

## <CN>Chapter 10

### <CT>Swallowing Time: On the Immaterial Labour of the Video Blogger

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<FL>The explosive development of digital videography is one of the definitive aspects of the new media landscape of twenty-first century mass culture. Back in the 1960s, video recording gear was bulky and only found in television studios, where it was mostly used for taping live programmes. By the 1980s, video had become mobile, replacing the film camera in news reportage, and the first semi-professional and consumer camcorders had arrived, bringing the spread of the skills of videography to new semi-professional and even amateur users. The closing decade of the century brought more miniaturization, convergence with the desktop computer and digitization, and today millions of people carry mobile phones with built-in video cameras and large numbers upload the raw results to platforms like YouTube. It is usual at this point to refer to the thousands of minutes of animals doing funny things, which seem particularly popular, not to mention the volume of pornography, but another major strand is a new mode of reportage, known as citizen journalism, and its cousin, the video blog. All this has occurred so fast, and in such a dispersed fashion, that it isn't easy to comprehend, even for logged-in scholars of the phenomenon, and while plenty of pundits and journalists speculate about what it all means, many aspects of the phenomenon remain unexamined.

YouTube, the leading video streaming platform, was launched in 2005. Eight years later, it boasts of having over eight hundred million unique users visiting the platform each month,

watching over four billion hours of video. Some seventy-two hours of video are uploaded every minute, and 70% of the traffic comes from outside the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Figures like this not only imply an immense expenditure of what conventional wisdom calls leisure time. The extraordinarily rapid expansion of the web services known as the ‘social media’ has been possible because these platforms have discovered how to swallow time, not only storing it digitally but crucially inducing users to populate these sites with the products of their own casual and unpaid creative labour, and at their own expense to boot. There is no reliable way to quantify the amount of time that people spend, not in viewing, but in generating the content they upload. Perhaps, if one did a search on Google Scholar (isn’t that how we’re supposed to do our research nowadays?), one might come across analyses of different types of traffic, or even the proportions of different genres, but that still wouldn’t tell you how much creative labour was expended in producing the original videos that form such a large proportion of YouTube content. Short bursts of camera-phone footage may not represent much by way of creative effort – there’s even software for amateurs that makes an automatic selection from your footage – but how do you calculate the conscious effort that goes into the range of more sophisticated videos that find their way onto the web, for which people spend time on the editing, sometimes lavishly?

It is tempting to approach this by way of the concept of immaterial labour that emerged from the Italian autonomist tradition, which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri initially define as ‘labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 290). Following Maurizio Lazzarato, this is ‘the activity that produces the “cultural content” of the commodity ... in other words, the kinds of

activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion' (1996: 132–46). These activities belong to the culture industry broadly understood, located in what is classed as the service sector of the economy, whose growth in recent decades corresponds to the intensification of the commodification of leisure which is integral to post-industrial capitalism and follows from the introduction of information technology. The web has created a new parallel public sphere, and one of the results is that these functions are now also conducted through the social networks by people who belong to the audience – the fan base, the consumer, the targets of the culture industry – and not those who work within it.

Mere aficionados, who previously produced duplicated fan magazines, can now be found on the web challenging the professionals who earn their income through cultural production – Lazzarato's 'immaterial workers': people 'who work in advertising, fashion, marketing, television, cybernetics, and so forth', all of them producers of subjectivity, and in certain sectors very well paid for it too. In other words, intellectual workers and creatives (as the advertising industry calls them) – copywriters and designers and the like, who have always been the core workers in publicity businesses – these people now have to learn to coexist with the social networks, indeed to find ways of infiltrating them. For many it was not difficult, because they were already adepts of self- promotion.<sup>2</sup>

The teacher is another kind of immaterial worker, generally less well paid, who produces subjectivity (or helps to shape the subjectivity of the student), and digitization and the web have also started to create radical shifts in education. In all these fields, artistic and practical skills have been retooled, transformed and reshaped by digital technologies, which also render

employment more precarious because they make it easy for employers to subcontract their labour needs. The new ‘immaterial worker’ needs to combine the results of various different kinds of skill: intellectual, technical and aesthetic, along with ‘entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations’. They are a largely atomized work force who often work alone (and sometimes from home), but the sector requires a great deal of highly mediated social cooperation, in which the individual worker is only a remote part. These are also skills, however, that whether part of their job description or not, all sorts of people nowadays exercise in their everyday lives using the same digital tools, at work and away from it, contributing content to the web. From this perspective, Lazzarato’s remark that immaterial labour involves doing things that are not normally thought of as ‘work’ almost appears prophetic of the condition of the social media. Perhaps we could even say that with the appearance of Web 2.0 this kind of labour produces, as Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus argue, a new version of itself that they call ‘immaterial labour 2.0’ (Coté and Pybus 2007).

