

Affect and Belonging in Late Capitalism: A Speculative Narrative on Reality TV

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. . . experience has no assignable beginning or end, it does pass thresholds, arriving unbidden into a context, then settling in and no sooner slipping out to seek ingress elsewhere. Its traveling across thresholds from situation to situation may prove to have a periodicity that, if followed, provides a more ample expression of its self-activity. Upon that expression a speculative narrative can be built.

~ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 2006

This essay puts forward a theory of communication apart from the dominant practices of ideology analysis and political economic inquiry. To do so, it connects affect to the Marxist theory of value production and tracks its circulation throughout activities inspired by reality TV participation. It follows the transmissions of affect through its cultural, political, and economic expressions and studies the habituated practices engendered from this television form, exploring the contradictions within different moments, some of which produce cultural and political values and others of which produce economic value.

Lawrence Grossberg (1992) has long advocated a critical method that follows affective forces and draws “links between points, events, or practices” (p. 284) within a multilayered and multidirectional field. While Grossberg’s affective model and its focus on the processes of becoming helpfully correct tendencies toward economic and cultural determinism, it tends to view the cultural and political economic as separate realms requiring different entry points and methodologies.¹ Contrary to this divided landscape, Brian Massumi (2002b) believes affect creates an ecological “coming-together or belonging-together of processually unique and divergent forms of life” (p. 255). Moving across thresholds and propelling individuals into and out of different situations, affect offers a way to explore how we have come to belong together as well as the imminent possibilities for belonging differently. This notion of affect underwrites a form of inquiry that travels across myriad spaces, assesses the social energies fostered through practices,

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¹ Vincent Mosco exemplifies this trend of separating cultural and political economic analyses, having written entire books from each perspective: *The Digital Sublime* (2005) and *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996).

habits, and everyday encounters, and tracks the formation of (un)stable coherencies formed through the associations among diverse cultural, political, and economic moments.

With its critical lens tuned to affect as such connective tissue, this article explores how audiences constitute themselves as workers and consumers of neoliberal capital through their participation in reality television and its attendant practices. Reality TV provides fertile ground for such analysis because of its reliance on advanced communication technologies, its interactive format, and an historical trajectory that parallels the development of neoliberalism. My argument builds on Laurie Ouellette and James Hay's *Better Living through Reality TV* (2008), which also seeks to overcome the tendency "to think about media either as political economic practice or cultural practice" (p. 13). Using Michel Foucault, they contend that reality TV cultivates the self-governing activities of neoliberal subjects: It teaches participants to engage in appropriate behaviors beyond television viewing, such as continuous education and self-fashioning, as well as informed financial planning and participation in charitable partnerships. Ouellette and Hay's illuminating analysis makes it tempting to define biopolitics as the regulation of conduct that derives from and sustains the economic structure. This appeal notwithstanding, my exploration situates itself within the rubble of a political economic sphere that has collapsed into cultural spaces wherein everyday activities constitute political value through subject formation and economic value through productive labor, making them part and parcel of capital rather than its derivative. I proceed in two parts: First, I explore the differences between a traditional Marxist theory of value and the notion of affective labor in order to offer a theory of affective value that combines the most important aspects of each; and second, I exemplify this theory through an exploration of reality television attuned to its cultural, political, and economic role within late capitalism.

Revisiting Marx's Labor Theory: Value Production and the Transmission of Affect

Marx's contribution to political economic theory lies in his discussion of surplus value. He postulates that workers sell their labor power—their ability to work—for a given period of time. They sell this labor power for wages determined by the minimum average cost of reproducing that labor power. Within a given timeframe, workers labor longer and more intensely than the value of their socially determined wages; thus, the value that workers transfer into products exceeds the value they are paid in wages. Marx calls this surplus value and argues that it is the source of all profit. This view, outlined in *Capital*, represents workers as living components of the capitalist valorization process—the circulation and exchange of commodities that transforms surplus value into economic profit. Against this perspective from above, Antonio Negri and other autonomous Marxists offer a politics from below by emphasizing working-class agency. In their view, workers struggle to reduce labor time and increase wages, simultaneously constituting themselves as a class and forcing capital into crisis because the shortened workday decreases surplus value and cuts into potential profits. To overcome these crises, owners are forced to develop technological innovations that increase relative surplus value, a temporary rise in value production derived from greater efficiency. As the capitalist class secures itself against crisis by constantly adopting new innovations, the spread of advanced technologies across the social field simultaneously enhances the general intellect and unwittingly provides opportunities for greater worker autonomy.

These two narratives of capitalism offer perspectives which, like a Venn diagram, maintain unique fields of vision even though they share some overlapping territory and vocabulary. Both views embrace a notion of worker creativity constrained by the capitalist mode of production and both maintain a political goal of moving beyond capitalist society; however, they prophesize divergent paths toward that future. Marx imagines a worldwide revolution that overthrows the mode of production and social organization particular to capitalism. In its place “there develops the universal character and the energy of the proletariat” (Marx & Engels, 1995, p. 93). Autonomists believe a multiplicity rather than a unity precipitates this rupture, which takes place unevenly across time and space. For them, communism is not the dialectical negation of capitalism as much as it is an escape or separation that can be identified within various contemporary practices designed to appropriate and redeploy advanced technologies toward anti-capitalist ends (Negri, 1991, p. 154). Accordingly, Nick Dyer-Witford’s (1991) analysis of contemporary social struggle suggests that organizations as diverse as Students Against Sweatshops, Justice for Janitors, and the Zapatista movement all disrupt the command logics of capital through political practices that develop the “creative energies” of people freed from the reaches of capitalism. Such independent groups work themselves out of the spaces of capitalism by appropriating digitalized communication technologies and redeploying value production toward alternative practices imminent in the contemporary stage of Empire.²

