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Epilogue: The Politics of the Affective Digital

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This intention behind this epilogue to the volume is to extract some of the political aspects of digital affect discussed by the contributors and highlight their importance for this new, emerging field of study. In plain words, this is a cross-disciplinary area between cultural studies and digital media; nevertheless, it is still the politics of emotion and affect, which digital media generate, that are the main preoccupation of the book (see Kuntsman's Introduction, this volume). In my own work, I argue that *affective structures mediate between the actual and the digital virtual*. This spectrum of affect relates to the interface between the actual and the digital, which contains the possibilities of what may or may not happen, to use the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of the virtual as potentiality (see Karatzogianni, this volume). In certain cases, where structures are overflowed with affect, the virtual is materialized, leading to what I called the 'Revolutionary Virtual'. With this specific concept in mind, I would like to revisit the contributions made hitherto, to make sense of the consequences of such a notion for the political in digital affect, while taking on board the significant theoretical and empirical contributions made available by the authors in this volume.

To begin with, it is Patricia Clough's understanding of affect which is of interest here. In a significant turn, Clough identifies the transmission of affect as a defining moment in aesthetic capitalism. Affect, in her reading, is different from emotion as it is pre-individual, pre-subjective, so that affect is not an emotion, but 'a bodily capacity, a bodily readiness, a trigger to action, including the action of feeling an emotion'; 'a vector of unqualified intensity seeking future actualization; it is a vehicle from one dimension of time to another' (Clough, this volume). Such understanding of affective branding, which is bringing the future into the present, is utilized by Clough to untangle the graphic framing

1 of unending war and the humanitarian response to it. In that sense,
 2 mapping the structures and economies of affect, which mediate the
 3 actual to the digital virtual, moves the study of digital media beyond
 4 the semiotic and representational, in order to further explore the unrec-
 5 ognized emotions triggered by engaging with the digital virtual. It is the
 6 internal governance of our feelings and emotions in relation to the dig-
 7 ital that can potentially make a difference to the political. Emotions act
 8 as a recognition of subjective affect, forming the platform from which
 9 political behaviour can be rationalized and materialized. And this politi-
 10 cal behaviour is not only possible for humans or organic matter. In fact,
 11 Luciana Parisi pushes the notion of affect further 'as a way of revealing
 12 inhuman modes of feelings and registering material change', arguing
 13 that 'nanotechnologies are weapons of affect', because they are adding
 14 another measure to the quality of feeling and are revealing that affect is
 15 not bounded to organic bodies, but 'on the contrary defines an architec-
 16 ture of feeling, a machinic registering of change that occurs at all levels
 17 of matter'. In this sense, the future holds a nanoarchitectural space as
 18 an 'autonomous body of affects ... subtly governing modes of thought
 19 and feeling as we know them' (Parisi, this volume).

20 The blurring of the actual, the material, the virtual and the digital
 21 virtual is already in the present, a field richer than reality, operating
 22 through affect. The digital self here is constituted also as a political
 23 subject, and yet the question remains, what kind of subject is consti-
 24 tuted through digital affect, and what are the political implications of
 25 this constitution? Debra Ferreday, on her part, locates empirically the
 26 relationship with affective structures in the digital self, in this case con-
 27 structed in the digital game world of the fantastical, where she examines
 28 how, by allowing participants to play with the notion of becoming
 29 nonhuman/posthuman, online gaming becomes 'a way of reanimating
 30 and thinking through the ways in which fantasies of the prelinguistic
 31 might be a focus of resistance'. It is through the digital fantastic that
 32 'new possibilities and new ways of thinking through subjectivity might
 33 be explored and become a source of hope' (Ferreday, this volume). Less
 34 optimistically, Eugénie Shinkle criticizes both the view that the self in
 35 online gaming is placed in a shallow engagement of stuplime affect,
 36 during which 'the subject experiences an attenuation of self in the guise
 37 of entertainment', and the view that the repetitive activity brings about
 38 not boredom but a semi-hypnotic state, a flow. She argues that the expe-
 39 rience of the digital sublime can be understood better at the point where
 40 there is a rupture; where the subject is no longer part of the game world,
 41 and where there is a collapse of control and meaning: 'The dissolution

1 of the technologically enabled self is both catastrophic and utterly
2 banal: marked by a profound sense of rupture and loss, and situated in
3 the mundane reality of the consumer everyday' ... 'The contemporary
4 digital sublime, the experience of the limitless potential of human inge-
5 nuity is lodged within artifacts whose material existence is fleeting and
6 insignificant' (Shinkle, this volume).

7 In another area of popular culture, Karenza Moore interrogates the
8 embodied practices of negotiating, displaying and circulating affect
9 through digital technologies in relation to clubber identities and the
10 memories of nostalgia, hatred and mourning entangled in remember-
11 ing spaces in which illicit-drug-fuelled intense feelings circulate. She
12 argues that 'affect, narrativization and identity-work intersect at the
13 site of online memorializations'. In this sense, digital affect can be used
14 as a conceptual tool to explore 'how technologies mediate emotions,
15 particularly those emotions involved in the pursuit of a viable "authen-
16 tic" identity practices' and 'how those committed to certain dubious
17 elective identities engage with those (others) they encounter in the
18 affective fabrics of digital cultures and beyond' (Moore, this volume).
19 Remembering is a significant part of digital affect, as Leder Mackley and
20 Angelina Karpovich point out, in that there are idiosyncratic, affective
21 stories behind physical objects' places in ordinary people's homes
22 and hearts. Leder Mackley and Karpovich view 'the affective fabrics of
23 creating personal object stories of the physical things we care about',
24 as digital overlays. Tobias Raun, while examining transgender vlogs
25 (video blogs), argues that for transgender subjectivities the digital fabric
26 enables an archive of feelings, playing a great role in constructing, per-
27 forming and expressing trans identities. The digital offers greater possi-
28 bilities for affective intensities to be experienced, and 'yet these affective
29 responses can form a basis for self-affirmation, intellectual inquiry and
30 political action'. Raun reads the transgender vloggers as an affective
31 counterpublic (Raun, this volume).

