



## AFFECTIVE NETWORKS

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### I.

Why are blogs portrayed as ‘inflicted’ on the rest of us? Are the ‘rest of us,’ *everyone else in the entire world*, really *victims* of what is written on a single blog, in a single post, in a single thread? Or has the world somehow become the victim of bloggers, and not just of some specific blog, blogger, or group of bloggers, but bloggers in the abstract? What sort of world does this anxiety about bloggers presuppose or imagine?

The language of victimization in the face of bloggers inflicting their boring lives, their obsessive lives, their sex lives, their pets’ lives, on *the rest of us* differs from the criticism of rabid political bloggers or snarky celebrity bloggers all working round the clock to attack their specific targets and generally amplify and intensify the circuits of communicative capitalism. The difference is that the anxiety about victimization construes blogging per se as an activity that victimizes and harms regardless of any particular content. The practice of blogging itself is harmful. Harm is an embedded feature of the application, like a link or tag. Anxiety about blogging relies on an image of the world as a communicative one, a world wherein communication is ubiquitous and fragile, dangerous yet unavoidable. That bloggers are blogging is a fact of this world that one cannot escape.

The claim that blogging is harmful, that *the rest of us* are its victims, points to a link between blogging and anxiety. Jacques Lacan associates the affect that is anxiety with *jouissance*, with the surplus enjoyment he designates as *objet a*.<sup>1</sup> Although anxiety seems to have no object (and thus differs from a fear or phobia), Lacan argues that it has to be approached in terms of *objet a*, the impossible object, surplus object, or object-cause designating excess enjoyment. Anxiety about blogging, then, is anxiety about enjoyment.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) 147.

Slavoj Žižek describes the way enjoyment constitutes itself as ‘stolen,’ or as present and possible only insofar as one is deprived of it.<sup>2</sup> *I would have read a serious novel, cultivated an organic garden, driven senior citizens to the polls if I hadn’t gotten caught up in those stupid blogs. Why are all those people blogging, anyway? What makes their lives and experiences so much more interesting than mine?* If bloggers weren’t inflicting their stupid stuff on the rest of us, the rest of us would be enjoying. We would be honing our writing, not reading the half-assed thoughts of idiots. We’d be making art, not looking at stupid cat videos. We’d be spending time with our family, not chatting with strangers on blogs. Blaming our failure to enjoy on bloggers thus compensates us for our failure by promising that *were it not for the bloggers* we would enjoy. Our failure, our insecurity, *is not our fault*.

The theft of enjoyment positions enjoyment as an object of desire. Allowing us to fantasize that we would actually prefer to be reading literary tomes, laboring in a weedy garden, and participating in a political process designed to ensure that political change never occurs, it postpones our confrontation with drive. Confident in what we would prefer to do, if only we could, we overlook what we are actually doing. *There’s no way I spend three hours a day on Mafia Wars! It’s important for me to tweet my reaction to the debate!*

The fantasy of enjoyment also displaces the fact that we are already enjoying, that we get off, just a little bit, in and through our multiple, repetitive, mediated interactions. It occludes, in other words, another economy of enjoyment, that of drive. The fantasy of enjoyment’s theft screens us from the Real of our enjoyment, the enjoyment that we can’t avoid, even if we don’t want it.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire and drive each designate a way that the subject relates to enjoyment. Desire is always a desire to desire, a desire that can never be filled, a desire for a *jouissance* that can never be attained. In contrast, drive attains *jouissance* in the repetitive process of not reaching it. Failure (or the thwarting of the aim) provides its own sort of success. If desire is like the path of an arrow, drive is like the course of the boomerang. What is fundamental at the level of the drive, Lacan teaches, is “the movement outwards and back in which it is structured.”<sup>3</sup> Through this repetitive

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<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 203–206.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981) 177.

movement outward and back the subject can miss his object but still achieve his aim; the subject can “find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object.”<sup>4</sup> Because failure produces enjoyment, because the subject enjoys via repetition, drive captures the subject. Žižek writes, “drive is something in which the subject is caught, a kind of acephalous force which persists in its repetitive movement.”<sup>5</sup> The subject gets stuck doing the same thing over and over again because this doing produces enjoyment. Post. Post. Post. Click. Click. Click.

Blog anxiety, then, expresses our anxiety in the face of our enjoyment. We are captured doing not what we want but what we must. My concern in this essay is with a specific aspect of this stuckness, namely, the feedback loops, the circuits of drive, entrapping contemporary subjects. When blogs are analyzed via the logic of drive, they aren’t something we want but lack, aren’t something introduced into a lack that they can’t fill. They are objects difficult to avoid, elements of an inescapable circuit in which we are caught, compelled, driven.<sup>6</sup> This circuit is that of communicative capitalism, the materialization of democratic ideals in the contemporary information and entertainment networks necessary for globalized neoliberalism. Communicative capitalism relies on networks that generate and amplify enjoyment. People *enjoy* the circulation of affect that presents itself as contemporary communication. The system is intense; it draws us in. Even when we think we aren’t enjoying, we enjoy (*all these emails, I am so busy, so important; my time is too precious to waste on another Facebook game ... but my score is going up; it’s such a burden having so many, many friends—oh, and I should tweet it so they know how busy I am*).

Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in. We might find ourselves more fearful or seem somehow secure, even if we have no idea what we’re looking for or

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999) 297.

<sup>5</sup> *Ticklish Subject* 297.

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between desire and drive here comes from Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytic (Lacanian) Marxism. He takes up the distinctions between these economies of enjoyment in various places, including *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006). For a summary see Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

what we've found. Unable to find a given dot, we feel, in ways that exceed our conscious perception, the movement of multiple colliding dots.

These affective links are stronger than hypertextual ones. Their resonance remains and continues after specific links are no longer operative. In flame wars, spam, and critical linking (linking not as a sign of affiliation but as evidence of something awful, outrageous, to-be-combated), intense feeling accompanies and reinforces code. Even failures to forward and refusals to link have affective impact: *why didn't she friend me? Why didn't he put me on his blogroll?* In a world of code, gaps and omissions can become knots of anxiety.

Affective attachments to media are not in themselves sufficient to produce actual communities—bloggers are blogging but the blogosphere doesn't exist. Conversely, the circulation of affect through multiple, networked media does not imply stimulus junkies in blank-eyed isolation before their screens, either. Affective networks produce feelings of community or what we might call 'community without community'. They enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict. So while relations in affective networks merge and diverge in ways resistant to formalization, the circulation of intensities leaves traces we might mark and follow: blog anxiety, mood flows on Twitter, military message intensification, irrational exuberance.

