
Andrea Righi. Assistant Professor of Italian and Coordinator of the Italian Studies Program at Miami University. He is the author of *Italian Reactionary Thought and Critical Theory: An Inquiry into Savage Modernities* (Palgrave, 2015), and *Biopolitics and Social Change in Italy: From Gramsci to Pasolini to Negri* (Palgrave, 2011). He co-edited, with Cesare Casarino, *Another Mother: The Symbolic Order of Italian Feminist Philosophy*, which is forthcoming at University of Minnesota Press.

Contact: righi@miamiOH.edu

THE *MAMMOLETTA-MAMMET* COMPLEX AND THE SEXED TRUTH OF NEOLIBERAL DIGITALITY

Andrea Righi
Miami University

EL COMPLEJO *MAMMOLETTA-* *MAMMETY* LA VERDAD SEXUAL DE LA DIGITALIDAD NEOLIBERAL

DOI: 10.17450/170210

Reception date 2nd June 2017; acceptance date 2nd July 2017. This article is the result of research activities held at the Department of French and Italian - Miami University.

Abstract

In this essay, I lay out a critique of neoliberal digitality from the vantage point of the thought of sexual difference. I consider the ways in which crowdworking platforms such as the Mechanical Turk micromanage digital living labor thus generating surplus value in the form of piece-work labor, rent, and increased scalability of the system. I then provide a discussion of the genealogy of Mechanical Turk demonstrating its clear sexed origins –what I identify as the mammet complex– as well as its relations to the sphere of

reproduction. This forms the basis for a reconsideration of the potential for opposition that lurks in this model that I assemble by recapitulating key insights in Luisa Muraro's considerations on what she calls the maternal continuum through a reading of Walter Benjamin.

Keywords

Digitality, platform capitalism, sexual difference, temporality.

Resumen

En este ensayo se plantea una crítica a la digitalidad neoliberal desde el punto de vista del pensamiento de la diferencia sexual. Se consideran las formas en que las plataformas de trabajo colectivo como Mechanical Turk micro administran el trabajo digital en vivo para generar una plusvalía en la forma de trabajo por encargo, renta y escalabilidad incrementada del sistema. Luego se presenta una discusión sobre la genealogía de Mechanical Turk que demuestra sus claros orígenes sexuales –lo que se identifica como el complejo *mammet-*, así como sus relaciones con la esfera de la reproducción. Esto forma la base para una reconsideración del potencial de oposición acechante en este modelo, que se reúnen recapitulando ideas clave en las consideraciones de Luisa Muraro sobre lo que ella llama el continuo materno a través de una lectura de Walter Benjamin.

Palabras clave

Digitalidad, capitalismo de plataforma, diferencia sexual, temporalidad.

Toni Negri has recently reminded us that while the “new impact by the digital machine on the producer occurs under the rule of capital, the former not only surrenders value to fixed capital” but, as immaterial labor, it “also connects to the digital machine and is able to blend with it insofar as this connection occurs within the immaterial flux of cognitive labor”¹. And yet, Negri continues, because cognitive labor inherently opposes domination, “capital must then raise the intensity of command putting into place operations of extraction of value that are increasingly more violent and arbitrary”². In the United States, it is hard to predict how much re-appropriation of fixed capital is currently at-hand for the massive army of reserve labor that emerged from the 2008 financial crisis. It may be true, as Negri argues, that “the emancipative conditions of living labor increasingly invest and occupy the spaces and the function of fixed capital”³. Yet, I suspect that what stands in the way of a foreseeable reappropriation is not only an issue of organization but also a subtle array of domesticating devices that bridle and micromanage immaterial labor. In what follows, I intend to analyze the organization of work deployed through platform capitalism and disclose the gendered truth that lies behind neoliberal digitality. The structure and ideology of the Amazon crowdworking platform Mechanical Turk (from now on MTurk) is a prime example of current transformation in neoliberalism that increasingly turned to more despotic tools of control. I am interested in providing a critique and overcoming of this form of production by looking also at its historical breadth, particularly what I call neo-archaisms. To do so, I will also consider Walter Benjamin’s definition of this model as a philosophical construct connecting it to the hidden sexed truth of digital labor.

