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PLATFORM PRAGMATICS
Labour, Speculation and Self-reflexivity in Content Economies

Abstract

This article proposes platform pragmatics as a framework for understanding collective behaviour and forms of labour within platform ecosystems. It contributes to the field of platform criticism by problematising a certain view of users as passive victims of surveillance and algorithmic governmentality. The main argument is developed by thinking through the production of content and forms by users, and their circulation through computational logic and affective contagion. Through some illustrative cases and analyses of cultural habits, the article addresses the political and aesthetic configuration of these forms of production – not only of content/forms, but also of culture and subjectivity. This is explored by thinking through three themes: the subsumption of creativity and opportunism in platform economies; the mobilisation of speculative temporalities not only in computation but also across user practices; and the generalisation of self-reflexivity as a feminised cultural behaviour and aesthetic mode. Finally, I propose to understand platform pragmatics as a mode of subaltern power, that might be alien to traditional political reason, but precisely because of this needs to be grappled with through inventive cultural and social criticism.

Introduction

This article proposes platform pragmatics as a framework for understanding collective behaviour and forms of labour within platform environments. The main argument is developed by thinking through the production of content and forms by platform users and creators, and how they circulate through dynamics of imitation and virality. It contributes to the field of platform criticism by pushing against a certain view of platform users as passive victims of surveillance and algorithmic governmentality, while also problematising the putatively autonomous position of the User as the universal agent of technology. I will start by thematising how a certain disposition to performance is increasingly important for a widening range of jobs, especially those connected to platform and attention economies. The article draws from digital media theory to understand content and forms as produced through a mesh of computational logic and affective contagion. Then, it considers the political and aesthetic configuration of this form of production – not only of content/forms, but also of culture and subjectivity – through some illustrative cases and analyses of cultural habits. This configuration is explored by thinking through three themes: the subsumption of creativity and opportunism in platform economies; the mobilisation of speculative temporalities not only in computation but also across user practices; and the generalisation of self-reflexivity as a feminised cultural behaviour and aesthetic mode. Following these threads, I finally propose to understand platform pragmatics as a mode of subaltern power, that might be alien to traditional political reason, but precisely because of this needs to be grappled with through inventive cultural and social criticism.

Platform Mediated Content Economies

Over the last decade, the proprietary platform technologies served to us by Big Tech have become key infrastructures of social life, of work and research, of cultural imaginaries and collective action. Although spheres of techno-cultural diversity still exist and thrive within the "platform society" (van Dijck et al) – the "Corporate Platform Complex" (Terranova "After the Internet") is deeply embedded in the background of everyday life, in a baroque mesh of networked user profiles, data interfaces and affective flows. Platforms mediate sociality even when people or organisations actively withdraw from them – see the case of Transmediale opting out of social media. Attending to them is necessary to those who champion their ethos just as much as to those who critique it. Platforms mediate the art biennale and its boycott, the university's neoliberal policies *and* its occupation by students.

Given their growing pervasiveness, a diverse body of research has developed criticisms of digital platforms. These are now widely understood as centralised architectures exercising integrated control over networked users' interactions (Bratton), strategically leveraging their infrastructural position to harvest data from these networks (van Dijck et al). A significant object of critique has been the models

by which platforms valorise the data gathered from social interaction (Srnicek) and how these models function through impersonal and cybernetic modes of power grounded in protocol and control (Galloway; Hui; Williams). Specifically, platform control operates by anticipating, modelling and influencing behaviour through statistical patterning and "algorithmic governmentality" (Rouvroy and Berns).

In the platform mediated social, economic survival requires at least the adoption of platform services, while access to the pleasures of sociality, consumption and aesthetic enjoyment often necessitates a willing self-investment in their logic. Our desires for traveling, for cultivating interests, even for sexual encounters, are strategically channelled through platform models of attention capture and networked sociality. Sustaining a working life that fulfils one's ambitions often requires platforms to mediate our connections, reputation, if not direct earnings. However, this doesn't mean that our proximity to networked computation is only forced by social necessities. For many of us, interaction with media and computation can be a pleasurable and interesting experience in itself, something we actively seek out.