Empire’s tendency toward the production of immaterial labor (work related to affect, service, or communication) supposedly represents a qualitative leap in capitalist relations predicted by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, the crucial text for autonomist Marxists. In these notebooks, Marx (1993) conjectures, in the two-and-a-half-page fragment on machines that has grown thick with interpretation, that with technological advances, “the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed” (p. 704) than on the general intellect and its technologies. Advanced technological know-how so weaves into everyday life that the terms of production shift: Technologies work more and people work less. Consequently, the value theory—based on unremunerated labor as the source of wealth—falls apart because labor time no longer adequately measures potential profit. Such a situation, Marx speculates, signals the transition from capitalism to communism and is discernable by the fact that “exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value” (p. 705). The potentiality unleashed by this transitional stage blurs the boundaries between the labor performed by people and processes performed by machines, making it difficult to distinguish work from leisure. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) stress affective labor as a particular strain on these boundaries and an indication of this political economic leap forward. For them, affective labor—in both its paid (i.e., nursing) and unpaid (i.e., parenting) versions—produces and reproduces human beings in their movement toward self-valorization or the possibility for becoming subject to one’s own creative energies beyond the reaches of capital.³ They emphasize that surplus value could not exist “if production were not animated throughout by social intelligence, by the general intellect and at the same time by the affective expressions that define social

² Nick Dyer-Witford (1999) theorizes that contemporary technologies can be used against capitalism while Jodi Dean (2004) argues that they are too deeply embedded in Empire to be the means of resistance.

³ For an excellent overview of this theory of affective labor, see their companion articles in *boundary 2*: Antonio Negri, “Value and Affect” (1999) and Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor” (1999).

relations" (p. 365). Using affect as a theory of potentiality that transpires between human beings, energizing production as well as reproduction, Hardt and Negri replace Marx's labor theory of value with an affective theory of value. Consequently, activities such as home caretaking no longer constitute unproductive labor (work that does not create surplus value) but affective labor (work that adds value to life).

According to this theory, the affective work of reproducing laboring bodies so prefigures the economic relations of commodity production that the two become indistinguishable in contemporary life.⁴ This prefiguration, however, holds true at any stage of capitalism. Early industrial capitalism, for instance, required socially reproduced workers with knowledge of how to operate machines (Mokyr, 2002). The crux of Marx's position in the *Grundrisse* lies not in the extension of productive labor but in its elimination. Marx conjectures that advanced technologies will limit the amount of labor time required of workers without limiting productive potential and this, he says, extinguishes all need for money as the universal exchange value. While new technologies certainly enable commodity production with less human exertion, labor time has been relocated rather than reduced. Value forms through a complex of labor practices, often outside the traditional spaces of capitalist production, suggesting the need for a more sophisticated way of tracking value rather than the conceptual liquidation of value theory.⁵ Indeed, if we were in the transitional space imagined by Marx, exchange value would cease to be the measure of use value and this is clearly not the case. Monetary cost still determines whether or not consumers purchase a product as well as whether or not a producer continues to manufacture that product. Far from disappearing, money circulates on a greater scale and with greater speed than ever before.

Upgrading the changing modalities of capitalism into a structural break paradoxically announces the negation of capitalism without its elimination—a proposal that only makes sense within the logic of separation. As others have pointed out, Negri (representing a trend among the autonomists in general) refuses a Hegelian dialectic, claiming that the working class can separate from, exist independently of, and constitute its own social structures outside of and antagonistic to an ongoing capitalist project.⁶ This notion of separate antagonism forms the fulcrum on which Hardt and Negri's popular notion of affect rests. Their theory of separation enables Empire's subjects to perform necessary labor and not surplus labor, to engage use value without exchange value, to work productively apart from wage labor, and ultimately to self-valorize outside the reaches of capitalist exploitation. In sum, individuals can enter into the necessary and life-affirming aspects of labor without being compromised by the life-depleting aspects of capitalist value production. This cheerleading for anti-capitalist activities serves the political goal of empowerment: It puts anti-capitalist practices in the driver's seat and relegates capitalist activities to a separate unfueled vehicle. Given such a scenario, the progressive aspects of Empire are bound to outpace its exploitative components. Yet this structure of separation seems to promote an overly optimistic (and

⁴ In fact, Negri argues that "production becomes coextensive with reproduction" (1999, p. 83). See, also, his *Marx beyond Marx* (1991, pp. 113–115).

⁵ I have argued elsewhere for a rhetorical methodology focused on affect in order to do such tracking (Chaput, 2010).

⁶ Max Henninger (2007), for instance, argues that "Negri never misses an opportunity to declare himself an enemy of dialectical thought" (p. 171).

privileged) sense of transcending capitalism by mobilizing its technological advances while ignoring its operating structures.

Even though I do not follow Hardt and Negri along their feted pathway beyond Marx, their theory of affective labor does compel me to inquire further into the mysterious process by which laboring bodies transfer value into commodities. Recall Massumi's definition of affect as a carrier of life energy across thresholds between situations, people, and things. So defined, affect intersects with the Marxist understanding of value as life energy transferred from a worker to the product of his or her creation. For Marx (1990), the value of things derives from the fact that "human labor is accumulated in them" (p. 128). When we look at a coat, for example, we see value in its ability to provide warmth. This visible use value derives from an invisible value—the labor transferred from workers into the things they produce. Human labor (measuring, cutting, and sewing fabric) congeals within the coat, "although this property never shows through, even when the coat is at its most threadbare" (Marx, 1990, p. 143). The transfer of this value lies at the heart of Marx's commodity fetish and its ideological symptom.⁷ Ever since Marx proclaimed that capitalism "transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic" (1990, p. 167), theorists have been obsessed with the need to decipher the always-already present, but not quite visible, sociality of the commodity. Some of these theories explore the labor that goes into commodity production (the political economic approach) and others study its erasure through cultural consumption (the ideological approach). What these theories fail to account for, however, is *the process* by which workers transfer their labor power or life energy into commodities—a process I believe takes place through the transmission of affect.