Retooling with new technology often also means deskilling, or the loss of the craftsmanship it replaces. The rise of desktop publishing, for example, threatened the jobs of highly skilled graphic designers (while a spate of ugly and sometimes even unreadable print designs appeared). But the digitized codification of aesthetic techniques – like the automatic exposure and focus of the video camera – have also meant that the new hi-tech gear could discover an enlarged consumer market, where the old categories of amateur and aficionado are transformed, and old dreams about the democratization of the media are revived. Dreams that go back to Vertov in Soviet Russia in the 1920s, conceiving of a network of local cine-amateurs providing a continuous flow of newsreel footage. And then Brecht, writing about

radio in 1932 as a medium with the inherent capacity to become ‘the finest possible communications apparatus in public life’, a vast system of channels of communication, or it could be if it were allowed to transmit as well as receive, ‘to let the listener speak as well as hear ... to bring him into a network instead of isolating him’ (2000: 42–43). Or Julio García Espinosa in Cuba at the end of the 1960s, who pondered the likely effects on artistic culture ‘if the evolution of film technology (there are already signs in evidence) makes it possible that this technology ceases being the privilege of a small few’ (1983: 30). For Espinosa, flush with the idealistic current of the Cuban Revolution, the promise of free artistic expression prompts him to remember Marx’s dictum that in the future, when communism does away with the rigid division of labour and allows people to fully realise themselves, there will no longer be painters but rather people who, among other things, dedicate themselves to painting. And then again in the 1970s and ’80s, the first video activists, working in groupuscules down at community level but imagining a world of community video everywhere. These are all utopian ideas, but as Brecht added, in that case, ask yourself why they’re utopian.

Technically speaking, convergence comprises the technical wizardry that allows different devices to ‘speak’ to each other and data to be transmitted and received, but this also brings the old utopian dreams a step closer. An updated version of Brecht’s rider still applies: the communicative utopia of the web is largely channelled through the portals of corporations dedicated to a consumerist ideology, for which participation is little more than a conditioned button-pushing reflex. Nonetheless, what digital convergence produces is not just the instant flow of free expression across borders but also a propensity for causing ideological upset by

breaking down social and cultural barriers, and discovering new sociopolitical constituencies. There's a crucial rider, however. If a vocation for free data exchange seems to be built into the fundamental design of the internet and the web that uses its cables, then this apparatus provides a freedom and a chance that comes at a cost, or rather, at costs that cannot be readily calculated. On the one hand, in succumbing to the invitation of the web, its openness, diversity and permissiveness, as worker or as netizen, we provide the apparatus with content, not to mention the metadata that corporations trade in and intelligence agencies seek out. On the other hand, how is one to evaluate the time economy of doing something that has become for so many people as much second nature as reading and writing? What does it mean when this immaterial labour is no longer paid, or even calculated, but simply swallowed up by the corporate websites that constitute the platforms of the social media?

### **<HDA>Labour Process**

<FL>To explain where I'm coming from, this is the account of a participant observer, who joined the ranks of net activists with a series of video blogs posted on the *New Statesman* (NS) in the early months of 2011. The project came about by happy accident. For some years I'd been shooting short video diary pieces whenever a good opportunity arose. In early December 2010 a young friend, a postgrad at a London university, told me of a teach-in against the new Coalition Government's drastic higher education policies due to take place at Tate Britain on the night of the Turner Prize, and we went along together to film it. The event turned out to generate its own drama in front of the camera, and was quick to edit. A chance meeting a few days later resulted in the *New Statesman* inviting me to become their first video

blogger, with the brief to report on the developing protest movement.<sup>3</sup>

From the magazine's point of view, the idea of hosting a video blog was a natural enough extension of running a website that expanded what is possible to do in print format. Although the magazine ran on a very tight budget – hence they didn't pay production costs, and this was a zero-budget project – I was told that their publisher was keen on developing the magazine's web presence, and newspapers like *The Guardian* were already engaged in video journalism. Practically the only guideline we agreed on was not to exceed a length of about fifteen minutes at most – and that's already pretty long for watching video on the web. The other main parameter was fast turnover: one or two days' filming, one or two days' editing, so that each blog would be up within a week or less of the events portrayed, rough edges included.