For these and other reasons, subjective investment in the logic of the platform complex keeps the collective body/mind at work around the clock, as a creative production unit: scripting narratives, producing content, devising promotional strategies, developing networks of contacts, partners, supporters, cultivating audiences and hopefully expanding them, 'hacking growth'. Personally, working freelance without possessing any particularly scarce technical skill, keeping my feet in more than one industry ('at the intersection' as the saying goes), while trying to do research in a way that is economically sustainable, requires me to mobilise all my inventiveness and opportunism – always keeping an eye on platform dynamics.

But such demands are not a cross to bear only for 'cognitive' or 'knowledge' workers, researchers or creatives. This is not only because all labour involves knowledge, cognitive activity, and has at least some immaterial component – as highlighted by autonomist Marxism – but also because the production of content and forms has become important for a widening range of professions. Running a popular Substack, operating fluently as a digital creator of some sort, or even just having a good social media presence, all function as good indicators of the entrepreneurial disposition that is usually required for white-collar or creative careers. But a similar disposition towards content and platform presence is increasingly important for professions that are not traditionally associated with performance or self-spectacle.

Companies increasingly understand their employees as content publishers and even influencers, capable of generating value for them not only through direct labour time, but also through their free engagement with content/forms on digital platforms, which is something they can also be trained and encouraged to do. Inevitably, "employee-generated content" becomes a management category and a consultancy genre (Goodall). Unsurprisingly, Amazon is an early pioneer in this: from 2018 to 2022, the company had reportedly set up an internal ambassador

scheme, paying employees for positively representing the company on social media – especially regarding the controversial issue of working conditions (Suciu). But besides the interests of their employers, content production engages workers first and foremost as self-entrepreneurs. In my PhD research on platform labour, I observed how gig workers often supplement scarce or unreliable earnings through content creation and other platform mediated side-hustles. For instance, online content around delivery work is often produced by workers themselves, in a proliferation of formats including tutorials, vlogs, newsletters, challenges, reaction videos, forums and group chats. People usually try to grow a community of followers, promoting content about their work with practical or entertainment purposes, sometimes even selling gadgets or coaching services (Biscossi). The capacity to create media forms, assigned by McKenzie Wark to the "hacker class" (Wark), appears increasingly essential to the working class as a whole.

Because of the ease of access to digital marketplaces, the practice of side-hustling, historically necessary to precarious workers for making ends meet, becomes more and more generalised. Precarity is reframed as a chance for empowerment, which resonates with a general need for opportunities in the face of economic vulnerability, but also with a certain desire for self-realisation and liberation from the drudgery of day-jobs. Platforms democratise entrepreneurial hustle by enabling anybody anywhere to access extremely dynamic content marketplaces, connecting with audiences and finding inventive ways to monetise attention, to live off one's previously un-expressed talent. After all, a key promise of the platform economy is that of connecting self-expression to monetisation, potentially freeing oneself from the dread of salaried work by pursuing their passion. [1]

Platform mediated content economies seem to integrate the creativity of the "hacker class" (Wark) with the versatility of the "entreprecariat" (Lorusso), the hustle of gig workers (Woodcock and Graham) and the general opportunism of post-Fordist labour (Virno). This is important to understand the circulation and mutation of content and forms, because it means that most people trying to go viral are not necessarily acting on some innate desire for self- expression or popularity, nor are they after any influencer or 'creative director' lifestyle. Most likely, they're either not earning enough or just don't like their job. Attention and content economies express certain cultural shifts that accompany mutations in production. I believe these need to be jointly addressed in order to understand emergent forms of labour and subjectivity.

Content/Forms in a "Techno-social" Milieu

Content and forms do not just shape each other, but also unfold through the turbulence and complexity of platform environments. If creative production entails the transformation of thought into proposals, personal traits into assets, and life into content, the rendering of its forms happens through platform mediation, which we can understand as an assemblage of interfaces, language, affects, attention and virality, behavioural vectors and algorithmic learners.

Mediation here does not simply mean transparent communication between discrete actors, but rather – in line with a long tradition of media theory (Galloway, Thacker and Wark; Kember and Zylinska) – a complex process that is at once social, cultural, psychic and technical. The production and circulation not only of content, but of culture and subjectivity, is articulated through a logic that is increasingly computational, destabilising any separation between the social – as the space of politics – and the medial, as the space of leisure and culture (Sundaram). This resonates with Tiziana Terranova's "techno-social hypothesis", which "concerns the idea that, over the last three decades or so, the technological and the social have become thoroughly enmeshed with each other", to the point that digital computational networks no longer simply combine a natural and technical milieu, but rather generate "a directly techno-social one" which is both medium and milieu (Terranova and Sundaram). Here, technical systems do not simply support social interaction, but make it digitally available to the computational architectures that mediate it, creating the conditions of communication through which content/forms emerge.