Jacques Derrida's important re-reading of Marx offers a portal through which we can begin to conceptualize the value theory of labor through affect. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994) explores the phantasmal quality of value—what he describes as an anthropomorphic energy "that breathes the spirit into [commodities], a human spirit, the spirit of a speech and the spirit of a will" (p. 157). Repeated emphasis on the spectral reveals the haunting sociality of things, but it also stresses the energetic relationship between workers and the products of their labor. Rather than describing labor as autonomous bodies strategically positioned for capitalist exploitation, Marx conceptualizes workers as creative beings who transfer their life energy into the commodities of their production. Their efforts, a concrete "expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands" (Marx, 1990, p. 163), produces commodities that have, in addition to their material qualities, an economic value that measures the social energy necessary for their production.⁸ Consequently, the table Marx famously discusses at the end of *Capital's* first chapter becomes humanized: "it stands on its feet" and evolves ideas out of "its wooden brain" (p. 163). The table's ability to move and to think certainly suggests the social inversion between things and people and yet that substitution derives from the affective transfer of life energy through labor. Because the things we produce contain our echoes, phantoms, and sublimates, they connect the human beings who create them

⁷ For Marx (1990), the commodity fetish represents the fact that laboring bodies become interchangeable things while commodities become "citizens of the world" (p. 128). Slavoj Žižek (1989) discusses how this notion of commodity fetish produced the ideological symptom or the belief in a hidden truth buried within texts.

⁸ Thus, Marx (1990) says commodities are both sensuous things and "suprasensible or social" (p. 165).

with those who consume them—commodities, producers, and consumers become coextensive through a labor process that facilitates energetic or affective flows. In other words, the transmission of life energy through commodity production and consumption becomes a literal collective coming-together.

Neither a state of being, nor a category of labor, affect names the material energy circulating throughout all life processes. Teresa Brennan (2004), for instance, conjectures that affect hangs in the air and moves between individuals, raising and lowering energy levels. Affect moves from person to person physiologically, circulating into and out of bodies through our oral, aural, visual, taste, and tactile senses. It produces a sense of belonging through a “process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (p. 3). Articulating this theory through Marxist terms, laborers transfer life energy (through mental and physical exertion as well as their unconscious affective emissions) into the commodities they produce. Recipients of these things consume not only their use values, but also their affective values—energies taken in through our sensuous interactions with these products. The transmission of affect respects no division between the physical and biological “nor between them and the human” (Massumi, 2002b, p. 37). From this perspective, the elusive thing that haunts commodities, the surplus value that represents the excess or remainder of exploited labor, may be invisible to our eye’s perception, but it is not metaphorical. On the contrary, affect—or what Patricia Clough and her co-authors (2007) call affect-itself—is a physical energy that unites a variety of human subjects through and with nonhuman objects, helping to constitute social relations separate from and prior to our ability to decipher meaning (p. 65).⁹

A speculative narrative drawn from the affective traces embedded within the cycle of production and consumption requires that we extend but not abandon Marx’s labor theory of value. For Marx, creativity functions through embodied action while exploitation—the ability to extract surplus value from labor—works through abstracted social averages. Importantly, this critique of capital relies on the struggle between the concrete and the abstract in much the same way as does Michel Foucault’s conception of biopolitics, the power apparatus most associated with affective labor.¹⁰ Indeed, placing Marx alongside Foucault (2003) illuminates how the affective potentialities so celebrated in contemporary theory are both produced and held in check by the same instrumental logic of capitalism (p. 246). In the biopolitical terrain of affect, just as in the value theory of labor, potential for individual creativity cannot be predicted or constrained even though it can be measured and regulated at an abstract, collective level. As subjects of Empire, we exist in an open field of potentiality—what Massumi calls the virtual—but we move in surprisingly predictable ways, playing out life possibilities within spaces shot through with the affective energy of capitalism.

⁹ They theorize affect “as a property of matter generally, disregarding distinctions between the organic and the non-organic, the open and the closed, the biological and the physical, even the simple and the complex” (p. 67).

¹⁰ Hinting at Foucault’s notion of the biopolitical, Clough et al. (2007) argue that “a dynamic, indeterminate matter is presently being configured in capitalism with corresponding techniques of administration and measurement aimed at a level below, above, or perhaps beyond that of the bounded body-as-organism” (p. 64).

Affective Labor and Reality TV: A Representative Example

As the energy transmitted through human contact in its actual and mediated forms, affect motivates individual and collective thinking and behaving.¹¹ This view of affect—one that treats value as a measure of diverse cultural, political, and economic energies transmitted between individuals and through commodities—offers a springboard into my speculative narrative on reality TV. Merging the theory of affective value with the labor theory of value, I suggest that the participatory, and hence value-forming, characteristics of reality TV unite disparate situations and diverse people under the umbrella of late capitalism and its uneven political economic manifestations while preserving space for uncertainty and difference. I might have little in common with my neighbor, for instance, except a shared habit of watching and voting for contestants on *Dancing with the Stars*. Our individual votes mark our different cultural valuations, but the embodied response to the television event—texting our desired winner through cell phones—signifies a mutual belonging within the digital economy.¹² In this way, television transmits affect and modulates embodied energies. These energies drive one from the television to the cell phone and the Internet, binding television with other communication technologies through which affect, like a contagion, likewise travels.

