21

# View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

**title:**
*Extras: Social Media and the Invisible Work of Observing the Other*

**author:**
Krzysztof Świrek

**source:**
*View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 21 (2018)

**URL:**
http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/601/1211/

**publisher:**
View. Foundation for Visual Culture

**affiliation:**
Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

Krzysztof Świrek

# Extras: Social Media and the Invisible Work of Observing the Other

Translated by Arthur Barys

In modern capitalism, human attention is one of the areas of accumulation. Traditional media outlets, Internet media, and social media all vie for influence, not so much over people's opinions, over what they think (as is the case in the traditional bourgeois public sphere), but to win their attention and engagement itself. Messages are crafted with the aim of distracting media consumers and refocusing their attention on specific content. The resulting labor performed by the mental apparatus – transforming, linking, and drawing associations between pieces of information, and responding to stimuli – provides a source of profit for media platforms.[1] For authors like Christian Marazzi, this is a "new system of production" in which we are "expected to extract value from ourselves, obtain it from the labor of our affects, our emotions, our feelings, our language, and our relational abilities."[2] While I disagree that the label of a "new system of production" is warranted in this context, it is true that a more comprehensive accumulation takes place under late capitalism.[3] What matters isn't just the active aspect of the user's effort, which combines labor in the above sense with traditional labor, but also its passive aspect, one that is based on pure availability; media consumers expose themselves to content, and media platforms in turn treat human engagement as one part of an unwritten user agreement, a "game" whose core rule might be stated as follows: "The user must exceed a specified level of engagement in order to experience pleasure."

Social media – a radical example of this modern-day trend – actively demand user engagement. If a Facebook user spends too little time engaging with the platform, she/he will receive various email "notifications" reminding her/him what she/he's missing out on by not participating in the flow of content. There is a crucial distinction to be drawn between the way people use social media and how they interact with traditional media: the user of traditional media could indeed have been said to merely "consume content," because the use of such media was


confined to the "unproductive portion of people's time."[4] The social media user, on the other hand, actively shapes the content with which she/he interacts. Taken as a whole, this labor contributes to the accumulation of massive quantities of information by media platforms, which take their knowledge of users' interests and monetize it on the advertising market with the help of algorithms. These algorithms form a key component of the infrastructure through which such platforms capture the value of the work performed by users. In this article I examine the immaterial labor involved in looking and being looked at – labor that is essentially invisible, because it is not perceived as labor by the people performing it. The very nature of the work carried out by users appears to be "beyond their view" and unidentified by them. By couching this activity in terms of labor and accumulation, I place it within the context of analyses of modern capitalism. Here I agree with Bernard Stiegler, who argues that it is more informative to frame contemporary phenomena associated with the circulation and formation of information in terms of the questions posed by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Karl Polanyi, rather than in terms of the "culture of narcissism."[5] In this article I examine this form of labor, focusing on the impulsive nature of social media activity and the processes of idealization and rejection that define the affective relations among these platforms' users. I also analyze a film metaphor, borrowed from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, which reveals the core dynamics of envy, an emotion that is part of the social media experience, due in large part to the act of observing the other.

## Drive and addiction

Today's media platforms no longer obey the traditional rhythms of the daily newspaper or television broadcasts, which begin and end at specific times of the day. They operate around the clock, "24/7,"[6] which means that they possess unlimited potential to engage our attention, and that the user's engagement can be equally unlimited. These media operate in an "inhuman" manner: they're ignorant of the "reality principle," they don't recognize the limitations of human mental resilience, and they fail to understand exhaustion. They operate according to a logic

that resembles the logic of the drive, as analyzed in psychoanalysis. The drive is not synonymous with needs: it does not follow biological rhythms, but instead exceeds them.[7] In this sense, it is like a spasm that exceeds the conditions of the behavior of life itself. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the satisfaction of a drive is seen as producing not just pleasure, but *jouissance*, which Lacan defined as an "excess of life"[8] (and which, we might add, exceeds the "reality principle," the recognition of which is necessary to preserve life as such).

