

## In the Mood for Work.

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*Can Representation Alter  
the Valorization of Work?*

*'Or come to find that loving is labor, Labor's life and life's forever'.*

*Biomusicology* by Ted Leo and the Pharmacists

### Defining a (kind of) Field of Production

At this point, it's no longer necessary to insist that cultural production is one of those spaces most affected by the transformations of labor taking place on a global level, processes such as the growing flexibilization of work, the precarization of labor conditions, and the demands upon workers that they assume their own risks and costs. We see, in the same vein, that David Harvey's system of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1990), widely debated in academic spheres (for example, Narotzky, 1997), has met with little resistance when introduced into the sphere of cultural production. We think that cultural production's 'bohemian tradition' has been a feeble buffer against these labor transformations which have been taking place at a global scale since the late seventies, or that it could even have encouraged them. Some of the problems we would like to reflect upon in this brief essay have to do with how these transformations have affected cultural production by modifying its practice, its economic models and how it is understood.

Throughout this text, we will try to talk about why a good part of such production is not perceived (or is perceived distortedly) as work, and also how the erosion of the traditional boundaries defining work has had a negative effect on how value is attributed to cultural production. Finally, we would like to speak about some examples of representations of this not-quite-work in the media, and discuss if these images contribute, or not, to the perception of cultural production as labor. It is an ambitious undertaking for such little space, let's see how far we get.

That jobs have mutated is a verifiable fact; this mutation has occurred in almost all fields (Federici, 1999, Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006, Rodriguez, 2003). However, very little has been said about how these changes have affected the sphere of cultural production, which must still struggle to understand the heterodox grouping of practices that configure it <sup>1</sup>, (scant delimitations in time and space, irregular remuneration or none at all, social under-recognition, etc...). In these past years we have observed how, in response to a past in which such forms of production tried to distance or even dissociate themselves from the dominant system and the economic game in general, collectives of cultural producers are beginning a series of small scale revolts in an attempt to normalize certain rights that up until now had only been claimed by salaried workers. Without a doubt, one of the movements that has been the most capable of articulating these demands with the most insistency has been that of workers in the performing arts in France, known as the 'intermittents du spectacle'.<sup>2</sup> On a less visible scale, we can see how certain processes of professionalization taking shape within the sphere of cultural production have permitted it, sometimes, to begin to consider itself as labor; but without a doubt these had characterized artisans,

1. In order to not get into a discussion about what is and what isn't culture, or about who are the cultural producers, we propose to understand as cultural producers all those people that work within one of the thirteen categories defined by the organisation Creative London: 'publicists, architects, art and antique dealers; crafts, design, fashion design, film and video, interactive media, software, music, theater, the editorial world, television and radio,' in 'Creative London's core Business' see: <http://www.creativelondon.org.uk/server.php?show=nav.009004001>

2. See Antonella Corsani's contribution in this same volume. advances have been, if anything, timid. Previously, one of us (Rowan, 2005) has described how, while artists were trying to leave behind notions of genius, vocation, etc., the processes of dislocation, and of 'putting out' that affected high volume factories simultaneously forced traditional salaried workers to assume forms of work similar to those which (Blim, 1992). It would be precisely among cultural producers' 'disorganized' (Lash & Urry, 1987),

precarious, flexible and barely unionized forms of labor where capitalism would find a perfect nest from which to grow. As Marina Vishmidt states in her text *Precarious Straits*, 'creativity' and 'flexibility', once deemed endemic to the artist as a constitutive exception to the law of value [are] now valorised as universally desirable attributes' (Vishmidt, 2005). So within Post-Fordism, the cultural producer becomes the ideal model of the worker.

But if indeed it is true that, with increasing velocity, cultural workers' attributes (extreme flexibility, the idea of the product as project, involvement and responsibility in the entire production process, etc.) are socially valued in recent decades, is it possible on the other hand that the value of the work-process itself has diminished just as quickly? In other words, is the socially positive perception enjoyed by these forms of cultural production proportional to the remuneration that the majority of its producers receive? We think not. We believe that if indeed the utilization of the concept of the artisan (or in some cases the imposition of the 'exceptionalities' of the artist) has rescued or revalorized the figure of the independent, autonomous producer, the valorization of the work-process itself (the unpaid time invested, the naturalized risks, the working conditions that do not improve) has not been recognized nor has it acquired proportionally adequate pay.