I conjecture that affective energies circulating among reality television's ecological coming-together trigger movement along three different vectors through which the television audience collectively constitutes itself in harmony with the needs of late capitalism. The first vector signals the shift from mass culture toward mass customization. Contrary to the conformity of mass consumption, reality TV encourages individual self-expression. Participation in the niche markets or self-fashioning genres provided by reality TV becomes the platform by which one can value and evaluate the individuality so central to contemporary life. The second vector normalizes the politics of surveillance as viewers construct themselves within what Foucault (2008) calls an "enterprise" society (p. 241). In the enterprise society, an individual becomes his or her own most valuable commodity, one that must be constantly monitored, assessed, and updated. The politics of surveillance functions as a catalyst for such behaviors. The third vector reinforces free labor in the workplace as well as in our home communities. Economic incentives might compel us to participate in voluntary forms of productive labor, such as carrying store cards for discounts, but reality TV gives life energy to such practical concerns, valorizing volunteer labor as a quintessentially progressive, innovative, and powerful component of our contemporary era. Using these

¹¹ Hardt and Negri allow for affect to enter into and move through things—both material and immaterial—as long as they have been energized by human contact. Michael Hardt (1999), for instance, argues that affective production is "associated with human contact, with the actual presence of another, but that contact can be either actual or virtual. In the production of affects in the entertainment industry, for example, the human contact, the presence of others, is principally virtual, but not for that reason any less real" (p. 96).

¹² This reading is inspired by Brian Massumi's (2005) insightful analysis of Homeland Security's color-coded alert system, which identifies levels of terrorist threat. According to his reading, a diverse population became similarly awash in the affective flows of this alert system without losing its multiple economic and geopolitical differences: "bodies reacted in unison without necessarily acting alike. Their responses could, and did, take many forms. What they shared was the central nervousness" (p. 32).

three vectors to connect diverse reality TV programming, this investigation follows the affective traces—passed along through television, telephone, and Internet spaces—as they leapfrog across our screens and habituate our embodied responses.

Individual Belonging and the Culture of Customized Consumption

Since its origins, game shows—a precursor of today's reality TV—were about little else than enculturation into mass consumer society, and today's television is no exception.¹³ Early reality programming focused on individual stories only to determine the contestant most in need of one-size-fits-all consumer products. Current programming, by contrast, allows the onscreen drama to unfold as contestants are shown how to consume according to their individual needs and unique personalities. An inability to construct oneself and one's belongings within the constantly updated and infinite range of consumer goods propels thousands of individuals to undergo makeovers ranging from the routine living room to the drastic body alteration. Houses are redecorated on *Merge* and rebuilt on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, cars are revitalized on *Pimp my Ride*, men are refashioned on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and bodies are literally reshaped on shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover*. Like its predecessors, such programming teaches viewers to identify one's sense of self through consumptive habits; unlike earlier shows, this identification process is individually tailored, validating a full range of life choices.

Reality TV valorizes individuation within late capitalism by abandoning a culture in which the individual is forfeited to mass consumption and replacing it with a culture that preserves such individuality as the prerequisite for customized consumption. *Merge* recognizes that two individuals, with their differing fashion senses, come together to form a newly married couple. With individuality as its premise, the show works to create a home decor that fits both styles; indeed, we are told that retail stores will accommodate *all* lifestyles. Because homes should reflect the different identities of their owners, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* customizes houses by literally rebuilding them from the bottom up. No one is criticized for having the wrong kind of car on *Pimp my Ride*. Rather, the car owner's individual tastes are affirmed by incorporating particular aspects of his or her personality into the car—going so far as to install cappuccino machines and fireplaces inside vehicles. The cast of *Queer Eye* survey the personal and professional identity of their "straight guy" and then customize their advice to his work, romance, and leisure desires. Epitomizing this customization are shows, like *The Biggest Loser* or the original *Extreme Makeover*, that provide dramatic weight loss, plastic surgery, and other reconstructive procedures specific to the contours of individual bodies and the contestant's desired imaginary. In short, reality TV signals the movement from a culture industry that ideologically "impresses the same stamp on everything" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1994, p. 120) to a culture industry that affectively "diffuses production (in subjectivity and consumption) throughout the extremities of the social factory" (Coté & Pybus, 2007, p. 95). Across its

¹³ My exploration of reality TV includes game shows, talk shows, docudramas, and makeover shows, what Ouellette and Hay (2008) call reality "subgenres" (p. 2) and Tiziana Terranova (2000) calls "people shows" (p. 52). Although diverse, these formats are all unscripted, use unpaid volunteer participants, and focus on everyday persons involved in real life situations. Ordinary people exposing aspects of their lives and audience interactivity are the hallmarks of such shows and the grounds for tracking them together.

many subgenres, reality television connects individuals and their divergent tastes to a larger community of similarly minded people, intensifying different life choices through properly channeled consumer practices.

As reality TV shows work to produce a new form of customized consumerism, they simultaneously necessitate and produce individuals open to the affective work of constant becoming. In order to get on any reality TV show, a contestant needs to apply via audition tapes, group casting calls, and/or personal interviews. The screening process for each show has basic bottom-line criteria—one must have a demonstrable need for a house, car, makeover, or the personal growth. Beyond this minimal criteria, producers look for someone comfortable disclosing personal information and willing to reflect on and adapt to difference. Participants need to possess a general affective quality that enables them to receive and respond to various triggers, regardless of the particular stimuli or one's reaction to it. They must be open to change precisely because reality TV functions pedagogically to highlight the value of constantly evolving identities in perpetual need of consumer updates. Notably, contestants in all forms of reality TV programming describe their experience in exclamations such as "unbelievable," "priceless," and "like nothing else" because, for them, it is "life changing" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 145). This linkage between reality TV and improved selfhood reflects affective energy and its potentiality for collective belonging. The value of these televised experiences, from such a viewpoint, proceeds through the affective labor circulating among contestants, whose rising energy levels seep into our home spaces and inhabit the embodied experience of viewers, compelling us toward new modalities of belonging.

