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Advertisarial relations and aesthetics of survival: Advertising → advertisign

Jonathan Beller

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Advertisarial relations

With his typical flair for the graphic identification of our enemies, Banksy has this to say about advertising and public space:

[a]ny advertisement in public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. It belongs to you. It's yours to take, rearrange and re-use. Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head.¹

In an ironic twist it seems that Banksy feels the same way about critical theory, since it was noted in March 2012 on Gawker that he actually lifted these lines from writer and graphic designer Sean Tejaratchi's essay 'Death, Phones and Scissors' in the 1999 zine *Craphound* #6.² Facebooked, Tweeted, and Tumbld, tens if not thousands expressed themselves by reposting Banksy, who was reposting Tejaratchi. Who was reposting whom?

To the 'content' of these mobilised signs: they mean to say that the onslaught of words and images launched by advertisers is an aggressive attack on us denizens of the world; and that, in short, advertising is an assault weapon. Like many of us have been saying for a while now it is also a new type of economic exploit, a psycho-economic machine – a key component of the social factory and, as such, an encroachment on the commons. The rock then is a metaphor. Banksy calls an advertisement 'a rock' hurled at 'your head' to emphasise its bellicose aspects; however,

as Banksy's film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* shows, the capitalisation of perception depends upon a transformed relation between vision and social practices: advertising is not, strictly speaking, a rock. The ad's job is not over upon impact. Perambulators in public space, spectators, users of images and screens, are the marks – bio-political entities targeted by computer-mediated advertising with the purpose of binding said beings to the social factory via present and future attention in order that their sensual labor may be expropriated for capital. In the prescient words of Dallas Smythe who in his landmark essay 'The Blindspot of Western Marxism' bequeathed to us an analysis of what he called 'the audience commodity', audiences do *the work* of learning to consume.³ As it turns out for advertisers, in principal *all moments* are teachable ones; but theirs is an exploitative pedagogy designed to expropriate the work of learning. Let us consider this pedagogy of finance capital before turning to some counter-examples at the end of this essay.

While Smythe wrote one of the earliest considerations of what today we theorist types as well as those more pedestrian, if richer, folks known as economists identify as 'postfordism', we are aware that advertising is not exactly what it used to be either and the strategies of capture of alienated labor have grown increasingly sophisticated. As we learn to work to mediate enter Big Data, and with it the computerised trawling of the sedimentation of attention. This outcome, which is also a prequel, should alert those who are not already clear on this matter – that postfordism is not to be thought in the absence of visual and digital media platforms. The servility (Virno), feminisation (Marrazzi), and semioticisation (Berardi) of directly capitalised 'immaterial' labor cannot be properly understood without the visual turn; the penetration of the life-world by capitalised interfaces (images) is its condition of possibility.

We will start in the present and work our way back. On 1 March 2012 Google changed its privacy regulations to allow its 50-plus stand-alone 'services' to share data under a single 'privacy policy'. According to media theorist Christian Fuchs

[a]nalysis [of the current policy] shows that Google makes use of privacy policies and terms of service that enable the large-scale economic surveillance of users for the purpose of capital accumulation. Advertising clients of Google that use Google AdWords are able to target ads for example by country, exact location of users and distance from a certain location, language users speak, the type of device used: (desktop/laptop computer, mobile device [specifiable]), the mobile phone operator used (specifiable), gender, or age group.⁴

Fuchs' trenchant analysis concludes that 'Google's "new" privacy policy is not new at all and should consequently best be renamed to "privacy violation policy" or "user exploitation policy"'. In a subsequent blog entry Fuchs 'agree[s] with Oscar Gandy that personalised ads are a form of panoptic sorting and of social discrimination' and argues 'for a worldwide legal provision that makes opt-in advertising mandatory and outlaws opt-out'.⁵

This is a significant, lucid discussion about the Internet and advertising and Fuchs' statement that 'being productive in the corporate internet factory is being exploited' moves that particular discussion a decisive step forward. Indeed the emergence of this screen-mediated, exploitative, deterritorialised factory that inaugurates a new mode of value-production and value transfer is the fundamental argument of my 1994 essay 'Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century', the article that first introduced the notion of 'The Cinematic Mode of Production' along with these corollaries:

1. cinema brings the industrial revolution to the eye;
2. to look is to labor;
3. the attention theory of value must replace the labor theory of value;
4. dissymmetrical (exploitative) exchange occurs vis-à-vis the screen, etc.⁶

Today the Internet as a means of production is both pre-condition and paradigm for the screen-mediated social factory. Currently this social-factory is capitalist and, as something like the most advanced incarnation of the digitality implicit in capital itself, it functions through the expropriation of labor. As has been noted labor itself has changed its form. For Marx expropriation via wage-labor was and remains dissymmetrical exchange: the worker gives more to his/her capitalist than s/he receives. Over time, due in part to the falling rate of profit, the wage is leveraged down so that the worker receives subsistence and the rest of the worker's product accrues to the capitalist as profit.

Screen labor combats the falling rate of profit by simultaneously extending the working day and increasing both the efficiency and flexibility of production; it also results in what Bernard Stiegler aptly calls 'the proletarianization of the nervous system'.⁷ There have been some attempts to work out what this looks like mathematically from a Marxist perspective in the context of both the Internet and other forms of screen economies, but I will leave that for another time.⁸ Let me just say here that while it is undeniable that screen-users are sold to advertisers there is a nagging question about what they get in return.