This mechanism can be observed in many areas, including labor. Workaholism is one way in which drives manifest themselves in a person's life: a subject who experiences this condition performs activities and engages in relations with the outside world with the maximum degree of intensity. On the other hand, workaholism unmoors this behavior from any constraints or definable goals, thus illustrating a characteristic feature of the drive – namely its encapsulation in constant activity that cannot be interrupted by any clearly defined outcome. The result is that, by exceeding certain boundaries (the need for sleep, biological limits, mental limits), these activities destroy life. This spasm of activity creates a kind of satisfaction that goes beyond the mere pleasure of having performed a task, while also exceeding the conditions that enable this satisfaction to exist. The periodic movement of the drive, which continues to orbit – yet invariably miss – its target, reveals it to be independent of the body's biological needs. The example of workaholism also shows that satisfaction achieved through such means should not be framed in positive terms, in the sense of benefits and drawbacks (as one might describe the benefits of "simple pleasures"): this satisfaction is produced by the repeated nature of the activity, rather than by any specific benefits that it provides.

If we accept that modern-day media platforms operate by producing such an impulsive abyss of constant activity, interactions with others, and "spasms" of communication, then it can also be said that the logic of these operations is extremely human and at the same time inhuman. It is extremely human because it follows the logic of addiction, separate from the biological rhythms of individuals and their "natural" needs, and thus points to a peculiarly human way of stepping outside the limits of the natural order; it is inhuman (or anti-human) because it ultimately destroys the very life that makes it possible. I refer here, of course, to addiction in the psychoanalytical, rather than the biological, sense: a particular relationship between the human subject and *jouissance*, not a biological

determinant of the human body. In this sense – and only in this sense – addiction is a paradigmatic example of how drives work in our lives: it is an illustration of a drive exceeding our biological needs. In the case of media platforms, this impulsiveness is manifested in the way users gain satisfaction from habitual activities (checking their feeds, sharing their own content, commenting on other people's posts, interacting with others) that become untied from the rhythms of daily life: they shatter the division between leisure time and work, and even disrupt sleep cycles. These actions appear to be driven by cognitive or communicative needs (the need to "check in," stay on top of things, keep abreast of the news), but the actual source of satisfaction is the repeatable activity itself: browsing, commenting, sharing, etc.[9] As with the previous example, this satisfaction should not be framed in positive terms; instead, one should make an effort to depict it as a characteristic of the repetitive habit itself, the movement involved in performing particular tasks that are in no way "pleasant" or appealing in the conventional sense of the words.

In this sense, late capitalism is the colonization of our mental lives: technology creates prostheses that imitate and reinforce certain characteristic features of people's mental lives. This technology is animated by the actions of the psyche, and in turn reinforces certain traits within the psyche. As a result, our attention, cognitive abilities, curiosity, engagement, and the formation of mediated relationships with other people through the "innovation" of modern media platforms have become an important area of capital accumulation. The source of this surplus value is the labor performed by users. It requires them to exploit their own cognitive and affective abilities, which are associated with the creation of symbols and the skills necessary to exchange those symbols with other users. Through its connection to hardware and algorithms, the "soul at work," as Franco "Bifo" Berardi puts it, ties the psyche to capital.[10] Technology facilitates this process of new accumulation, but is not its "cause": as Fredric Jameson writes, it is not relevant "in its own right," but because it represents the "network of power and control" wielded by global capitalism.[11]

## The colonization of the psyche

As Fredric Jameson observed several decades ago, the operations of modern capitalism are guided not by conservative bigotry, but by the radical critique and destruction of traditional societies. This opens up a homogeneous space, which

capital can then penetrate at will.[13] The same is true of the immaterial labor that today's media platforms harness their users into performing. The demands posed by this technology are both revolutionary and "permissive" – at its core is a call for users to participate and experience it "24 hours a day," to be constantly up to date and incessantly sharing with others. To some extent, it is a vision of a radically socialized psyche, one diametrically different from the traditional model of the bourgeois individual, for whom the distinction between social role and internal life is deeply valued. The separation between the public and private spheres makes it possible for one to settle into the "cozy interiors" of the home – a figure of individual intimacy, or even, as Walter Benjamin writes, an aesthetic form akin to a "spider's web," a den of "satanic contentment."[14] The basic "technique of the self" used by such an individual was the "intimate journal," a stage upon which everything that was hidden from the eyes of others could take shape and blossom.