Telephone texting or going online, and thus submitting oneself to other forms of mediated individuation, has become a natural extension of reality TV programming and its cultural logic of self-expression. Viewers access the valuable experience of reality TV on the Internet by logging onto the channels' Web sites or chatting online. Web sites that give behind-the-scene narratives, follow-up information on contestants, as well as product and production details cater to viewers savvy enough to acknowledge the artifice of reality TV, but who nonetheless fear missing some detail of its construction. The increase in social networking spaces, the popularity of YouTube videos, and the rise of online purchases all indicate a burgeoning interest in fulfilling our individual desires through mediated activities. Reality TV plays a crucial role in the increase of these practices by circulating affective energies that animate bodies into action within the digital sphere. Online applications hold out a chance of participating on television; online or telephone voting offers an opportunity to shape the direction of current shows; adding comments to online blogs opens a space for all of us to be television critics; and online stores allow us to purchase copies of television shows as well as related paraphernalia suited to our individual desires. The circulation of people, information, and products among these spaces increases the affective potential that adheres to each site.

As reality TV participants and audience members learn to individualize themselves on television and online, they channel and fuel others to do the same. Ouellette and Hay (2007) argue, for instance, that this new wave of television rationalizes a society wherein individuals and private funds work together to solve the problems of community welfare, addressing diverse "values subcultures" to model behaviors for self-fashioning, community restoration, and general governance. This rationale, they say, makes the self a conductor of power: "someone empowered to take charge of one's life, and also as someone who can effectively conduct a charge (as certain metals conduct electricity)" (p. 15). Human beings are

electrically charged and capable of transmitting their own energy to others. Reality television, which frequently engages at-home participants with tips, instructions, and confessions, functions as a medium for this affective transmission. Perhaps more than other mediums, this human energy feels palpable as the television commodity utilizes participants in their everydayness, addresses audiences directly, and encourages active viewer participation. In this complex of activities, affect (the sensuous nonsensuous value of capitalist production) rises to the surface, nearly visible, as reality television merges worker, commodity, and consumer into an ecology of constantly intertwined production and consumption.

The connective energy of reality TV habituates people into individuated forms of belonging patterned through a repeated movement between the television, telephone, and computer. Traveling through our embodied experiences, affect teaches us to repeat this movement with less and less direction. As Massumi (2002b) argues, "habits are socially or culturally constructed. But they reside in the matter of the body, in the muscles, nerves, and skin where they operate autonomously" (pp. 236–237). When we participate in online extensions of these shows, when we build online communities, when we use our phones to record daily events, or when we entertain ourselves with interactive gaming popularized by Wii and X-Box, we train our bodies to find self, community, and life energy within online spaces. From this perspective, the cultural value of reality television stems less from its aesthetic or ideological content than from the life practices it inspires. Reality TV constitutes individuals as projects to be enhanced, updated, and redirected toward the increasingly digital spaces of social networking, shopping, entertainment, and education.

We cannot say with any certainty what will happen online or which online spaces will become popular, but we can say that we are, indeed, becoming habituated into bodies that move within online environments, willingly provide personal demographic data, do Google searches on one another, and consume supposedly unique identities, all of which are recorded and digitally preserved for those with the power and the technology to access such information. If television discourses simply worked to discipline ideological identification, there would be no need to customize our consumer identities, and if institutions demanded consumption, people would likely resist. Contrary to the cause and effect relationship of ideological or institutional power, affect motivates consumer actions because it individuates potentialities even as it directs them into appropriate spaces of valuation. Affect doesn't "just force us down certain paths, it puts the paths in us, so by the time we learn to follow its constraints we're following ourselves" (Massumi, 2002a, p. 223). As a physiological energy circulating among and between situations, affect concretizes that often fuzzy link between ideologies and lived material experiences and gives us reason to believe that as the market for reality TV becomes ever more commonplace, viewers will become more and more comfortable online and under surveillance. Trained to seek life energies along the paths set before us, people who engage comfortably within the culture of reality TV will undoubtedly engage comfortably with the politics of its surveillance.

Collective Belonging and the Politics of Habituated Surveillance

Late capitalism, which relies on technologies of surveillance from satellite television and the storing of "cookies" on personal computers to video cameras in schools, grocery stores, and banks to the complex biometrics increasingly requested for cross-border travel, requires widespread surveillance. Since

the 1970s, such surveillance has become increasingly integral to reality TV programming, helping to redefine voyeurism as personal entertainment and self-empowerment rather than as an apparatus of institutional abuse (Calvert, 2000, p. 28). This shift seems less like an abrupt about-face if we rethink the binary of positive freedom versus negative surveillance within the “resonating levels” of stasis and change propelled by affective flows (Massumi, 2002b, p. 33). Unlike ideology that operates along a pole between the hegemonic and the oppositional, affect moves throughout all life spaces: It pulls people together or pushes them apart; it raises energy or lowers energy; and it fixes them within particular spaces or it opens them to the possibility of new spaces.¹⁴ Thus, the measure of reality TV’s use of surveillance needs to focus not on binaries like negative oppression and positive resistance but on the ways it modulates affect within the disparate activities of watching others. In the lexicon of affect studies, we need to ask questions about how it pushes or pulls, what it strengthens or weakens, and where it opens or closes life potential.

As surveillance activities conduct the affective flows of reality TV, they simultaneously energize individuals, connect them to others, and open new lines of thinking. Illustrative of this complicated space of surveillance is *Big Brother*, which takes its title from George Orwell’s *1984*, wherein the characters live in a highly authoritarian society monitored by the panoptic and all-powerful Big Brother. Designed around the notion of 24-hour surveillance in an enclosed house over several months, *Big Brother* entertains almost completely through surveillance. In contrast to Orwell’s characters, who feared Big Brother’s gaze, monitoring on reality TV functions as a commonplace activity that helps one measure and assess risk.¹⁵ By watching others, we gain insight into their intentions and can determine our own actions in relationship to theirs—a skill that helps us manage our lives within an enterprise society in which marketable individuals are those who endlessly assess and adjust to the vicissitudes of the world around them. The affective energies of programs like *Big Brother* habituate viewers toward collective belonging through surveillance. Viewers subscribe to 24-hour live feed, call-in their elimination votes, engage in online discussions with participants who have been voted out of the house, and write online commentary about each episode, crafting themselves into a collectivity defined by watching and commenting on each other.