I would say that the wage – formerly thought to be exclusively paid in money (which Marx also called 'the vanishing mediator' and 'the general

equivalent') – like labor has also changed its form. The general equivalent is a convertible form of social wealth, the commodity that became 'money' that had among other uses the specialised function of indexing abstract universal labor-time as price. Increasingly it appears that the money-form and social recognition are convergent, as with the celebrity and the brand. It seems unproblematic to say that money is what Sohn-Retel called a real abstraction but so too with the brand. Is it possible that wages are paid in real abstractions of the value form, varying intermediate currencies supported by what Chih-hsieh Chen (following Foucault) calls 'regimes of truth', which although convertible experience value fluctuations and require exchange. Just what can you get with 1,000,000 YouTube views? Have we learned to assemble iconic presentations of the self in exchange for what are effectively local currencies of recognition in order that we might extend our own productive basis and auto-capitalise at a higher rate of return by extending our market base? Are we paid in the mode of subsistence of others who are themselves taken as means of production? At any rate, on the labor side, by this time we are all familiar with the various cognates that with differing emphasis endeavor to name these even later capitalist convergences of work and play: immaterial labor, attention, prosumer, playbor, cognitive capitalism, semio-capitalism, virtuosity, etc. Less familiar is the convergence of wage as money and as recognition, both becoming iterations of the general equivalent and thus exchangeable for human time. We must consider that just as money can be utilised as either a medium of exchange (in simple circulation) or as capital so too with recognition and, more generally, attention. The celebrity quite literally banks human time.

The point I want to make with regard to the screen-mediated production of profit – which is also a challenge to the category of 'advertising' – has to do precisely with the idea of real subsumption that is implicit in the postfordist model of production indicated above. Although it is necessary to insist upon the role of the screen in organising the relations of postfordist production it is a mistake to think that once one leaves the light of the screen work grinds to a halt. The point of Virno's concept of virtuosity is that the cognitive-linguistic has been commandeered by capitalist production – virtuosity is a command performance: one thinks and speaks capital and constantly cooperates in productive processes everywhere to purchase survival. There is a blurring of the lines between work, attention, semiosis, and remuneration. With a somewhat different emphasis this displacement of the sovereign subject *within* language – a form of dispossession – is also the ultimate point of Vilém Flusser's work on the photographic appa-

tus.⁹ The camera is a collection of programs that fundamentally alters the character of language and sociality but also of history and metaphysics; it works through a process that marks a triple abstraction from reality: from the hand-rendered pictographic image, to the written line, to the materialised calculus of the photographic apparatus. Through the production of 'technical images' photography fundamentally transforms linear thought, the fabric of time, and therefore the relation to history and reality such that humans are placed within the domain of the programmed image, 'the universe of technical images'.

Additionally, Steigler's current work on political economy and dispossession remarks on the 'grammatization of gesture' by industry and then on audiovisual perception and cognition by what he calls 'retentional systems', meaning media technologies.¹⁰ This grammatisation of perception and cognition by media platforms harnesses the libido and institutes the aforementioned 'proletarianization of the nervous system'. Therefore the screen, while a command-control nexus that directly harnesses libidinal drives as sensual labor, continues to organise the social factory through its after-images. As a moment's reflection on the enclosure and re-presentation of off-screen spaces by the operations of visual capital should make clear, even in the apparent absence of screens their programming organises off-screen places like the imagination, as well as the planet of slums.

Therefore we may draw a conclusion that presents itself as the statement of a problem: if what one means by advertising is 'the marketing of commodities for the purpose of capitalist valorization' then 'advertising' has become a general condition, the real name for informatic throughput in capitalism. If, given the postmodern intensification of the disappearance of the referent of the sign, the cynosure of postmodernism was that everything means something else, in postfordism we could say that everything advertises something else – and also itself. This pithy formula could be further reduced to a precise deduction of what is nothing short of the reigning imperative of postfordist societies. Reminiscent of but antithetical to Jameson's famous slogan, the capitalist response to Marxism's 'always historicise' is 'always advertise'!

Advertisarial relations should be understood as the mode by which the multitudes are dispossessed of history – the imperative to advertise is also the imperative to erase the archive (non-capitalist and non-capitaliseable strata) of shared, collective becoming. The real subsumption of society by capital marks the conversion of representation itself to advertising. Virtuosity, which is to say omni-present command performances within the social factory that mark the expropriation of the cognitive linguistic

capacities of the species, as well as the corollary production of knowledge according to the score of the general intellect, means that we speak for capital, which is precisely the role of advertising; it also happens to be the role of the news, the state, and the military-industrial complex which, understood thus, suddenly appear more starkly than ever to be on a continuum with advertising itself. Dialectically then, within the framework of actually-existing capitalism, media convergence (the movement of all platforms toward digital computation and, arguably, the movement of all digital computation toward digital capitalism) implies the movement of all cultural practice towards advertising. Data mining must therefore be understood as a vast uptake of the commons, of the residuum of our common cultural and attentional practices, designed to intensify the imposition of an advertisarial relationship on every semiotic, and by extension biotic, process. This mode of capitalist production in which thought and 'noetic acting' directly produces surplus value strives to include all the sedimented attentional practices which were once relatively and at times avowedly unproductive: the very stuff of literature, art, theater, music, culture, and history, not to mention mindless banter.