32 Consequently, the constitution of the political is inevitably tied to
33 the intersection between political economy and affective economy.
34 In contemporary post-industrial societies, even intimacy is exploited
35 and commercialized, becoming yet another fabric of branding affect,
36 beyond bio-politics, operationalized to capture manufactured opportu-
37 nities for intimacy for white-collar workers. Melissa Gregg, for example,
38 examines online companies, promising help to make intimacy and
39 love easier and convenient, bypassing the unproductive search and
40 consuming dimensions of start-up relationships. In that sense, spaces
41 of digital media provide a sense of community and affection – a form of

1 affective labour which is lacking in the offline working life of advanced
 2 capitalist societies. 'The register of intimacy is one of the better ways
 3 to explain how workplaces exploit the pact between emotional and
 4 temporal investment in labour in the interests of capital' (Gregg, this
 5 volume). The link of affective economies to the political economy of
 6 global communications is further demonstrated in detail in Mihirini
 7 Sirisena's account of the use of mobile phones in romantic relationships
 8 by young people in Sri Lanka. The mobile phone becomes an affective
 9 extension to the self, assuming a form of intersubjectivity, where 'being
 10 there through mobile phones becomes expected of relationships, not as
 11 a form of surveillance, but as a carefully managed aspect of togetherness'
 12 (Sirisena, this volume).

13 Beyond the intersection between political economy and affective
 14 economy, in the explicitly political aspects of digital affect, evading
 15 and reacting to digital censorship by the oppressive and authoritarian/
 16 totalitarian state, emerges yet another affective plateau. In countries
 17 which are placed in the semi-periphery or the periphery of the Western
 18 world view, countries where political oppression by the state still
 19 attempts to keep the population in line, in order to pre-empt democratic
 20 transformations, digital affect is emerging as a topos of expression
 21 of political discontent and the mobilization of dissidents. It seems
 22 that such online engagement in mobilizing dissent and protest is less
 23 successful in some parts of the world than in others. The use of social
 24 media might be inconsequential, where other factors are not present,
 25 such as underlying causes of political, economic and social crisis
 26 brought to a boiling point, and the financial, rhetorical tools, resources
 27 and windows of opportunity in the political structure to engage in
 28 meaningful social change. In Laura-Zoë Humphreys' account of the
 29 paranoid public sphere in Cuba, Cuban intellectuals respond through
 30 email wars, by engaging in 'a symptomology of the state, reading and
 31 interpreting the smallest gestures, interactions, and statements of Fidel
 32 Castro and other top officials'. In response to the debate of digital media
 33 used as a tool for a more open, democratic public sphere, 'Cuban intellectuals
 34 vacillate between optimism about the potential of digital technologies to
 35 escape state control and wariness of a censorship that has, in response,
 36 become more unpredictable, anonymous, and difficult to detect with
 37 certainty' (Humphreys, this volume). In the case of Bulgaria, Julia Rone's
 38 examination of the election campaign in 2009 points to an 'exuberant
 39 depiction of social media, which were expected to "kill" the old-style
 40 top-down authoritative politics', which degenerated quickly to a
 41 'picture of irony, Balkanization of the online debates and general

1 lack of interest in the specific political programmes of the parties'. In
2 fact, the parties that invested more in the digital domain fared worse
3 in the outcome of the elections, with alternative campaigns through
4 social media failing to reconfigure the offline space. Not only that, in
5 the Bulgarian scenario, 'social media actively helped to consolidate the
6 nationalistic discourse and to eliminate any possibility of a rational
7 debate' (Rone, this volume). In political art, Michaela Quadraro points
8 to hopeful uses of the digital fabric to challenge hegemonic logics about
9 the body, race, gender and identity, to revolutionize the mentality of
10 the spectators of digital art, and to move them beyond the purely narra-
11 tive reading of content, while the digital 'amplifies the affective politics
12 of the audiovisual production' (Quadraro, this volume).

13 In conclusion, the digital affect of discontent and the desire for social
14 change are often not channelled through or translated tangibly into
15 the actual world, and even when they are, they often seem not sustain-
16 able enough to channel forces and materialize actual social or political
17 change. As I suggest in my own contribution to the volume that the
18 overflow of affective structures enabled by the digital virtual, coupled
19 with systemic failures can serve as an explanation of the ongoing pro-
20 test and regime overthrow in the Middle East and indeed in hundreds
21 of cities in Europe, North America and then globally with the Occupy
22 movement during 2011. This is because, in the world of ideas, the cir-
23 culation of affect and the digital archive of feelings and images, of new
24 spaces of open public spheres, in which affect circulates freely, creating
25 memory, multiple identities and hope, affect enables both the recogni-
26 tion of the feelings of the Other and the desire for a freer and more open
27 democratic sphere, envisaged with a more transparent and less violent
28 state or without a state altogether. It is at this point that the circulation
29 of digital affect serves as a spectrum between the actual and the digital
30 virtual and demands change away from bankrupt liberal representa-
31 tional democracies and/or other authoritarian variants of capitalism of
32 the accumulation by dispossession variety. This kind of tangible politi-
33 cal change is sure to follow, as these current models shall not manage
34 effectively networks, flows, material machines and productive labors at
35 the libidinal, affective, and ideological levels, unless the world system
36 is rebooted as a whole.