## II.

2009 was the year of Twitter. Even before the so-called Twitter Revolution in Iran ('so-called' because U.S. preoccupation with tweeted updates occluded the more mundane organizing done with paper and pencil), Twitter's 140 character updates were widely heralded as the next phase of social media, for better or worse. With Twitter, one can send and receive messages to one's network ('followers') from either laptop or phone, thereby staying in touch with a group while away from the computer. Twittering—like updates on Facebook—lets users keep connected without having to trouble with sending or responding to individual text messages. Users don't even need to concern themselves with specific followers. They can find and follow updates by topic, a practice enabled by hashtags, or phrases preceded by the hash sign (the number or pound sign). Rather than keeping abreast of what Joe is doing, for example, I can track tweets on specific issues.

By 2009 politicians and celebrities seemed to be tweeting their every move (some U.S. members of Congress tweeted during President Barak

Obama's first state of the union address). Their tweets were archived and circulated, perpetual reminders of the inanity of these momentary updates. Large websites and blogs began to feature twitter rooms, pages of twittered posts grouped thematically by poster (journalist, celebrity, right-wing political operative). Non-politicians and non-celebrities also tweeted. Even when our tweets weren't followed by more than a few hundred people, it still felt like something to issue updates and statements.

Not surprisingly, commentary was mixed. For Alexander Zaitchik, Twitter feeds a growing "constant-contact media addiction, birdlike attention-span compression, and vapidness to the point of depravity."<sup>7</sup> What happens when the communication standard is 140 characters? What comes next? "Seventy characters? Twenty? The disappearance of words altogether, replaced by smiley-face and cranky-crab emoticons?"<sup>8</sup> *Wired's* Clive Thompson is more enthusiastic, in a 'bright side of crack' sort of way. An early adopter, Thompson was already celebrating the 'stupefyingly trivial' aspect of Twitter in the summer of 2007.<sup>9</sup> For him, multiple, mindless updates result in something more, a kind of ambient awareness or 'social proprioception.' They have a cumulative effect, producing a sense of others' everyday lives and feelings.

Lauren Berlant describes Facebook's news feed:

Facebook is about calibrating the difficulty of knowing the importance of the ordinary event. People are trying there to eventalize the mood, the inclination, the thing that just happened—the episodic nature of existence. So and so is in a mood right now. So and so likes this kind of thing right now; and just went here and there. This is how they felt about it. It's not in the idiom of the great encounter or the great passion, it's the lightness and play of the poke.<sup>10</sup>

Like a tweet, a Facebook update marks the mundane by expressing it, by breaking it out of one flow of experience and introducing it into another. Now part of a shifting screen of comments and images, the mundane moment tags a mood or sensibility. Differently put, because updates are aspects of a practice, singular moments among many such moments, they both contribute to an

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Zaitchik, "Twitter Nation Has Arrived: How Scared Should We Be?" *Alternet* (posted 21 February 2009). Available at <http://www.alternet.org/media/127623?page=3>

<sup>8</sup> Zaitchik.

<sup>9</sup> Clive Thompson, "How Twitter Creates a Social Sixth Sense," *Wired* 15.07 (posted 26 June 2007). Available at [http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-07/st\\_thompson](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-07/st_thompson).

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Faceless book," *Supervalent Thought* (posted 25 December 2007). Available at <http://supervalentthought.com/2007/12/25/faceless-book/>.

affective flow and mark divergences from it. Little moment-to-moment reports suggest the pattern of changes in one's feelings about one's life, what is worth noting and why. The flow is the result of these multiple offerings, back and forth, up and down, on and on. The feel of the updates arises out of their setting, a setting that is a little different for everyone—not all of your friends are mine. The fact of uttering, of adding in, displaces the content of any one utterance. The flow of tweets transmits what exceeds any specific tweet, that is, a broader, less tangible, more general mood. One even gets accustomed to overlooking tweets in their singularity, enjoying instead getting swept into their flow.

By the summer of 2009, a study of 11.5 million Twitter accounts showed that the ambient awareness of Twitter was heavily tilted toward a small number of super users and a bunch of automated zombies.<sup>11</sup> Five percent of the accounts were generating seventy-five percent of the tweets—another example of powerlaws on the web (the authors of the report refer to Twitter's "hockey-stick like growth").<sup>12</sup> Likewise, while about one percent of users tweeted ten or more times a day, over eighty-five percent tweeted less than once a day (and half hadn't updated in over a week)—a finding hardly suggestive of an environment where one starts to sense the rhythms and feelings of the lives of others ... unless, of course, the others in one's environment are marketers, advertisers, and automated bots. We were sensing not just networked generated moods, not just the multiplication of the feedback effects of our tweets, but the directed channeling and amplification of some streams over and against others. The Sysomos study found that twenty-four percent of the tweets were coming from automated bots, feeds from elsewhere on the Net, like Second Life (2000 plus updates per day from this virtual world) or Dogbook (Facebook for dogs). It also determined that "social media marketers are far more active than overall users."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps #Twitter tags the reflexivity of contemporary media networks as they turn back upon themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Alex Cheng and Mark Evans, "Inside Twitter," Sysomos Inc (posted June 2009). Available at <http://sysomos.com/insidetwitter/>.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Cashmore, "Twitter Zombies: 24% of Tweets Created by Bots," (posted 6 August 2009). Available at <http://mashable.com/2009/08/06/twitter-bots/>. See also Clay Shirky, "Powerlaws, Weblogs, and Inequality," (8 February 2003). Available at [http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw\\_weblog.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html). Cheng and Evans, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Cheng and Evans 25.

### III.

One of the numerous scandals extending out of and around George W. Bush's aggressive war against Iraq involved the Pentagon's organization of former generals as media talking heads. Not only did these 'military analysts' advocate war, parroting administration talking points, but many were also tied to the defense industry as executives, consultants, and board members.<sup>14</sup> According to the *New York Times*, "Internal Pentagon documents repeatedly refer to the military analysts as 'message force multipliers' or 'surrogates' who could be counted on to deliver administration 'themes and messages' to millions of Americans 'in the form of their own opinions.'"<sup>15</sup> The term 'message force multipliers' suggests one of the ways that state political power operates under communicative capitalism.

