IRONY 2.0

By Pil and Galia Kollectiv , 11 December 2007

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Ironic distance is ambiguous. It grounds both critique and detached resignation to the status quo. What becomes of it in the viral world of web 2.0?, ask Pil and Galia Kollectiv

In 1951, in his film *Traité de Bave et d'Éternité*, Isidore Isou announced:

I believe firstly that the cinema is too rich. It is obese. It has reached its limits, its maximum. With the first movement of widening which it will outline, the cinema will burst! Under the blow of a congestion, this greased pig will tear into a thousand pieces. I announce the destruction of the cinema, the first apocalyptic sign of disjunction, of rupture, of this corpulent and bloated organisation which calls itself film.

This prophecy could be seen as coming to pass with the fragmentation of moving image and cultural production brought about by web 2.0. However, its implications for what we understand to be the relationship between culture and critique far exceed those foreseen by Isou. Much of the critical thinking around web 2.0 has so far focused on issues of authorship and ownership, participation and consumption, the internet as public sphere, communication and community, the alienated labour of the creative industry worker, the commodification of information, opinion and taste. In short, a lot of the writing on the subject adopts a 'strategic' point of view, to use Michel de Certeau's distinction, rather than a 'tactical' one. The goals of this strategic investigation can be diverse: Richard Barbrook champions an 'anarcho dotcommunism'[1] while Manuel Castells describes the 'unseen logic of the meta-network, where value is produced, cultural codes are created and power is decided'[2]. But whether exposing the concealed relationship between institutions and mechanisms of power and control, re-establishing such institutions and mechanisms or seeking alternatives to them online, most readings, stemming from a socio-economic point of view, ultimately rely on an understanding of complex social practices as a superstructure within which differences, hybrid forms and cultural meanings become an undifferentiated morass of exploitation and oppression. In discussing the rise of the virtual, localised uses of networking websites within geographic communities get ignored. Bulletins, blogs, vlogs, comments, photos, mp3s and other forms of media and interaction get reduced to a corporate platform understood purely in terms of technical innovation and monetary value. However, the practices associated with the new platforms for user-generated content referred to as web 2.0 require a more detailed analysis. If we are to see these activities as a truly new field of cultural production, we need to stop applying paradigms borrowed from pre-

existing notions of critique. More importantly, in doing so we can begin to address the limitations of this critique more generally and open up a space for new forms of critique to emerge.

One strand of criticism against web 2.0 seems to come from a reactionary position, which sees in the democratisation of knowledge proposed by such sites as Wikipedia a threat to established hierarchies of experts and amateurs. The kind of emergent knowledge produced by users' contribution to editable entries is perceived as a 'dumbing down' of culture. In *The Cult Of The Amateur: How Blogs, Wikis, Social Networking, and the Digital World are Assaulting our Economy, Culture and Values*, Andrew Keen writes:

We – those of us who want to know more about the world, those of us who are the consumers of mainstream culture – are being seduced by the empty promise of the 'democratised' media. For the real consequences of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of information.[3]

Keen binds this anti-democratic sentiment to a defense of copyright against the ease of online appropriation that goes hand in hand with sites like YouTube. These issues, the ownership of truth and of intellectual property, are clearly related in their attachment to an order that is being undermined by a new mass culture. But what is interesting is what this critique shares with its more left-leaning allies, who would otherwise support the weakening of the same mechanisms of control that Keen wants to strengthen.

To the twin conservative critiques raised by Keen, more progressive critics add two more complaints: web 2.0 posits a regime of simulation in which spectacularised human relations supplant 'real' lived ones; moreover, those participating in these relations unwittingly contribute their immaterial labour to a capitalist market in which work and leisure are no longer differentiated. In the first instance, real friends are replaced with Friendsters, MySpace contacts or Facebook friends:

Sit someone at a computer screen and let it sink in that they are fully, definitively alone; then watch what happens. They will reach out for other people; but only part of the way. They will have 'friends', which are not the same thing as friends, and a lively online life, which is not the same thing as a social life; they will feel more connected, but they will be just as alone.[4]

This neo-platonic idea that mediated social relations are somehow inauthentic, like the idea that truth is corrupted online, assumes that 'real' truth, unmediated relations and authentic, singular selfhood exist offline. For Žižek, however, if we concede that the self revealed online is possibly more real, inverting the dichotomy, the consequences for society are even more dire:

The fact that I perceive my virtual self-image as mere play thus allows me to suspend the usual hindrances which prevent me from realising my 'dark half' in real life. My electronic id is given wing. And the same goes for my partners in cyberspace communication. I can never be sure who they are: are they really the way they describe themselves, is there a 'real' person at all behind a screen persona, is the screen persona a mask for a multiplicity of people, or am I simply dealing with a digitised entity which does not stand for any 'real' person? 'Interface' means precisely that my relationship to the other is never face-to-face, that it is always mediated by digital machinery.[5]

Žižek pulls the rug under the hierarchy that locates the real offline, but retains a hierarchical construction within his scheme, derived as it is from the psychoanalytical distinction between ego and id.