By encouraging users to share their thoughts in real time, social media largely nullify this distinction. They make it difficult to differentiate between the "stage" and the "backstage" of society, and impose a mode of speech that renders the distinction between the public and private "ineffective," so to say. The status of statements made on social media is neither private nor public, or official in the traditional sense of the term; rather, it excludes this logic entirely. Each act of participation in the flow of information engages the psyche, but it is not private – it becomes visible to others, though it is not public either.

This paradox was made acutely visible in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the company was revealed to have used information gathered on social media to politically profile users and direct them to content that was specially crafted to encourage them to make particular choices at the ballot box.[15] The company's activities cannot possibly be mistaken for traditional campaigning or advertising, which have always been filtered through the public sphere. These sorts of activities rely on that which is hidden; they circumvent the public sphere, directly targeting the mental intimacy of their audience – the sphere of affective engagement that isn't meant to be put on public display, not just because someone might want to keep it hidden, but also because there is no way to publicly articulate it. It is the intimacy of personal preference, not public engagement. In order to direct messages to specific individuals, psychological modeling is used whereby user profiles are created not on the basis of a person's publicly stated preferences, but

on a number of diffuse traces of the person's activity, which an algorithm then reconstructs as relevant to a particular political message. Instead of targeting a political "persona," or the mask of a certain segment of public opinion, user profiling aims at an individual's fantasies and anxieties, which can be reconstructed without their knowledge, based on events that occur behind the scenes and beyond the stage of the official public sphere. This is why the concept of identification is not particularly useful in analyzing the image produced by the algorithm. When a psychological profile is created, the individual's self-presentation is irrelevant; what actually matters is the map of the person's affective engagement reconstructed *ex post facto*. Assembled by an algorithm from random clues left by the user, it is a map that is unfamiliar to the person her/himself.

As Jameson notes, the colonization of life by capital is a perspective from which it becomes possible to "grasp the progressive value of conservative or residual modes of resistance."[16] This observation is worth recalling, because it realistically emphasizes certain demands that reality places on the human psyche, unlike the optimistic theories that regard the psyche as a productive, inexhaustible source.[17] When one is faced with a business model built on the revolutionary vision of a psyche constantly bombarded with new and exciting stimuli, it becomes progressive, in a sense, to pursue a mental life that appreciates limitations and a traditional daily rhythm. In this model, the fundamental mode of resistance against the colonization of the psyche is non-participation – cutting oneself off from new forms of communication and treating them as invasive and destructive. This strategy is potentially the simplest and most effective, but it has one serious flaw: it requires us to renounce our interactions with others (thus committing to "desocialization," or the loss of participation), and like every "ascetic" strategy, there is a strongly individualistic and elitist quality to it.

## Same, but different

Having made these observations, it is worth examining the model of relations present in social media, and the content of the engagement that occurs in a virtual space. Modern media platforms are places where the well-established phenomenon of focusing on the lives of celebrities – people famous for their "lifestyles" rather than any particular accomplishments –is becoming radicalized. This working definition contains an intentional modification of the phrase taken from

a popular Polish book that depicts celebrities as being "famous for being famous,"[18] the purpose of which is to highlight a particular type of work that involves self-creation and is associated with celebrity status. Celebrities do not resemble an "idle class" or aristocracy in the traditional sense; rather, they embody the ethos of the new middle class, with its ceaseless "self-improvement," a practice governed by status criteria.[19] It consists of strenuous exercise, dieting, and incessant image building. No less important is the spiritual content of this labor: the work of making oneself out to be perceived as a person in search of spiritual truths, embarking on a path of self-discovery, and building one's own unique narrative about pursuing the meaning of life (by following any number of paths, which may include yoga, Kabbalah, and Scientology, or even rediscovering Christianity or a "traditional lifestyle," with central focus on the family), as well as an individual narrative about personal crisis and rebirth.