[INSERT FIGURE 10.1 HERE]

For my part, I was happy with the arrangement for several reasons. Firstly, because posting on the NS gave the videos a different profile from an academic blog: a political identity within the independent left, and a potentially more broad-based audience. Secondly, because the locus of a current affairs magazine also has useful legal implications, since current affairs is legally exempt from certain copyright requirements; in particular, it allows the fair use of footage found on the web taken from sources like television without prior clearance. (Of course among video activists it's good practice to make arrangements to share material when you can.) The use of this kind of found material was part of my

strategy – and perfectly acceptable to the NS – from the outset, not just to plug narrative gaps but also to contrast the mainstream media representation with what it didn't show. At all events, when the University agreed to pay the costs of the DVD edition, due diligence required that they didn't take the word of their own Professor of Film, but sought legal opinion. The lawyers viewed the film and replied that yes, the film fell under fair dealing, adding, to my amusement, that it would remain so until 'the austerity measures are no longer a matter of public debate'.

Reflecting on the experience raises various questions. For one thing, I call myself a video blogger, but it's a term without a precise meaning. The point of calling something a blog is to flag it as the work of an individual, but like written blogs, video blogs cover a huge range of subjects, styles, genres and purposes. This can also be deceptive. Corporate blogs, for example, unlike press releases, are written in a personal voice, but may actually be produced by professional copywriters (nowadays there are also companies that run Facebook pages) – in short, subcontracted immaterial labour. For present purposes, we can think of the video blog as a form of solo video-journalism, a cross between documentary and citizen reportage, with a mode of address essentially different from conventional television documentary reportage because it escapes a corporate point of view and often instead adopts the partisan stance which is allowed the committed print journalist. Importantly, it is also different in its mode of production: the video blogger doesn't have a budget handed down to them, isn't backed by institutional resources, and doesn't work with a crew (only the help of friends). In a word, it involves a different labour process.

The labour process is a topic almost totally neglected by academic film studies, a field



with only limited interest in questions of political economy, despite a number of studies of the economics of production, the economic history of the studios and the like. Largely overlooked is the conflict that arises within the mode of production between the interests of studios, producers, distributors and the capital behind them, and the needs of what Marx understood as aesthetic labour, the creative labour of the artist unhindered by imposed conditions of employment. The film industry introduced new complications in this disjunction precisely by becoming industrialized. Film production stumbled from its initial artisanal mode of production towards its formal division of labour in the studio system from the same two directions that Marx identified in *Capital* as the twofold origin of manufacture. On the one hand, it evolved its own specialized jobs in the areas of its own specific technology – the camera, editing, the laboratory and later, sound; on the other, it brought in workers from different crafts – electricians, carpenters, scene painters, hairdressers, costumiers, etc., and melded them all together into a new hierarchy under the joint authority of the director and the producer. This process was the subject of my own first published work of film scholarship – a history of trade unionism in the British film industry, which appeared in 1976 – and returning to it now half a lifetime later in a new context feels a little like intellectual archaeology.

The question of the labour process was central to New Left-inclined Marxist debate at the time, one of the active topics of theoretical analysis that despite the recent revival of interest in Marx remains forgotten. I well recall listening to discussions on the topic at the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists) – an event attended by many who were not economists but Marxists in other disciplines, who felt they had to grapple with the subject.

