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Unleashing the Collective Phantoms

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In the best of all capitalist worlds, the stock market is supposed to provide resources for industrial development, through a speculative game that pays off later in the "real economy." What about the Internet then? From 1995 to 2000, huge amounts of infrastructure were financed throughout the world; now the oversupply crisis is accounted a disaster. But history is cunning, and the result of the dotcom boom may have been to free up vast amounts of private money for the development of a virtual public space, where people can confront the major corporations on their home turf - that is to say, in the realm of transnational exchanges. The speculators of the late twentieth century asked: "Is there any limit to the profit we can make off the Internet?" Those who work for the virtual economy, or who suffer its effects, are tempted by a wilder speculation: "Can we really build a networked resistance to corporate capitalism?"

While dissenting movements face up to the new "anti-terrorist" campaigns, that last question is more timely than ever. Among the answers that emerge will be changes in the law, and in the course of technological development. [1] But the primary responses are cultural and artistic. They have everything to do with subjective capacities for resistance. And resistance itself has a history, with

many different ruses. Those are what I'll be looking at here, to answer what might turn out to be the most important question: *"Can the virtual class really escape the domination of the flexible personality?"*

Paradigm Shift

From Taylor and Ford to Stalin and De Gaulle, the major adversary of the radical Left in the twentieth century was rationalizing authority. Whether on the factory floor or in the military ranks that gave the orders, regimentation and the hierarchical pyramid were the archetypes of oppression. From the 1930's onward, authoritarianism developed in both the East and the West, with a logic that brought together war, work and bureaucracy. The first to analyze this situation were the Frankfurt School.

The originality of the Frankfurt School was to combine Marx and Freud, to explore the industrial economy's masochistic libido. But to do so was not just to go beyond the pleasure principle. What the Frankfurt School studied from the 1930's onward was a paradigm shift: a new form of political-economic command that stretched its social fingers deeply into the psyche. The liquidation of nineteenth-century bourgeois individualism and the emergence of a central-planning state, along with a totally mobilized factory society, were pursued on the subjective level by what they called *the authoritarian personality*. They understood this fascistic character structure as a "new anthropological type." Its traits were rigid conventionalism, submission, opposition to everything subjective, stereotypy, an exaggerated concern with sexual scandal, emphasis on power and the projection of unconscious impulses. [2]

The Frankfurt School writers pursued their analysis of authoritarian behavior in the 1940's and 50's, in the face of American state capitalism. Exiles in the land of freedom, they denounced a deepening enslavement to instrumental reason, particularly through the soft coercions of the culture industry. By the mid-1960's, critiques of the disciplinary society became widespread. We know the new forms of revolt that arose against the standardizing forces: everything from free speech campaigns and draft resistance to Reichean group-sex, Provo events, situationist drifting and LSD, what Marcuse called "outbreaks of mass surrealism." On a deeper level there was an assertion of subjectivity, of identity, of sexuality, the personal that is the political. A poetics of resistance spread through society and helped bring the decline of regimentation, welfare-state bureaucracies, mass-consumption models and factory discipline. But are we even aware how that transformation helped shape today's political-economic system?

The social order responded to the crisis the 1960's and 70's, accepting selected elements of the old critique. A new paradigm has arisen in the developed countries in the past twenty years, with a specific production regime, consumer ideology and social control mechanism, all integrated into a geopolitical order. For almost two decades this development remained largely unconscious, invisible, unnamable. During that time, vanguard movements were obsolete, intellectuals were useless, there was no alternative. Now the cracks have suddenly started to open up everywhere. People begin realizing that the New World Order is not just oppressive on its edges, in the so-called developing countries. It has created a new regime of flexible labor that exploits and alienates broad swathes of the population, even in the places that are supposed to be rich. And it's at the very heart of casual freelance culture, replete with

PCs, mobile phones and general nomadism, that the technology of control is continuously recreated. Winning the economic game today brings a high reward. You get to be the inventor of *the flexible personality*.

Culture/Ideology

New paradigms are adopted because they work. Only in retrospect can we see them becoming modes of control. Flexibility was an extremely positive idea, in California in the 1970's when the culture of microelectronics was invented. It was the polar opposite of the rigid 1950's: openness to others, embodied experience, self-expression, improvisation, refusal of hierarchies and discipline. These were the utopian days of Bucky Fuller, Gregory Bateson and the *Whole Earth Catalog*: no-one would have dreamt that *An Ecology of Mind* could become a management tool. But the looser, more creative lifestyle did not just mean the emergence of a whole new range of products, useful for stimulating consumption. In California, and ultimately in much of the developed world, the new culture seemed to promise a way out of the social conflicts that had stalled the Fordist industrial regimes.