Reality TV’s politics of surveillance encourages us to find community through watching, recording, and discussing the events—large and small—of our everyday lives. This affective labor binds us together and adds value to such activities even as it refrains from giving meaning to those behaviors. Consider the incident involving the San Francisco police officers’ handling of a subway fight that resulted in the fatal

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) explain that that affect vibrates, increasing or lowering the intensity of energies, and it clinches us together or withdraws us from each other (p. 168). Teresa Brennan (2004) further describes this affective movement as capable of unlocking our fixations or sealing our hearts around particular positions (pp. 113–115).

¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the contestants on *Big Brother* and those on MTV’s *Road Rules* refer to the camera crew and staff members as “Big Brother.” Andrejevic (2004) argues that “the historical reality of Big Brother had apparently changed for this savvy, post-Cold War generation. The totalitarian speaker was gone, replaced by the increasingly routine, annoying but necessary intrusions of commerce in the form of the entertainment industry” with a format that pokes “fun at the idea that there’s anything scary about perpetual monitoring” (p. 96).

shooting of Oscar Grant on January 1, 2009. The incident was recorded by cell phones and publicized on YouTube for widespread viewing. The rhetorical impulse to persuade public opinion through posting—by one account, more than 500 videos related to this incident—online at a public-sharing site corresponds to the habituated movement between viewing reality TV and discussing it online (Kiss, 2009). Because we house surveillance texts online where people can deliberate their meaning but not enforce a verdict, the final adjudication of justice cannot be predicted from the text of surveillance. The surfeit of online deliberation, however, intensifies the affective experience and inspires repetition of other surveillance acts as a responsible means for managing contemporary life.¹⁶ The importance of this video lies in its illustration of how community forges itself through surveillance and not in the meaning, whatever that may be, of its content.

The tendency to record and watch everything that can be caught on camera makes an individual grievance or the outcome of any particular incident less important than our continued habit of watching and recording others. In another illuminating case, *Shulmand v. Group W. Productions*, a woman sued the reality-based *On the Scene: Emergency Response* for airing, without her consent or knowledge, a car accident in which she almost died. She claimed that the program had violated her rights by publicly disclosing private facts of her car crash. The production company defended itself, arguing that the accident and its details were within the public interest because they were newsworthy. Upholding the liberal ideology of free expression and the neoliberal standard of deregulation, the California Supreme Court sided with the production company and asserted amusement as a criterion for newsworthiness (Calvert, 2000, pp.145–147). An alternative reading, however, might suggest that the affective path between real-life surveillance and television audiences accounts for the presence of viewers more so than the newsworthiness of the accident. In such a reading, an entire range of practices connected by their affective circulation constitute part of the value-added labor of this event and its ability to attract an audience. Elizabeth Wissinger (2007) explains that

the affectivity of images does not depend on subjective content or meaning, but rather on their ability to attract a ‘televsual glance,’ no matter how fleeting . . . this glance develops an attachment to being exposed to images, to watching television, hooking into the internet or browsing magazines. (pp. 265–266)

Apart from whether or not this accident was newsworthy, it tapped into our attachment to watching and being watched and further centralized affective energies within the sphere of surveillance.

The affective value produced by watching consenting adults in various life circumstances stems from its ability to provoke other similar activities, which further energize still other practices. Just as

¹⁶ Both Grossberg (1992, p. 292) and Andrejevic (2007) argue that the affective lines of flight surrounding surveillance encourage interactivity but not deliberation. Andrejevic, for instance, believes that online participants ratify a predetermined political and cultural script, but that this discussion lacks genuine deliberation because it is not attached to larger “goal-setting decisions” (pp. 242–243).

contemporary marketing produces “an affective intensity that can trigger a number of autonomous—or ‘viral’—communicative networks among consumers and the public at large” (Arvidsson, 2007, p. 13), the increased surveillance of our contemporary world generates, in part, from the ripples of affective energy flowing throughout the spectrum of behaviors attached to reality television. Audiences who watch reality TV participants perform under constant surveillance learn to document potentially noteworthy activities, whether entertaining, informative, or criminal, and thereby perform the double work of circulating affect and laboring under the porous governing apparatuses of neoliberalism—a political economic terrain wherein constant assessment is the prerequisite for constant production and consumption.

Reality TV positions the work of viewing and deliberating as the foundation for a public life played out at the intersection of material and virtual spaces, circulating affective patterns that connect our cultural, political, and economic practices. Consequently, we readily translate reality TV viewing into an entire complex of feelings. As we watch docudramas, we feel a sense of belonging; as we watch cop shows, we feel secure as a nation; as we watch talent shows, we feel pride in American meritocracy; and, as we watch makeover shows, we feel as though we are taking responsibility for those in need. The actions triggered by these feelings do not stay within the viewing situation, but flow throughout a digital continuum that compels many of us to labor on behalf of the surveillance impulse. We record beatings and car crashes as frequently as the mundane events of our everyday lives. This comfort with surveillance invites participation in the embodied performance of watching others and thus (re)constructs individuals within new dispositions. People who feel a sense of security through surveillance, for instance, may be less likely to fear participation in various “forms of interactive monitoring relied on by producers to reduce uncertainty in an increasingly diversified market” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 68). Politically, we engage in ever more forms of surveillance; economically, that surveillance transforms into productive labor: Normalized and unremunerated surveillance generates profits. Andrejevic calls this the online enclosure; I call it the economics of de-wagification, or more simply, free labor.¹⁷