Everyone read Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974), a book by a worker-intellectual about the ways in which capital steals the skills of the worker and takes control of the process out of the worker's hands. When I compared the theory with different types of film crew (I had already accumulated personal experience of features, television documentary, independent documentary and the television studio), I quickly realised that here too the same sort of forces were at work, but with one big difference: film production required the exercise of creative initiative and aesthetic judgement in a collectivized form, which made real controls over the labour process, of the kind exemplified by Henry Ford's production line, impossible. Creative input isn't limited to a few names at the top the credits entitled to receive part of their 'wages' in the form of royalties. As long as an element of judgement is needed on the worker's part, down to the humble makeup artist or the props, then the full resources of real control over the labour process are unworkable. Something, however subtle or slight, escapes mechanization and automation. In short, the film crew is a co-operative team where people do their jobs in turn and wait on others as and when necessary. Nonetheless, the division of labour in film production still needs to be disciplined, and capital therefore has to resort to formal and ideological controls in order to induce a subjective automatism in the worker's exercise of judgement instead.

There are two main aspects to this. At the level of formal controls, conventional wisdom, in taking the hierarchy within the film crew as the natural order, overlooks the convenience of the arrangement from the point of view of capital, and the disadvantage for creative labour, in respect to time economy. The effect is to place producer and director together in the position of agents of capital in the control of the labour process, where one of

their essential functions is time management. In the studio system, the director owed their job, beyond whatever creative talent, to their capacity to control the shoot, get the right amount of footage in the can each day and keep within the agreed schedule; but directors were subject to the control exercised by the producer and the studio, which retained the right to final cut (and in certain infamous cases expelled the director from the cutting room).

The second aspect is the very nature of film language, particularly what Noel Burch called the ‘institutional mode of representation’ (1973) – the codes of shooting and montage that came to govern the construction of the visual narrative according to certain rules of enunciation. Critical film theory has subjected these codes to very extensive semiotic analysis, without always realising their ideological function in containing creative labour within the generic bounds operated by the studios and the distributors. The labour process plays its part in generating genre as a solution to a collective endeavour by providing a series of models or paradigms that tell everyone in the team (behind the camera and in front of it) what they’re supposed to be doing (more or less), while also satisfying the requirements of the producers and financiers by enabling them to get what they’re expecting (more or less).

In this perspective, documentary was born and remains relatively free. Firstly, it is filmed, as a rule, away from the studio by very small crews on very low budgets. And then its language, its forms of exposition and enunciation, are less constrained by the laws of narrative continuity, working instead through associative, intellectual or poetic montage. The pioneering documentarist Joris Ivens somewhere described it as a creative no-man’s-land, an interloper in the genre system. All the same, with the coming of sound, commentary and music would often constrain its power of representation, answering to the requirements of sponsors, television

after the war, and more recently, festivals and distributors, which have all impelled documentary to develop its own range of genres and subgenres. Yet the potential to break free remains a powerful factor, and documentary has reinvented itself time and again. In fact it has a tendency to do so every time a technological development provides the chance, and every time it thereby renews both its audience appeal and its capacity to bear witness to the social, anthropological, cultural or political moment. Today is no exception. While the web extends the reach of the kind of long form documentary that returned to cinema screens in the 1990s, perhaps more importantly it also stimulates a plethora of new short forms, styles, genres and subjects.

### **<HDA>The Organic Composition of Capital**

<FL>The concept of immaterial labour evokes Marx's analysis of the difference between productive and unproductive labour. A writer, he says, 'is a productive worker not in so far as he produces ideas, but insofar as he enriches the publisher who publishes his works, or if he is a wage labourer for a capitalist' (Marx 1963:157–58). Or again, a singer who sings as freely as a bird 'is an unproductive worker. When she sells her song, she is a wage earner or merchant. But the same singer, employed by someone else to give concerts and bring in money, is a productive worker because she directly produces capital' (quoted Attali 1985: 39).