Celebrities are neither inaccessible heroes of the collective imagination (like traditional heroes), nor figures in some distant, exotic world (like the aristocracy, royal families, etc.); instead, the relationship between the celebrity and his or her observer (a term I use to refer to an "audience"[20] member) is a complex relation of similarity and difference, one that contains a powerful ideological charge. A classic essay about the culture industry, part of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, includes an interesting passage that describes this ideological potential:

"Those discovered by the talent scouts and then built up by the studios are ideal types of the new, dependent middle classes. The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary, though in a way which makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus she apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them."[21]

I am aware of the temporal distance separating the Frankfurt School's subject from the present-day cultural model. Horkheimer and Adorno refer here to the starlet who appeared in a classic Hollywood romantic comedy that featured a "Cinderella" story. All of this occurred within an industry that was supposed to standardize and depict existing social relations as inevitable. It socialized its audiences to be members of a mass. In this sense, "existence in late capitalism," Horkheimer and

Adorno write, "is a permanent rite of initiation"[22] (what form this "rite of initiation" assumes today is a question I return to at the end).

Today's cultural industry relies not so much on mass spectacle as it does on the multiplication of myriad messages (as we might put it, drawing inspiration from Jameson's analyses), which colonize the subject's mental life by engaging her/him and her/his communication activities. Like contemporary capitalism, it socializes us not to toe the line, but to be flexible and to adapt to changing circumstances, and therefore shapes the individual to be an "entrepreneur of the self" rather than a cog in the machine of the monopoly.[23] At the same time, the acts of observing and being observed – these contemporary modes of participation – make celebrities models for today's "dependent middle class" as well: the middle class experiences new forms of communication as arenas in which they test their own adequacy, communication skills, and the ability to flexibly transform their attention, directing it towards whatever is worth being perceived. What matters is the imperative to "keep up" and remain in a game whose rules and shapes are undetermined and constantly redefined. An Instagram influencer or Facebook commenter are not important in and of themselves, but they gain significance as models for the activities of millions of other users on these social networks.

## From ideal to excrement

The passage quoted above is also an excellent illustration of a certain duality present in the relationship between the observer and the celebrity. To a member of the middle class, celebrities are "the same, but different." They are similar enough in their aspirations and in the structures of meaning they reference, and yet distant enough to make it impossible to identify with them completely. This model is therefore distant from Sigmund Freud's figure of the "great man."[24] Freud perceives him as being a strong, independent, and caring (but menacing) father figure. The audience finds in him its charismatic leader, but also an object of hatred – typically directed against those who bend our will by the power of their authority and put a stop to our desires. The celebrity is not a father in the sense of a prominent political or cultural figure, but like a father figure, he or she evokes ambivalent feelings of admiration and hatred. Rather than exuding the quasi-religious charisma of greatness, the celebrity is wrapped in the ambiguous aura of

a person who is both chosen and cursed. Perhaps René Girard's "scapegoat"[25] model would be more fitting than Freud's "great man."

Girard describes this figure as part of the social process by which a community idealizes and subsequently demeans the object of its idealization. At the center of this dynamic is "mimetism," which Girard understands as an anthropological constant that continuously stirs our fascination with, and aggression towards, others: our imitation of their desires, our competition with them, and our attempts to affirm ourselves as the ones who will achieve the object of our desires at the expense of others. Driven by this mimetic affect, the envious rivalry culminates in a moment of crisis, at which point a ritual of bloody sacrifice takes place, literally or metaphorically. "One" (the sacred one or the cursed one – in this case the categories overlap or may even be coterminous) is sacrificed to defuse the conflict and restore social cohesion. In order for this to occur, the figure must first arouse the collective imagination and trigger the dynamic of rivalry.

This logic of the celebrity with a circle of "followers" finds its radical expression in social media. The object of their observation is often a person who is nearly devoid of distinguishing features, but is able to achieve social visibility through skillful use of the medium. Their rise almost resembles a stroke of good fortune: here the work of Horkheimer and Adorno's "talent scouts" is replaced by a voting system, but the result is just as arbitrary. The fact that the person has mastered the skills needed to join the ranks of the observed is hardly a sufficient explanation – lots of people can do it. On the other hand, the community's ruling bears the hallmark of actual selection – it cannot be forced, nor is there any doubt that it occurred. Truly popular people have thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of followers, and this is a result that cannot be achieved through sheer effort – it requires a coincidence that resembles an act of providence. Such providence can be retroactively bathed in glory, enchanted, and ascribed to personal charisma, as was the case with the influencer Aimee Song, who, as of March 2018, had nearly five million Instagram followers, and who claimed to owe her success there to her "good style," something that could not be bought for "all the money in this world."[26] Meanwhile, social networks are rife with "mimetic crises" in which the observers become objects of symbolic aggression; as if in a collective waking fantasy, the idealized object of desire becomes cursed refuse. The diamond becomes excrement, and the distance between the two, as psychoanalysts demonstrated long ago, is not great.[27] At the

same time, the very concept of idealization demonstrates that the entire process relies on the activity of both sides: the star's own characteristics matter less than the engagement of the observer, who is capable of idealizing the other, who, in turn, makes every effort to streamline this process.