A Sexed MTurk and the Neo-archaisms of the Gig Economy

In 2005, Amazon CEO, Jeff Bezos went public with a project he had personally conceived and supervised. MTurk was a new revolutionary platform whose corporate purpose was explained by Bezos as follows: “normally, a human makes a request of a computer, and the computer does the computation of the task,” with online marketplaces instead, “artificial artificial intelligences like Mechanical Turk invert all that. The

1. T. Negri, “Appropriazione del capitale fisso: una metafora?,” in *Euronomade*, 2017, available at <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=8936>. (Here on translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

computer has a task that is easy for a human but extraordinarily hard for the computer. So instead of calling a computer service to perform the function, it calls a human”⁴. In effect, with Amazon being the biggest online marketplace seller of goods –and thus also of the labor they incorporated– Bezos’ brilliant intuition was that it could also profit from selling workforce, and thus living labor.

In neoliberal parlance, MTurk represents the first viable electronic experiment in what business culture calls an innovative and dynamic mode of generating revenue streams by spurring entrepreneurship and capitalizing on technological automation tools. This digital space where work is traded and sold is organized and managed according to the principles of what is called the Lean Platform. “Lean” here means that all that is not fixed capital, in other words, software, must be minimized and ideally eliminated completely. The Lean Platform Corporation’s mission is to “reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and [...] profit by reducing costs as much as possible”⁵. More specifically, MTurk is a:

Microworking system which enables elementary tasks to be performed by a huge number of people (typically called “Turkers”) on-line. Ideally, these tasks are meant to be solved by computers, but they still remain out of computational reach (for instance, the translation of an English sentence into Urdu).⁶

All these curatorial actions, digital manipulations, and services are called HITS (Human Intelligence Tasks) and are not only former white collar labor. The market for trading online and real-world interactions is rapidly expanding and many others collective platforms are now providing a variety of offerings: “Thumbtack, for professional projects; Postmates, for delivery; Handy, for housework; Dogvacay, for pets; and countless others.”⁷ Crowdworking is, in fact, moving deep into a vast area of cognitive and non-cognitive labor, creating a business community “where contractors are [...] paid by the task: a cut of every ride from Uber, of every rental from Airbnb, of every task fulfilled on Mechanical Turk.”⁸ What all these services have in

4. J. Pontin, “Artificial Intelligence, With Help From the Humans”, in *The New York Times*, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/business/yourmoney/25Stream.htm>.

5. N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 49-50.

6. K. Fort, G. Adda, K. Bretonnel Cohen, “Amazon Mechanical Turk: Gold Mine or Coal Mine?”, in *Computational Linguistics*, 2, Barcelona, 2011, p. 414.

7. N. Heller, “Is the Gig Economy Working?”, in *The New Yorker*, 2017, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/is-the-gig-economy-working>.

8. N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 77.

common is that they aim at collecting a variety of performances organized and micromanaged via one single digital system. In so doing, they do not only replace the hardcore production of services but rather they capitalize on the informational and the network effect they generate. The more people join the community and create traffic the higher the value of the company.

The particular ideological assumption of this form of labor can be found in the buzzword used to describe the new type of employment plentifully available for millennials under Platform Capitalism: The Gig Economy. The particular artistic provenience of the term “gig” –musicians often refer to their shows or performance as gigs– recapitulates all the neoliberal assumptions that transformed the status of labor from wage-labor under Fordism to human capital under post-Fordism. Some of its bright and more optimistic aspects are simply borrowing from the usual tag words of the neoliberal discourse: inventiveness, self-affirmation, and most importantly the idea of flexibility peppered by the dream of open-ended and cooperative work.