Consider the way things looked to the Trilateral Commission, in their 1975 report on *The Crisis of Democracy*. [3] Not only were Third World countries using the powers of national liberation to demand higher prices for their resources, while the US lost its war in Indochina. Not only were the capital returns plunging, while wildcat strikes multiplied and the big ecological standoffs began. But worst of all, the huge postwar investments into socialized education, conceived to meet the knowledge needs of the techno-economy, were backfiring and producing resistance to capitalism and bureaucracy, alternative values, demands for further benefits

and socializations. These new claims on the welfare state had to be added to the traditional demands of the working class; and then the crisis began. In the eyes of the elites, the Trilateral countries were becoming "ungovernable," there was an "excess of democracy" - in the infamous phrase of Samuel Huntington. The kind of systemic critique that the Frankfurt School had pioneered reached its height in the mid-1970's. From that point forth, the authoritarian system had to start learning from the enemy within.

The transformation took a decade. The golden age of neo-management began in the mid-1980's, while unionized workers were replaced with robots and unskilled labor was sought overseas. Corporate operations and financial flows expanded outside nations, where regulation and redistribution were called excessive. The triple challenge for the managers was to keep tabs on a distant work force, to open up global marketing and distribution, and above all, to create a culture - or an ideology - that would make significant amounts of younger people want to run this new machine. The key word of the age was "flexibility."

The social system had to accept and divert the demands for autonomy, self-expression and meaning; it had to turn those very demands into a new mode of control. The French sociologists, Boltanski and Chiapello, have shown the importance in this process of the cooptation of what they call "artistic critique," which demanded mobility, spontaneity, the reduction of hierarchy, in short, disalienation - at least for the "creatives." [4] The hierarchical pyramid would therefore be replaced, whenever possible, by the social form of the network. But an important aspect of the solution was directly technological. The magical answer to the questions that faced the governing elites of the 1970's turned out to be a communications device, a language-and-image machine: the networked personal computer. For the critical

theorists of the 1960's, IBM had been the instrument and symbol of a disciplinary bureaucracy. Now the computer was going to set you free.

Freedom has always been the great neoliberal watchword, from Hayek and the Chicago economists to the right-wing libertarians and the Cato Institute. In their theories, it is constantly identified with economic initiative. On the left, the economy had traditionally been seen as the opposite of art, just as the act of selling is the opposite of the spontaneous gift. But the aesthetic strategies of the "counter-culture" - difference and otherness, the rhizome, the proliferation of subjectivities - could be exalted and set to work in a semiotic economy, where what you sell are images and signs. Such an economy had been rendered possible by telematics. Networked interactivity promised to place a whole new alchemy of cooperative production in the same kinds of global channels that were already working for the finance economy. Research and invention could happen directly within the circuits of production and distribution.

The laptop computer freed up individuals for physical and psychic mobility; it could also be used as an instrument of control over distant labor. It miniaturized access to the remaining bureaucracy, while opening private channels into entertainment, media and the realms of "fictitious" capital - the speculative economy that feeds off the dismantling of the public sphere. Best of all, it recoded every kind of cultural production as commodities, multimedia. Here was a mode of development that might solve or at least gloss over the full set of problems inherited from the 1960's, particularly the struggles around the welfare state. Small wonder that the governments and the corporations started actively promoting a myth of flexibility. The emerging "virtual class" - including cultural

producers, digital artisans, prosumers, what are now called "immaterial laborers" - stumbled more or less blindly into it.

Guidance Systems

How does the culture/ideology work? War is popular these days, so let's take the military point of view. The weapon of choice during the Cold War was the ICBM: a huge, never-used giant, endlessly deconstructed by the critiques of phallo-logo-centrism. The New World Order takes off with a smaller, more practical device: the cruise missile. This kind of weaponry gets constantly used, and not just on the battlefield. Since the heyday of Star Wars - both the Strategic Defense Initiative and the Lucas movie - the military-entertainment complex has become part of everyday experience.

"It seems that retailers will go to any length to capture customers," reads a 1997 article called "Star Wars turns on to Shoppers" (quoted by Sze Tsung Leong in *The Harvard Guide to Shopping*). "Witness Safeway, which has recently used an artificial intelligence system from IBM called AIDA (artificial intelligence data architecture) - which was initially developed to detect and identify Russian missiles in space, but is now used... to analyze information on buying patterns with details of purchase from loyalty cards." When consumer desire is "turned on" and encouraged to proliferate, the ultimate control fantasy becomes that of tracking the flexible personality.