In terms of *how* they emerge, in this techno-social milieu, content and forms are rendered and experienced less by linguistic representation, and increasingly through algorithmic synthesis. This is evident, for instance, in how users adapt their content practices to algorithmic logic for visibility purposes. The changing grammars of content circulation are a clear product of this. On social media platforms, content creators work with combinations of typified forms; elements of content that can be imitated and reproduced by other users, constituting trends or templates that spread through virality. It could be a particular move, sound, catchphrase, visual element or graphic animation, that circulates through imitation, and through this imitation produces difference and new invention. In fact, these are not finished pieces of content that are re-shared *as-is*, but viral *components* of content that spread and mutate through the logic of contagion.

By this process, the visual cultures of the attention economy have developed according to what Leaver, Highfield and Abidin call "templatability" (Leaver et al), an algorithmically- driven process shaping the grammars of platform users. Here, platform aesthetics take form between the affordances of algorithms and their appropriation by users, who bend their performance and internalise the algorithmic gaze in order to take advantage of it (Portanova "Camera eats first"). Content appears as the surface of the cultural plane field, whose organisation increasingly takes place at the more fundamental level of computational mediation.

The Political Aesthetics of Content/Forms

Under Big Tech's corporate oligopoly, the production and circulation of content/forms across the social might appear firmly subjugated to algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy and Berns). As suggested by many accounts of technological power, from Tiqqun to Bernard Stiegler, these conditions dramatically

limit the space of political and aesthetic possibility.[2] We can find one of the most influential critiques of platform control in Shoshana Zuboff's work on surveillance capitalism as a new regime of accumulation grounded on the extraction of "data exhaust" from social relations (Zuboff). In this critique, behavioural modification and commodification are fundamental to accumulation and power. Surveillance ubiquitously records, predicts and steers everyday practices in a way that surpasses the anticipatory conformity of panoptical surveillance, where subjects chose submission by fear of compulsion. Under surveillance capitalism, "agency […] is gradually submerged into a new kind of automaticity – a lived experience of pure stimulus-response" and "conformity […] disappears into the mechanical order of things and bodies" (Zuboff 82). From this perspective, the social might appear inert and disempowered under the transcendental control of Big Tech.[3]

However, it's worth questioning this perspective by looking at the current configurations of content and forms within the techno-social milieu. The proliferation of connected mobile devices and the low barriers to entry to the platform-ed internet have produced a multiplication of media objects and populations. The result is a global digital culture with intensive capacities for circulation, imitation and affective connection through networked computation.

Despite the clear diversities of experience across the global lines of class and race – and keeping in mind that even basic internet access is not universally given – global media populations still disorderly imitate and contaminate each other's aesthetic registers and performance grammars, through overlapping networks of social media, content platforms, private messaging, servers and group chats. The younger segments of the Western and Eastern middle classes share at least some of their memetic language with urban proletarians and migrants around the world. In January, a Yemenite Houti pirate attacking ships controlled by Israeli allies in the Suez canal, went viral after portraying himself using the same aesthetics as the average western teenager – the ultra-smooth cuteness of a TikTok filter – by which his image entered global cycles of cultural remix (Steinbuch & O'Neill). Cultural critics have recently observed how young women from the US and Israeli military, some even employed by US intelligence, circulate military propaganda on social media by following the same aesthetic grammars used by lifestyle influencers and "e-girls" (Yalcinkaya). Political forces – most prominently right wing nationalism, from the US to India – have successfully weaponised affective media networks for the purpose of spreading propaganda and inciting political violence.