More prosaically, the sharing and collective labor typical of the Gig Economy is instead closely connected to long-standing processes of feminization of labor, which places emphasis on the many opportunities to deploy your social, cognitive, and emotional skills, while taking advantage of part-time employment and remote work that enable women to continue engaging in their most notable (and unremunerated) activity: the work of reproduction. A 2010 study on the composition of the digital workforce discovered that “almost 70% of mechanical Turkers were women” and that “women provide the behind the scenes labor that is mystified as the work of computers, unglamorous work transformed into apparent algorithmic perfection.”⁹ In this context, multitasking and flexibility enter into a particular relationship with other standard feminine virtues: abnegation, resourcefulness, meticulousness, and versatility, which are, incidentally, all key features of feminine surplus labor. Thus it should not be surprising the particular gendering of work that emerges when looking beyond the utopian image of what Bezos called the “Artificial Intelligences” marketplace. As Shawn Wen explains:

Relying on data from mechanical Turkers, computers have dramatically improved in recent years at facial recognition, translation, and transcription. These were tasks previously thought to be impossible for computers to complete accurately.

9. S. Wen, “The Lady Vanishes”, in *The New Inquiry*, 2014, available at <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-ladies-vanish/>.

Which means that mechanical Turkers (mostly women) teach computers to do what engineers (mostly men) cannot on their own program computers to do.¹⁰

The ideologies of neoliberal digitality enforce on us a shiny vision of techno-professionalism but the old industrial economy too praised the zealous diligence of women typists, secretaries and other sorts of data collectors. They too were early types of immaterial laborers at a time when “computing was thought of as women’s work and computers were assumed to be female.”¹¹ And the product of their work was also subject to the theft of wage labor. Online marketplaces lodge the same old truth, the extraction of surplus value which is now enhanced by a specific form of expropriation: the mining of collective intelligence which is stored and operationalized via proprietary adaptive learning software.

Beyond the usual neoliberal narrative of individual growth and freedom, the moralizing tone that accompanies these discursive practices should not be forgotten. Just like the debt economy is built on guilt and the ethical “work on the self” that the debtor must carry out at the personal level, the notion of participating in the *sharing* of ideas, information, skills, interests, discoveries represents another and equally pressing moral obligation.¹² It is, in other words, another form of implicit commitment, only perhaps more pleasing and auspicious than its counterpart. In this sense, the sharing economy becomes a necessary counterbalancing mechanism. The lightness of its gesture cleans it of any hardship projecting the image of a smooth, generous life free of the looming sense of endless expiation that, instead, mobilizes the debt economy. But the participation into the sharing of everything that exists too follows the logic of the expected deed, which carries with it the eerie sense of a sanction for any irresponsible shortcoming; that too is driven by a sacrificial economy of commitment and endless restitution. Endless valorization and employability demand continuous repayment: more interest payments, more HITS, more visibility on social media.

When it comes to the working environment, Lean Platforms look quite different from the frivolous account of the wonderful accomplishments of neoliberalism. The specific tools used to improve and ensure service quality and customers satisfaction bear

10. Ibid.

11. D. Skinner, “The Age of Female Computers”, in *The New Atlantis*, 12, 2006, available at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-age-of-female-computers>. See also F. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, pp. 193-217.

12. M. Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2012, p. 33, translation by J. D. Jordan.

testimony to how the so-called free creativity spurred by these business models is not so free in the end. Compared to digital platforms, Fordist enterprises were not effective in closing the loops between production and the information that it generated so that “their way of operating was to produce a good in a factory where most of the information was lost, then to sell it, and never to learn anything about the customer.”¹³ In terms of labor, Taylorist tools of control were thus a top-down mechanism that reigned in workers’ autonomy. Today, autonomy is presumably encouraged only in so far as is inflexibly commanded by productivity. Micromanagement operates through numerical evaluations that users internalize as moral injunctions. By introducing constant feedback and rating of performances, the worker is now locked into a system of automated measurements based on some proprietary algorithm that determines the fate of the worker’s next revenue. Benchmarking is the new electronic shape of the despotic foreman, only one that is increasingly more lethal in its scorings, which are also easily accessible and, thus, may be held up to public ridicule. What remains completely hidden, instead, is the scalability of the software magnified in its digital capabilities by the daily drudgery of living labor. This is a tale of two economies. The presumed independence and the digital worker’s performance are flaunted through colorful diagrams. Visibility here is associated with immediate public scrutiny and the proper accountability for the worker’s labor. On the other hand, the enormous expropriation of collective intelligence that comes from that labor is shrouded in mystery: the algebraic secret of algorithms.

