

Lecture: Experimentality and the Digital

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The forthcoming 'Cloud Time' book (Lockwood and Coley) emerged from an international conference on the topic of 'The Experimental Society' held at Lancaster University last summer.

From the conference programme: *'The idea of experimentation was at the heart of modernity's promise of human freedom and self-determination. But is the experiment now too complicit with power to act as a carrier of hope? To close the year-long Experimentality programme, participants at this international conference and art event will debate different visions of an experimental society in which the emancipatory potential of the experiment could be renewed'*.

The thesis of our book is that cloud computing is a capitalist adventure. Capitalist culture is a culture of 'permanent revolution'. Famously, Marx said (in *The Communist Manifesto*) that capitalism involves 'constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation...All that is solid melts into air'. Experimentation is crucial to it because it needs to keep finding new markets, new ways of generating profits. We argue that digital networks have become key to the experimentality of economic power and also, we might add, governmental imperatives of security and surveillance. Cloud culture is an experimental culture which is paradoxically anti-experiment, which seeks to secure and securitize the future.

Experimentation is, of course, associated with a more emancipatory sense of innovation, invention, creativity; exploring different ways of doing things and organizing things in ways which liberate us from the grip of established powers. In this sense, the present moment might be one which offers great potential for experiments in society. In 2008-2009, as we know, the global financial system almost collapsed; this was a near-catastrophic turn of events for capitalism. Things were considerably shaken up, and since that time banks have had to be bailed out, governments and corporations struggle to reassert the market model against widespread criticism. What has happened is that, for the first time in a long time, people are discussing capitalism critically again. During the 1960s and 1970s, the post-war political consensus in the West was breaking down for various reasons, and everyone was speaking about capitalism (high point was '68). But in the 80s and 90s, capitalism massively renewed itself in the West—the rise of the New Right – and Margaret Thatcher was able to declare outright that 'There Is No Alternative'. At the extreme, Francis Fukuyama published a book called 'The End of History and the Last Man' (1992) which claimed that liberal democracy and the capitalist market were the pinnacle of humanity's evolution, the absolute ideal. Game over, bask in the sunlight. Basically, the critique of capitalism was no longer on the agenda. In a recent book, Mark Fisher

calls this situation one of 'capitalist realism' – actually most of us are fully aware that capitalism isn't perfect, but realistically it's all we've got. No other system will work. Under capitalist realism, as I think Slavoj Žižek said, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the overthrow of capitalism. That is, until now...

Interesting things are happening – a window has opened. Let's focus on the university. For a couple of decades and more, higher education has increasingly been pushed towards running on a business model, a market model, in which the student is understood as a consumer. The current struggle over tuition fees highlights the extent to which this model is in crisis, in common with the market model more generally. Many are arguing again, just as they did in 68, that education must be politicized, connected back up to struggles against exploitation. Here, at Lincoln, the institution of the university itself is showing signs of moving this way, or at least there is an initiative, an experiment, at large within the university which is based on the argument that those who teach can no longer remain politically indifferent. Mike Neary, our Dean of Teaching and Learning, has even gone so far as to call for an agenda for 'revolutionary teaching', what he calls a 'pedagogy of excess' (see bibliography).

This agenda has become dominated by an organizing principle for teaching and learning which goes by the name of 'Student as Producer', which I want to say a few words about. SaP takes its inspiration from a lecture given in 1934 by the Marxist critic, Walter Benjamin, entitled 'The Author as Producer'. Benjamin argued that it was not enough for writers simply to be committed to the cause of ordinary working people (to demonstrate 'political correctness', we might say); writers need technical correctness as well; they need to experiment to find appropriate new forms and techniques in which to write. Wishing oppressed people well is insufficient – the author has to achieve solidarity with the oppressed in terms of how they engage with the process of production. The emphasis is firmly on the *process*, production and its function rather than the finished product – above all, what you do and how you do things...For Benjamin, it's imperative to 'functionally transform' the apparatuses, the machines, the organization of production, to innovate and create new ways of doing things, new roles and identities for ourselves.

