages we need to understand that the crucial problem, both at the political and at clinical levels, is the bodily dimension of the general intellect. This is why I speak of cognitarians, in order to define the cognitive workers in conditions of precariousness. Precarity is jeopardizing the sphere of affection and language, but we cannot cherish the idea of a comeback to the old times of the ‘standardized’ employment and social discipline. We should find a way to disentangle the potentialities of the new condition starting from an understanding of its alienation. This is why I use the word ‘cognitariat.’ In this concept I want to underline the implication of the intellect and of the body, the denial of this implication, and the separation of mental activity from the social body.

Since 2001, Christian Marazzi has been warning of the dismantling of the general intellect, a process that started after the dotcom crash of spring 2000. As he predicted, during the first decade of the new century cognitive labor has been disempowered and subjected to the form of precarization. The social and affective body of the cognitive workers has been separated from their daily activities. The alienation of the first generation of people who have learned more words from a machine than from their mother is based on this separation, on the virtualization of social relations. In the past 2 or 3 years, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, riots and huge demonstrations have exploded in many European cities, and seem destined to spread and gather strength in the coming years. But it is difficult to imagine what the forms of the struggle will be, as financial capitalism is deterritorialized and virtual, and therefore it is impossible to zero in on a social target, to attack a delimited enemy, as the enemy is nowhere and everywhere. So what is the issue of the mobilization against financial capitalism, if financial capital is impossible to locate and to contest?

At the same time, the possibility of a revolution seems to be out of reach, as social reality has become too complex, and replacing the ruling class seems useless, as a specific ruling class, strictly speaking, no longer exists. The financial class is not a territorialized class, as the industrial bourgeoisie used to be, it is rather a transversal function, recombining countless fragmentary actions of net-trading, exchanging stocks, producing simulations and so on. Economic power and political power are not the emanation of a rational decision, but a recombinant function, traversing the boundless sprawl of digital financial exchange. How can this ocean of fragments be subverted, how can a rational direction be imposed on this constellation of segments? It is not possible.

So why are people taking to the streets, and fighting against the police, and destroying the shops and the banks? Old rituals coming from the proletarian revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth century? Perhaps, in a certain way, yes: old rituals have become ineffective as the city is no more a place of social life, but a simulacrum, and the enemy is no more identifiable and targetable. But we should see another face in this kind of mobilization, one that is not aimed towards aggression and destruction, but towards self-recognition and recomposition.

The cognitarians of this generation are going to the streets to recompose their social and affective bodies. They are reactivating their bodily relations with the metropolitan territory. Riots are reshaping the perception of urban territory, and the perception of the complicity between bodies. From this point of view the students' struggles that exploded in fall 2011 are not to be seen as a sudden outburst of rage, but as the beginning of a long-lasting process that will encompass the next decade, a cognitarian insurrection of sort. Insurrection means rising up, and also full deployment of the potencies of the actor. The actor who is coming out on the historical scene of our time is the general intellect in its process of subjectivation. The potencies of this actor are the

potencies of the collective intelligence in the network, the potencies of knowledge, reduced to the narrow dogmatic utilization that capitalist economy is forcing on them.

The full deployment of the general intellect falls beyond the sphere of capitalism. When the general intellect will be able to reconstitute its social and erotic body, the capitalist rule will become obsolete. This is the new consciousness that comes out from the explosion of the last months of 2011 from reclaiming the autonomy of knowledge. The process of social recomposition is essentially the process of reactivation of the body of the general intellect, whose social existence is constrained in the precarious fragmentary form.

About the Author

Franco Berardi Bifo is a contemporary writer, media-theorist and media-activist. He founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975–1981) and was part of the staff of Radio Alice, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976–1978). He is author of numerous books, including *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of post-alpha generation*, *After the Future, Ethereal Shadows: Communications and Power in Contemporary Italy*, and *Félix Guattari: Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography.* He is the founder of the European School of Social Imagination and teaches social history of communication at the Accademia di belle Arti in Milan.

References

Berardi, F. (2009a) *The Soul at Work*. Translated by F. Cadel and G. Mecchia. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Berardi, F. (2009b) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation*. London: Minor Compositions.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1983 [1972]) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: The Athlone Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1994) *What is Philosophy?* Translated by G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson. London: Verso.

Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Behrens, W.W. and Randers, J. (1972) *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. London: Earth Island.

Recalcati, M. (2010) *L'uomo senza inconscio: Figure della nuova clinica piscoanalitica*. Milan, Italy: Raffello Cortina Editore.