

A Politics of Judgment?: Alienation and Platformized Creative Labor

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What possibilities for collective struggle exist within platformized creative labor processes? Creative labor's platformization exacerbates barriers to collective resistance. These barriers include widespread entrepreneurial dispositions and divergence in terms of workers' experiences, narratives, practices, and class interests. I show how routine and expressive workers involved in the production of YouTube content share a distinctive dispossession: alienated judgment. Based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a YouTube management company and interviews with managers, office staff, and content producers, I argue that alienated judgment provides a possibility for collective resistance across creative class fractions. Creative labor requires judgment, yet routine and expressive workers' judgments are subordinate to platforms' affordances and governance as well as racialized and gendered managerial hierarchies. I highlight major obstacles to collective resistance among creative workers while holding out the possibility that alienated judgment provides for the articulation of workers' experience and thus a point around which the digital economy's divided labor might organize. I conclude by arguing that any collective resistance built on a shared politics of judgment must articulate both the generality of creative labor's alienation as well as workers' intersectional identities.

Keywords: alienation, cognitive capitalism, labor resistance, affect, platform labor, YouTube, social media

In July 2019, the Internet Creators Guild (ICG) shuttered its activities. The ICG attempted to provide "union-like" mediation between digital content producers and platforms such as YouTube, but the guild gave up after failing to gain interest among content producers (Alexander, 2019). This closure came despite several years of well-publicized (and ongoing) conflict between YouTube and its "creators" over the platform's rapidly changing policies governing earnings. Even before the rise of platforms, efforts to mobilize creative labor often failed due to the absence of conditions conducive to group formation such as shared

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narratives, identity, and meaning. The platformization of creative labor further exacerbates this problem for culture workers, adding lack of physical copresence.

To this rather bleak situation, I ask: What shared experiences provide organizing possibilities for platformized creative labor? Searching for possible paths to collective resistance among platformized creative workers, I start with theorists of “cognitive” capitalism who claim that heightened interdependency within cultural production and, more broadly, “knowledge work” may lead to realizing the “common” of “immaterial” labor (e.g., Hardt & Negri, 2005; Virno, 2004). This runs counter to recent events noted above where platformized creative laborers appear uninterested in organizing while other platformized workers develop the collective strategies of resistance detailed in this special section and in the news (Butler, 2018; Hussain & Bhuiyan, 2020; Ongweso, 2021). *Why?*

Key obstacles to culture or knowledge workers’ collective resistance include heterogeneity in terms of wages and status, which leads to a “narcissism of minor differences” (Deuze, 2007, pp. 121–122) alongside widespread entrepreneurial attitudes toward work (duGay, 2005; Neff, 2012), absorbing and dynamic interactions vis-à-vis technology that enroll workers in organizational projects (Siciliano, 2016, 2021), absence of physical copresence due to geographic dispersion (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018), atomization (Gray & Suri, 2019), and classification as “users” rather than workers—similar to other industries’ platform workers (Rosenblat, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Given these obstacles, what possibilities for articulating a politics of resistance exist within platformized creative labor processes? Comparing two platformized, creative class fractions (i.e., routine and expressive workers), I argue that workers in quite different positions share a common experience. Their engaging labor processes alienate judgment. I base this argument on 10 months of ethnographic participant observation conducted at a global YouTube production network (a multichannel network or MCN) that I call The Future.² The Future is a “social media intermediary” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) wherein employees provide services to content producers similar to conventional talent management agencies such as advising creators on how to “optimize” content for YouTube. The Future directly employed a relatively small office staff for routine service and data-analysis positions. In contrast, expressive workers (i.e., digital content producers or “creators”) worked as freelancers represented or “managed” by office staff. This creates at least two clear class fractions with seemingly divergent interests. However, I show how both class fractions experience alienated judgment vis-à-vis platforms as well as a racial and gender hierarchy within The Future.

Both office workers and “creators” possess autonomy in completing tasks, yet both lack decision-making authority over the ends to which they put their creative labor. Creative labor requires using judgment, yet workers’ judgment tends always to be subordinate to the platform’s metrics and algorithms. As I show, this holds true for both class fractions and so, workers’ common experience of alienated judgment may provide a *possibility* for a collective politics of judgment, a point around which fractions of the digital creative class might organize collective resistance to global capital.

² The names of the company, staff members, and content producers are pseudonyms.

In addressing these issues, I aim for both theoretical innovation as well as discursive interventions to both academic and public discussions of platformized creative labor. Speaking directly to this special section's focus on digital labor activism, my interventions name the alienation experienced by social media workers to highlight a potential path toward the "organization of alienation" (Tronti, 2019, p. 274) into collective resistance. Delineating specific tactics for organizing alienated judgment lies beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I aim to highlight the *possibility* of collective resistance among class fractions of *platformized* creative labor.