An important part of this transformation involves breaking through the barriers between different forms of production, 'melting down' these forms, as he puts it, into 'an incandescent liquid mass from which the new forms will be cast'. His primary model for this was the work of his friend, the dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Brecht introduced techniques from the new media of film and radio into the machinery of his theatre. In particular, he took ideas from editing practices, especially the montage theory of Soviet film-makers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov which made use of the juxtaposition of images to create new, unexpected and often shocking collisions. Brecht experimented with interrupting the ongoing action at key moments to create similar shocks – this would astonish

the audience, setting up a sudden distance between them and the drama (Brecht called it 'alienation-effect'), a halt in the action which would effectively diagram the conflicting forces present in a situation and compel the spectator to take sides. This was conceived as a counter to the typical bourgeois drama which was bent on creating a naturalistic illusion, bringing characters and situations to life and inviting empathy. In such a drama, you could thoroughly empathize with the 'underdog', swept along with the tragedy through to some final vindication or epiphany. But this solution is illusory – nothing changes in actuality – instead, Brecht insisted that the audience has to be forced to become a critical collective, be compelled to think and even act together to change the way things are, to rectify the injustice exposed diagrammatically by the dramatic interruption. For Benjamin, this appropriation of new media techniques in Brecht's theatrical laboratory is a valuable model for how production processes might be functionally transformed.

The author that is satisfied with traditional forms, that shows no interest in revolutionising his or her own production process, in breaking down barriers between different media forms, for example, is a mere 'hack', Benjamin says. They're really just in the business of entertainment, turning out products for consumption. Mike Neary, in his supporting essays for SaP, attempts to show how these ideas are relevant for university education. A great deal of teaching in higher education is in thrall to the market model and churns out content – lectures, modules – for consumption. It says quite openly that the student is a consumer. It contemplates ways of branding itself to become more attractive. Even radical ideas are transformed into consumable product – this is what concerned Benjamin and Brecht. Nobody is expected to really think or act on this material. No one really expects more than indifference on the part of the student. The way education is organized is along the lines of the capitalist organization of work, which depends upon a process of abstraction. Ideas, inventions, creative power, the 'general intellect', as Marx once put it, is abstracted from people and embodied in machines. Workers are alienated from this power, made to serve as mere appendages to the machine. Just so in education, the student is not much more than an appendage to an instructional machine. Consider the children's activity of 'Join the Dots'. Let's say I have a simple drawing of an elephant – along the outline of the elephant I mark a series of dots and number them, say 1-20. Then I erase the drawing. With a pencil, a child joins the dots together in sequence and hopefully they'll recognize the elephant and will have been entertained. A lot of teaching is like that. I, the module co-ordinator, hope that you will follow me through the course of the semester in joining together the dots I've set out for you until, at the end, you will in your assignments demonstrate that you have recognized the elephant. If you've been entertained, maybe you'll give the module good scores in your end-of-semester module evaluations. But you are a mere appendage to the game...you've contributed almost nothing to the production process. SaP insists that the student must not merely be appended to the process of knowledge

production, mustn't simply consume and reproduce its results. *The organizing principle of SaP is the engagement of both student and lecturer together, collaboratively, in research.* The aspiration is to move towards a new social teaching machine which functions to produce something new, something unexpected, even beyond what everyone thought they could achieve. It might even change who we are, how we act together and what we do when we go out into the world. We have to reach beyond what we already know and understand, what currently seems possible and realistic. Education must strive for the *impossible*. We will not be able to know ahead of time where we are going. In the SaP vision, there is no elephant lurking behind everything we say and do. That is to say, we are no longer merely representing and consuming existing facts, identities and meanings. We are creatively producing the new. In the context of a degree in Media Production, these ideas suggest that our course should not be primarily engaged in getting you skilled up and rehearsed for your future role in one of the media industries. Instead, it suggests that together we could overpower this conformism, aspire to create a new future, some alternative practice.

It's important that we conceive of this as collaboration, as a collective and social activity. We have to think beyond our individual needs and interests and try to begin with our social context, the collective conditions which form the way we all relate to one another. The individual must learn for all, in essence. As Mike Neary and Andy Hagyard say, in their essay, 'Pedagogy of Excess', the tutor is merely a guide, a participant. All involved should 'look beyond their own self-interest and identity', refuse to accept their given role. Think in terms of *excess*, going beyond the given, the actual. Try to seize the virtual potentials of the situation. Neary and Hagyard say that students can escape their roles as consumers, and their assumed political indifference, to become bearers of a 'power of rupture', 'revealers of a general crisis'.