The numerical despotism of the platform, the moralist sanctions of the sharing economy, the theft of the collective intelligence, and the share/fee digital workers pay to the platform proprietor are perhaps coated by the narrative of creativity and technological expansion –and at least, in the first two cases, they may be fully interiorized as self-discipline– but they are also showing premodern tyrannical features that appear to be more than simple incongruences in the system. The archaic face of hypermodernity is a counterintuitive phenomenon only for those who look at neoliberal digitality from the point of view of the final product or from that of the value aggregated qua internet traffic and digital footprints. When taking into account the perspective of labor, in fact, one clearly sees how the unregulated, cooperative but precarious labor carried out under the Gig Economy is simply a return to a practice that had already been consolidated at the dawn of industrial civilization. Take for instance the case of Goethe’s so-called *mystery of Naples*. Contrary to the common belief of a generalized idleness of Neapolitans, the

13. N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 42.

city's parasitic hierarchy propelled, in fact, the extreme industriousness and continuous workings of vast segments of the lower class. Unveiling the conundrum, Antonio Gramsci recalls the old Neapolitan proverb "where a horse shits a hundred sparrows feed."¹⁴ Beyond the coolness of the Gig Economy, one finds a similar preindustrial exploitation typical of the servile condition where the particular parasitic organization of work forces a multitude of people to engage in various degrees of surplus labor.

The relations of production of our glamorous digital world solicit further investigations in the direction of their mottled temporality. In the case of the MTurk, for instance, the platform ingeniously accomplishes two coveted dreams. First: it limits investments to fixed capital to the highest degree possible, by drastically cutting all remuneration to piece-work labor. Piece-work labor, in turn, reduces production costs and simultaneously expands the capacity and value of fixed capital, that is to say, it advances the software's analytical capacity. Second, similarly to a sharecropping model, it extracts value in the form of rent. By capitalizing on its established hierarchy, the platform takes the position of the rentier, who parasitically profits by demanding a share from what its subjects produce. In effect, the Turkers represent a type of worker that encapsulates three major historical forms of domination: similarly to the Fordist worker the Turker is exploited in terms of surplus value; like the agrarian laborer s/he has to pay a fee to work; while as digital user s/he is robbed of the added-value generated by using and improving the platform. Consider the case of Uber. The driver is a piece worker for the individual employer who hires a specific manpower, that is to say, the customer who needs a lift. But, simultaneously, the driver is also a sharecropper for the Uber platform owner who demands a cut in the revenue generated. Finally, to the extent that Uber drivers constantly invent new methods and strategies to maximize their work output, the corporate platform grows in its analytical capacity of calculation, prediction, and execution. After all, it is no secret that self-driving cars are the next step the corporation is ready to implement in the foreseeable future.

The archaic features of this form of labor can hardly be domesticated by the rhetoric of being-your-own boss, the flexibility of the working schedule, and the almost total compulsion to work typical of modern-day supreme belief in productivity. And already whiffs of conflict begin to emerge as the unionization of Uber drivers in the State of Oregon attests.¹⁵ But there is another ancestral element of unruliness that the MTurk

14. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, New York, 2003, p. 283, translated by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith.

15. See for instance, D. Z. Morris, "Judge Upholds Uber Drivers' Union Rule in Seattle", in *Fortune Tech*, 2017, available at <http://fortune.com/2017/03/18/uber-union-rule-seattle/>.

model reveals. In the remaining part of this essay, I want to discuss the temporal component of the Mechanical Turk as a philosophical construct by relating it to the issue of living labor and its sexed truth. In this case, temporality has significant philosophical and political relevance.