My discussion here is not really meant to disagree with the contra-Google idea of opt-in-only advertising, nor to undercut policy recommendations that seek to limit the perpetration of advertisers' distinctively diabolical exploits. However, given the sea-change in the nature of languages and images themselves – their transposition and transformation from a means of representation to a means of production – the difficulty here is with the us/them perspective: we want to ban advertisers but today we must also confront the disturbing possibility that we *are* them. Remember, 'they' program 'our' language and 'our' imagination, 'we' speak 'their' thought – indeed that is our work, or rather our labor. As capital's nations, banks, armies, schools, languages, newspapers, and films did to its colonies and colonial subjects the current institutions from states to computer-media companies do to 'us': they command us to make ourselves over in capital's image for their own profit through networked strategies of expropriation and dispossession. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, this digital neo-colonialism could be understood as being on a continuum with the internal colonisation of Europe by the German banks – which depends of course on the distributed production of a kind of neo-liberal 'realism'.

This fact of our investment in and by advertising, the conversion of the sign to the 'advertisign', poses a genuine problem for theory – indeed an unprecedented one. This problem is particularly evident considering the

material conditions (class, nationality, education, race, language, etc.) of the participants in would-be counter-hegemonic theoretical discussions of culture and policy that presuppose books, computers, schools, and the institutions that sustain these. Those within the circuit of these discussions have already passed through a homogenisation process which programs them in compatible systems languages. Without submitting ourselves and our own aspirations to radical critique, without conducting a Gramscian inventory of our ostensibly internal constitutions, we run the risk of merely trying to set up a competing corporation with a new business model.

Any would-be anti-capitalist 'we' runs this risk of co-opting from the get-go, particularly if it does/we do not think about the materiality of social production from top to bottom: class, yes, but also race, nation, gender. The world's postmodern poor – that is, the two-billion living on two dollars a day – also labor to survive in the material landscape organised by the postfordist social factory. However, from the standpoint of capital their role is to serve as substrate for image-production and semiosis; as starving hordes, irrational or surplus populations; subjects for policing, encampment, and bombing; desperate refugees, and even as voids in the idea of the world. Humans are troped (via discourse and the screen) to organise military production, national policy, internment camps and prisons, corporate strategy and market projections. Any programme that does not admit this excluded planet into dialogues that vitiates the monologues imposed by capitalist informatics and advertisigns is still floating in the realm of the ruling ideas. These ideas are the ones whose density and weight, whose very machinery, threatens to further crush the late-capitalist poor out of not just representation but of existence. Banning what we recognise as advertising on the internet, even if an excellent beginning, is not adequate to address these issues of representation and social justice.

To summarise: the forms of sociality which are the conditions of online possibilities run through every sector and register of planetary life. The Internet, while recognisable as an effect and a cause of contemporary planetary production and reproduction, cannot be considered in isolation if its historical role is to be properly understood. To take the Internet as an autonomous force results in a form of platform fetishism that disavows both the histories and material conditions of its emergence which are, in short, those of screen culture and of imperialism; which is to say, the means by which the capitalist suppression of global democracy (which is, of course and emphatically, economic democracy) has been accomplished. To ban advertising on the Internet would be a good start, but what if the whole thing is advertising?

One reading of what I have said thus far might suggest that given the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic our volition is overtaken by capital-logic; and given our inability to cogitate in any way that is genuinely resistant to capitalist expropriation, coercion, strictly speaking, is no longer necessary to impose cooperation for capitalist production. We ‘want’ to cooperate productively, our desire is itself an iteration of capital. Thus in a certain way and particularly since we no longer have any thoughts of our own we all collaborate in a world organised by images and screens, thereby participating more or less mindlessly in the seamless realisation of the programming of businesses. However, I am sorry to have to report that my dystopian vision is not quite as bucolic as this already dreary picture. While I do see that representation and semiotics have been increasingly flattened à la Orwell and Marcuse by a vast internalisation of the apparatuses of oppression (in which ‘thought’ is the [productive] thought of the [capitalist] Party and repressive desublimation is an engine of capitalist-fascist production) I do not think that hierarchy or class have gone away; neither have racism, sexism, homophobia, and fascist-nationalisms ceased to play their roles. Indeed today thought is all about maintaining hierarchical society (capital is nature, capital is eternal, capital is information is nature; or, in a more pedestrian mode: human beings are naturally acquisitive and competitive, economic growth means progress, etc.) *and* advancing one’s place in it by any (crypto- or not-so-crypto-fascist) means necessary. There is programming (the big Other, as distinct from the racial other, becomes the self) but it is violent, competitive, hateful, and alienating at the same time as it is cooperative, simpering, and abject. Of course this diagnosis is a huge generalisation but this schizoid oscillation between entitled adjudicator and abject suppliant sums up your average reality TV show or comments section on YouTube. It is Bateson and Deleuze’s schizophrenic becoming the capitalist norm – one who struggles to negotiate the aporias of hierarchical society while reproducing it.¹¹

Let me develop my question about the Internet, ‘what if it is all advertising?’, understood in the framework of postfordist production. The argument is that in the context of virtuosity the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic by capital sociality itself has become advertisarial, a ceaseless waging of capitalised exploits designed to garner attention/value for oneself and one’s capitalists. Advertising has worked its way into the sign itself and has generated the advertisign. This is not simply the brand but also vectoral language: words in a production channel, the micro-management of desire, the production of new needs, the capturing of the imagination all in order to induce linguistic and behavioral shifts in others is no longer merely the

province of advertising but of so-called human interactivity, now become advertisarial through and through. From Smythe's claim in the Blindspot essay that all leisure time has become labor time to Virno's virtuosity we have seen aspects of this model for the capitalist overdetermination of apparently unremunerated time before. However, given the thoroughgoing intensification of vectoral signs we need to investigate its implications in the context of a discussion of radical media practice.