The operative factor here is the idea that productive labour is labour that produces exchange value, if it only produces use values (ideas, songs) it is not productive from the point of view of capital. This distinction goes back to Adam Smith, who spoke in a famous passage from *The Wealth of Nations* about 'perishable services', meaning the type of activity that

‘does not fix or realise itself in any permanent subject, or vendible commodity, which endures after the labour is past’ (Smith: 1970: 295). Perishable services, like those of both the ‘menial servant’ and the court musician, do not regenerate the funds that purchase them. The labour of some of the most respectable orders in society, says Smith, as well as some of the most frivolous, is in this respect the same: churchmen, lawyers, physicians and men of letters on the one hand, and on the other, buffoons, musicians, opera singers, opera dancers, etc. Marx commented wryly in *Theories of Surplus Value* on the ‘polemical effect’ of these arguments. Great numbers of ‘so-called “higher grade” workers – such as state officials, military people, artists, doctors, priests, judges, lawyers, etc. – ... found it not at all pleasant’, he said, ‘to be relegated economically to the same class as clowns and menial servants and to appear merely as ... parasites on the actual producers (or rather agents of production)’ (1963: 174–75).

Marx explains in *Theories of Surplus Value* that in order to be economically productive, labour has to reproduce its own value and more: it has to be capable of returning a profit; when performed only as a service, it remains unproductive because it doesn’t generate capital, it consumes it. Conversely, even a clown is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist employer who derives more income from the show than the costs of putting it on, not least the wages. Marx was fifteen years in his grave when a novel invention appeared that rapidly created a new form of exploitation of clownish labour. Cinematography did for the perishable performance of the clown what another new invention, the phonograph, did for the musician: it allowed their immaterial labour to take the commodity form of mechanical reproduction. The exemplary case is Charles Chaplin, a clown quick-witted enough to become the owner of his own immaterial labour power at the inception of Hollywood.

One advantage that Chaplin acquired by becoming his own producer-director was control over the process of production, meaning control over time economy and productivity. In conventional mass commodity production this is achieved through the techniques of scientific management emerging over precisely the same period as the infancy of cinema; indeed cinematography was one of the technologies that the proponents of scientific management employed in their researches.<sup>4</sup> This is ironic, since the kind of labour employed in making films is not mechanical but aesthetic, and thus resists easy measurement. Indeed the reduction of aesthetic labour time to a homogenous standard makes doubtful sense. There is no necessary correlation between the quality of a painting, a symphony or a novel and the amount of time taken to produce them. (Handel famously took ten days to compose *Messiah*, while Brahms tarried over his First Symphony for twelve years.) Artistic work is not standard and uniform but concrete and individual, and subject to psychological variation. Aesthetic labour does not respect utilitarian functions – a kind of magic is also necessary. The threat that hangs over it in the capitalist mode of production is this: that for the purposes of making a profit it will be treated exclusively according to economic criteria, as wage labour measured in the expenditure of time. Who now remembers the ‘quota quickies’ made in the U.K. in the 1930s at a fixed cost of a pound per minute? Only perhaps in the animation studio can you calculate production costs with some assurance. The history of cinema is littered with productions that have gone over budget because they went beyond the shooting schedule. In short, Marx spoke correctly when he spoke of the hostility of capitalist production to art. This hostility was expressed in the studio system through the imposition of formal and ideological controls over the complex and intricate division of labour, supervised

top down by the producer with the director in charge on the studio floor. (The television studio adds to this through the architecture of the channels of communication: the director in the control box can speak to whom they like, but those they talk to cannot answer back.)

Documentary production, while relatively free, does not completely escape these strictures either, especially since it could be brought back under control in the editing phase which necessarily follows shooting. The documentary production units run by John Grierson in the 1930s were in this sense benign dictatorships, where filmmakers enjoyed freedom of aesthetic experiment but were subject to limits in the matter of content, which everyone understood implicitly. As the documentary historian Erik Barnouw saw it, the situation they were in 'kept them sharply aware of the political limits inherent in government sponsorship' (Barnouw 1974: 91). There also emerges the 'industrial' film and the system of commissioning, where content is prescribed and implicit aesthetic rules apply. Conditions after the Second World War were essentially the same as before, but with the addition of new currents in the margins, such as the encouragement of art film documentaries in France.