This critique of the confusion arising from the interfacing of technology and sociality is mirrored in the second complaint around the dissolution of the boundaries of work and leisure online. One not only experiences a new kind

of alienation from the self (even if as a heightened, more real than real subjectivity à la Žižek) within this pseudo-community, but also a new kind of alienation from the fruits of one's labour. Postfordist or immaterial labour, which 'produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity',[6] to use Maurizio Lazzarato's terminology, has greatly expanded the creative industry, turning formerly artistic and even political activity into a leading sector of the job market, in a much rehearsed argument summarised by Paolo Virno: '[t]he dividing line between Work and Action, which was always hazy, has now disappeared altogether.'[7] The unwitting or unremunerated culturepreneurs of web 2.0 are thus victims of a false consciousness which, unlike the more traditional Marxian one, doesn't just turn them into passive consumers, but actually exploits their active resistance and creativity to generate profits and appropriate their output. Not only is 'the postindustrial commodity [...] the result of a creative process that involves both the producer and the consumer', but

immaterial labor produces first and foremost a social relation—it produces not only commodities, but also the capital relation.[8]

Participants in new internet platforms contribute their time and energy in producing videos for YouTube, uploading images to Flickr and making music to fill up MySpace, but above and beyond this what they contribute to the speculative economy generated by these websites and their accompanying technologies is their communicative skills, their networks of friends within which such content is circulated and manipulated.

The reception of these cultural products therefore becomes an integral part of their production:

In the first place, as the addressee of the ideological product, the public is a constitutive element of the production process. In the second place, the public is productive by means of the reception that gives the product 'a place in life' (in other words, integrates it into social communication) and allows it to live and evolve. Reception is thus, from this point of view, a creative act and an integrative part of the product.[9]

It is precisely because of the centrality of this activity to the production of content on web 2.0 that much of this criticism, with its focus on a truth to be uncovered about what is really going on, finds itself at an impasse. The challenge to authorship online far exceeds questions of ownership and exploitation, and to address it we need to look at the ways in which not just products but meanings are forged in this context. Jaron Lanier is right to complain about 'the lack of a coherent voice': sites and applications such as YouTube, MySpace TV and Google Video erode the coherence of cinematic work and threaten its status as the most significant product of the culture industry.[10] In an issue devoted to 'distributed aesthetics', contributors to online journal *Fibreculture* have already noted that changes in the form of spectatorship, from the mass audience of the darkened movie theatre to the distributed aloneness of the computer screen have contributed to the emergence of new artistic sensibilities.[11] However, the implications of this transition from film to viral video, or from newspaper to blog, go beyond the aesthetic.
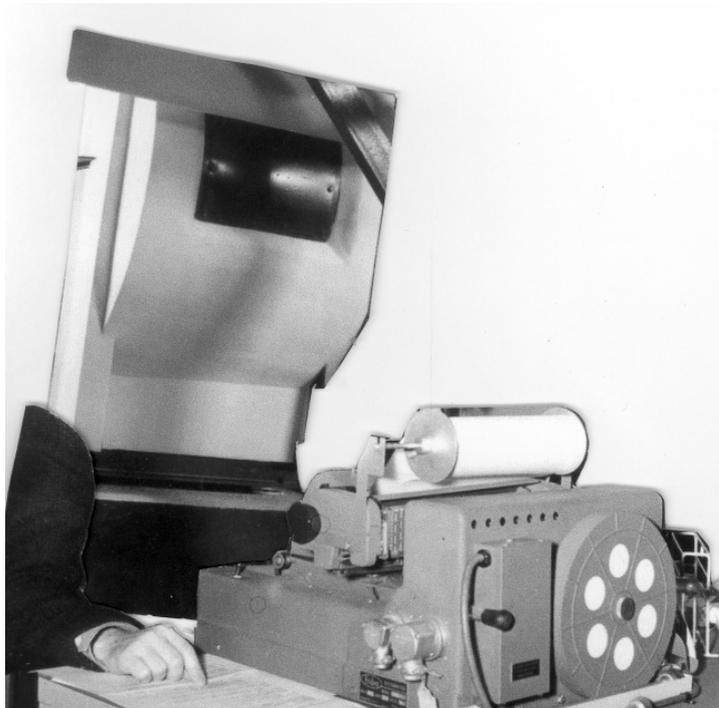
What films do best is provide us with the space of irony which has become synonymous with critique. The cuts, the layering of sound and vision, the limited scope and proportions of the cinematic frame, the always questionable neutrality of the camera, all construct a Swiss cheese arena of negative spaces, each defined by the gaps or holes of knowledge surrounding it. One either reads with the audience against the grain of the Hollywood epic, exposing an obscure level of meaning (something we all know the film doesn't know, to use Žižekian terms) or with the film against the audience (the ignorant passive viewers who 'share' the sadistic fantasy of a moral distinction between 'good' and 'bad' of the epic, only to 'realise' in the end that they too are being implicated in its violence). For instance, a film like *Top Gun* can be read as a homoerotic narrative, exposing the underlying homoeroticism of macho American militarism (and indeed artist Don Bury has proposed such an interpretation in a video that re-edits the film to underline this). Meanwhile, a film such as *Starship Troopers* itself proposes an ironic relationship to its subject matter, leading the viewer to assume a degree of identification with the 'filmmaker' against the film, or the social scenario it presents of unqualified support for the military. In both cases, a gap opens between what we see and how we interpret it which produces a sense of criticality. Even if we know that the 'authorial' voice is something we construct, we can still seek to find 'unintended' or 'subconscious' meanings within it. This is for instance what psychoanalytical or feminist readings of texts classically do, what Irit Rogoff terms