I will make two additional points here before shifting gears and turning to what I identify as an aesthetics of survival – an aesthetics that emerges from within the matrix of advertisarial capture. If the dominant means of representation have become the dominant means of production, the questions of and models for political agency are radically transformed. Language and images are neither inside nor outside – they are part of the general intellect. We also know that languages and images are not isolable, meaning that they are not and never have been stand-alone entities but rather exist in relation to their media, their platforms. Furthermore, each platform relates to another platform. The 'content' of a media platform is another platform. Thus the general intellect is inseparable from the media platforms. We have seen that the general intellect once largely held in common is increasingly being privatised; the very media of our thought belongs to someone else. *This expropriation of the media-commons is precisely the pre-condition of the real-subsumption of society by capital.* We no longer own the materials for thought itself – the words, images, and machines we require have been ripped from the species and privatised via the long *duree* of dissymmetrical exchange. The media themselves have become *forms* of capital and our usage of these media means that we work to valorise capital for the capitalist – in a relation designed as much as possible to guarantee that our creative acts necessarily occur in dissymmetrical exchange with capital. The means by which we most intimately know ourselves and our desires (our images and words) are themselves vectors of capitalisation intent upon converting our very life-process into surplus value (which is to say value for capital). Again, I think this is what Stiegler means by the proletarianisation of the nervous system – which would include the proletarianisation of the pathways of feeling and thought. Our affective capacities are put to work in the social factory and their product is alienated, producing ever-intensifying and ever-accumulating dispossession and disempowerment as the dialectical antithesis of its production of unprecedented wealth and power.

From a historical perspective this encroachment on the means of representation indicates that the individual subjective agent, itself a platform for sociality that developed with the rise of capitalism (as the

subject who relates to other subjects in the market, the thought of the commodity), is defunct. In a world where life processes are stripped, ripped apart, rebundled, and sold as derivatives the individual subject-form is an outmoded technology despite the fact that it still appears as a skeuomorph in certain updated techno-social apparatuses – like the latest forms of films, games, and versions of national politics that proffer invitations to momentary individualistic identification for the purposes of providing a sense of familiarity and orientation. While palliative for some in small doses such individuality is no longer a viable (which is to say a sustainable) fantasy. This expiration is not necessarily a cause for lament. From a political perspective it means that within each concrete individual body the presumed continuity of the individual is riddled with contradictory and indeed unassimilable indicators; it means also that there exists in differing quantities and qualities capitalist and non-capitalist striations or sectors. There are, to be a bit simplistic, aspects of desire that are programmed (indeed farmed) to produce practices that function in perfect accord with capitalist accumulation strategies (individualising or schizoid) and aspects of desire that are atavistic or collectivist, utopian, communist, or maybe even just plain lonely. In reality, of course, desire is more singular than such formalisations might indicate. However, we are speaking of politics here and therefore necessarily of the abstract forms available for the conceptualisation and deployment of concrete emergences. Allow me to put it thusly: in *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin showed how imperialist dividends complicated class issues in England since many people, otherwise part of the working class, got a share of the dividends of imperialism by clipping the coupons of their investments in racist, exploitative British enterprises. Today this race-based class fractionalisation is fully internalised; on our iPads built by Chinese slaves from blood metals extracted from the Congo, we may feel like biomorphically unmarked nobles in the global cosmopolis, while on the job market we are objects. Even the concrete individual is composed of class fractions (okay, multitudes).

Of course this is still somewhat simplistic and also class specific, as many (*billions* even) never get to participate as an enfranchised global citizen in any aspect or moment of life.¹² A more complex view is that we are the product of the world system and thus *everything* we are has been produced vis-à-vis globalisation, therefore bearing the trace of the system in its entirety (again, in varying proportions). This conceptualisation of concrete individuals (speaking bodies) as global communitarian products is not to erase class; however, it suggests that just as A. Césaire saw the great European metropolises as the product of third world labor we are all products

of the worst conditions prevailing in the global south and around the planet. *Global inequality is internal to our being.* How then does one inventory those relations and produce them as formations of solidarity rather than as disavowed residuum? Is there another data-sphere, a communist one? Can we build communist interfaces? How would we register, track, amplify, and render actionable our communitarian affinities, solidarities, obligations, and debts that in actual practice underpin the official economy, collective life, and whatever authentic hope is left to our species? Perhaps we have arrived at a question worthy of theory: is there, could there be, a Communist algorithm?