### Forms of not working

*All societies legitimize some forms of work and not others*  
Standing, G. *Beyond the New Paternalism* (2002)

If, as we have said, the defining boundaries between what is and what isn't work have succumbed, pressed by the implementation of Post-Fordist forms of production, something similar has occurred in the world of cultural production in an exponential way –and this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to talk about labor practices within this terrain. In her magnificent text 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy' Tiziana Terranova (Terranova, 2004), demonstrates the current situation's complexity. She argues that the development of new technologies of computerized production has generated an enormous market for what she calls 'free labor', that is, large cadres of workers willing to offer their work for free to corporations that control such technologies. For such a thing to be possible this cultural production activity mustn't be considered work. Only that way can corporations like AOL take advantage of the time of all of the people who –through using their chat rooms, moderating their discussion groups, or participating in their games– generate benefits for a company capable of capitalizing upon them. Accordingly, Terranova defines 'free labor' as 'the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited' (2004). The author argues that these new forms of cultural production are characterized by an expansion of 'forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters, and so on' (2004). Along the same lines, in his text *Sim Capital*, Nick Dyer-Whiteford (2003) explains how a greater part of the videogames distributed by large companies have in fact been, over time, elaborated by kids who have modified them, improved them, redesigned them by consuming them. A good deal of the tools and software that we use are the fruit of collaboration between 'prosumers' who have improved and developed them through everyday use, making the barriers between consumption and work increasingly imperceptible. Such lack of definition threatens to invade any and all activities which might be considered cultural production, pushing practices within this area further and further away from what actually can be considered work. It's not surprising that it is becoming ever more difficult to understand, to adequately evaluate –and consequently to remunerate and to recognize– all of this dedication. Cultural producers' activities are so subjugated by the system of flexibilization that it becomes increasingly difficult to discern if one is chatting with friends or networking, if one is reading or researching, if one is fucking or relaxing oneself to get back to work. With all this said, if we can't even untangle what is and isn't work in our own lives, how can we hope to design arguments that help us revalorize this whole process? And would it help anyway?

## Invisible Jobs

*I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the 'proper' political agenda, but rather that the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying.*

Phelan, P. *Unmarked, the Politics of Performance* (1993)

In the situation we are sketching out, could cultural production's lack of representation as such have to do with it being so under-valorized? We cannot forget, as we have argued elsewhere, that the system of representation is a form of control associated with diverse manifestations of power, and that lack of visibility can be used, on occasion, as strategy in a given juncture (Phelan, 1993; Ruido, 2001).

And we can hardly ignore in moments such as the one we live in –one of a crisis of representation– that it is almost a necessity to doubt the capacity of representation to provide political agency. These days, when workers accuse unions of being institutions of pacts and consensuses (we have in mind, for example, the images of the conflictive first of May, 2003 when former Sintel workers rebuked the CC.OO 3 leader in Madrid), the demand for recognition of cultural workers' value cannot rely, evidently, upon traditional channels of visibility. But we should remember that, as occurs in the economy of desire, the lack of images translates into the lack of power (and accordingly, value): Linda Williams already said this in her text 'Fetishism and Hardcore' when she associated the legitimization of pleasure with economic control, making the 'money shot' tantamount to the 'come shot' (Williams, 1989).

As the artist Hito Steyerl explains in a recent text that re-updates Walter Benjamin's 1934 classic 'The Author as Producer', the image-building system is closely linked to the productive and economic systems into which the images are inserted (Steyerl, 2005). Following this logic, capitalism has progressively transformed its imaginary of work from the apparently simple binary between productive (factory, office, school) and reproductive (home, street, free time) spaces, into a complex representational logic like today's, where the nuances are extensive and our position within the cogs of the productive system changes within a single workday.

In the new imaginary of production, some forms of work continue to be difficult to recognize or to openly declare as part of the system. We could say that there are forms of work that resist recognition by 'lack' (domestic work, reproduction in a wide sense, sex work...) sometimes to the point of social stigmatization and punitive invisibility, while others resist by 'excess' (cultural work, for example), as they lack limits and fixed competencies, and are generally too mystified or even too strategically overvalued to be considered 'just' work.