The celebrity's labor of self-creation is therefore accompanied by hidden and equally important labor on the part of the observer: following, observing, and rating – in general, establishing a relation with an ambivalent figure who is alternately admired and despised. Observers engage in what Lacan would call an imaginary relation. This is based on external similarity and animated by the contradictory affects of fascination and antipathy, rooted in the dynamic of envy. In the imaginary relation, love and hatred are located as if on the same plane; the object can alternately evoke both affects, and the relation between the subject and the object remains unresolved. When bathed in the aura of the affect of love, the object appears "ideal," captured in the still frame of someone's love as if in a painting. But as soon as it reveals its weakness and ceases to match its ideal image, it immediately falls into the realm of disdain, evoking aggression. The act of identifying with the image of the celebrity is thus an imaginary one. It engages the subject's affects and is highly unstable, unlike symbolic identification, which occurs in the context of a certain fixed "matrix" of positions. Effective symbolic identification with the father allows the subject to take his place (assume his role in the symbolic sense, and adopt certain rules that differentiate the role of the father from other roles), while imaginary identification engages the subject in a game of hesitation between a sense of personal power and weakness.[28]

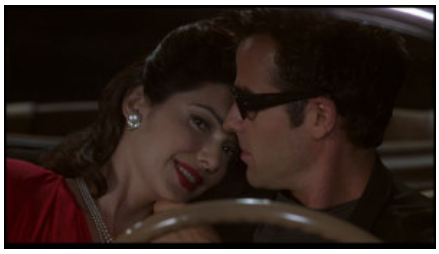
Celebrities are people just like us, but at the same time better (chosen) and worse (their weaknesses are exposed). They can be imitated: social media and traditional media encourage us to do so, often by placing advertisements for online fashion stores alongside images of the celebrity's look, allowing us to "imitate their style." But it's apparent that an expectation of failure is inscribed into every attempt at imitation: my imitation must be ineffectual, if only because it follows in the footsteps of another, as there will inevitably be a gap between the efforts of the individual and the model upon which they are based. The very same media that depict some celebrities as role models will pillory others for their alleged poor taste, chaotic personal life, or dubious professional choices. This produces an affective entanglement in which fascination mixes with contempt, and fondness with hatred.

Celebrities can be idealized, but they can also be grotesque, and when vilified (during a "mimetic crisis") they become simultaneous objects of sympathy and hatred. They also lack a stable place in the symbolic sense: unlike experts who derive legitimacy from their titles, a celebrity's position is highly precarious, because it ultimately rests on current levels of collective investment in her/his image, which evokes either fascination or contempt. Celebrities have "that something," but can lose "it" at a moment's notice. Their status is inextricably linked to the expectation of failure: stars are shrouded in an aura of potential embarrassment that is anticipated by their precarious position in society.

## A film metaphor: the extra

Diane in costume as an extra. Mulholland Drive (2001), dir. David Lynch

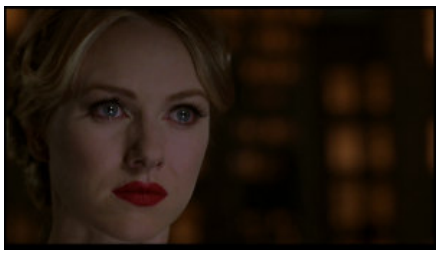
This particular relation to someone similar to ourselves, but distinguished, beloved, and hated, is aptly depicted in a short scene in the movie *Mulholland Drive* (2001), directed by David Lynch. The themes explored in this drama include the dream of fame, deadly envy, and the arbitrariness of success and failure, which is ultimately revealed to be a matter of fortune. In terms of narrative, the film is split into two intricately interwoven stories, each mirroring the other, and tied together by a pair of main characters. In one plot, Naomi Watts plays the role of Betty, a young girl from small-town Canada who arrives in Hollywood with hopes of becoming an actress. There she meets a mysterious woman (Laura Harring) who has lost her memory as the result of a car crash. Betty is successful at her first audition and seduces the woman. At the very moment in which the narrative tension reaches its climax, the story abruptly ends and another begins.