To add to my point about the shifting, distributed character of political actors that goes so far as to suggest that we can no longer think of actors but rather must think of vectors and fields, I will make a second observation. A political intervention in the advertisarial relations that have this planet heading towards environmental doomsday requires not only revolutionary policy but revolutionary culture. This culture must take into account that for many on this planet Armageddon is not the future but an ongoing constant. My call here (which should not be entirely unfamiliar, as it gives petit bourgeois intellectuals something important to do) is to (re-) politicise semiotic and affective structures and practices, including and perhaps especially those we might control, for example our own utterances. Of course to call them 'our own' seems to contradict what I said earlier about the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic, but it is here precisely that we confront one of the significant material contradictions of our time: who or what speaks in us? This question, which I shorthand using the phrase 'the politics of the utterance' and which you can experience palpably right now (as you think), seems to me to insist that our idea-making actively produces its solidarity with the dispossessed. We must struggle for the radical constellation. The question concerning the politics of the utterance also raises the question of becoming, as well as the questions of agency and of action within the capitalist image – images that, in the terms we have set out, are functionally omnipresent. Continuous media throughput has generated a capitalist imaginary structuring both language function and imaging processes. Thus, to insist upon the unremitting relevance of both culture-making and of cross-cultural transnational solidarity helps to avoid platform fetishism because it sees the Internet and its machines not as set or collection of autonomous technologies but as a historically-emergent system of expropriative communication-organisation built directly on older but nonetheless contemporaneous forms of inequality, including but not

limited to historically-emergent techniques of gendering, racialisation, and imperialism, and embedded in the living flesh of the world.

All of this implies, contradictorily in fact, that the Internet is not all advertising – but neither is advertising all advertising. The advertisarial relation is the programmatic relation encrypted in the apparatuses of capital: the war of each against all taken all the way to the speech-act in accord with the autopoietic algorithm of the distributed Leviathan. Marx himself saw capitalism as vampiric and today's processes of capitalisation are even more totalitarian, more widely distributed, and more blood- and indeed soul-sucking than in prior eras. Despite the disavowals to the contrary we recognise that capital needs labor more desperately and more voraciously than ever before (what else is bio-politics?) and furthermore, that it wages war on all fronts to secure labor power, its product. The pyramids of inequality become internal fractals even as they ascend ever higher. We do not yet know what can be destroyed or indeed built with the massive appropriation of Banksy's rocks but we do know that at present there is total war against our using them to build anti-capitalist, non-hierarchical sociality. The refusal or *détournement* of capital's encroachment is itself a creative act. Perhaps we have only begun to glimpse what a total refusal might achieve.

Aesthetics of survival

Without trying to pursue this thought to whatever logical conclusions it may harbor (counter culture, counter-computation, the overcoming of the aporetic character of our times) let us take a moment to think about the implications for life in the visible world, the *speculum mundi*. The concept of a visual economy which would undoubtedly extend beyond what is visible both to everyone and also to anyone in particular would insist that the logistics of screen-mediated capitalism pertain in myriad situations beyond the purview of the screen vis-à-vis a structuring (and indeed continuous modification) of the general intellect and therefore of the imagination and the cognitive-linguistic.¹³

I have been working with the idea that real subsumption also means the total or at least totalising enclosure of the bios by the logistics of the image. Although I cannot develop all aspects of this discussion here one can shorthand it by recalling Flusser's idea of the technical image as well as his understanding of the photographer and pretty much everyone else as 'a functionary' of the camera.¹⁴ For Flusser the better part of the last two centuries has been organised by the programs that constitute the camera

for the benefit and proliferation of cameras; hence one sees the camera's promulgation unto omnipresence. Increasingly all life is organised in accord with these programs such that humans produce in a way that is subsidiary to the protocols of the camera and its product: the technical image. According to Flusser we have become functionaries of this technology and our lives, histories, and indeed History and metaphysics are effectively if not ontologically internal to it. Humans are subsumed by the photographic apparatus and we make our way in what Flusser calls the universe of the technical image – what elsewhere I have called the media-environment and the world-media system.¹⁵ However, unlike Flusser I also see the programme of the technical image as predatory in a capitalist mode. In other words the programs that ramify the visual do not merely institute capture (culture or life could do the same), they institute leveraged exploitation which constantly threatens and indeed actively strives to transfer all wealth to capital precisely by exercising a radical overdetermination with regard to our (meaning the species') practices and potentials. As individual organisms and as a collective species we are pushed to the limits of survival. In a manner not unlike Bateson's porpoises we find ourselves compelled to create something extraordinary or perish in the crossfire of contradictory and annihilating programs. This requirement that we actively wager our lives within the image is operative for all no matter how conscious or unconscious its imperatives remain. It implies that we wager our very being within the image in a reconfigured politics of utterance, gesture, and action. Within the image there is a stake, a *political* stake in every form and indeed all forms of expression.

I will discuss two examples here, one of the global middle class and one of the global subaltern class; specifically, Ho Hsiao-Hsien's *Three Times* (2005; a clip from 1:33:20-1:38:40) and Khavn de la Cruz's *Iskwatterpangk* (Squatterpunk, 2007; a clip from 00:06:15-00:09:50). *Three Times* treats two characters (played by the same actors) in love in three different historical times: 1911, 1966, 2005 – but the film is not an exercise in mere repetition; rather, it is an image of three different *times* and their modalities (one is tempted here to say their *media*). In *Three Times* love functions as a thread that allows for a kind of media archeology, an examination of the structures of connection and containment that gendered love must navigate to realise itself. In 2005, the present of the film, which is already the time of the full-blown technical image in Flusser's precise sense of the term, the digital photograph and *its* world (of screens, text messages, and garage bands – the latter of which shows how even music has become a computerised image) have overtaken what in prior moments were the times of early 20th century

media: the 1911 bordello, with its courtesan's song along with the books and calligraphic letters of the nationalist writer and, in the episode set in 1966, the times of the international letter, the radio, the military order, and the pool halls accommodating soldiers' R&R. The juxtapositions with their focus on writing, communication, and song function as if to say 'to each time its media-mash-up and to each media mash-up its form of time'. Ho's analysis of the media of sociality however is not only an effort to periodise the media and thus the historical forms of love it is also a philosophy of the historicity of meaning, praxis, and political agency.