Thus, the platform milieu appears as a crucial site of aesthetic negotiation and power struggles. Ravi Sundaram sees the "new urban information ecology" as a "remarkable infrastructure of agility and possibility" with enough expressive and associative power to exceed complete capture by platform logic (6). It is precisely this tension between corporate calculation, affective coordination and aesthetic expression that produces the rhythm of techno-social life.[4] Here, the techno-social body appears not so much as a homogenous "silent majority" (Baudrillard), but rather as a libidinal mesh of users' desire and corporate interests, affects and

computation, radically open to imitation and affective contagion. Collective intelligence and creativity never seem to realise any complete autonomy from control, and *yet* they are never fully subjugated to corporate accumulation.

The interesting question then becomes: within the techno-social milieu, what forms of individuation take shape, and how can they be studied through the lens of content/form? This theme can be explored through the initial question of labour in platform mediated economies, looking at everyday practices of content production/consumption, work and research. How do forms circulate across user interfaces, bedrooms/offices/studios/stages and proprietary computation? What kind of subordinate subjectivation takes form through collective inventiveness and contagion? How do these pragmatics interpret and contaminate platform logic?

The production of content/forms in platform economies foregrounds at least two dynamics that characterise labour in the techno-social milieu, which I will now turn to: one is linked to speculation as a constitutive element not only of computational architectures, but also of everyday user practices; the other highlights self-reflexivity and performance, especially as culturally feminised behaviours, as central to the techno-political imaginaries of contemporary labour.

Speculative Interfaces

This section argues that platform mediated economies mobilise speculative practices as increasingly central to flexible labour.

In its common use, for instance in financial investment, speculation entails a set of calculative techniques for trying to manage time in the form of uncertainty, anticipating the future while recursively producing it (Esposito).[5] Through generalised speculation, the financialisation of the economy twists time in such a way that anticipation, instability and contingency become key to the performance of power in the present. However this is not *entirely* new. Already the planning aspirations of the 20th century – the ideological battle between free market economics and socialist planning – focus on prediction as a critical site of power. Economic modelling relies precisely on this power to calculate and represent complexity in order to tame it, bringing a desired scenario into existence through the joint action of prediction and speculation (Medialab Matadero).

Today's control apparatuses – as we've seen – deploy statistical prediction and hypothesis- making at scale, through algorithmic governmentality. The personalised anticipation of wants and desires is now a standard feature of most software services, from algorithmic recommendations to artificially intelligent UX design – by which my phone is increasingly capable of anticipating what I am about to do with it. In the commercial realm, the popularity of foresight consultancies and speculative design studios testifies a certain appetite for accelerating futures into existence. The recent hype around Meta's project of the Metaverse demonstrates the power of large corporations to create almost entire economic sectors – with very real

investments into virtual real estate (Biscossi & Campani) – simply through speculative proposals for vague visions of the future.

Across culture, there seems to be a widespread celebration of potentiality as an almost tangible force. This is reflected for instance in the cultural virality of positive affirmations and "manifesting" (Burton); while at a more intellectual level, the growing interest in speculative practices and fabulation within art and critical practice might indicate an aesthetic tendency towards seizing the virtuality that many see as latent in the real.

I would like to argue that speculation is not only something that operates *from above* through corporate and governmental infrastructures, but rather innervates the techno-social body also *from below*. In fact, various small-scale speculative interfaces permeate contemporary reputation and attention economies. These seem designed for the constant guessing of what the near future will look like. Within the highly metricated space of content platforms, users try to predict what forms and content will gain higher visibility and virality. Here, their ability to forecast trends, to embody and reproduce them, assumes uncannily financial connotations.

With the increasing *templatability* of content and its deconstruction into re-composable trends, striking the right combination of content and forms, catalysing collective affect as a vehicle of virality, can bring about very significant material opportunities. Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, when TikTok was popularised among the European public, the platform established itself as a key promotional media for small businesses, autonomous workers, cultural workers and diversely underemployed populations. The context of Naples – where I lived at the time – presented a mix of affective expressivity and economic precarity that made it the epicentre of an emerging media vernacular, which crucially intersected with a wave of "touristification" investing many Southern European cities (Esposito). The performance of a certain 'southern' identity, the enactment of certain tropes and stereotypes, the display of visual and sonic elements tightly linked to local culture, demonstrated a powerful affective charge that resonated with platform publics well beyond the local dimension. The most famous case is that of a long-time employee at a popular Neapolitan deli, who accidentally became a TikTok sensation after being filmed by some customers during his humorous sandwich preparation. While his employers felt that Donato's growing engagement with content creation was disrupting the shop, another entrepreneur stepped in and offered to fund the opening his very own place. Themed around Donato's online character and catchphrases, "Con Mollica o Senza?" has since become not only an attraction in Naples, where people queue around the block for a sandwich and a video, but also a global sensation, with shops in different cities and brand collaborations worldwide (Abazia; Glassberg).