Digitalized Belonging and the Economics of Free Labor

From its inception, television programming has operated in ways that challenge Marx’s general formula of capitalist production, and yet we can still understand its economic structure through his labor theory of value. Borrowing its model from the magazine industry, television sells products to consumers below cost, but sells its audiences to advertisers at steep prices in order to garner an overall profit.¹⁸ As Dallas Smythe (1977) argued long ago, audience activities, although located outside the wage system,

¹⁷ While Tiziana Terranova (2000; 2004) uses the same term, we do not share a common definition. For me, free labor signifies unpaid wage labor and not all unpaid work. Terranova, following autonomist thinkers, sees all work as contributing value to capitalist exchange. Acknowledging the porous boundaries between work and leisure, I nevertheless believe that there are spaces outside capitalist production of surplus value. The autonomists are right to suggest that the complex boundaries of these processes make the neat equations found in *Capital* fairly untenable, and yet there are different kinds of work—some of which contribute to capitalist surplus value and some of which do not.

¹⁸ For an excellent history of the cultural and economic evolution of such media, see Richard Ohmann (1998).

contribute to the production of surplus value because their labor produces a product (marketable viewer shares) for which they are unremunerated. Unlike audience members who are uncompensated for their labor, television writers, actors, and production crews are paid wages. This system of paid and unpaid labor has become less and less profitable with the proliferation of cable channels, access to overseas programming, and technologies like TiVo that enable viewers to bypass commercials. Consequently, most television shows become profitable only after syndication and DVD releases. Reality TV, however, forges a path beyond this economic crisis because its volunteer contestants are not paid wages as actors would be and its audience labors significantly more than traditional viewers. By increasing affective flows through contests, challenges, and life experiences of televised volunteers and interactive audience members, reality TV dramatically reduces wages from wage labor and increases surplus value, or the amount of unpaid, value-generating labor.¹⁹

This shift from wage labor to volunteer labor requires willing bodies—bodies affectively constituted through their repeated engagements with televisions, telephones, online mediums, and other digital spaces. Within this trans-situational experience, individuals subject themselves to surveillance for the payoff of experience, personal growth, and possible opportunity rather than an old-fashioned equation between time, labor, and wage. In an uncertain economy, made more precarious by the recent economic crisis, individuals readily volunteer for reality TV shows that provide recognition for their diverse identities (*Big Brother* and *The Real World*), pseudo job interviews (*Project Runway*, *Top Chef*, and *American Idol*), or potential prize money (*Fear Factor* and *Wipeout*). What characterizes this programming is its double production of surplus value. On the one hand, it produces surplus value through the labor of its volunteer contestants; on the other hand, it produces surplus value from the labor of its volunteer viewers. Viewer votes, blogs, and subscriptions to live feed all generate value in the sense that they add to the quality of the show. *American Idol*, for instance, would not work without viewers willing to text message votes. In a different way, blogs that leak information about docudramas like *Big Brother* similarly enhance value through speculation about the show's outcome. Regardless of what form this viewer participation takes, such activities increase the intensity and energy of the television program, simultaneously habituating individuals toward specific affective pathways and increasing the market value of reality TV shows without any accompanying costs in wages.

To be clear, the transmission of affect contributes to the economic cycle with varying degrees of proximity to the production of surplus value and thus all “free labor” should not be theorized the same way. The transmission of affect exists both inside and outside capitalist modes of production. When it enters into the capitalist circulation cycle, it can be used to add surplus value; when it remains beyond the interventionist capabilities of capitalism, it produces value in the autonomist sense of self-valorization but

¹⁹ Chad Raphael (2004) and Ted Magder (2004) both offer overviews of how reality TV, unlike other kinds of programming, generates a profit in its first broadcast rather than waiting to recoup costs through subsequent syndication. It does this by dramatically cutting the cost of labor, shifting to product placement advertising, creating other value-adding opportunities through online tie-ins, and copyrighting formats rather than episodes.

not surplus value. Specific labor practices, and not affect, produce surplus value.²⁰ Andrejevic (2007), for instance, explores Web sites that discuss reality TV and include a range of “fans” who both like and dislike the shows. What binds these fans together, and keeps them loyally tuning into the programs, is the online discussion. While this kind of viewership no doubt existed before, the difference is that the dialogue has been redirected onto the Internet, a space wherein these conversations can contribute directly to surplus value production. During television’s earlier periods, determining the lines of discussion and the demographics of participants who deliberated in offices, at kitchen tables, and in the streets required marketing teams who worked for wages. Moving these activities online allows for a smoother assessment of such discourse, extending, argues Andrejevic (2007), the Fordist model of detailed production oversight into the detailed marketing of consumption (p. 55). Because labor must be organized and spatially mapped out by capital to create surplus value, the economic potential of affective labor lies dormant until it is oriented within the proper channels of capitalism.

Not only does reality television create new forms of producing surplus value for the television industry and thereby secure the changing medium against crisis, it also constitutes viewers as neoliberal citizens capable of shouldering an array of other economic responsibilities. Thus, financial advice programming like *The Suze Orman Show* teaches audiences how to behave in the current economic climate. As Orman personally addresses callers, her voice transmits affect that moves viewers. Her repetitive commentary may reveal few new insights, but the live, unscripted nature of her show provides space for the production and transmission of affective energies. According to Wissinger (2007), this ability to modulate affect works like a sixth sense: people who have it are able “to open themselves to capturing something unexpected, something that moves beyond the norm, toward the unknown” (p. 260). Although Wissinger analyzes the modeling industry, her point is equally true of the voices and languages that bind to televisual images. The meaning of Orman’s directive to know your credit score, a statement heard numerous times in each episode, has little revelatory effect on callers who are also frequent viewers. The affective energies of her instructions nevertheless move from the televised Orman to the viewing bodies, directing them toward online spaces. Many viewers may ignore this direction, but those who respond to it by going online—for whatever reason—become carriers in the flow of affect from one place to another.