If this study in remixing the sense ratios sounds McLuhanesque what we are talking about with Ho Hsiao-Hsien and Taiwanese history is anything but the global village. Rather, Ho (particularly in his later work) shows us people in some way connected to Taiwan but able neither to experience community nor conceptualise their history: space and time have undergone a radical dissolution but it does not bring anyone closer to others or to the past. The characters' radical dis-placement and alienation here (and perhaps even more emphatically in Ho's film *Millenium Mambo* [2001]) is accomplished through a near-total immersion of the film characters in a world of images. These images, themselves a product of a history and a media-history almost unknown, are part of the legacy of a continuing past but are devoid of narratives and concepts that would explain their function. They therefore generate alienation so intense that it is tantamount to dispossession; it is in fact dispossession, since properly speaking it is Taiwanese images, Taiwanese history, and Taiwan itself that confront its people as hostile and alien.

In *Three Times* we move from the time of the nationalist writer to the time of the military order to the time of a near total absence of words. These three eras are represented not only through period fashion, architecture, and gesture but by using cinematic conventions pertinent to the time of each vignette, like intertitles for the 1911 section and appropriate lighting, film stocks, and pallets. Indeed, given the thoroughgoing endeavor made by the filmmaker, it might be more accurate to say that the periods are not only represented but the particular character of their temporality is recreated. Thus the viewer experiences three different media ecologies. Pointedly, in the concluding episode of *Three Times*, Ho's contemporary characters with their smartphones, headsets, and screens are not only severed from their past along with its networks of connections and forms of temporality (they do not know themselves to be the same lovers they were in prior episodes, which of course raises all the questions associated with repetition, difference, and performance), they are also severed from their

immediate present (their community) and are dispossessed of a coordinate system – that is, a framework of interpretation that would allow the kind of self-assessment and autolocation necessary to provide oneself with a sense of narrative purpose. They are dispossessed both of history and of narrative. It is as if the characters have been absorbed into their images and thus deprived of the *power* of speech; they can no longer speak anything important and must negotiate a world of images. It is perhaps in accord with this diagnosis that Ho's most recent works set in contemporary times only manifest themselves minimally as stories. Key conversations are gestural and nearly inaudible, taking place in clubs with pumping techno-music. The films that focus on the contemporary are primarily explorations of programmatic *mise-en-scène* in which the effort to navigate from within the image registers a new form of Realism – a Realism without reality.



Fig. 1: Ho's contemporary characters in *Three Times*.

The intro of Jing's (Qi Shu's) song 'please, open your eyes, open your ears, check your brain' and the refrain 'to realise what you want, to realise who you are' are, despite their denotative simplicity, a crystallisation of artistry and wisdom that is also the best and perhaps only means of her liberation – a medium of her desire. This song erupts in a filmic episode characterised by the almost complete absence of speech. It is sung in a club with a small, distracted audience while three men including the photographer with whom Jing is having an affair shoot her from increasingly close distances. Like the filmic images of words on computer screens and smartphones, like the monetary Yen sign 'branded' on Jing's throat, these words (sung in

English and passing through the Yen tattoo) are part of the reclamation of words whose character have been forever altered by the globalisation of the technical image – a logic which has at once converted words into images and degraded them to near superfluity. Jing's deployment of language, minimal as it is, threads a connection through the sensory overload of the present, forging a path through the capitalised force-fields of the imaginary. That she sings in English – the universal language of global capital – only heightens the tension between the forces of the geopolitical marketplace and the particular intensification she pursues. Although understated as an act it is notable here that during her song which draws the male photographers closer, Ah Mei, her female lover in the audience, turns her back on the performance and walks out.

Jing's fate, though indeterminate in *Three Times*, is inflected somewhat more positively than that of Vicky (also played by Qi Shu) in Ho's *Millennium Mambo* (2001). In that earlier film the downward spiral of Vicky's life is made visible for the spectator as evidence of a kind of wasted beauty – her own; Ho emphasises Vicky's dilemma as a socio-cultural squandering of beauty by creating subtle yet magnificent geometric compositions (à la Ozu) that frame Vicky's life while remaining absolutely irrelevant to its events (in a way that Ozu's frames were not). This extra-diegetic, formalised aestheticisation of Vicky's life (which is the very material of the film) is of no use to her whatsoever. In *Millennium Mambo* one could say that there is an aesthetic dimension to the gradual dissolution of the film's central character, but this aesthetic component avails her nothing. Vicky is shown to not have the means to represent or abstract her situation to herself. Whatever pleasure the spectator takes from her presence in the image is taken without compensation or reciprocity; consequently the audience's pleasure is little more than a symptomatic form of surplus from a generalised dispossession and the systematic indifference towards the destruction of others vis-à-vis a socio-technical mechanics that are organised by and for the image at a level beyond the ordinary individual's level of conceptualisation. Vicky produces pleasure and indeed Art, but not for herself.