For someone trying to promote their activity without capital to invest, the virality of content/ forms provides access to volumes of exposure and circulation that they wouldn't be able to generate through traditional promotional tactics. This

opportunity arises via the networks of affective contagion that people access through digital platform's speculative interfaces. And speculative interfaces require a speculative disposition. Am I going to be able to strike the right combination of visuals, sound, lingo and overall vibe? Am I sufficiently in tune with algorithmic cultures to stay on top of constantly shifting platform vernaculars?

Clearly this logic of prediction and performance is not limited to social media forms. Work in design, communications and commercial creativity is also distinctly geared towards the constant development and testing of aesthetic and consumer trends. Working in the knowledge industries, maintaining a research or artistic practice, similarly requires a certain engagement in speculative practices.[6] Where is institutional funding headed? Is it worth still investing time and labour into the AI bubble, or has it reached its peak? What will be trending next year at Transmediale? What I am trying to say is that speculation appears as a pervasive practice, almost a basic requirement for surviving in the precarity of contemporary economies.

Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik talk about a "speculative time complex" brought about by a "post-contemporary" condition where the linear direction of time has changed and the future appears – at least politically and aesthetically – before the present, so that speculation and futurity influence the present before it actually happens (Avanessian & Malik). This speculative temporality becomes productive in everyday life precisely through the rendering of content and forms by digital creators, trendsetters, artists, managers, researchers, gig workers and other platform users. In the rhythmic complexity of techno-social life, human and nonhuman speculative capacities integrate in the key tension between affective contagion, statistical calculation and opportunistic inventiveness.

Assets and Labour

As noted by many scholars, getting by in platform-ed economies depends not only on the direct commodification of labour time, but also increasingly on what Kean Birch and Fabian Muniesa call "assetisation" (Birch & Muniesa); the opening of one's productive capacities to valuation on digital marketplaces. Obviously these assets do not constitute a concrete portfolio: they exist as undetermined virtuality until one finds ways to actualise them in specific enactments of exchange – it's all up to me, it's *my* human capital.

In my research on platform labour, I had the chance to observe the inventive practices of many full-time platform workers (Biscossi).[7] In a particular case, a young woman who had left a job at the airport to work as a rider – seeking more autonomy over her work – was not only active on several delivery platforms at once, but also constantly creating videos about her delivery shifts to disseminate on social media and content platforms.[8] She would comment on her job in diary-style vlogs, engage with social media challenges and trends, or share practical advice for other couriers. Here, content creation becomes a way to valorise the significant amount of

unpaid waiting time that comes with delivery work, by channeling it into other platforms' content-based earning models. Her time, creativity and willingness to communicate, her body and its capacity to perform, constituted her assets, which could be simultaneously plugged into multiple virtual marketplaces, appropriately rendered through content forms. She would remain available for delivery gigs, while also creating videos for her followers, and trying to catch the right trends and content templates on social media.

It is now interesting to think about how, by this constant speculative effort and this process of assetisation, living labour is subject to a condition of exposure, affectability and necessity of performance. As highlighted by Kylie Jarrett, this entails the development of a self-reflexive sensibility, by which workers experience themselves through the gaze and logic of platform valorisation (Jarrett).

Self-reflexivity and 'Girlhood'

Self-reflexivity appears as a key characteristic of contemporary labour; a hyper-awareness of being watched, by which one learns to self-observe from the outside. It appears particularly fundamental to platform economies, where users-workers are constantly exposed to their own valuation and sorting through the algorithmic gaze of digital metrics. Crucially, Jarrett notes how this constant performance of availability and desirability is a historically gendered cultural behaviour. In fact, the vulnerability of this self-reflexive condition is in line with a historical feminisation of labour – understood as a process that both signifies and subtends its exploitation and vulnerability (Haraway; Jarrett).