With the rise of independent documentary in the 1950s and '60s, however, now often supported by public cultural funds, a significant factor ironically drops out of the budget, as the real costs of labour are often discounted. In other words, they are assumed by the filmmaker, who doesn't work by the clock, and may even work around it. On the other hand, television expanded employment and opportunity without fundamentally altering the terms. You were either directly employed by the television station and totally subject to its norms, or you were 'freelance', with prized schedule D tax status, but really a euphemism for subcontracted labour. Many independent filmmakers typically found employment on other people's films in

order to earn a living, and then invested their labour in their own films, especially in developing the idea in the first place. The expansion of production, which accompanied the diversification of television by means of new cable and satellite channels, placed added pressure on the conditions of employment. Working for an independent producer was no better and often worse than working for the channel that commissioned it. I recall an incident from the 1980s when a freelance researcher employed by an independent production company on a commissioned film for Channel Four complained in an open meeting of the exploitive terms of employment, and was told that since he was not employed by the Channel, this was not the Channel's responsibility.

The underlying difficulty is what is known in mainstream (non-Marxian) economics as 'Baumol's cost disease'. The tag gained currency after two Williams, Baumol and Bowen, wrote a study in the 1960s of the ineluctable rise of theatre ticket prices on Broadway, which they then generalized to the world of the performing arts (Baumol and Bowen 1968). The problem was the irreducible cost of artistic labour. The amount of labour required to play a Mozart quartet at Carnegie Hall in New York was the same as at the court of Joseph II two centuries earlier. Productivity in the chamber music sector has been stagnant, while in the manufacturing sector it has rocketed, with a consequent rise in the relative cost of artistic performances. Baumol's 'cost disease' has since been diagnosed in many fields, including education and healthcare. The quality of all such services depends on the quantity of labour invested in them. It is difficult, says Baumol, to reduce the time needed to perform certain tasks without also reducing the quality of their product. 'If we try to speed up the work of surgeons, teachers, or musicians, we are likely to get shoddy heart surgery, poorly trained



students, or a very strange musical performance' (2012). It almost seems we are back in the land of Adam Smith, despite the fact that various artistic services are no longer perishable but have been rendered into vendible commodities by (to invoke Walter Benjamin's term) mechanical reproduction.

Baumol's cost disease is really none other than a form of Marx's organic composition of capital, the ratio of the fixed costs of production (plant, equipment, materials) to the labour power, or variable capital, required. Capitalism advances by introducing technology and increasing productivity to improve this ratio, but there are a whole range of activities – Smith's services, from the law and medicine etc., to clowning, acting and singing – where this is impossible or comes unstuck. Twentieth century technologies make a difference, but in different ways in different service sectors, where the application of technology has different effects. The gramophone created whole new branches of professional popular music, and cinema initially extended musicians' employment opportunities, until conversation to sound threw them out of work. Domestic labour was alleviated by various labour-saving electrical goods, but with the contraction of domestic service, it disappeared into the unpaid labour of the housewife. The photocopier transformed the office; computerization and telecommunications did so even more radically, but often with contradictory effects – the end of the typing pool; deskilling of certain kinds of detail work like design; the rise of the call centre, where workers are not replaced by machines but programmed to act like them.

All this results in what a recent article on the topic describes as 'exactly the opposite of what most people think of as a good service'. Good services, say the authors, are intrinsically expensive because they require a high ratio of labour to product (Skidelsky and Craig 2013).

However, the digital office does not increase the productivity of the immaterial labour of intellectual professions like the law or accountancy because their top members provide services to other top people who can afford to pay. When it comes to cultural production and aesthetic labour, another pattern kicks in, for which the film industry serves as a paradigm – because here production depends on irreducible amounts of aesthetic labour, but its economics depend on reaching a mass audience by means of mechanical reproduction. Distribution and exhibition become determinant factors, and after the initial artisanal phase of early cinema these require major investment, but quickly end up in superprofits. Hollywood rose to pre-eminence because it attracted the investment of the New York bankers. Mechanical reproduction creates a mass market, which in turn creates stars able to command huge fees, a monopoly rent payable for their value as cultural properties in a market distorted by the monopoly practices of the majors. Since a hit is never guaranteed, entertainment capital needs to develop its own techniques to protect against risk. These included the star system, the genre system, and various unfair practices, of a kind that Marx already knew about: in the *Grundrisse*, he mentions theatre directors who buy singers for a season not in order to have them sing, but so that they don't sing in a competitor's theatre (1973: 282).