In *Three Times* Jing sings 'the color that you've seen, the shape which you're in may reveal the secret you've never known before'. Like the courtesan-singer of the 1911 episode, Jing's art gives her some agency – again it is the medium of her desire, an engine of value-formation and seduction. Using the instruments at her disposal she creates an affective form that both crystallises and mobilises some of the relations that have overtaken everyday know-how and common language; in the clip indicated she sings to her lover (as well as to Ho Hsiao-Hsien and to his audience) *through* the

camera. Her ability to wager within the image, to answer a non-discursive (anti-discursive) aesthetic regime with an aesthetic form, allows her to create a line of flight; narratively this deterritorialisation is at best a mixed blessing. The film ends on a kind of in-between, grungy, and urban image with Jing on the back of her cameraman lover's motorcycle negotiating traffic on a smoggy Taipei highway, seemingly having left and possibly having betrayed her lesbian lover. While the couple on the motorcycle cut through the dense megalopolis that is Taipei the audience, contemplating Jing's momentary freedom with some exhilaration, is left to wonder if her girlfriend Ah-mei has in fact committed suicide as a consequence of Jing's affair with the photographer. Jing has made her aesthetic wager within the image but someone very close will have to pay.



Fig. 2: *The betrayed lover in Three Times.*

The second example of a wager within the advertisarial logic of image-function, from de la Cruz's *Squatterpunk*, allows us to more closely consider 'the digital' as a reification and dispossession itself as surface of inscription while further exploring the politics of the wager. In the previously indicated segment children between the ages of 5 and 11 dive acrobatically into the trash-laden ocean – literally an ocean of floating debris pressing up against the shore of their squats. The swimming and play in a world of garbage is accompanied by a wailing punk sound track. As you view your body knows that this swim alone would likely kill you, and watching these children you are not sure what to feel. Later you will see those same kids selling the plastic they scavenged to a small-time recycler and using the money to buy a tiny meal. Here is an example of 'playbor' for you – a wagering in the image of

globalisation. We should consider permanently marking this term with an awareness of child-labor and the post-apocalyptic neo-imperialist violence of sheer survival. It is also noteworthy that for most of the audience the form of playbor that de la Cruz records, in which children mix their passions for play with the work of scavenging for survival (which, as mentioned, would literally kill them due to the level of toxicity of the water), registers itself through a visceral repugnance of a shoreline and ocean filled with garbage and waste – human waste, the non-spectacular side of postmodern capitalism.



Fig. 3: *Swimming and playing in a world of garbage in Squatterpunk.*

The film, with its punk track by de la Cruz and his band The Brockas (after the great Filipino cineaste Lino Brocka), also features one of the kids with a Mohawk haircut (the eldest, judging by size). However, marginal as it may be, ‘punk’ whether British, American, or Pinoy is still a style-choice – being born a squatter is not an option. The situation of the children that provide compositional elements for *Squatterpunk* is political but it is, in and of itself, not a political choice. The filmmaker utilises punk to approach the conditions of the squatters; but, as we shall see, the film is also interested in the place where style and indeed representation approach their limits. To this end of raising questions about the limits of style, representation, and digitality, *Squatterpunk* is emphatically not a documentary. De la Cruz uses the bodies and conditions of children born on the outskirts of Manila as an expressive medium – he films the Mohawk haircut that one of the children gets for the film; he colors, rotates and solarises the images, always insisting on the fact of a constructed relation between the image and its

'content'. This insistence serves to dramatise the conditions that underpin not just this digital film but the larger explosion of Philippine digital cinema and, more generally, 'the digital' itself. For the poverty that we see is itself a consequence of, and a condition of possibility for, globalisation – which is, in turn, the geo-political formation in and through which digital technologies have their large-scale emergence.

Thus the film does not provide unmediated access to a profilmic Real but rather dialectically reveals that the viewer's affective experience (not just of this film but of globalisation and digitality) is inscribed on the universal appropriation of the 'reality' of these lives and bodies. For the poverty that is *constitutive* of this film, it must be underscored, is *also constitutive* of globalisation and *its* digitality. Radical dispossession is one with capitalist accumulation, both of which are intensified by and managed with digital technologies. Digitality, consumerism, wealth, and waste; it is no accident that the film begins by tracking a one-legged child 'soccer' player dribbling a Coke can through the slums. Here, because of the punk sound track and the blatant manipulation of the plastic quality of the image, we see *through* the digital and we know it. The violence (the manipulation of images of 'Others' that the capitalist sub-routines of art and anthropology more traditionally would have us 'respect') done to a Real generates a dialectical image in which everything that has ever happened – colonialism, imperialism, globalisation (all the mediations of history) – are palpably the conditions of possibility for the spectator's current and indeed profoundly ambivalent experience; and not just this particular experience but of all contemporary spectatorial experience.