the endless cataloguing of the hidden structures, the invisible powers and the numerous offences we have been preoccupied with for so long.[12]

But to do this you need to assume a stable position to argue with or to ironise. This logic of irony in the cinema, the space between 'intention', however constructed, and action or surface, becomes nearly impossible when confronted with the viral video of web 2.0. The difference in our relationship to such 'texts' and to more traditional media is between reading 'with' and 'against' the grain and not even seeing any grain. The basic question which the spectator in the cinema asks – 'why is this being shown to me and why am I not permitted to see that?' – loses all relevance in the endless sea of home videos, fragments of obscure music videos, webcam diaries, video-game captures etc. Instead of the artful economising of the cinematic image, we are flooded with the off-the-cuff spontaneity of uploaded amateur media. Because of the viral nature of these websites, questions of originality and authorship become pointless: only after numerous versions of the memorable 'Dramatic Chipmunk' clip (the camera closing in on a terrified looking prairie dog, cast and recast as James Bond or a character in *Kill Bill*) did we stumble upon the original Japanese television show from which the five second clip was edited, and by that point it was no longer an original in any meaningful way, only another variation on the theme. Without a clear authorial voice, ironic subversion makes way for appropriation.

Interpretation, rather than taking a secondary role in deciphering 'true' meanings becomes primary, a fiction on the same level as the 'work' itself. Web 2.0 challenges previous distinctions of private and public, of what one is permitted to see or barred from seeing. Žižek, one of the great masters of dismantling ironic gaps of knowledge in cinematic works, writes that the notion of citizenship under the late communist regimes of Eastern Europe was constituted on an ironic gap between the private, in which one criticised the regime, and the public sphere in which one participated in party functions and rituals, creating a sense of inauthenticity and personal guilt. This actually creates the mechanism of control through guilt that Žižek identifies as a distinctive feature of the late Communist regimes:

we thus had a regime that actively condoned and relied on the moral bankruptcy of its subjects. This actual shared guilt provides the disavowed foundation of the spectre of the 'objective guilt' evoked by the Communist regime.[13]

We can perhaps compare this observation to the quiet collaboration of the artist in an alienated art market: we all hate the art fair in pub conversations, but agree to participate in them because 'an artist has got to make a living', leaving us with the confused sense of self-betrayal. Web 2.0 makes this conflict between private and public vanish, the pub conversation becomes the business card, blogs proclaim what has traditionally been said behind people's backs. Even *Vogue*'s Nicholas Coleridge remarks in astonishment:

Facebook has altered our concept of privacy. Rich people who loftily decline to list their home in *Who's Who* are there, complete with specially commissioned photograph.[14]