"Mass marketing, for all intents and purposes, is dead," writes business guru Art Weinstein, in *Market Segmentation*. "Precision target marketing... has taken over. By focusing on ever smaller yet profitable market segments, stronger company-customer relationships transpire. With technological products, users can

practically invent markets for companies - customers become customizers." When feedback devices are built directly into the distribution circuits, the sources of desire are directly available to corporate monitoring. So you can help perfect your own internal guidance system.

Until recently, such trends seemed comfortably ambiguous - just the irritating price for increased freedoms. But with security-fever rising after September 11, everything starts to look different. The incitement to perform, to find creative ways of deploying the new equipment, reveals its hidden face, the fear of the excluded other, the imperative to ruthlessly extend and perfect the system. And the system really is threatened, not only by suicidal terrorism: the collapse of the "new economy," the growing protests against neoliberal globalization, the revolution against the IMF in Argentina... The perfect solution is total mobilization, the shift to a wartime footing. September 11 was a chance just waiting to be taken - the chance to consolidate the new paradigm, on every level.

The American artist Jordan Crandall has made the military compulsions of the networked system visible. His work began with the heritage of the 1970's: experimentation, cooperation, networked performance, adjustment to the presence of others in virtual space. But in 1998, he hired a freelance military contractor to help him develop movement-predicting software, whose algorithms show up as eerie green tracery around bodies in a video image. The following exhibitions, "Drive" and "Heat-Seeking," were full-fledged explorations of the psychosexual relations of seeing and being seen, through the new technologies in both their civilian and military uses. [5]

A text recently published on Nettime, "Fingering the Trigger," recounts the use by the CIA of an unmanned, camera-and-missile-

equipped Predator drone to fire upon a suspicious Afghani man who, it turns out, was probably just scavenging for metal. "We align eye, viewfinder, and target in an act of aiming," Crandall writes. "But we are aimed at, we are constituted in other acts of looking. These are analysis and control systems in which the body is situated.... It sees us as a nexus of data, materiality, and behavior, and uses a language of tracking, profiling, identifying, positioning and targeting.... Within the circuitous visualization networks that arise, one never knows which 'side' one is truly on, as seer switches to that which is seen; as targeter switches to that which is targeted." Crandall thinks a new sexuality lodges in the body-machine-image complex; hence the image of the soldier-man "fingering the trigger."

This work helps us see what the easy money and pluralism of the Clintonian years kept hidden: the outlines of a social pathology. It has an authoritarian cast, like everything that involves the military. But it does not produce unthinking, stereotyped behavior, of the kind we associate with 1930's fascism (or today, with Le Pen). What Crandall describes is an extremely intelligent process that, precisely by individualizing - tracking, identifying, eliciting desire, channeling vision and expression - succeeds in binding the mobilized individual to a social whole. The new fascism discovers a complex, dynamic order for subjective difference, perspectival analysis, *jouissance*, even schizophrenic ecstasy. It integrates networked individualism.

Ghosts in the Machine

Arthur Kroker had an inkling of these things. Almost a decade ago, he and Weinstein wrote about the "liberal fascism" of the "virtual class": a technological elite, driven by possessive

individualism, whose interests lay with the financial establishment, the military state and the big corporations. But like all neo-situationists in Baudrillard's wake, Kroker is obsessed by "the recline of the West" and the hypnotic power of the digitized image: "The virtual class is populated by would-be astronauts who never made it to the moon," reads a passage from *Data Trash*. "They do not easily accept criticism of this new Apollo project for the body telematic."

No doubt that was true, in 1994 when Kroker's text was written. But the massification of Internet access, pushed by the needs of globalized management, and hailed everywhere as a catalyst of technological development, has brought about the opening of the virtual domain to political critique, and to social movements. At the close of the millennium ordinary citizens began exploring transnational space, which had formerly been the sole preserve of the elites. One of major efforts since the late 1990's has been to map out the new modes of domination, in order to identify the planetary division of labor, beyond the spectacular flux of images (and of financial information). Another attempt, less accessible to the general public perhaps, but decisive for the struggles that became visible in 1999 in Seattle, has been to create a poetics of resistance: a *virtual class struggle*, alongside the embodied one that never disappeared.