These pressures have a commensurate effect on everyone else's wages, pushing up the cost of variable capital among the leading producers. But this disadvantages the smaller ones. While writing these paragraphs, a case in point is reported in France, where for more than half a century governments left and right have provided the film industry with forms of support designed to help it hold its own in the face of U.S. domination of international distribution. The system has been coming under strain, and the film unions have recently

complained that crew members on low-budget films are being forced to take heavy pay cuts while working nights and overtime without due compensation. The government on duty has responded by signing a pact with big producer-distributors and some unions to correct the situation, but independent producers, who account for around 90% of French output, says Angelique Chrisafis, 'have risen up in rebellion, warning that the new deal as it stands would be "disastrous" and a "death warrant" for low-budget arthouse films' (2013). Independent producers, she says, argue that 'risk-taking, quirky auteur films that have helped shape France's reputation for independent cinema would have to be shot abroad or would not be made at all because the new wages would be unaffordable' (ibid.). Meanwhile, according to Vincent Maraval, one of France's leading producers, a small number of French megastar actors are demanding disproportionately huge pay packets because French TV companies, obsessed by competition from the internet, will now only sponsor films which feature the 'bankable names', which supposedly ensure high audience figures (Lichfield 2013).

At the opposite end of the scale, where there are no stars and no unions, digital video dissolves the division of labour. Here it turns out that a video on the web that cost its maker no more than a few pounds can 'go viral' and accumulate millions of viewers without any kind of publicity budget to promote it. But 'viral' is another term without a precise meaning. The concept is relative, with an undefined lower limit. A medical metaphor, the main thing is that its occurrence is unpredictable and uncontrollable. No recipe or formula can tell you how to make a viral video. But if a video blogger normally expects a post to get a few hundred views and it gets a few thousand, then it does so by the same means that produce a viral circulation of millions – by circulation across social platforms. This is the zone of the video activist. But this

too is a term with only a loose meaning, since in the scenario being described here, there are clearly numerous different possibilities for intervention, and different levels and kinds of activity.

### **Don't give up your day job**

<FL>Looking (on Google Scholar, of course) for any relevant recent writings, I discover a Canadian scholar writing in a new academic journal called Digital Journalism about 'Social Moments in Solo Videojournalism', which sounds promising (Hedley 2012). It turns out that the piece rather misses the point. David Hedley chooses to look at the move from two- or three-person television news crews to 'one-man-band' reportage, using as his model a two-minute award-winning report for KUSA-TV about 'the support offered by a war veteran bikers' group for a dying senior'. The problem is not that his semiotic explication of the report is pretty routine but rather his focus on the professional, because the real impact of solo videography is not to be found in the institutional setting of television. Nor is there anything here to indicate that solo filmmaking has a history that goes back many decades, to the gestation of experimental cinema in the 1920s. Still less is there any notion that the very idea of solo filmmaking contravenes all the norms of industrial and commercial film production, and necessarily raises crucial issues about the labour process and value.

[INSERT FIGURE 10.2 HERE]

If digital video dissolves the division of labour, then solo videography ditches regular time

economy. When you work alone you also tend to work unsocial hours and to take as long as it needs to do the job without bothering to count the hours. The regime you work is the epitome of aesthetic labour – not the managerialist notion that workers should look good and behave nicely, but the Marxist concept of free creative labour, which is not subject to the external constraints imposed on regular labour by the conditions of employment, and which Marx held in high esteem, writing in the *Grundrisse* that ‘Really free labour, the composing of music for example, is at the same time damned serious and demands the greatest effort’ (1973: 124).<sup>5</sup>

Digital videography benefits from this freedom by introducing a rupture in the mode of audio-visual production, not in the commercial market, where its adoption is a matter of necessary technical retooling, but by opening it up to amateurs, aficionados and activists who are thereby no longer excluded from potentially reaching a wide public. The video blog or any form of solo video-journalism takes us outside the world of television, and here, different conditions apply. Freedom from regular time economy means no formal controls over the labour process, which allows a voice free of imposed ideological constraints, a partisan discourse free from institutional doctrines of political balance, and sometimes the space for a different aesthetic. This is the prospect of ‘immaterial labour 2.0’. The quid pro quo is that the result is open to the new form of exploitation that is constituted by web 2.0.