On Facebook, blogs and forums, what we hide from the world becomes our most visible trait. Gradually, the ironic gap between the social and the professional is closing. Journalists often complain of the cowardly cruelty of users

who write comments, or talkbacks, in response to an online article. But isn't this the kind of violent externalisation and dramatisation of opinion that is lacking in an unengaging political arena?
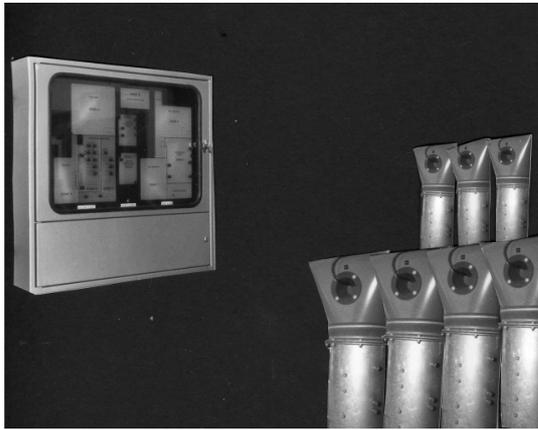
The question that we are presented with is not one of uncovering the hidden system of power relations that is duping us into being exploited. This is not a case of the users being used. Rather, we need to find a new language of critique that takes for granted the possibility that the truth is not out there and doesn't matter anyway, that there is no longer an ironic gap to be narrowed. Just as Walter Benjamin recognised that literature and theatre could no longer form the basis of a critique in the face of cinema, we need to ask what the performances we undertake and are subjected to online require of us politically. We are witnessing exchanges of information in which we may never know what an author might have intended, whether the person who posted the clip or set up the profile was joking or not, and we need to discover a new political praxis that acknowledges this interface as a valid form of communication, regardless of its instrumentalisation within an economic scheme. It is not that subversion can't happen under the noses of Murdoch et al, oblivious to users' manipulation of their spectacular technologies, but that the failed dialectic of subversion and hegemony, in which users don't know what they are doing and end up reinforcing or being co-opted by the system, is annihilated in the post-ironic sphere of web 2.0, where that knowledge is immanent. The moment of truth, or revelation, is no longer the punch line of critique, but the starting point of production. Writing about the role of critique in relation to the digital economy, Tiziana Terranova claims:

As the spectacular failure of the Italian Autonomy reveals, the purpose of critical theory is not to elaborate strategies that then can be used to direct social change. On the contrary, as the tradition of cultural studies has less explicitly argued, it is about working on what already exists, on the lines established by a cultural and material activity that is already happening […] Rather than retracing the holy truths of Marxism on the changing body of late capital, free labor embraces some crucial contradictions without lamenting, celebrating, denying, or synthesizing a complex condition.[15]

We can therefore no longer rely on critique, which we understand as an ironic distance between our enlightened consciousness and those duped by the system, to produce resistance. As Paolo Virno has noted, '[t]he dividing line between Work and Action, which was always hazy, has now disappeared altogether.' Instead of striving to uncouple work and political action, we must turn our gaze to the equivocal action latent within our new regimes of work as leisure.

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Footnotes:

[1] Barbrook uses the heading 'The Net as Really Existing Anarcho-Communism' to discuss an online gift economy transcending the net's military origins and capitalist instrumentalisation. Richard Barbrook, 'The Hi-Tech Gift

Economy', *First Monday* Special Issue #3: Internet banking, e-money, and Internet gift economies, December, 2005, http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_12/barbrook/#author

[2]Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000, p. 508.

[3]Andrew Keen, 'The Great Seduction', extract from *The Cult Of The Amateur: How Blogs, Wikis, Social Networking, and the Digital World are Assaulting our Economy, Culture and Values*, New York: Random House, 2007, http://andrewkeen.typepad.com/

[4] John Lanchester, 'A bigger bang', *The Guardian*, 4 November 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,,1937496...

[5] Slavoj Žižek, 'Is this digital democracy, or a new tyranny of cyberspace?', *The Guardian*, 30 December 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1980156...

[6] Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labour', 1997, translated by Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm [currently offline]

[7] Paolo Virno, 'Virtuosity and Revolution', http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/00...

[8] Maurizio Lazzarato, op.cit.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Jaron Lanier, 'Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism', *Edge*, 30 May 2006, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_...

[11] Lisa Gye, Anna Munster and Ingrid Richardson, [eds.], *Fibreculture*, issue 7, December 2005, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue7/index.html

[12] Irit Rogoff, 'Academy as Potentiality', 18 February 2007, http://summit.kein.org/node/191

[13] Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Mention Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*, London: Verso, 2001, p. 91.

[14] Nicholas Coleridge, 'Everybody's At It', *Vogue*, London: Conde Nast, December issue, 2007, p. 138.

[15] Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy', *Electronic Book Review,* 20 June 2003, http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technoc...