Consider the AAA, founded in 1995 with a five-year mission: establishing a planetary network to end the monopoly of corporations, governments and the military over travel in space. The Association of Autonomous Astronauts is a kind of multiple name, a freely invented identity. Forget about the moon: "Reclaim the Stars" they said on June 18th, 1999, during the Carnival against Capital. The idea was to create not an art group, but a social movement - a collective phantom acting on a global scale. "Unlike

a multiple name that is restricted to art practices, a collective phantom operates within the wider context of popular culture, and is used as a tool for class war," says an astronaut of the South London AAA, in a text called "Resisting Zombie Culture." [6]

One aspect of the project was infrastructural mapping, identifying the satellite hardware that links up the world communications network. But another was what Konrad Becker calls "e-scape": "Cracking the doors of the future means mastering multidimensional maps to open new exits and ports in hyperspace; it requires passports allowing voyages beyond normative global reality toward parallel cultures and invisible nations; supply depots for nomads on the roads taken by the revolutionary practice of aimless flight." Ricardo Balli gives a further idea of what the galactic phantom might do: "We are not interested in going into space to be a vanguard of the coming revolution: the AAA means to institute a science fiction of the present that can above all be an instrument of conflictuality and radical antagonism." [7]

The ideas sound fantastic, but the stakes are real: imagining a political subject *within* the virtual class, and therefore, *within* the economy of cultural production and intellectual property that had paralyzed the poetics of resistance. Consider Luther Blissett, an obscure Jamaican football player traded from Britain to Italy, who fell short of stardom but became a proliferating signature, the "author" of a book called *Mind Invaders: Come fottere i media*. There, between tales of Ray Johnson and mail art, Blissett takes time out for some political-aesthetic theory: "I could just say the multiple name is a shield against the established power's attempt to identify and individualize the enemy, a weapon in the hands of what Marx ironically called 'the worst half' of society. In *Spartacus* by Stanley Kubrick, all the slaves defeated and captured by Crassus declare themselves to be Spartacus, like all the Zapatistas are

Marcos and I am all we Luther Blissetts. But I won't just say that, because the collective name has a fundamental valence too, insofar as it aims to construct an open myth, elastic and redefinable in a network...." [8]

The "open myth" of Luther Blissett is a game with personal identity, like the three-sided football played by the AAA: a way to change the social rules, so a group can start moving simultaneously in several directions. This "fundamental valence" lies at the prehistory of the counterglobalization movement. Just think of the way names like Ya Basta, Reclaim the Streets, or Kein Mensch ist Illegal have spread across the world's social networks. One can see these names, not as categories or identifiers, but as catalysts, departure points, like the white overalls (*tute bianche*) worn initially in north-eastern Italy: "The Tute Bianche are not a movement, they are an instrument conceived within a larger movement (the Social Centers) and placed at the disposal of a still larger movement (the global movement)," writes Wu Ming 1 in the French journal *Multitudes* (#7). This "instrument" was invented in 1994, when the Northern League mayor of Milan, Formentini, ordered the eviction of a squatted center and declared, "From now on, squatters will be nothing more than ghosts wandering about in the city!" But then the white ghosts showed up in droves at the next demonstration. And a new possibility for collective action emerged: "Everyone is free to wear a *tuta biancha*, as long as they respect the 'style,' even if they transform its modes of expression: pragmatic refusal of the violence/non-violence dichotomy; reference to *zapatismo*; break with the twentieth-century experience; embrace of the symbolic terrain of confrontation."

Yet a strange thing happened, explains Wu Ming in another text: "Some rhetorically opposed the white overall and the blue overall, and the former was used as a metaphor for post-Fordist labor -

flexible, 'precarious,' temporary workers whom the bosses prevent from enjoying their rights and being represented by the unions." [9] Between politics, class uncertainty and sheer word play, the Tute Bianche got into full swing. The technique of "protected direct action" - allowing ludicrously padded protestors to face blows from the police - was a way to invade, not just the media screens, but above all the minds of hundreds of thousands of other people. They converged in Genoa in July 2001, to open a real political debate in a country stifled by a neofascist consensus.