Camilla, a star, makes sure the extra sees her success. Mulholland Drive (2001), dir. David Lynch

In the other plot, the more relevant one to this discussion, the roles are reversed. The character played by Watts, who is now named Diane, is not successful in Hollywood; on the contrary, she is one of hundreds of actresses who find work as extras with little hope of making it big. Diane carries the painful memory of her unrequited love for Camilla (played by Laura Harring), a woman who achieved success and is now seducing one of the hottest

directors in Hollywood. Rather than turn her back on Diane, Camilla helps her by landing her minor parts in her films. For Camilla, Diane's pitiful professional situation is an important gauge of her own success. As the relationship between Camilla and the director grows closer over days of intense film shoots, the actress makes sure that Diane is there to witness her old friend's newfound happiness. Diane is needed as an extra on set, but she also plays an extra in Camilla's own success story.



**Diane, an extra, glances at Camilla. Mulholland Drive (2001), dir. David Lynch**

Lynch tells this story with the use of powerful cinematic devices, including two close-ups of Diane's face as her eyes well up with tears: once when she sees Camilla kiss the director on the film set, where Camilla is the star (and Diane is in costume as an extra), and once as she observes Camilla and the director's flirtatious teasing at the couple's engagement party (where she is again cast as an "extra" at the lovebirds' table, not quite in the center of events, but close enough to make looking away impossible). Using the film's trademark shorthand, these close-ups illustrate the suffering of a woman forced to witness the happiness of another: a star, nearly her mirror image, but also a better version of herself – someone who has been granted the honor of being chosen.

But Diane's glances aren't the only ones that matter. Equally important are those cast by Camilla, as she repeatedly makes certain that her less-fortunate friend is looking. What makes this metaphor so powerful is that extras are often a "silent" but indispensable part of a performance. They are "in cahoots" with the leading actors, who require their cooperation if the main characters are truly to shine. The star is helpless without a crowd of extras: as with the stirring "portraits of faded stars" that litter Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the star is revealed to be frail once her/his entourage and stage disappear. It is the mechanism of the spectacle that elevates a person to stardom.

We witness a game of similarity and difference being played out between Diane and Camilla, a game that translates into an entanglement of amorous and hateful affects. In the engagement party scene, Diane tells the story of her friendship with Camilla: they met at an audition, which the latter woman won. At that moment

**Camilla and the director celebrate their engagement. Mulholland Drive (2001), dir. David Lynch**

Camilla was chosen, and the professional paths of the two budding actresses diverged. But that is not to say that Diane and Camilla have nothing in common – their closeness is in fact crucial to the relationship that unfolds between them. In Camilla, Diane sees the life she could have had; she sees in her someone who was close, within reach, and also "accessible" in the physical, bodily sense (the scenes depicting Diane's erotic fantasies imply that the women share a sexual fascination beyond their friendship), but then became unattainable. Conversely, Camilla sees in Diane someone against whom she can measure the scale of her own success. Her status is relative: without Diane at her engagement party, Camilla would just be whoever she is to others in the "the industry" – just another star enjoying her moment in the limelight, with a few excellent performances, but destined to disappear into obscurity like so many before her. Diane is living proof that Camilla has achieved something.

**Diane, an extra, witnesses the couple's joy. Mulholland Drive (2001), dir. David Lynch**

Today, millions of people perform the silent work of "extras" on social media. They vote with their eyes for ambivalent stars who are "just like them, but different." This act of elevation is one of fascination, but it also contains an element of envy, which is essential not just as a mental characteristic of the individual, but as a feature of a particular social situation. It is present in the egalitarian nature of the very act of choosing (by way of voting, a "verdict of fate," in a sense), just as the seed of envy in Tocqueville's account of American democracy was planted in the democratic principle of equal opportunities.