The topic of digital media aesthetics with which we're directly concerned on this module is not incidental to these concerns. It is right at the heart of the matter. Our lives are inextricable from the contemporary media ecology. Media is our 'new nature', conditioning our perception and organization of our existence. Any critical pedagogy has to be 'grounded fundamentally in a media ecology' (Willis). As we saw in Benjamin's argument, functional transformation of processes of production can be elicited through experimentally breaking through the barrier between productive forces, just as Brecht combined theatre with film to get them to act in concert and comprise a new force. Now a major part of what many call the 'digital revolution' is precisely the breaking down of the form-barrier and increasing inter-relation, networking and convergence of different media forms. As William Merrin has written: 'contemporary media developments take on an interconnected and exponential form once they become digital, feeding on, adding to and playing off each other...the "mobile phone" is no more a "phone" than a computer is a computer - it is a hybrid digital device, built up on computer processing technology, that incorporates and hybridises the phone, the

TV, the net, the videocamera, the camera, whilst remediating and hybridising the letter and the telegraph in the text message, etc. and its all-singing and all-dancing ability to cross all these media explains the remarkable cultural energies it has produced, the waves of which continue to sweep over us’.

My question here is: Has this of itself led to an ‘improved apparatus’ overall, a revolutionary experiment in the way Benjamin means it? There are many who would argue that it has, who celebrate and eulogize digitality. For example, just a few days ago, in the Technology section of *The Observer* newspaper, journalist Jemima Kiss says that, with new developments in smartphone technology, what was science fiction just a few years ago is now almost a reality. She quotes Amit Singal of Google, who says: ‘From a device they can pull out of their pocket, every citizen in the world can access the power of hundreds and thousands of computers in the cloud. That’s incredibly exciting. Aided by tools like search and the mobile revolution that happened in parallel, the web has become an endlessly open channel where people share ideas and information. That has the power to enrich people’s lives and I’m very excited about where this world is headed’.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the battle for the kind of collaborative ethos implied in Student as Producer is already practically won if you took this very seriously. The problem is that a great deal of this celebratory discourse focuses on the process of exchange – the oft-repeated hacker slogan, ‘information wants to be free’, seems to indicate an inevitable freeing up of the exchange of information and knowledge in a shift towards rampant connectivity and accessibility. As Charles Leadbeater claims, in a recent thinktank report on cloud computing: ‘The combination of mass self-expression, ubiquitous participation and constant connection is creating *cloud culture*, formed by our seemingly never-ending capacity to make and share culture in images, music, text and film’ . It is the sharing, the free exchange of things that prevails. However, as Mike Neary has indicated in some comments he has made on the use of new digital technologies in education such as Blackboard and other forms of virtual campus, this sharing of things is foregrounded to the detriment of a focus on production. Despite the rhetoric of ‘user-generated content’, ‘the produser’ and other formulations, the ubiquity of the capitalist organization of production has proven hard to shake. Our role, the way we operate has not radically changed. The rhetorics of the net and digital connectivity are pretty much bound up with exchange relations and do not problematize production profoundly enough. Leadbeater worries about the possibility that capitalists may take over the Cloud, but, as the authors of the forthcoming book, *Cloud Time*, comment: ‘in reality, the dangerous possibility of a future cloud-based capitalism has not only *already* become fact, but in this contemporary scenario where capital must be recognized as a force of rationalization and control, the Cloud should be understood precisely as both the force behind this new paradigm and its new *configuration*’. In other words, the Cloud, from its inception, can be

understood as an experiment of capital in its bid to capture and control creativity and invention power.

This is not to say that there is no hope for us in our digitally connected and controlled condition. It is rather to serve as a critical reminder that breaking outside of capitalism is almost impossible to conceive. Our media technologies cannot magically transcend this situation. They are not 'innocent' or 'neutral' wonder-tools but rather sites of struggle. Developments in media technology express and embody mutations of capitalism, mutations of power and escape routes from power. This module explores how digital media technologies organize our perception of reality and how we imagine, or fail to imagine, alternative ways of living, alternative realities.