I say 'suggests' because the term 'message force multipliers' can be accented in at least two ways: the force multiplication of messages or the multiplication of message forces. Force multiplication indexes a communications strategy for a complex media environment. It implies adding lots of forces, putting more people on the ground or on the air, just as one would send more troops into a situation. It's like spam for television—which is not the same as propaganda. The term 'propaganda' isn't useful in an age of constant media, ever-present advertising, unavoidable spin. The government's provision of forces differs from spam on the Internet, though, because it's spam by request—television news shows invite the military analysts to appear and analyze what's going on. In this way, the mainstream, commercial media (including large right-wing blogs) *ask* to be bearers of the administration's media. They set themselves up to be its tools, its voice—when they aren't, they lose what they understand as access to power, to 'the story'. News, then, is what the administration reports and the mainstream media is the neutral vehicle—medium—for it (as if they had no responsibility for the practice formerly known as 'journalism'). In psychoanalytic terms, this instrumental relation is perverse. Media position themselves as the means for others' enjoyment, whether that enjoyment is the administration's or, more likely, their sponsors'.

'Multiplication of message forces' indicates a concrete awareness of the affective dimension of media in communicative capitalism. The Bush administration excelled in excepting itself from the signifying aspect of language and relying instead on affective prompts. It absorbed the lesson from

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<sup>14</sup> David Barstow, "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," *New York Times* (20 April 2008). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/us/20generals.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>15</sup> Barstow.

advertising and pop music: repetition exerts a force, a compulsion; repetition has effects independent of the meaning of what is repeated. Repetition itself has an affective impact—a sexualizing pulsation, a threatening intrusion, a hilarious extreme. State politics in the twenty-first century in the U.S., Canada, U.K., and Europe has become ever more adept at tying together previously stable meanings in ways that rely on and at the same time disrupt these meanings. This combination of reliance and disruption generates affective responses from the tension accompanying the combustion of meaning and non-meaning.

The combination also suggests a tactical appreciation for contemporary short attention spans. With multiple message forces, one can keep a message alive on one terrain even as it dwindles in another—a role at which blogs excel. Issues that seem to have died can reanimate: mainstream journalists report, ‘bloggers are debating...’ or ‘as was recently uncovered by blog X....’ The idea of multiplying message forces highlights how messages carry affective charges. The communications strategy on which it is based doesn’t turn on ‘getting our message out there,’ as if there were to be a debate on positions that need to be understood and considered. Rather, the goal is spreading, diversifying, and intensifying the message force. Abundant, dispersed, mashed up messages thus displace previous communication strategies focused on direct image control. Even when facts are corrected, fictions remain, repeated and circulated in affective networks. The generals were vehicles for this spreading and distributing—message force genbots.

My account here shares elements of Tiziana Terranova’s description of informational culture. She writes:

an informational culture marks the point where meaningful experiences are under siege, continuously undermined by a proliferation of signs that have no reference, only statistical patterns of frequency, redundancy and resonance (the obsessive frequency and redundancy of an advertising campaign, the mutually reinforcing resonance of self-help manuals and expert advice, the incessant bombardment of signifying influences).<sup>16</sup>

Such a media environment could be read in information theory’s oppositional categories of signal and noise. This reading would indicate that the way to get one’s message across would be to eliminate noise and establish a clear channel of communication (perhaps by ‘going over the heads’ of the media and ‘speaking directly to the people’). Terranova rightly eschews the binary of

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<sup>16</sup> Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (New York: Pluto Press, 2005) 14.

signal and noise, arguing instead for the turbulent materiality of communication wherein information as such relies on ‘distracted perception’. For example, architecture and design induce bodily habits directly implicated in the processing of information. Signal and noise, then, exert reciprocal effects not only on each other but are implicated in feedback processes in the environments out of and through which they are generated, transmitted, and received.

Terranova’s discussion is persuasive and surely right: information is more than the delivery of a coded signal. Yet her jump to the active, material, dimensions of information relies on two omissions. The first is the split within a message between its content and the fact of its being sent, what I call its ‘contribution’ (and what Lacanian psychoanalysis treats in terms of the enunciated and the enunciation).<sup>17</sup> The recipient of a message can ask, ‘what does this mean?’, attending thereby to a message’s content. She can also ask, ‘why are you sending me this?’, drawing out the deliverer’s purpose or intent, what the deliverer aims to contribute by sending the message. Terranova, explicating key debates in information theory, omits this doubling of the utterance into content and contribution, noting that communication at its most minimal depends on the establishment of a clear channel. For information theorists such as Claude E. Shannon, it simply doesn’t matter who is sending and receiving.

Terranova’s omission, while responsive to information theory, occludes a key feature of networked communication: the displacement of content by contribution, more specifically, by communication for its own sake. Contemporary affective networks rely on the marking, adding, forwarding, and circulating of messages not because doing so ‘means’ something but simply to communicate. Tweets, Facebook updates, images of cute kitties, text messages—these media of affective flow can be limited neither to their content nor to their materiality. Understanding them requires attending to their doubling as message and contribution and grappling with the ways that the latter’s displacement of the former amplifies the chaotic, intensive, circulation of enjoyment even as it diminishes the impact of any single contribution.

The second omission effected by Terranova’s jump to a materiality rendered as chairs and keyboards, bottles and telephones, is its neglect of the materiality already at play in perceiving. Perception as such is ‘distracted’, contorted around a stain or gap. One of the ways Lacanian psychoanalysis theorizes this gap is in terms of the gaze. This concept designates the way that

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<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the shift from messages to contributions see my *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) chapter 1.

one's perceptions are always partial and incomplete. As we fill them in, we infuse our perceptions with inadequacies and distortions.<sup>18</sup> For example, the subject might fill in what he wants to see; his desire may fill in the gaps he encounters. He may then become aware of such a gap, and his involvement in it, turning his attention from the object of perception to himself as perceiver. The point is that perceiving requires attending to some aspects of a setting rather than others, even as that attending may be involuntary, compelled by an element in a situation, unconscious, or a deliberate effort at focusing one's attention on one's breath rather than on the multiple stresses of one's day.

As a tactic in the Bush administration's communications strategy, message force multipliers presuppose both the displacement of content by contributions and distracted perception. They thrive, in other words, not in a closed media environment but in the open, distributed, recombinant, chaotic feedback loops of affective networks. In contrast to a state politics waged through message force multipliers, Terranova claims that opinion polls, surveys, and risk assessments are "the most effective and concise modality of information transmission today."<sup>19</sup> Her response is to advocate a "cultural politics of information."