Just as it is with Diane and Camilla in *Mulholland Drive*, the relation between the observer and the observed on social media relies on a certain degree of similarity. This is precisely what the game is all about: true engagement is only achieved through relations with people who resemble us in some way. Not with the authority figures of what was once the public sphere, but with figures with whom we interact in the imaginary processes of idealization and devaluation – people similar to us; better, or soon-to-be worse versions of us.

## To imitate and be seen

Above, I quote Horkheimer and Adorno's remark about existence in late capitalism being "a permanent rite of initiation." In that context, I pointed to a fundamental difference between the cultural model they described and the contemporary model. I devote the final part of this article to answering the question: what "rites of initiation" do we witness today in the context of immaterial work that takes place through the gaze?

Most significantly, this ritual no longer demands the standardization that defines monopolistic capitalism. It is replaced with a different mode of adaptation, one that I have compared, after other authors, to the model of the individual as an "entrepreneur of the self" who responds to changing circumstances. In this mode, the subject is "initiated" into a particular norm of communication that is also a norm of rationality – at once particularistic and obligatory. If a person expects to be heard, she/he must think and speak in an appropriate fashion and be aware not so much of her/his own place in the hierarchy, but of the constantly shifting dynamics between different messages that are engaged in market-like competition. In the realm of looking and being seen, it is crucial that the act of self-creation is based on an outwardly comprehensible model of uniqueness. Originality is simultaneously obligatory and strictly limited to that which is "communicative" – it is both audible to others and compliant with the mean expectations concerning the elements that constitute "a person's value." These mean expectations do not take the form of universal maxims: they are historically determined and socialized (that is, they indicate context, codes of identity, and a given communication situation), and we see them diffused "all around us" in the media space. Hence the simultaneous emphasis on similarity and differentiation, which triggers the logic of envy.

The dynamic of relations with the other is both "flattened" and concentrated by its imaginary nature, and strongly fueled by modern media platforms, which are abandoning the mechanisms of symbolical mediation that typified the "old" public sphere (such as norms of argumentation, a hierarchy of authorities, and expertise as a basis for making statements), while algorithms give higher scores to messages that trigger users' affective engagement. This imaginary nature is mainly manifested in the reciprocity of the relation, which oscillates between fascination and envious rejection, and in the concentration on the object, which is both similar

and different. Within this relation, looking is simultaneously an exercise in being looked at; it teaches one how to shape oneself to be the object of another's gaze.

In this sense, the work of observing the other is also the work of shaping the self as an object that is worthy of being noticed – and perceived in its inadequacy. There is a clue here that explains the persistence of the aggressive dynamic of observing others: it always assumes thoughts of one's own inadequacy and, associated with it, the aggression directed against the object of our gaze, which constantly looks back at us in judgment. This is perfectly illustrated by the metaphor in David Lynch's film, in which we see a series of real and imaginary exchanges depicting the reciprocal glances between the "extra" and the "star." The joy of looking at another is tied to the ecstasy of exhibitionism and the shame of one's own inadequacy within the other's field of vision. Modern social media have turned these processes into a source of accumulation while also using them as tools for shaping people's behavior, reinforcing the dynamic present in the familiar phenomena of observing the other and shaping oneself in their image and likeness. These platforms turn their users into crowds of extras, harnessing them into performing the multifaceted labor of observing others and shaping themselves. The processes triggered by these means are in no way new; what is new is their current configuration, which results from a new combination of market mechanisms, technologies, and communication models. This model is dependent on a constant stream of content and the poetics of alternating distraction and attention, making it impossible for the user to gain perspective on the incessantly repeated cycle of fascination and rejection, into which the process of observing the other is drawn.

## Footnotes

1 Franco "Bifo" Berardi analyzes this "internal labor" process, with particular emphasis on rhythms of attention and distraction, in *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009).

2 Christian Marazzi, *Sozialismus des Kapitals* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2012). Translated here from the Polish edition: "Socjalizm kapitału," trans. Sławomir Królak,

in *Marks. Nowe perspektywy*, ed. Krystian Szadkowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014), 269.