Another example of the effects created by a confusion of identities are the Yes Men, in their cameo or "chameleo" appearances as representatives of the World Trade Organization. Here we're talking about two artists, whose names aren't hard to discover. But the uncertainty over language is no less interesting. To say "yes" to neoliberal ideology can be devastatingly satirical, as when the self-elected WTO representative "Hank Hardy Unruh" displayed the logical fiction of the *Employee Visualization Appendage*, a telematic worker-surveillance device in the shape of a yard-long golden phallus. No one has yet imagined a better caricature of the flexible personality. But what kind of satire is at work when Kein Mensch ist Illegal takes the neoliberal ideology seriously, and declares all the world's borders open, for everybody? Like the fire-colored masks worn by thousands in Quebec City, today's networked protests have two faces: the laughter of open communication, or the violence of a gagged mouth behind a chain-link fence. Both faces are the truth of the contemporary political confrontation.

Voice and Exit

No doubt millions of the world's "flexible" workers remain largely gagged - mute - with no voice and no hope of escaping. But as use

of the Internet has increased, and as people have seized its communicational power for both organization and subversion, a metamorphosis has invaded the "transnational public sphere," which formerly was only open to corporations and their governments. Electronic *e-scape* - a new form of the exit strategy, an exodus from the national space - has been a condition for the access to political voice, far from being its contrary. [10] It is in the Deleuzian sense that dissent became *virtual* in the late 1990's: virtuality as latency, as unmanifest reality, potential flight-lines towards other spaces of confrontation.

The virtual class in this sense, or the immaterial laborers - I've always preferred to say *networkers* - cannot *stand in* for the rest of the world's population. There is no universal subject to represent, when the individual, the supposed bearer of human rights, increasingly becomes a target for technological and ideological manipulations. But an active indistinction of identity has begun to spread, like a new departure point; and the artistic experience of multiple names points to one of the possible paths to a renewal of collective autonomy. In a recent text, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno locates the universal in *pre-individual* aesthetic and linguistic experience, in the impersonality of perception and circulating language. The chaotic dissension of public space then becomes the landscape, not of defensive individualism, but of evolving paths to *individuation*: "Far from regressing, singularity is refined and reaches its peak in acting together, in the plurality of voices, in short, in the public sphere." [11]

The kinds of conflict that began in the universities in the 1960's have crossed over into the global knowledge-space, whose nature as a public domain is now intensely at issue. To what extent will these networks form a space of cooperation, and to what extent a space of intensified control? If new political voices confirm an exit from

the flexible personality, and a refusal of liberal fascism, then there will have been no waste in the wild speculations of the late 1990's - whatever the multiple names of the investors.

This text was initially published in *Mute* magazine.

[1] On the closely intertwined relation between legal and technical aspects of the net, see Lawrence Lessig, "The Internet Under Siege," <www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_novdec_2001/lessig.html>.
[2] Cf. Theodor Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: Harper, 1950). For a more thorough treatment of the theories of authoritarianism and their dialectical reversal in our time, see my text on "The Flexible Personality," <www.noemalab.com/ sections/ideas/ideasarticles/ holmespersonality.html>.
[3] The European rapporteur of *The Crisis of Democracy* was the French sociologist Michel Crozier, author of an important book entitled *La société bloquée* (The Stalled Society). The American rapporteur, Samuel Huntington, has not ceased to make his views known since then.
[4] See Luc Boltanski et Eve Chiapello, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

[5] For the work of Jordan Crandall, see his book *Drive: projects and writings 1992-2000* (Cantz Verlag/ZKM, 2002), as well as his website, <http://jordancrandall.com>.

[6] Written in the name of Boris Karloff, <www.uncarved.demon.co.uk/turb/articles/karloff.html>.
[7] The two quotes are taken from a French anthology of the AAA, edited by Ewen Chardronnet: *Refuser la gravité* (Nîmes:

L'éclat, 2001); online at <www.lyber-eclat.net>.

[8] Luther Blissett, *Mind Invaders, Come fottere i media: manuale di guerriglia e sabotaggio culturale*, chap. 1, "Ray Johnson e Reggie Dunlop tra i Tamariani," <www.lutherblissett.net/archive/215-02_it.html> (note: the "translations" of this text on the website are incomplete and very free; and the Italian book it not the same as the one published by Stewart Home under the same title).

[9] Wu Ming I (alias Roberto Bui), "Tute Bianche: The Practical Side of Myth Making," <www.wumingfoundation.com/english/giap/giapdigest11.html>.

[10] The opposition between the functions of "exit" and "voice" in social conflicts was theorized by Alfred O. Hirschman, in a book to which the Italian theorists of exodus frequently refer: *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[11] It is in this sense that the "multitudes" are still before us, emerging through exchanges and acts, unlike the prepolitical multitude described by Hobbes. Cf. Paolo Virno, "Multitudes et principe d'individuation," in *Multitudes* #7.