Tiqqun's famous theorisation of the "Young-Girl" as a paradigmatic condition of labour subjectivity in the early 21st century sees her as "the being that no longer has any intimacy with herself except as value, and whose every activity, in every detail, is directed to self- valorization" ("Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl" 18). Tiqqun are careful to clarify that the Young-Girl is not a gendered concept nor necessarily female. Of course, this condition can also apply to men, only as long as they are emptied of *all* the autonomy and capacity to struggle of the male industrial worker: girlhood here means being reduced to a mere vessel of capital. However, beyond Tiqqun's dismissive formulation, the Young-Girl has been mobilised in feminist cultural studies to understand the subaltern agency of this vulnerable condition. In fact, it is precisely "the contradictions that the 'Young Girl' exists within – both object and subject; both active and passive; both observed and watchful" that "offer a way of understanding the absorption of life into labor" (Jarrett).

This constant self-reflection and its duplicity – activity/passivity, observed/watchful – is clearly at play within platform and content economies. Here, most work is about being subjected to similar contradictions: competing for visibility while at the same time trying to maintain some tactical privacy. Taina Bucher argued, in her brilliant reading of Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm as a reversal of Foucault's framework of

panoptic surveillance, that the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms establishes not a mechanism of permanent visibility, but rather a "threat of *invisibility*" as constitutive of participatory subjectivities (Bucher). People quickly learn that the monitoring and evaluation of their performance determines their access to opportunities, and organically internalise this logic through behavioural reward mechanisms. This is true for delivery couriers deciding whether or not to reject a poorly paid order, and equally for Instagram users deciding to post certain types of content – for instance selfies – in order to be rewarded with algorithmic visibility. At the same time, it is often in their interest to maintain some degree of privacy and tactical invisibility from the managerial gaze of the platform. If algorithmic visibility grants increased access to opportunities and pleasure, tactical privacy enables one to retain some autonomy and possibility for indiscipline. It is in this double dynamic that platform mediation enforces self-reflexivity as a feminised cultural behaviour.

Alex Quicho's recent intervention into girlhood discourse asks what makes the "girl" such a viral figure for online subjectivity. Drawing from Andrea Long Chu's idea of being females as becoming vessels for someone else's desire, she understands the girl not through victimhood, but as a mode of subaltern power articulated through artificiality, proposing this as a model for platform survival, for learning "how to move with the trap" in order to stay clear of complete capture (Quicho). One of the ways in which 'the girl' seems to do this is through a certain mobilisation of aesthetics. Sianne Ngai proposes the zany, the cute and the interesting as the paradigmatic aesthetic categories of the technologically mediated, performance-driven world of late capitalism. She argues that "the best explanation for why the zany, the interesting, and the cute are our most pervasive and significant categories is that they are about the increasingly intertwined ways in which late capitalist subjects labor, communicate and consume" (Ngai 238). In comparison with the traditional aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, the zany, the cute and the interesting represent weak forms and soft powers. These are clearly mobilised in online content production and circulation, as ways of capturing the gaze of both other users and algorithms.

These aesthetic modes are about the need to constantly maintain attention and sociality, and about the subsumption of subjectivity and creativity into exchange, which also highlights a certain loss of tension between leisure and work, or culture and commodity. Performing cuteness or zaniness online can be read as counter-hegemonic tactics for economic survival and for pragmatically pursuing pleasure under platform control.

Platform Pragmatics

Learning to engage with content/forms in the platform environment requires users not only to think according to a computational logic, but to internalise algorithmic reasoning, in order to act on their needs and wants. By this process, one is inevitably produced simultaneously as a subject (User) and object (used) of

technology. I propose to understand this entanglement with the platform milieu, as a technology of the self, through the idea of platform pragmatics.

I am drawing the idea of pragmatics from the work of Veronica Gago on what she calls "neoliberalism from below". Looking at Latin America, Gago argues that what enabled neoliberalism to persist beyond its crisis of political legitimacy was its integration with "popular pragmatics". This situates neoliberal subjectivation at the conjuncture between an exploitative rationality "from above" and a popular rationality "from below": it does not determine nor dominate, but is rather assimilated and distorted by those who are assumed to be simply victims to it. By this conjunctural mode of subjectivation, neoliberal rationality becomes immanent to what Gago calls "vitalist pragmatics": practices and ways of reasoning by which subaltern classes adapt to life under neoliberal "baroque economies" (Gago). Very significantly Gago shows how these pragmatics emerge from vulnerable and feminised labour, after the disintegration of the male paternal figure of the salaried worker. Gago interestingly draws from Paolo Virno's idea of "opportunism". While Virno describes how inpost-Fordist labour opportunism has been put to work as a "bad sentiment", signifying corruption and cynical acceptance of domination, it can also be understood in its structural and non-moralistic sense, as a mass emotion and a mode of being that is rooted in a social reality characterised by unexpectedness, chronic instability and innovation. "Opportunists are those who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another. [...] It is a question of a sensitivity sharpened by the changeable chances, a familiarity with the kaleidoscope of opportunities, an intimate relationship with the possible" (Virno 86).