Without attempting to force a symmetry between these two categories, as it is very clear that capacity to mobilize that symbolic capital has from one or the other extreme is quite different, it seems evident that the movement of the scene towards these 'other forms of work' could mean a reversion to a social and economic redefinition necessary for both, understanding of course that they should go through very distinct processes of redefinition. If indeed domestic work and reproduction –in all of its aspects– have appeared frequently in movies and in traditional media as a 'women's vocation', it is only in the past thirty or forty years that they have suffered a denaturalization that places them within the system of production and introduces suspicion about their hierarchies. And more recently, they have also experienced the profitable inertia of an informality which relies upon reproduction as a model of extreme implication, emotional involvement, responsibility...

But without a doubt, among all the other kinds of production, it has been the cultural that has experienced the most substantial surge in its representation, since, like we mentioned above, its supposed 'attributes' have been signaled as models for the new forms of production. Thereby, its exceptionalities (Lazzarato, 2004) and its lacks, (lack of articulation, precariousness, hyper-flexibility, the lack of competency limits, etc.) are transformed –within the media– into emblems of a model of success that once again obscures the process of production and the cost of the cultural product.

3. CC.OO stands for Comisiones Obreras, one of Spain's major national unions. Translator's note.

And we're not talking about the melancholy and tortured artist, no. Now our public image is associated with characters like Carrie Bradshaw, the lead role in *Sex and the City*, a woman whose life takes place somewhere in between fashionable clubs and trendy magazines, a woman who has made work material out of her experiences and her relationship with her friends by raiding her fascinating life to produce (or reproduce?) on her laptop a newspaper column that is excellently paid (judging from her lifestyle.)

It seems clear that visibility doesn't always translate into valorization (or at least into a collective and effective valorization), and even less so if this visibility does not evidence a process but rather re-mystifies and revitalizes its clichés, twisting the product into something the execution of which was apparently fun and exciting, though perversely utilitarian in that its costs are never explained, (it is not unlikely that one day Carrie's friends will leave her high and dry, sick of seeing their private lives ransacked on the page...). We don't find around us, in the movies or on television, representations that embody with any sort of realism the daily activities of cultural workers. Almost all of them are permanently young, they live in a precarious way that they somehow feel is just temporary, and they have a complex labour horizon that promises some different future. Though there are some characters that are more nuanced than others: (remember, for example, Ed Chigliak, the dubious apprentice filmmaker in *Northern Exposure*, a badly paid and aloof multitasker/Guy Friday, a peripheral character that did his thing to the scanty interest of most of the Cicely, Alaska community).

If in a traditional capitalist scheme cultural workers made demands by, as Benjamin explained, positioning themselves within the relations of production (for example, like Bertolt Brecht, indicating the representation pact), the new system of production requires a permanent negotiation with conditions of production that are in continuous transit, a constant turning to the representational 'offstage', since when we specifically note this process, we are acting vicariously and making way for a 'new cultural object'.

If we agree that the system of image generation is directly related to the system of production and to its power relations, it seems clear that cultural workers are 'invisibilized by overexposure': an overexposure that has not contributed to a valorization of their work, but rather to a devaluation and an inverted profit from of their precarious conditions which they have not only not questioned, but extended (except, maybe, in very concrete cases and moments, more individual than collective, such as those of the 'Young British Artists').

Let us return to the initial question in this text: can representation alter the valorization of cultural work? The answer seems to be no. As we have been highlighting throughout this essay, it is only possible to change the images if we change the general conditions of production itself. Maybe it is the moment to ask ourselves if it is really possible to represent each and every step and process that occurs throughout the production of a cultural object. We think to do so would end up being quite complicated, as it would mean shedding light on a layout of relations that are complex to the extreme (tensions, negotiations, repressions, self-censorings, dislocations, etc.) in addition to requiring the re-definition and demystification of the competencies, times and places of cultural workers. But at the same time, we think that we should be capable of identifying and making visible all the 'positive externalities' that cultural production generates, which are diffuse indicators of the real contribution of culture to the bulk of society, and that they should contribute to the living conditions of its producers. Through this approach, in addition to social recognition, economic valorization can be addressed, which is an aspect that we believe to still be inactive. Only by understanding the value of these 'positive externalities' <sup>4</sup> can we leave behind old debates about how to remunerate and consider cultural practices, which not only hamper the growth of this area, but make it more difficult to understand its real working processes.

4. A term introduced by the economist Alfred Marshall at the beginning of the twentieth century that could be defined as the collateral benefits (not necessarily monetary) generated by a productive activity that go towards a third party.

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