One component of a cultural politics of information would posit "radically other codes and channels." Although the very notion of 'radically other' makes it impossible to imagine or assess such codes and channels (if they could be imagined or assessed they wouldn't be 'radically' other but would be in some relation to our current setting; likewise, insofar as they are 'radically other', their political implications are unknowable), Terranova's suggestion could be valuable. Yet her analysis is premised on a too quick mapping of information theory onto information politics. Under communicative capitalism, an excess of polls, surveys, and assessments circulates, undercutting not only the efficacy of any particular poll or survey but the conditions of possibility for knowledge and credibility as such. There is always another survey, done by another group or association, with whatever bias and whatever methodology, displacing whatever information one thought one had.

Another component of Terranova's cultural politics of information would pursue digitalizing tendencies to decompose and recombine, tendencies she associates with montage (via the work of Pierre Levy). Given Lacan's association of montage with the drive and the repetitive jumping among

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<sup>18</sup> See also my critique of Mark Hansen's account of perception, "The Real Internet," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4.2 (2010). Available at <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/index>.

<sup>19</sup> Terranova 25.

heterogeneous elements, decomposition and recombination appear more as aspects of our capture in affective networks than as tactics of resistance. Drive as montage indicates how media tactics of resistance such as mash-ups and remixes are already captured: not only do they contribute to the ever-circulating flow, amplifying the intensity of the very elements they seek critically to recombine, but in presuming the efficacy of a politics of meaning they displace attention from the fact that the multiple elements of our contemporary media ecology are already fragments and parts ready for recombination.

The politics montage suggests is a politics released from burdens of coherence and consistency. It needs neither theme nor message but can rely on questions and repetitions. It is not a politics that relies on “the intensity of the image and the afterlife that such intensities carry,” but one that has already challenged and undercut, remastered, recontextualized, and mashed up innumerable, uploaded and recirculated images.<sup>20</sup> Understood in terms of drive, montage clicks on a politics that exceeds the constraints of narrative, appearing as a combination of disparate images shifting and mutating without beginning or end, head or tail. In the setting of communicative capitalism, we might also think of such a politics in terms of links and windows, text messages and blog posts, contributions to the flows into which any addition is absorbed. What’s clear, is that far from a left-wing political application, montage is well-suited to a political Right, in both its neoliberal and its neoconservative guise, insofar as this Right thrives on uncertainty, insecurity, and turbulence as easing the flow of affective intensities and consolidating our capture in the networks of drive.

#### IV.

More than a decade before his famous recantation of the ideology that had guided his life (and brought global financial markets to their knees), Alan Greenspan, then chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board, gave a speech at the American Enterprise Institute where he was being honored with a prestigious award. Entitled, “The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society,” the speech outlined the history of the Federal Reserve, particularly with regard to maintaining the purchasing power of money. Greenspan pointed out the difficulties with inflation and unemployment in the 1970s, crediting a turn away from Keynesianism and toward monetarism as key to remedying those economic problems. Yet he also confronted an emerging non-knowledge or loss in knowledge at the level of the economy.

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<sup>20</sup> The quoted passage is from Terranova 142.

Greenspan noted the complexity of “pinning down the notion of what constitutes a stable general price level.” If prices are necessary for measuring inflation, which prices matter? Do escalating stock and real estate prices pose a problem to economic stability? What about “the price of a unit of software or a legal opinion”? The combination of informatization and the post-industrial shift toward the service sector’s increased role in the economy eluded the standard mechanisms for assessing changes in prices and hence inflation.

Technology figures heavily in Greenspan’s speech. The Chairman mentioned costly equipment expenditures associated with increasing the safety and reliability of electronic payments: “like a breakdown in an electric power grid, small mishaps create large problems.” As if foreshadowing the economic debacle that would cascade from the collapse of the investment banking firm Lehman Brothers twelve years later, Greenspan observed as well the risks associated with financial interconnectivity, “the failure of a single institution will ricochet around the world, shutting down much of the world’s payments system.”

Most of the press on his speech, though, highlighted his gesture to the booming stock market (the Dow Jones Industrial Average had risen nearly 3000 points over the preceding two years), a rise seemingly driven by Internet stocks, despite the fact that no information technologies were yet included in the Dow: “how do we know when irrational exuberance has unduly escalated asset values?”<sup>21</sup>

The dotcom bubble didn’t burst for four more years. It intensified and expanded. Not only did the Dow rise another 5000 points, but stocks, markets, and investing infused American popular culture, becoming intense attractors of interest and attention. For some, including Greenspan, the key factor behind the market boom was the fact that the country had entered into a ‘new era’. Technology and competition created new opportunities for prosperity and growth, indeed, whole new ways of conceptualizing prosperity and growth. For others, that increases in corporate earnings in the mid-1990s coincided with popular uptake of the Internet (the Mosaic browser was released in 1994; the Internet backbone was fully pushed into the private sector by 1995) did not mean that computers and the Internet themselves caused the increases.<sup>22</sup> Most

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<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Shiller, *Irrational Exuberance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 21. The text of Greenspan’s speech is available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/speeches/1996/19961205.htm>

<sup>22</sup> On pushing the Internet into the private sector, see M. Mitchell Waldrop, *The Dream Machine: J.C.R. Licklider and the Revolution that Made Computing Personal* (New York: Viking, 2001) 464.

of the Internet companies—despite their extraordinarily successful initial public stock offerings—were not themselves making a profit.

Still, the Internet *felt* profitable. It felt new, exciting, innovative. Greenspan emphasized “awesome changes.”<sup>23</sup> Net cheerleaders like *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly celebrated the expansion in opportunities ushered in by the Net, an expansion so significant that firms could stop thinking in traditional economy terms like productivity and problem-solving.<sup>24</sup> More important were conversations, relationships, networks, all of which amplified value (even if this value couldn’t be quantified or monetized). Kelly thus emphasized ever-extending feedback loops: “each actualization of an idea supplies room for more technology, and each new technology supplies room for more ideas. They feed on each other, rounding faster and faster.”<sup>25</sup>

Critics, also identifying the Internet with feedback loops, saw the booming stock market not as proof of a new economic era but of a speculative bubble with its own self-fulfilling momentum. Where Kelly perceived “opportunity cascades,” economist Robert Shiller saw “information cascades,” that is, people—investors—taking a kind of information short-cut by assuming that what everyone else is doing must be right.<sup>26</sup> For example, if we believe our friends are on Facebook, we will join. Even if our friends aren’t there yet, after we’ve joined, they will, too. During the dot.com bubble of the 1990s, herd behavior, copying the actions of others, started to make sense—in fact, not doing so when all these others seemed to be becoming millionaires felt irrational, like being left behind or being a dupe, a sucker, old-fashioned, behind the times.