The labour process of the individual video blogger contrasts starkly with the conventional mode of documentary production, but it also differs from the egalitarian collective practices of political filmmaking thirty or forty years ago (for example, the workshop movement in the U.K. supported by Channel Four in the 1980s). Both involved small crews and a given, although flexible division of labour, combining specialism with

creative collaboration. The video blogger, however, thanks to digital technology, is able to work alone at all stages of production. This gets very close to the concept of the ‘caméra-stylo’ introduced in the late 1940s by the French avant-garde film-maker Alexandre Astruc, the idea of the camera as a tool to write with – indeed twice over, first when you shoot and then when you write the film on the timeline. But this solitude also becomes a liability, because it deprives the video-author of the creative feedback that goes with the teamwork of a crew. If this is not uncondusive to the solo video artist, it’s a danger for the video activist, who cannot thrive without the most lively connection to the social, which comprises another aspect of immaterial labour: the work that is put into building relationships which create the vital bond with the subjects of the filming – a far cry from ‘entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations’. People who are actively involved in campaigns are usually readily amenable to participation, since they regard the video as an opportunity, an extension of their own political agency and objectives. Like all documentary filmmaking, however, this is always partly about an instinct for opportunity. My own experience has been that where people identify the videographer as one of themselves, a bond of solidarity is quickly formed that is denied to the institutional camera crew, who are seen as belonging to an alien force. Indeed people will even sometimes volunteer themselves.

The immaterial labour of the video blogger is essentially unquantifiable: there is no rule that says how long it should take to shoot and edit a video, any more than to write a song or a poem. Like the artist who lives from their aesthetic creation, there is no determinable relation to the exchange value, if any, eventually earned by the work. The video activist doesn’t even think of earning anything. One may dream of a video going viral, the reality is rather different.

The necessary multiplier effect depends on the initial circle of diffusion, and then on random connections with other ever wider circles. There are techniques for getting things out but virtual networks are fickle, in no way as solid and reliable as the social bonds of real old-fashioned physical association. They are not a replacement for the social solidarity that is still the necessary condition for real political effect. The social media are incomparable at rapid mobilization and the horizontal transmission of solidarity, but remain essentially ephemeral (a strange paradox when everything uploaded remains there in a suspended state forever). Political change needs more concrete forms of social association to gain traction. This, however, need not discourage the video activist. The gap between political aspiration and reality has always been there in all forms of agitational art, and bridging it is the object.

But this, it turns out, is also ‘free labour’ in a new sense, the donation of those who supply the social media with content, off whose backs, in their millions, enormous profits are made. We should not be surprised by this turn. Another fragment of intellectual archeology flits into my head, a description of the state of music in a pamphlet for the Worker’s Music Association at the end of the 1930s, in which the U.S. composer Elie Siegmeister writes that ‘capitalism has created the most magnificent apparatus for the production, distribution and consumption of music that the world has ever seen. Yet this apparatus is so riddled with contradictions which are basically economic in origin, that it continually negates its own potentialities’ (Siegmeister n.d.). The web, an invention of corporate capitalism in the era of globalization, where I freely upload the oppositional product of my irreducible aesthetic labours, offers a domain of free expression, a potential for human liberation, which in the very same moment is also negated and denied, to leave us perplexed in front of our screens,

before the dialectic of the digital.

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### <HDA>Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to [www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html](http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html).

<sup>2</sup> The question of the traditional critic's role came up as I was completing this essay in the shape of a book by the film critic Mark Kermode, himself an enthusiastic blogger. According to Will Self, reviewing *Hatchet Job* in *The Guardian*, 'His anxiety that in the age of the internet and the worldwide web the role of the serious critic may be becoming otiose speaks to the contemporary condition'. Retrieved from [www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/09/hatchet-job-mark-kermode-review](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/09/hatchet-job-mark-kermode-review).

<sup>3</sup> The video blogs were subsequently incorporated into a film, *Chronicle of Protest*. Both the film and the original blogs can be found at [www.chronicleofprotest-thefilm.co.uk](http://www.chronicleofprotest-thefilm.co.uk).

<sup>4</sup> The footage is included in *Clockwork*, Newsreel, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Art Versus Work', retrieved from [www.artandwork.us/2009/11/art-versus-work](http://www.artandwork.us/2009/11/art-versus-work).