Other Mechanical Turks: Zoltar and Benjamin's Chess Player

The particular exotic flavor of the MTurk directly recalls the image of a popular comedy of the late 1980s directed by Penny Marshall, *Big*, which starred Tom Hanks. In it, Josh Baskin is a twelve-year-old boy in love with an older girl who ignores him because of the age gap. A fortune-teller machine fashioned as an East-Asian magician called Zoltar Speaks grants him his wish to grow up. Suddenly a thirty-year-old man, Josh is forced to enter the brave world of New York City where he makes a career in the toy industry. Predicting the success story of Silicon Valley kids turning their passion into moneymaking machines, the plot replays the old trope of rejuvenation. The character impersonated by Tom Hanks, who eyes at a typical 1980s yuppie, is softened by the grace and idealism of his true twelve-year-old self. The wish that Zoltar grants Josh splits the character in two. Josh's exterior body is merely a medium to gain access to his true potential: his pristine creativity. The target here is unlocking childhood's magic so that it can be put to use and valorized to create goods to be sold to an increasing population of never-aging young adults. A proliferation of the mechanical colonizes the film. It originates from the magic of Zoltar which turns Josh in another veritable machine-maker. Thereby an interesting parallel arises with MTurk. As Moshe Z. Marvit notices the symbolism of Zoltar-MTurk goes far back in time. It is clearly connected to the "chess-playing machine commissioned by the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria in the early days of the Industrial Revolution," a "device that fit perfectly into the creeping belief –replete with excitement and anxiety– that mechanical labor (and maybe mechanical minds) could replace human labor and agency."¹⁶ What is at stake here is, thus, a technology that enables the tapping into some form of living force, which is original and fantastic in nature.

I mention this film because *Big* raises particular personal memories –when the film was released I was about the same age as Josh. And now when I pick up Walter

16. M. Z. Marvit, "How Crowdworkers Became the Ghosts in the Digital Machine", in *The Nation*, 2014, available at <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-crowdworkers-became-ghosts-digital-machine/>.

Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History*, particularly its opening paragraph, this rather dull Hollywood product keeps coming back to my mind. I thought it was due to one of those basic associative mechanisms that enable your mind to grasp a concept by preliminary placing it in a familiar context, despite how useless and perhaps mistaken that original reference is. Yet, as I consider Benjamin's writing, this lingering presence does not dissipate but rather becomes more intensively captivating. I begin, in fact, to see that something, perhaps a kernel of truth in my recollection, connects Zoltar to MTurk to Benjamin's *Theses*. Here is how Benjamin famously opens his work:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight¹⁷.

The little hunchback is a recurrent theme in Benjamin's autobiographical recollections. In this specific case, the hunchback represents Marxism. Theology, on the other hand, does not stand for official religion but rather it illustrates a form of weak messianic power. Scholars have associated this popular figure of German folklore with Benjamin's more famous theoretical figure: the Angel of History. And although the latter is typologically a figure of history, while the former belongs to the biographical dimension, a close association of the two is plausible.¹⁸ In my case, the reverberations between Benjamin's mechanical chess player, MTurk and Zoltar may have to do with a particular auroral moment in life: the beginning of adolescence where growth and transformation take an unavoidable corporeal and cognitive meaning. Adolescence was also a period in which I distinctively recall immersing myself in a sense of being that constantly ripped apart routine. It was a time when the automatisms of life were jammed by illuminations, which

17. W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Thesis I, 1940, available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>, translated by D. Redmon.

18. See V. Nelson, "Walter Benjamin and the Two Angels", in *Raritan*, 3, 2016, pp. 1-14.

I could not quite grapple with. These revelatory moments forced me to lend an ear to a sense of *becoming* that appeared and immediately *retreated* before I could seize it.