Applying George Soros’s theory of reflexivity in financial markets, John Cassidy argues that the reflexive process of the 1990s bubble was most powerful in the technology sector.<sup>27</sup> The same technology on which people were speculating was enabling ever more speculation. America Online, CompuServe and E\*Trade allowed independent investors to trade online (by 1999 over five million U.S. households had online trading accounts).<sup>28</sup> Likewise, computer-linked day traders (there were over sixty day trading firms

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<sup>23</sup> John Cassidy, *dot.con* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) 267.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Kelly, *New Rules for the Economy* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Kelly 153.

<sup>26</sup> Shiller 151–153. Information cascades designate the same phenomenon Barabasi describes in terms of powerlaw distributions in networks characterized by growth, choice, and preferential attachment, see Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, *Linked* (New York: Plume, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Cassidy 250.

<sup>28</sup> Cassidy 229.

in 1999) quickly bought and sold stocks as they tried to profit from small shifts in price.<sup>29</sup> Both groups relied not only on networked trading but also on the ever-increasing deluge of financial information—cable news, financial chat rooms, close to real-time share prices. Exchanges of tips and opinions amplified both the popular feeling that money was being made and the individual sense that one has the information necessary to join right in. Using Internet technologies to make money seemed to prove that the technologies themselves were money-makers, money-makers without limit, even when, especially when, the actual companies showed no profits and quickly burnt through their venture capital. Some of the more spectacular collapses included Pets.com (which lost over \$100 million) and eToys (with debts over \$270 million).

The rapid, expanding, intensifying circulation of information and capital traced a loop around a change in knowledge. Not only did the speculative bubble indicate that markets could be irrational, that prices could well be the outcome of irrational exuberance, and that people would speculate on the fact that predicting exactly when the bubble would burst was impossible, but the information superhighway didn't seem to provide much information. The issue is not the typical lament regarding search-engines and filters. It's the fact of fundamental non-knowledge and uncertainty. Even *Wired* editor and network propagandist Kevin Kelly acknowledges this point as he urges his readers to jump, act, risk, move—anything can be an opportunity; one doesn't know what will work, what will fail. He writes: “Because the nature of the network economy seeds disequilibrium, fragmentation, uncertainty, churn, and relativism, the anchors of meaning and value are in short supply. We are simply unable to deal with questions that cannot be answered by means of technology.”<sup>30</sup>

A decade after the dot.com bust, the so-called advanced economies confronted the even more extreme and devastating collapse of the credit, mortgage, and finance markets, again in the wake of a massive bubble of irrational exuberance. Investors had convinced themselves that they had the mathematical formulae and computing skills necessary to shield themselves from risk, neglecting the fact that “when enough people subscribe to a particular means of taming financial risks, then that itself brings new risk.”<sup>31</sup> Barely three months before the collapse of Lehman Brothers ushered in a ‘once in a century’ financial and economic calamity, another *Wired* editor embraced and exaggerated Kelly's point about our inability to deal with questions that

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<sup>29</sup> Cassidy 225.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly 159.

<sup>31</sup> Justin Fox, *The Myth of the Rational Market* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) 238.

can't be answered through technology. Chris Anderson pronounced that such questions need not even be asked—the 'data deluge' makes science and theory obsolete: "This is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology."<sup>32</sup> Neglecting the ways human behavior leads not just to bubbles but to the rational irrationality of short-term investments precisely because everyone else is doing it contributes mightily to extreme fluctuations in financial markets, at great human cost (estimates of the loss of wealth in the 2008–2009 crisis exceed ten trillion dollars). Anderson similarly ignores how interpretations of data both shape data and are themselves also data. Differently put, he omits the fact that interpretations of behavior influence behavior. This neglect of feedback is particularly shocking coming from an editor of *Wired*.

## V.

In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, published twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord offers the notion of the 'integrated spectacle' as the highest stage of the spectacular society. Although he doesn't describe the integrated spectacle as a reflexive circuit or as the spectacle's turning in upon itself, such reflexivity seems to be its primary conceptual innovation. Debord writes, "For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this—that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien."<sup>33</sup> The integrated spectacle is an element of the world it depicts; it is part of the scene upon which it looks. It is a circuit.

Debord misses the circuitry of the integrated spectacle because his account of the spectacle is embedded in a model of broadcast media. His arguments thus proceed as if the problem of the spectacle remained, for all its dispersion, ultimately a matter of top-down control, of actors and spectators. Debord worries about images as the individual's "principal connection to the world." The problem, though, isn't with the image's displacement of language

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<sup>32</sup> Chris Anderson, "The end of theory: the data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete," *Wired* 16.07, posted 23 June 2008. Available at [http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb\\_theory](http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory). Critical responses can be found at *Edge*: [http://www.edge.org/discourse/the\\_end\\_of\\_theory.html](http://www.edge.org/discourse/the_end_of_theory.html).

<sup>33</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998) 9.

and critical thought or even with its commodity-function. Rather, Debord's worry stems from the fact that the images the spectator sees are "chosen and constructed by *someone else*."<sup>34</sup> When 'chosen by someone else' is the problem, the solution seems like it can be found in choosing and constructing for oneself—and *maybe with cool, Free Software, or with photo and video uploading and sharing capabilities: freedom through Apple and Flickr*. If the problem of the image is that it comes from 'someone else', then participatory technology is the solution. Anyone who makes her own images is a threat, a radical, a revolutionary. But this solution leaves out underlying questions of access and ownership, not to mention the fundamental trap of an ever-intensifying image environment as more and more of us upload videos to YouTube. Debord suggests that in the spectacular society, 'those who control information' can alter at will individual reputations. He doesn't consider what changes when we alter our images ourselves (*I should have never posted those party pics on Facebook!*). He can't allow, in other words, for the possibility that in choosing for ourselves, in participating in the production of the spectacle, we might contribute to our own capture.

Discussion poses a problem similar to the manipulated image. Debord claims that "spectacular discourse leaves no room for any reply."<sup>35</sup> This doesn't apply to contemporary networked information and entertainment media: it's easy to 'reply all'—although these replies, like the others circulating around and through us don't feel like responses; they are just more contributions to be deleted, stored, or forwarded. Debord writes that people have "never been less entitled to make their opinions heard."<sup>36</sup> Again, under communicative capitalism, the opposite is the case. Everyone not only has a right to express an opinion, but each is positively enjoined to—*vote, text, comment, share, blog*. Constant communication is an obligation. Every interaction, transaction, inaction, reaction is construed in terms of a conversation. Debord rightly emphasizes the repetition constitutive of the spectacle. Arguments in the spectacle prove themselves "by going round in circles," "by coming back to the start." Yet he laments that "there is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them."<sup>37</sup> Today people discuss the realities that concern them everywhere and all the time—blogs, Facebook, Twitter, they ooze with the realities of individual concern. Talk. Talk. Talk. Discussion, far from displaced, has itself become a barrier against acts as action is perpetually postponed. What appears as an exchange of reasons is a vehicle for the

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<sup>34</sup> Debord 27.