From this perspective, the masses do not necessarily appear as passive subjects of surveillance or neutralised *silent majorities*, but as a collective social body/brain that might be alien to traditional political reason, but that clearly expresses subaltern power through pragmatics and speculation. This shows how the political question of content/forms in the techno-social milieu cannot be reduced to a dispute between subjugation and autonomy. Studying platform pragmatics as a mode of subjectivation, we can understand platform economies not as a homogenous or totalising apparatus operating 'from above', but rather as a conjunctural space grounded in the plurality and indeterminacy of everyday content practices, and their ambiguous interpretations of platform logic.

Through the observation of speculative and self-reflexive practices, we also see how pragmatic intelligence and creativity entail the internalisation and appropriation of an *alien* logic – that of computation but also that of capital – producing a plastic, artificial subjective mode, for opportunistic attunement to an always unnatural, inhuman milieu.

Lastly, this framework points to the question of *who* the subject of contemporary technological ecosystems really is. I suggest that the speculative and self-reflexive

character of platform pragmatics undermines the universality of the User as the received subject of media technologies – self-possessed Man, master of the instrument and transparent subject of volition. In contrast with this fantasy, the legible subject of platform pragmatics appears radically affectable, feminised and open to outer determination, troubling a cornerstone of the master discourse around humanity and technology, by being – at once – user and *used*.

Notes

1. ↑ Interestingly, analysing the online aesthetics of "hustle culture", art critic Brad Troemel individuates 1 a key shift in the post-pandemic period; whereby the meaning of 'hustle' as never-ending grind through many part-time gigs – the ethos of the gig economy – mutates into hustle as 'scam', the logic of recruiting followers and growing a community in order to promote investments and spread propaganda. Scam culture follows the promise of achieving passive income through confidence scam models, which was popularised during the 2021 NFT bubble and the subsequent online proliferation of investment recruiting, coaching communities and other forms of pyramid schemes (Troemel).

2. ↑ Even seeming irregularities fail to destabilise a system that is already predicated on constant crisis (Chun), error and instability (Majaca & Parisi), especially given the power of platforms control to modulate turbulence and "metabolise contingency into power itself" (Williams).

3. ↑ Such a scenario somewhat echoes Baudrillard's famous thesis on "the end of the social", whereby the emergence of informational media networks allows a neutralisation of the social as a political field, producing the "silent majorities" of mass culture as a mere "simulation of the social" (Baudrillard).

4. ↑ According to Stamatia Portanova "the complexity of rhythm resides in the problematic co-existence between […] the regularity of measurement and the spontaneity of sensation, the abstraction of metrics and the experience of complexity" ("Whose Time Is It?" 44).

5. ↑ Financial derivatives use the anticipated future price of an asset, and its associated degree of risk, to draw profits against present prices, operationalising this uncertainty through a series of financial "futures" – like swaps, options and forwards – primarily dealing "with the links that exist between the way the present sees the future and the way the future actually turns out" (Esposito 2).

6. ↑ Benjamin Noys describes a certain paradox of creativity in relation to artistic self-valorisation: "on the one hand, the artist is the most capitalist subject, the one who subjects themselves to value extraction willingly and creatively, who prefigures the dominant trend lines of contemporary capitalism […] On the other hand, the artist is the least capitalist subject, the one who resists value extraction through an alternative and excessive self-valorisation that can never be contained by capitalism" (1).

7. ↑ Gig workers understand the importance of being early adopters of a successful platform: arriving before platforms' over-hiring practices determine an excess of workers, scarcity of jobs and lowering of fees.

8. ↑ https://www.youtube.com/c/AtlantaDelivers

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Biography

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