I feel that the hidden link between Benjamin's automaton and its filmic representation resides in this insight into becoming. Perhaps I can better lay it out via a parallel. In Benjamin, the scientific study and possible emancipation of living labor is naturally Marxism, and the hunchback is the anti-normative and *subtractive* force of his infancy which held the promise of salvation.¹⁹ Zoltar's magic, in turn, gestured toward the unleashing of the potential of transformation. In the stereotyped aesthetics of the 1980s, that unleashing was already coded as the utilitarian spirit of neoliberalism. But Zoltar's ragged special powers hold in reserve a morphogenetic force which is still not subsumed by mechanisms of capture –the confused and insecure look of Tom Hanks during the course of the film bears testimony to this unpredictable living element.

On the other hand, the energy that moves the Mechanical Turk and platform capitalism, in general, is also living labor. This means that when we talk about the neoliberal use of digital crowdworking something visceral emerges that has to do with life. The temporality of this emergence is far from linear, for it does not follow the progressive direction that we customarily attribute to it. Present, past, and future seem interconnected. After all, the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous is a characteristic of capitalism and the three figures of historical exploitation that converge in the digital worker illustrate it well. But there is a temporal element that Benjamin discusses, which is radically different from the neo-archaisms I discussed, that is important to unearth. Platform Capitalism neutralizes difference by inserting it into metrics of control that funnel living potential into mechanisms of valorization. This axiomatic is usually the result of a restructuring that responds to failed attempts to upset power. I cannot help to notice that digital platforms and HITS look like *perversions* of experimentations typical of anti-globalization movements. Think of common reciprocity-based work trading system such as Time Banks that flourished at the turn of the last century. While services were exchanged, the computing capability of the platform probably increased too but not at the expense of the users.

In addition to the organizational problem at stake, which obviously involves also the issue of ownership of the platform, we need to consider the return to a morphogenetic moment of passage and perhaps to a childlike dimension of life. In order to unpack the socio-symbolic complex that underlies the hybrid figure of Zoltar and Benjamin's Chess

19. R. K. Salinari, "Walter Benjamin e l'omino con la gobba", in *Tysm. Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2013, available at <http://tysm.org/author/admin/>.

Player –half-automaton and half-human, half-divine and half-mortal, half-modern and half-archaic– we need to look further back into the history and origin of the Mechanical automaton.

The *Mammoletta-Mammet* Complex

While discussing the intricacies of medieval theology, Jonathan Gil Harris brilliantly elucidated the complex temporal problem I just cited:

The Mechanical Turk, in its various medieval and (post-)modern iterations, is the exemplar of the post-human; Islam comes historically after Christianity, and its mechanical avatars replace humans and human labor. Yet the Mechanical Turk is also the exemplar of the pre-human, inasmuch as it is typologically left behind by the dwarves and contracted laborers who consolingly usurp its miraculous or messianic agency²⁰.

Harris continues his inquiry by describing the etymological reasons for this comparison, which he finds most clearly in “English Renaissance drama”, where words like Mawmet “or ‘maumet’ or ‘mammet’ was a common term for a doll, puppet, or mechanical homunculus”. These terms are all derived from “the proper name ‘Mohamet,’ or Mohammed” which “was first used in medieval England to designate the Prophet of Islam”²¹. Harris also traces back the Shakespearean use of this word to works like *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), where “Capulet calls his daughter, who has refused his choice of husband [...] A whining mammet”²². An interesting trope emerges –although Harris disputes its etymology– that, as in the gendered labor of the M-Turk, implies again the feminine living dimension. The *mammet* seems to have embodied the young woman who does not want to follow the father’s arrangements for marriage. She is thus another case of those “little women who have not yet acquired full life or maturity”, but who “are also, in their illicit desires, artificial puppets, straying from the course of true desire”²³. Much earlier in his *Stanze per la Giostra* (1478), Poliziano had begun to use

20. J. G. Harris, “Mechanical Turks, Mammet Tricks and Messianic Time”, in *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, 1, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 2010, pp. 82.