<sup>35</sup> Debord 29.

<sup>36</sup> Debord 22.

<sup>37</sup> Debord 19.

circulation of affects. The lack of action is the abundance of discussion viewed from a different angle.

Debord criticizes the experts who serve the media and state, experts he presents as falsifiers and fools. His argument, again reinforcing an underlying assumption that participatory media technologies might prove a way out of spectacular society, relies on a faith in amateurs, in ordinary people, individuals with the “capacity to see things for themselves.”<sup>38</sup> Insofar as Debord’s critique positions professionals as completely bound to the spectacular state, it relies on a suspicion toward expertise. Not only can expert knowledge not be trusted, but there is really no such thing as expertise: “the ability to falsify is unlimited.”<sup>39</sup> Failing to follow his argument to the end, Debord implies that non-expert knowledge necessarily brings with it capacities for resistance and transgression. This may be true under mass media, particularly in the case of censorious mass media. In the setting of communicative capitalism, another name for the impossibility of expertise, for falsification without limit, is the decline of symbolic efficiency. How do we know whom to believe or trust? Suspicion or even uncertainty toward expertise goes all the way down: skepticism towards politicians and the media, scientists and academics, extends to local knowledges, knowledges rooted in experience, and anything at all appearing on the Internet. Not only has amateurism and gut-level or street knowledge supplanted what was previously considered expertise, but even amateur and everyday knowledge is now rejected as nothing more than opinion, and opinion which is necessarily limited, biased, and countered by others. The ability to falsify *is* unlimited. The lack of a capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge.

Finally, correlative to the embeddedness of Debord’s critique of the image, discussion, and expertise in mass media, is his presumption that the spectacle is a form of state power, that it is a vehicle for mastery over the people. Understood reflexively, constant, pervasive communication can be a regime of control in which the people willingly and happily report on their views and activities and stalk their friends. We don’t need spectacles staged by politicians and the mass media. We can make and be our own spectacles—and this is much more entertaining. There is always something new on the Internet. Corporate and state power need not go to the expense and trouble to keep people entertained, passive, and diverted. We prefer to do that ourselves. Mark Andrejevic’s analysis of the constellation of voyeurism and self-disclosure in interactive media (his focus is on the reality television message boards,

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<sup>38</sup> Debord 17.

<sup>39</sup> Debord 18.

Television Without Pity) persuasively demonstrates the ways even dismissive, critical engagement with television binds viewers more closely to the shows they claim to hate. The result, he argues, is a “reflexive redoubling that amounts to an active form of self-submission.”<sup>40</sup> Networked, participatory spectacles let us stage and perform our own entrapment.

Debord’s claim that, in the society of the spectacle, “the uses of media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance” applies better to communicative capitalism as a disintegrated, networked, spectacular circuit.<sup>41</sup> Key to this circulation is the fact that networks are not only networks of computers, protocological, and fibre-optic networks—they are also affective networks capturing people.

## VI.

Critical media theorists have recently begun to consider the affective dimension of networks. Describing the shift in thought toward affect, Patricia Clough writes that the affective turn marks

an intensification of self-reflexivity (processes turning back on themselves to act on themselves) in information/communications systems, including the human body; in archiving machines, including all forms of media technologies and human memory; in capital flows, including the circulation of value through human labor and technology; and in biopolitical networks of disciplining, surveillance, and control.<sup>42</sup>

Some of the recent work on affect and media technologies extends out of Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (which is influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari). In the context of outlining *Empire* as a new global political-economic formation, Hardt and Negri discuss the expansion and proliferation of communication networks as well as the role of informatization in the post-Fordist economy. Among the changes in labor they associate with informatization is “the production and manipulation of affect.”<sup>43</sup> Here they are concerned with feelings—of attachment, affection, excitement, fear, ease, or

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007) 160.

<sup>41</sup> Debord 15.

<sup>42</sup> From her introduction to *The Affective Turn*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 3.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 293.

well-being—as products. Hardt and Negri view affective labor as including such seemingly diverse sectors as entertainment, health care, and women’s unpaid labor. Each of these areas involves the production of feelings, be they those of thrill and amusement, vitality and security, or care and belonging. Women’s affective labor is particularly important to Hardt and Negri’s account because it produces social networks. They don’t link these social networks directly to the Internet, however, nor do they take up the disruptive dimensions of networked intensities. Nonetheless, their association of affective labor with the production of social networks opens up the possibility of conceiving communication networks not simply in terms of linked machines but as networks that are constitutively affective.

Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker go further in this direction as they critique Hardt and Negri for relying on a simple symmetry between Empire and the revolutionary force opposing it, the multitude. For Galloway and Thacker, the network form itself needs to be interrogated, particularly with regard to the constitutive tension “between unitary aggregation and anonymous distribution, between the intentionality and agency of individuals and groups on the one hand, and the uncanny, unhuman intentionality of the network as an ‘abstract’ whole.”<sup>44</sup> My claim is that this uncanny intentionality is best understood via the psychoanalytic notion of drive. The loops and repetitions of the acephalous circuit of drive describe the movement of the networks of communicative capitalism, the ways its flows capture subjects, intensities, and aspirations. Accompanying each repetition, each loop or reversal, is a little nugget of enjoyment. We contribute to the networks, as creative producers and vulnerable consumers, because we enjoy it. In fact, the open architecture of the Internet enables and requires the capture of enjoyment insofar as it is premised on users’ contributions, alterations, and engagement. It’s not like cinema where people only have to show up. For the Internet to function at all (as is abundantly clear in Web 2.0 and 3G mobile networks) people have to use it, add to it, extend it, play with it. Our participation does not subvert communicative capitalism. It drives it. Again, contemporary information and communication networks are essentially affective networks.

Terranova also jumps off from Hardt and Negri’s discussion of Empire in terms of a network of networks. Particularly compelling in this regard is her rejection of all too static accounts of the Internet as a global grid or extended database that displaces attention from movement in and through the networks. Communication networks are dynamic. Terranova writes, “A piece of

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 155.

information spreading throughout the open space of the network is not only a vector in search of a target, it is also a potential transformation of the space crossed that always leave something behind—a new idea, a new affect (even an annoyance), a modification of the overall topology.”<sup>45</sup> This something left behind, this product of movement through the networks, should be thought in terms of enjoyment: both result from circulation through a communicative space.