3 See the section "The colonization of the psyche" below. Cf. the theory of cognitive capitalism, a general overview of which is presented in Mikołaj Ratajczak, "Wprowadzenie do teorii kapitalizmu kognitywnego: kapitalizm kognitywny jako reżim akumulacji," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* vol. 15, no. 1 (2015), 57–94.

4 Jacek Tittenbrun presents a classic explanation of the distinction between productive and non-productive time in *Gospodarka w społeczeństwie: zarys socjologii gospodarki i socjologii ekonomicznej w ujęciu strukturalizmu socjoekonomicznego* (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, 2012), 467–469.

5 Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 36–37.

6 For a reconstruction of this model, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014).

7 On the Lacanian distinction between drive and biological needs, see Jacques Lacan, "On Freud's 'Trieb' and the Psychoanalyst's Desire," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 722–723, and Maire Jaanus, "The Démontage of the Drive," in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 122–123.

8 French: *surabondance vitale*. See Jacques Lacan, *La Séminaire, livre VII. L'ethique de la psychanalyse (1959-1960)* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 278. On this topic, see the useful and elucidating article by Owen Hewitson, "What Does Lacan Say About… Jouissance?," July 3, 2015, http://www.lacanonline.com/index/2015/07/what-does-lacan-say-about-jouissance/ (accessed January 12, 2018).

9 In this sense, drive does not defer satisfaction, unlike desire, but achieves it by continuously circling around its goal. This is the distinction Slavoj Žižek draws between desire and drive. See Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), 496–497.

10 See Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 87–92, and Ratajczak, "Wprowadzenie do teorii kapitalizmu kognitywnego," 72–73.

11 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 37–38.

12 This phrase was coined by Fredric Jameson, whose ideas inspire this whole section.

13 Fredric Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 2009), 56–57.

14 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 216.

15 See the dossier compiled on this company by the *Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files (accessed January 19, 2018).

16 Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," 57.

17 This also applies to the previously mentioned theories of cognitive capitalism, which recognize the intense exploitation of the psyche taking place in this new reality, and in response propose that a basic income be provided as remuneration for the immaterial labor performed by the subject, instead of criticizing the system of labor itself. For a critique of these ideas, see Michel Husson, *Kapitalizm bez znieczulenia*, trans. Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski (Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2011), 140–147. Originally published as *Le capitalisme sans anesthésie. Études sur le capitalisme contemporain, la crise mondiale et la stratégie anticapitaliste* (Paris, 2011).

18 Wiesław Godzic, *Znani z tego, że są znani. Celebryci w kulturze tabloidów* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2007).

19 In Polish scholarly literature, the unrivaled description of the new middle-class ethos continues to be Małgorzata Jacyno, *Kultura indywidualizmu* (Warsaw: PWN, 2007).

20 In writing about the "observer" and the "observed," I also intend to emphasize activeness; the concept of the audience may evoke associations with passive

contemplation.

21 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 116.

22 Ibid., 124.

23 The central figure of this order, therefore, is not hierarchy but competition under specific conditions. See William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: SAGE, 2014). The "entrepreneur of the self" is a concept taken from Michel Foucault. Like many other terms coined by the author, it has become a widely used descriptor – in this case, to describe the contemporary model of market-based subjectivity.

24 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 169–176.

25 See René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 154–168, and Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

26 "You just need good style," "You can have all the money in this world and still not have personal style." Quoted in Jarry Lee, "What Does It Cost To Be Big On Instagram?," *BuzzFeed News*, March 3, 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jarrylee/what-does-it-cost-to-be-big-on-instagram. I intentionally avoid mentioning specific examples of social media stars in the remainder of this essay. I am interested in the attendant mode of social relations rather than specific examples, which at any rate are defined by a degree of variability that can render any example incomprehensible within a few months.

27 These topics can be found in the writings of Sigmund Freud, in the context of the relation between the anal zone and the superego, and in Jacques Lacan's analyses of the forms of the *objet petit a*. See Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 294–309.

28 Helpful explanations of these distinctions can be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek. See the concept of the "father" in three registers (Real, Symbolic, Imaginary): Slavoj Žižek, "Four Discourses, Four Subjects," in *Cogito and the Unconsciousness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 74–113; on the difference between symbolic and imaginary identification, see Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London – New York: Verso, 2008), 11.