21. J. G. Harris, “Mechanical Turks, Mammet Tricks and Messianic Time”, pp. 82- 83.

22. J. G. Harris, “Mechanical Turks”, p. 82.

23. *Ibid.*

the Italian term *mammoletta*, which originally was another name for violets, to indicate chaste virgins, in other words, figures that have still not been incorporated by, and may perhaps even evade, patriarchal power. *Mammolette* thus potentially refuse life, naturally intended as the masculine appropriation of the feminine gift of life. Strictly speaking, Harris concludes, “what links all these instances of stage-mammets—whether transgressive females or irreligious idols—is their stigmatization as false images that are lifeless or mechanistic”²⁴.

As noted, there is a temporal element here that links the Mechanical Turk to Benjamin’s philosophical construct. The *mammoletta* with its stigmas of immaturity points to a threshold figure for the patriarchal order. The whining little doll is the prize of a conquest that is within reach, the anticipation of the latter only adds to her appeal. As she does not subdue to male authority, however, she exposes her truth: a being that is thought of as a thing, which cannot be turned into a property, a prey that cannot be fully seized. Evading the masculine grip, the *mammoletta* resists being internalized into patriarchy thus falling outside accepted symbolic positions. The commonplace stigmatization of the old virgin, as a matter of fact, perfectly explains what’s at stake with her symbolism. As Simone de Beauvoir writes “turned away from her destination, the old maid becomes an eccentric object, as troubling as the incommunicable thinking of a madman” for “virgins that men have not subjugated, old women who have escaped their power, are more easily looked upon as witches than other women”²⁵. Hence, this figure ensues fear and a feeling of revulsion. Misogynist and racial markings converge here. As Harris writes, “the female fetishist-mammet and the blasphemous fetish-mammet conjoin temporally: they are stigmatized as backward, undeveloped and immature; they cannot partake of the living Word, the truth and logos, of the Christian future”²⁶.

What is constructed as a regressive, lifeless and outside of history points thus to the trans-historical biopolitical complex of production, which in the case of the woman equals to the prescribed natural (and private) dimension of reproduction. Similarly, the heretic position of the Muslim world identifies the political-religious Other thus projecting on its technology the dark shadow of witchcraft, just like the eccentric, recalcitrant woman is associated with the devil’s spell. Being outside the righteous path of the Christian law and its teleological course, the *mammoletta*-mammet symbolically occupies thus a pre-historical or post-historical dimension. It is either a zone that escapes

24. Ibid.

25. S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books, New York, 2010, p. 209.

26. J. G. Harris, “Mechanical Turks”, p. 84.

patriarchal control and is thus prior to Christian truth or simultaneously it points to a temporal beyond, it is successive as it indicates a form of authority that is irresponsible and indifferent to true religious redemption.

This is the judgment passed by Christian Western thought. The case of Benjamin is different. I believe it is possible to read the chess player philosophical construct by looking at how Benjamin assumes the *mammoletta*-mammet eccentricity in a positive light. In the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Benjamin sought to imagine a *future* at a time when the latter seemed utterly impossible. His idea of history thus radically disrupts the naively linear progressive one that defined Bourgeois mentality and its barbaric inflection concocted by the Nazi regime. This is not the place to engage the complex problem of Benjamin's messianism. But it is perhaps worth directing our attention to the theoretical importance that Benjamin poses on the biographical dimension of infancy. As Victoria Nelson writes, it is here that we gain a "vantage point outside time and place", and it is here also that "we can finally grasp the particularities of linear history, because comprehending the past doesn't mean understanding 'what really happened', Benjamin says, but 'seize[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger'"²⁷.