Terranova approaches this affective production, however, via the image (she positions the image as a sort of bioweapon in an informational ecology). Although the image is too restrictive a notion to account for the variety of contributions to contemporary networks—music, sounds, words, sentences, games, videos, fragments of code, viruses, bots, crawlers, and the flow of interactions themselves as in blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—Terranova rightly highlights that what’s at stake in the image “is the kind of affect that it packs, the movements that it receives, inhibits, and/or transmits.”<sup>46</sup> The most interesting aspect of the image, in other words, is the way that it not simply itself but itself plus a nugget or shadow or trace of intensity. An image is itself and more.

Psychoanalysis can be some assistance in theorizing the movements Terranova associates with affect. As Joan Copjec points out, both Freud and Lacan associate affect with movement.<sup>47</sup> Freud viewed affect as a kind of displacement, representation’s fundamental ‘out-of-phasesness’ with itself. The conventional view of the displacement of affect treats it as the distortion of perception by an excess of feeling. Copjec disagrees, arguing that the affective experience of something as moving indexes a movement beyond the perceiving individual, a surfeit or excess that ruptures the perception, making it more than itself and enabling it to open up another register (for Lacan, the Real; for Deleuze, the virtual). Affect, then, is this movement, a movement which estranges the subject from its experience. A thought, memory, or perception is affective to the extent that it opens up or indexes something beyond me.

I can’t help but think of the cute cat photos and funny animal videos that circulate on the Net. Why do people upload, forward, and link to these? It’s not only because cats are cute or even because one’s own cat is completely interesting. The feeling that the cuteness accesses, the feeling that moves it, opens to something more, to a kind of beyond or potential. The dimension of

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<sup>45</sup> Terranova 51.

<sup>46</sup> Terranova 42.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Copjec, “May ’68, the Emotional Month,” pp. 90–114 in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2006) 95.

affect is this ‘more than a feeling’ that imparts movement. The potential here may be for connection (though one should be careful not to reduce affect to the intensions of the subject sending cute cat photos), but not necessarily—anyone who uses email knows how annoying forwarded cuteness can actually be. Cute sayings or images are also not the only contributions that circulate: funny videos, shocking statements, pressing opportunities, silly applications, all inhabit contemporary communication networks. They all provide momentary, even fleeting, charges and intensities, interruptions, and divergences.

Insofar as affect as a movement designates a doubling of an image, utterance, perception, or sound into itself and something else, we can account for the affective discharge or reflexivized communication. The additive dimension of communication for its own sake designates an excess. This excess isn’t a new meaning or perspective. It doesn’t refer to a new content. It is rather the intensity accrued from the repetition, the excitement or thrill of more. In the reflexive doubling of communication, the enjoyment attached to communication for its own sake displaces intention, content, and meaning. The something extra in repetition is enjoyment, the enjoyment that captures is in drive, and the enjoyment communicative capitalism expropriates.

At the same time that affect is movement, there is a specific affect that is a halting or arrest. Copjec invokes the image of running in place. This affect that is an inhibition of movement is anxiety. The experience of anxiety is a confrontation with excessive enjoyment: one encounters what is more than oneself, an alien yet intimate kernel at the core of one’s being. Copjec writes, “*Jouissance* makes me me, while preventing me from knowing who I am.”<sup>48</sup> Finding oneself face-to-face with *jouissance*, one is pulled between incomprehensibility and extreme intimacy.

Copjec identifies two versions of the experience of anxiety: exposure to the excess of our unrealized past and to the punishing, relentless super-ego, itself an altered form of *jouissance* (as Žižek frequently puts it, the fundamental injunction of the super-ego is Enjoy!).<sup>49</sup> In the first instance, my anxiety results from encountering past alternatives: *what would I have become had I stayed in that relationship? What would have happened had I arrived the next day instead?* Copjec writes:

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<sup>48</sup> Copjec 102.

<sup>49</sup> Copjec follows Lacan in attributing the change to the shift from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the university, itself a capitalist formation. Rather than following this temporalization, I view both elements as aspects of contemporary society.

For, in the experience of anxiety, one has a sense not only of being chained to an enjoyment that outstrips and precedes one, but also of the opacity of this enjoyment, its incomprehensibility and unassumability, which is dependent, I have argued, on its being grounded in nothing actual, in a “thrust-aside” past that never took place.<sup>50</sup>

Facing my enjoyment, uniquely mine but alien and seemingly unchosen, I cannot avoid the unsettling question ‘how did I get here?’

We should also add to this aspect of anxiety the enjoyment of the other. As Žižek explains, one of the ways that the subject organizes enjoyment is via fantasies about the other. These fantasies express essential features of our own enjoyment. For example, homophobic treatments of gay men as excessively promiscuous, as having frequent, intense, anonymous sexual encounters, express the homophobe’s suppositions regarding real sexual satisfaction (consequently, for conservatives, gay marriage threatens marriage itself by eliminating its supplemental fantasy: that one sacrificed real sexual satisfaction for it sake; this sacrifice is necessary for the sacred character of marriage—without it, sex becomes common, conventional, and rather boring; in other words, the worst that the homophobe can imagine is that gay sex is just as boring as married sex). Žižek writes: “the fascinating image of the Other gives a body to our own innermost split, to what is ‘in us more than ourselves’; and thus prevents us from achieving full identity with ourselves. *The hatred of the Other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment.*”<sup>51</sup>

In the second instance, the experience of anxiety results from the super-ego injunction to enjoy. The super-ego commands the subject to an impossible enjoyment, to find complete fulfillment in sex, exercise, professional achievement, a fabulous vacation. The very impossibility of fulfilling this injunction not only suffocates the poor subject but also incites a flight away from anxiety and toward the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>52</sup> To avoid the anxiety of the *jouissance* that prevents me from knowing who I am, I come under a compulsion to “Keep on knowing more and more,” a compulsion or thrust Lacan associates with an “epistemological drive.”<sup>53</sup> The attempt to escape anxiety thus results in capture at another level. Lacan associates this capture with science, capitalism, and the discourse of the university. We can extend this point by noting their contemporary merger and materialization in networked

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<sup>50</sup> Copjec 105.

<sup>51</sup> Žižek, *Tarrying* 206.