One confronts the material basis of capitalist-digitality, the structural dispossession that comprises its conditions of possibility. In so doing we also confront the condition and limit of the ideology of the digital in as much as it posits an ideology of a pure informatics, of liberated data, and of incorporeality. It is as if de la Cruz cracks the algorithm of digital representation in the age of finance capital and reveals that the virtual is inexorably material. The filmmaker attaches his wager to the wagers of survival shown on screen such that we, the viewer, can access the conditions internal to our specular speculation – which is to say, ourselves. The audience's position is not ultimately one of judgment but of a kind of non-subjective recognition. Again: de la Cruz mobilises the computer-processed digital image making it visibly co-present with its materially co-present politico-economic underside (the planet of slums) such that the audience confronts conditions – aspects of the global economy – that are actually (that is, materially) internal to its own speculation. Such an endeavor imposes with new urgency – an urgency that

I insist weighs upon our utterance and action in this moment and all the ones to come – the abiding question ‘what is to be done?’ This insistently digital image links the digital spectator with the human substrate of the digital; we confront affective consciousness as cybernetic while we confront the material integration of specific and seemingly contradictory elements (ourselves and our slums), and we do so without resolution. The experience of the film’s intensity depends upon an experience of the world’s inequality. Like it or not, the question posed by such inequality is the call to wager: to wager with one’s words, one’s art, one’s life.

It remains to say how the wager, the cosmic gamble, is indeed connected to the analysis of advertisarial relations set out above; how it is in fact the central feature of an aesthetics of survival in the aestheticising regime that the dominant mode of semio-capital’s digital culture is. In semio-war we too are called to cast stones. If the machines of capital are distributed through the socius such that attentional activity includes affective labor – the utterance, action, and other forms of social praxis – and if this labor is organised at multiple levels by media-systems of value extraction and measure, then it is probable bordering on certain that life itself has become universally posited as a worksite of capitalism; all social activity, even survival, is posited as value-productive labor in planetary semiosis. This view can be gleaned from a pitch for Mechanical Turk, the Amazon platform that would employ global southerners to perform cultural piece-work such as receiving texts and texting them back in indigenous translations for a few pennies per transaction; there are currently ‘billions of wasted hours’ in the third world which could be used for profitable production.

As ‘life itself’ becomes a real abstraction of postfordist capitalism (one which would be the alienated inverse of species being), a structural effect of the integrated and aestheticising operation of global semio-financial apparatuses, then all social activity is placed within the framework that before pertained to wage-labor – human becoming emerges as a socially-leveraged engine for production, even when wasted unto death. With the invasive fractalisation of the commodity-form one survives to the profit of another. This is a speculative regime and the communication already latent in the very idea of exchange-value achieves unprecedented metrics, feedback, and intelligence. As consumer and as consumed the conditions of emergence are thus overdetermined by capitalist programmes – intentionally (or perhaps not) but systemically. However, as with wage-labor, the totalising control of wage-laborers’ activities, thoughts, and potentials inexorably sought by capitalist management-systems should and indeed must have limits. What these limits necessarily imply is that by casting our lots it is possible to

introduce rupture in the capitalist expropriation of what was previously called labor time and what Neferti Tadiar has been calling life-time.¹⁶ Such rupture would mean a break with the capitalist program in semiotic, spatial, temporal, sexual, discursive, informatic, communitarian, or other modes; not simply a refusal of the programming but an interested, liberatory, insurrectionary, and creative positivity; whether as a rearrangement of existing terms, a break in the temporality imposed by capital, or an exceptional form of desire or care – to name some possible modalities of risk.

This opens up to what in the cinematic era with reference to the spaces of the everyday Benjamin referred to as ‘a large and complex field of actions’ – one that cannot possibly be summarised in the final sentences of an essay. However, in conceptualising the current dialectics of capture my wager here is that the field of liberatory assemblage both constitutes the current reservoir of anti-capitalist values and is open to all of us here and now. In a world where late-capitalist fascisms aestheticise politics, digital communists – self-identified or not – respond by politicising ‘life’, both within quotation marks and without.

Notes

1. Banksy 2006, p. 196.
2. Pietzman 2012.
3. Smythe 1977.
4. Christian Fuchs’ posts on listserv: [ICTs-and-Society], string, ‘Blogpost about Google’s “New” Terms of Use and Privacy Policy: Old Exploitation and User Commodification in a New Ideological Skin’, 1 March 2012, Discussion mailing list Discussion@lists.icts-and-society.net, <http://lists.icts-and-society.net/listinfo.cgi/discussion-icts-and-society.net>.
5. Ibid.
6. Beller 1994.
7. Stiegler 2010, p. 10.
8. Chen 2004.
9. Flusser 2000.
10. Stiegler 2010, p. 10.
11. But wait a minute – that is just a postfordist version of killing your father and marrying your mother! (Do not worry historical materialists. Our analysis shows not the re-emergence of the eternal psychic drives in shaping the world-media system but rather that the modern constitution of the psychic drives are symptomatic of capitalist exigencies even as early as Freud.)
12. Indeed, in 2002 it was reported that 67.3% of people on Earth have never made a phone call. See Clay Sharkey’s \$20 question and ‘Cynthia’s’ well-researched answer at <http://answers.google.com/answers/main?cmd=threadview&id=20411>.
13. There are many ways to experience this. For example, when you regard a person on the street or yourself in the mirror the calculus of social relations structures your perception,

e/valuation, attitude, decisions. When you sit down to write you are making economic decisions. When you speak you produce revolutionary solidarity, or not. Rather than looking inward in a narcissistic manner and/or asking each of us to confront the pyrotechnics of our own abjection I want to examine here some images that both decode the logistics of the media environment and offer some examples of liberatory inclinations, what I think of as wagers within the image.

14. Flusser 2000.
15. Flusser 2011; Beller 2006.
16. Tadiar 2012.

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