As we move, almost instinctually, among many different sites, we perform embodied practices routinized by the affect flowing throughout the television, telephone, and computer screens that litter our professional and personal landscapes. Even as we freely choose to participate in reality TV and its continuum of diverse value-generating activities, we do so because the circulation of affects within its triangulated digital world “gives the body’s movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions—accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in *tendency*” (Massumi, 2002a, p. 213). As reality TV compels us to travel from the television to the computer, checking *Big Brother*’s live feed or one’s favorite TV blog becomes as much a part of our morning ritual as coffee or email. If we are already in front of a computer screen and online, why not print out airplane or movie theater tickets? Why not purchase household products? Why not do our own banking or brokering? Why not do any number of

²⁰ Marx (1990) differentiates between productive labor (which produces surplus value) and unproductive labor (which does not produce surplus value). This differentiation does not mean that productive labor is more important, but simply that it exists within the spaces of capitalist production (pp. 643–644).

activities subtly unhinged from the system of wage labor? When affect is directed along particular trajectories, such as those forged through reality TV's circulating energies, it creates a force: "the set of invisible, untouchable, self-renewing conditions according to which certain effects can habitually be expected to appear" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 160). In short, reality television directs our affective paths toward digitalized mediums, moving our life energies through observable spaces so that their potentialities can be valorized according to the economic logic of capitalism.

By connecting television viewing with productive and consumptive online behaviors, reality TV sets the stage for further participation in the digital enclosure. Such interactive television invites viewers to move more deeply within the online world where, Andrejevic (2004) says, "every consumption decision represents a double value: that realized in exchange and that which can be generated by the information about that exchange" (p. 84). The extra value derived from this information comes at no cost to the receiver and only a trivial cost to those of us who must type in our demographics at each new Web site we frequent. Extending the television experience into the online experience, reality TV constructs opportunities for individual movements and preferences to be tracked, recorded, and resold to marketers at the same time that it habituates participants into the practice of free labor.²¹ When we provide information that can be catalogued and sold for a profit, when we fill our own soft drinks, when we check out our own groceries, and when we swipe our own credit cards, we are providing our labor for free, marking our successful transformation into neoliberal citizenship. These activities generate relative surplus value—a temporary increase in value due to technological innovation within production—because they are externally controlled by corporations which no longer have to pay for this work. Yet we go online, revealing personal marketing information to the likes of Axiom and ChoicePoint, and we eagerly perform consumer labor, in part, because reality TV has normalized free labor by affectively reconstituting unpaid work as a crucial component of our subjective belonging in late capitalism.

Affect and Critical Methodologies in Late Capitalism

My speculative narrative on reality TV rests on two assumptions: First, critical cultural theorists can interpret texts, like reality TV, trans-situationally and with simultaneous attention to their cultural, political, and economic implications, and second, theories of affect that emphasize the transfer of life energies among people and things need not abandon a Marxist theory of valuation. Using this double lens, my survey of the affective flows surging throughout the myriad spaces of reality TV suggests a tripartite legitimation of belonging within late capitalism. Culturally, reality TV instructs us to embrace customized commodities as a means of expressing our individualities, as do contestants on its shows, reimagining consumerism within the neoliberal sphere of the all-powerful self rather than the masses. Politically, viewers learn to embrace surveillance—the cornerstone of reality TV. Just as surveillance becomes the condition for audience constitution so does it forge neoliberal subjects whose constant monitoring and assessments contribute to the diffusion of affective labor. Economically, reality TV reinforces the widespread de-wagification of labor and forges online communities. By replacing paid actors with on- and

²¹ At least one company, San Francisco-based Bynamite, is working to compensate such consumer labor (Lohr, 2020).

off-screen volunteers, reality TV programming legitimates various ways people work for free. Mutually imbricated, these three vectors of reality TV constitute a force that energizes multiple affective moments and persuades us to adapt our sense of belonging through practices commensurate with a constantly evolving capitalist valuation process.

In this analysis, affect travels throughout the disparate exchanges among television participants and viewers. Both external and internal, affect challenges the very notion of a unified, self-contained subject who persuades an audience to a specific end vis-à-vis rational argumentation. Refusing the liberal subject of rational deliberative theory, affect reconfigures agency so that it encompasses individuals bound together by a rhetorical situation shot through with excessive and irrepressible affective energies. Rather than calling us back to a rational subjectivity by escaping or countering these energies, theorists espousing critical affect studies need to concentrate on tracking the potentialities inherent in the uncertain and open field of their circulation. By following affect from one situation to another, our traditional methodologies, the close reading strategies of cultural studies as well as the empirical research of communication studies, simply unravel. Affect, that is, stages the scene for reflecting on and reinvigorating our critical practices beyond ideological and political economic methodologies.

Although still very much alive, methods of ideological or political economic analysis rely on modernist notions of agency wherein the critic and the consumer are obligated to see correctly and then act accordingly—creating what Ronald Walter Greene (2004) calls a permanent anxiety. Greene suggests that we replace these political-communicative visions of agency with communicative labor, which he defines as “a form of life-affirming constitutive power that embodies creativity and cooperation” (p. 201). Communicative labor, premised on the belief that affect flows throughout the entire range of life practices, requires methodologies able to pursue these energies as they move people and things. Individuals who are compelled by the power of commodities can no longer be considered passive ideological dupes or agents of unique semiotic decoding. According to this conception, the power of commodities derives from and participates in the circulation of capitalist value as much as the circulation of life energy—processes that should be theorized together. Methodologies based on the assumption of traditional agentive power work through fixed categories and equivalences between otherwise diverse human beings that do not account for affective flows. But, if we replace agency with affect, we tie cultural participation to the life energies that connect diversity rather than sameness, opening cultural studies to its as yet uncharted immanence.

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