<sup>52</sup> Copjec 109.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan 105–106.

information and communications media (after all, the Internet arose in the context of government sponsored research, initially carried out not only at the Department of Defense but also at a small number of universities, the linking together of which provided the groundwork for the Internet that was later opened up to commercial interests and celebrated as the primary figure of global capitalism).

To reiterate, the object of anxiety is surplus *jouissance*, designated by Lacan as *objet petit a*. Copjec presents it in terms of a confrontation with an unrealized past as well as with the super-ego, a confrontation the subject attempts to flee by pursuing knowledge. Her account of anxiety corresponds to what Žižek (following Jacques-Alain Miller) designates as “constitutive anxiety,” that is “confrontation with *objet petit a* as constituted in its very loss,” that is, *objet petit a* as an object of drive.<sup>54</sup> In both instances, the object is loss (rather than lost): the loss of an unknowable past (rather than a specific experience), the loss of a capacity to obey or comply (no matter what one does, one cannot satisfy the super-ego). The blockage or stuckness of anxiety, then, is at the same time the repetitive, circular movement of drive, the force of loss.

The point becomes clearer when we consider epistemological drive: keep on knowing more and more. In Lacan’s account in Seminar XVII, this ‘keeping on’ results from the change in the status of the master in university discourse, that is to say, a change in the status and function of knowledge. Because university discourse cannot be anchored, cannot be held in place by an ultimate truth or injunction, it keeps on keeping on knowing. It doesn’t come to an end or reach an ultimate goal. It circulates and its circulation is an effect of its failure to anchor. Nothing can stop the progress of science; nothing can stop the movement of ideas. Information wants to be free—to circulate round and round. The more knowledge we accrue, the less we know. Abundance from one perspective is lack from another.

The networks of communicative capitalism are affective because they are characterized by drive. Their affective dimension thus should not be reduced to desiring productivity or a nurturing emotional practice. *Contra* Hardt and Negri, networked communication is better understood via the negativity of drive, a negativity that results in stuckness and movement, rupture and creativity, a negativity, in other words, capable of accounting for the reflexivity in real networks (so, negativity here connotes positive feedback and the excess of an effect in relation to its cause). More crudely put, the affective charges we transmit and confront reinforce and extend affective networks without

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<sup>54</sup> Žižek, *Parallax* 61.

encouraging—and, indeed, by displacing—their consolidation into organized political networks.<sup>55</sup> While this circulation might constitute a kind of affective labor, it is affective labor that is already captured.

In fact, rather than presuming the fit of the category of labor, we do better to note the persistent disagreement among bloggers and Net researchers regarding work and play in social networks. When we blog, are we working or playing? If we are working, then for whom are we working? Who enjoys or who accrues enjoyment? If we enjoy does that mean we are actually playing?<sup>56</sup> Or might the instability here index the fact that we are caught in circuits of drive wherein we cannot escape enjoyment but neither can we assume or accept it as our own?

## VII.

I have presented the concept of affective networks as a constitutive component of communicative capitalism. Affective networks express/are the expression of the circulatory movement of drive—the repeated making, uploading, sampling, and decomposition occurring as movement on the Internet doubles itself, becoming itself *and* its record or trace. The movement from link to link, the forwarding and storing and commenting, the contributing without expectation of response but in hope of further movement (why else count page views?) is circulation for its own sake.

Understanding this circulation via drive enables us to grasp how we are captured in its loop, how the loop ensnares. First, we enjoy failure. Insofar as

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<sup>55</sup> See Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Paolo Virno has already raised a similar point in his critique of Marx's 'fragment on machines'. Virno writes:

For example, at the end of the "Fragment" Marx claims that in a communist society, rather than an amputated worker, the whole individual will produce. That is the individual who has changed as a result of a large amount of free time, cultural consumption and a sort of 'power to enjoy'. Most of us will recognise that the Postfordist labouring process actually takes advantage in its way of this very transformation albeit depriving it of all emancipatory qualities. What is learned, carried out and consumed in the time outside of labour is then utilised in the production of commodities, becomes a part of the use value of labour power and is computed as profitable resource. Even the greater 'power to enjoy' is always on the verge of being turned into labouring task.

See Paolo Virno, "General Intellect," translated by Arianna Bove. Available at <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>.

the aim of the drive is not to reach its goal but to enjoy, we enjoy our endless circulation, our repetitive loop. We are captured because we enjoy. This idea appears in writing that associates new media with drugs, ‘users’ and ‘using’, as well as colloquial expressions like ‘Facecrack’ (as a friend said to me, well, why didn’t you tell me *Mafia Wars* is like crack? Now I’ll totally play!). Thomas Elsaesser illustrates the point via YouTube. Describing his movement among the links and videos, he writes:

after an hour or so, one realizes on what fine a line one has to balance to keep one’s sanity, between the joy of discovering the unexpected, the marvelous and occasionally even the miraculous, and the rapid descent into an equally palpable anxiety, staring into the void of a sheer bottomless amount of videos, with their proliferation of images, their banality or obscenity in sounds and commentary.<sup>57</sup>

Failure, or what Elsaesser tags ‘constructive instability’, is functional for communicative capitalism; it’s our ensnarement in the loop of drive.

Second, we are captured in our passivity or, more precisely, by the reversion of our active engagements and interventions into passive forms of ‘being made aware’ or ‘having been stated’. The problem, then, is that ubiquitous, personal media, communication for its own sake, turn our activity into passivity. They capture it, use it. We end up oscillating between extremes. On the one hand, we have opinions, theories, ideas, and information that we want to share. So we write our books and blogs, adding in our contribution to the circulating flow. *Just what was needed—another blog*. On the other hand, the information age is an age wherein we lack the information we need to act. As communicative capitalism incites continuous search for information, it renders information perpetually out of reach. Outraged, engaged, desperate to do *something*, we look for evidence, ask questions, and make demands, again contributing to the circuits of drive.

Contemporary communication networks are reflexive: we, the users, are creating them. We are producing the affective networks we inhabit, the connections that configure us. We provide the feedback that amplifies or ignores (or write the code that provides the feedback that amplifies or ignores). The more we contribute, the more extensive our submission. We configure our worlds, yet they are ever less what we desire but haven’t reached and ever more

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “‘Constructive Instability,’ or the Life of Things as Cinema’s Afterlife?” in *Video Vortex: Reader Responses to YouTube*, edited by Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute for Network Cultures, 2008) 30.

what we cannot escape yet still enjoy. As it designates the plasticity of the objects to which we become attached, the repetitive movements of our attachment through networks, and the extremes and disequilibria inextricable from the circuits that result, drive indexes the primary structure of enjoyment for contemporary subjects.