In biological terms, a medium is a substance in which a culture, a group of micro-organisms, is grown. Theorists often refer to the substance in which we grow, in which our societies, cultures, politics and ideas are shaped, as the 'mediasphere', the 'media environment' or 'media ecology' (all fairly synonymous). Natural ecologies are not static, they are changing and dynamic, processual. The media ecology, configured now around the phenomenon of digitality, is also fluid and hybrid. It is crucial to our social context. The media technologies that we create are an important constitutive element of the wider environment, the 'material matrix', increasingly in fact identified as a 'media matrix', which in turn shapes and remakes us as subjects, identities, our sense of who we are, what we can do and how. The aesthetic dimension of this shaping and remaking is very important. Here we are not referring to the traditional notion of aesthetics as referring to beautiful form. The Greek origin of the term is *aisthesis*, or *aisthetikos*, which refers to that which is perceptible by the senses, and it is this kind of use of aesthetics which we prefer. There's a lot of research being done now on the social and cultural history of the senses - visual culture; auditory culture; tactile culture; even taste and smell culture - and the way in which the human senses have been shaped, re-organized, re-educated, if you will, socially, culturally and technologically. In short, new media technologies change and train the ways we can and do perceive.

If you recall my comments earlier on Walter Benjamin's ideas, he is greatly inspired by Brechtian theatre and its appropriation of techniques drawn from the cinema, specifically the theory of montage. In fact, montage became crucial in Benjamin's work more widely. In his seminal 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction', he describes the cinematographer as a surgeon. Where the painter contemplates reality, the cinematographer penetrates, cuts bits from reality, splicing them together in the editing process, reconstructing the world as montage. Thus, Dziga Vertov, a Soviet film-maker inspired by the Constructivist avant-garde movement, understood cinema as a form of revolutionary engineering, a media which could serve in the construction of a new society, organized in a new way, along the lines of the agenda in place in post-revolutionary Russia. You can see these ideas carried out best in his 1928

film, 'Man with a Movie Camera', and see also his manifestoes on cinema. Again, cinematic montage 'interrupts' and allows reality – specifically, the reality of capitalist production – to be criticized and reconfigured. Of course, montage was very much a radical aesthetic technique for organizing perception at the time of Benjamin's writing. However, we need to acknowledge that montage has long been appropriated by dominant media practices – advertising and publicity, for example, routinely makes use of such tactics of shock, astonishment and interruption in re-educating us for consumption in a media age – but clearly this schooling of the senses in no way problematizes capitalist production. So, the question of technique, of the re-education of the senses, is one which constantly has to be freshly posed. Techniques appropriate at one particular time may not be appropriate at another. Digital media aesthetics are prone to 'capture' and appropriation as much as any other. There is nothing revolutionary, in the critical sense, about internet connectivity in itself. What is crucial, again, is how we collectively functionally transform the machine. What concepts and techniques can we invent that will constitute a 'line of flight' into the impossible?

In closing, I want briefly to comment on what I think is a valuable way of thinking about aesthetics. 'Line of flight' is a phrase often used by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (key figures emerging from the 68 praxis). With Deleuze and Guattari, we might conceive of aesthetic experience as *encounter* as opposed to mere *recognition* (see O'Sullivan, 2006, 1). Recognition involves confirming what already exists, and it is conditioned by our already existing knowledge, belief, values and so on. Recognition merely re-presents what's there as a matter of habit. It is bound up with *representation*. But a genuine encounter opens us up to something truly unknown, different or other, something you don't yet know how to deal with. It opens up a 'line' to the 'outside', or the 'virtual', which is Deleuze's term for the potential for transformation in any given situation. It interrupts our knowledge, it 'forces us to think'. It alters us, it takes us out of ourselves. The encounter is affirmative and experimental because it permits us to think otherwise, to perceive otherwise than usual. It is a creative event of *becoming*, another Deleuzian term. We should welcome and seek out such events, events which counter the actual and allow us to imagine things differently and become. Whatever form it might take, might need to take, to escape the clutches of power, which is itself experimental in the search for profit and control, the genuine encounter is the key to revolutionary life. In perfect alignment with SaP's insistence on collaboration, crucial to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minoritarian' culture – the culture of genuine encounters and becomings – is that 'in it everything takes on a collective value'.

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