The little hunchback embodies this radical deviation from a progressive development of history because its inner motive is to change reality by reconnecting us to the flux and magmatic nature of life, to something, in other words, that runs deeper than present capitalist configurations. How is it possible that the future of the utopian reflects the past? Discussing the concept of temporal plurality in Marxism, Vittorio Morfino recalls Nietzsche's insistence on the *untimely*. Morfino writes "that which is not actual is also not contemporaneous only when compared to our inauthentic contemporaneity", which means that "in the non-actual resides, in fact, a contemporaneity that is deeper and more profound"²⁸. The archaic element of our hypermodern world is not so much the chronological old but the regressive constrains that repress, administer, and exploit life. The neo-archaic is what blocks the emergence of a life that is more truly ours, and whose originary, immanent strength is certainly ancestral and yet still present to us. A post-human life, that might be more fully human perhaps, if with that term we indicate a life that we have not lived yet because of the prolonged endurance of human exploitation. To reverse Bezos' slogan we should not implement Artificial Artificial Intelligences but Human Artificial Intelligences. That is to say, we should not artificialize the artificial

27. V. Nelson, "Walter Benjamin and the Two Angels", p. 12.

28. V. Morfino, "Sul non contemporaneo: Marx, Bloch, Althusser", in *Bollettino Filosofico*, 27, 2011-2012, p. 413.

via human exploitation, but rather liberate human labor through artificial capacities. Today, we can interpret the hunchback as the mechanism that through subtractions and disruptions pulls the strings of the automaton (technology) to move in a direction that explodes the “homogenous and empty time” constructed by capitalism.²⁹

This means that the hunchback must turn back to infancy, looking at the temporality of the *mammoletta*-mammet complex. The hunchback suspends the time of infinite growth of progress opening the possibility to look beyond it. The hunchback is just another name for the “child’s divinatory relation to the world of things, a relation in which discovery and assimilation are predicated on mimetic immersion”³⁰. Again a similar insistence on the non-actual emerges, one that insists on immaturity and eccentricity against the prescribed path of performance and valorization. The point here is not to simply negate the current state of affairs. A direct denial of the latter does not undermine the system’s efficacy because it is still entangled in the very mechanism of control it wants to break away. With the *mammoletta*-mammet complex, we name something different: a refusal that affirms a *different* life form. I believe Luisa Muraro clarified this point when discussing what lies beyond the interdiction of the mother-daughter continuum. In her work on the symbolic order of the mother, she argues that “children are capable of transforming a state of need into a veritable laboratory for transforming and knowing themselves and the world”³¹. The maternal continuum in which they partake is a world-forming experience that is based on reciprocity and not on ownership nor, for that matter, on the teleology of value. Muraro further explicates this point when she states:

It is the experience of a subject in relation to the matrix of life, a subject that is distinguishable from the matrix but *not from its relation with her*. It is therefore not, properly speaking, a relationship between two. It is a relationship of being with being, that is how I propose to think (of) it. But it is a dynamic relationship, neither tautological nor self-reflexive, which I believe can be properly conceived according to the relationship of being-part-of.³²

29. W. Benjamin *On the Concept of History*, Thesis XIV, available at http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.PDF.

30. N. Heller, “Is the Gig Economy Working?”, *The New Yorker*, p. 18. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/is-the-gig-economy-working>.

31. L. Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1991, p. 38, unpublished translation by Mark Epstein.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

As a relation that suspends the frantic accrue-ment of capital and participates in the flux of life, this continuum sketches the contours of a cooperation that is different from the principles of neoliberal digitality. It alludes to an agency that defies the predominant individualist fetishism of communicative capitalism –where “we are told, repeatedly, that we are unique and special, that no one can speak for us, that we have to do it all ourselves– for it thrives on a relationality that it is not subject to despotic hierarchies but that acknowledges asymmetries based on authority and not power³³. This life form does not accept the blackmail of a mindset ruled by HITS, with its notion of self-reliance, and the productivist ethos typical of digital crowdsourcing. It also challenges neoliberal teleology providing an open-ended form of life that is based on the difference. Consequently, it ignores the utilitarian call to valorize the totality of experience because its relationality is already a form of communal experience, and thus, possibly, of creative work as well. These are obviously only theoretical aspects of a different relationality and this form of sociality is not void of conflicts and discrepancies. But these insights may function as a guide for a political organization that eventually would lead to a reappropriation of fixed capital without falling into the many ruses of neoliberal domesticating power.

33. J. Dean, “Not Us, Me”, *The New Left Review*, 2017, available at <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2970-not-us-me>.