Relatedly, my analysis of creative labor's alienation pushes back against celebrants of the neoliberal "entrepreneurial agency" afforded by platforms (i.e., Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021). In forceful contrast, I affirm social media workers' experiences as *labor subordinate to global capital*, not simply "entrepreneurs building cultural and commercial value" (Craig, Cunningham, & Lv, 2021, p. 100). I do so while attending to what I elsewhere call platformized creative labor's positive and negative poles (Siciliano, 2021), thus acknowledging creative labor's core ambivalence and avoiding unproductive conceptual divisions among workers' enjoyment, alienation, exploitation, and pleasure (Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021).

Below, I discuss alienation's role in workers' collective identification and group formation before discussing the relationships among alienation, affect, and judgment in theories of labor under cognitive capitalism. I then present ethnographic and interview data in which workers, paradoxically, enjoy producing that which they dislike. I term creative labor's distinctive form of self-estrangement *alienated judgment* to provide a theoretical discourse by which scholars and workers may articulate this ambivalent experience (Hall, 2021). I claim that alienated judgment stems from specific social relations found within *particular labor processes*. I say this to set boundary conditions not found among scholars who use similar phrases to make grand claims about macro-social cognitive deformation or "false consciousness" (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno's [2007] *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Slöterdijk's [1987] *Critique of Cynical Reason*), though, of course, their claims and mine are by no means mutually exclusive. To be clear, I do not claim workers' capacity for reason to have been permanently lost or rendered ineffectual, only that platformized labor processes require workers to subordinate their values to the platform when exercising critical judgments of quality, value, or ethics.

Creative workers' alienation runs counter to the ideas of aforementioned neoliberal proponents of social media entrepreneurship, more critical theorizations of social media workers as exploited but unalienated labor (i.e., Andrejevic, 2009), and autonomist Marxists who claim that "cognitive" capitalism alienates workers' affects (e.g., Berardi, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2005; Lazzarato, 2014; see also Gill & Pratt, 2008 for critique). In contrast, *I argue that creative labor's distinctive mode of alienation provides for a potential resistance built on a labor politics of judgment* rather than a "politics of affect" (Massumi, 2015). I conclude by highlighting several practical barriers to such collective resistance, but a full consideration of all potential challenges lies beyond the scope of this article.

Possibility in Alienation

In Marxist theoretical traditions, the negative—that which capitalism excludes or denies—provides possibility for collective resistance or struggle against capital. Insofar as this article focuses on the *possible*

politics of platformized creative labor, I focus on the negative to illuminate shared lived experiences, narratives, and practices of meaning-making that set base conditions for group formation and collective action among workers (Sallaz, 2013). Further conditionings of resistance include the structure of labor processes (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979) as well as platform workers' legal status, relation to and investment in work, and management style (van Doorn, 2019). In "creative" sectors, the organization of work tends toward the atomized and isolated, presenting another barrier to unionization (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018) and heightening the likelihood that workers see themselves as entrepreneurial "venture labor" (Neff, 2012). Relatedly, workers' tendency to identify with an industry or "field" rather than any particular occupation diminishes the possibility of a shared collective identity around which they might rally (Damarin, 2006, 2013; Huws, 2014).

The platformization of creative labor exacerbates these barriers to collective resistance as workers' individual experiences greatly diverge such as their emotional attachments and personal investments. Even so, two dialectically related poles typify creative labor processes (Siciliano, 2021). At creative labor's positive pole, workers tend to be affectively engaged or aesthetically enrolled by managerial practices aimed at "fixing" how workers feel (Ross, 2004; Siciliano, 2016, 2021). This occurs across a variety of occupations, most often those whose work demands recurrent interactions with dynamic technological interfaces that elicit "causal pleasure" (Chun, 2005), moments of "flow" vis-à-vis information appresented or added to our perception by means of screens (Cetina & Bruegger, 2000; Christin, 2020; Snyder, 2016), or what I describe as "aesthetic experiences" in which workers subjectively "disappear" into technology (Siciliano, 2016, 2021, 2022).

While work's affective and aesthetic dimensions provide yet another barrier to resistance, alienation provides possibility for organizing platformized creative labor. Platformized *creative* labor—like all platformized labor—experiences objective subordination to platforms' "algoratic" control (Aneesh, 2009) and thus shared experiences of what Mary Gray and Sidharth Suri (2019) call the "algorithmic cruelty" of platforms' digital despotism. Despite this, Andrejevic (2009) claims that platforms "offer to overcome estrangement or alienation" in exchange for willful participation in an exploitative process of appropriation (p. 419). More recently, research on platformized creative labor trends toward discussions of "relational" or "emotional" labor between content producers and fans (e.g., Baym, 2015, 2018; Guarriello, 2019). This research fruitfully focuses attention on the continued devaluation of feminized, affective, emotional, or relational labor (see also, Duffy, 2017) but ignores the other half of "immaterial" labor in online content production: Cognitive/intellectual work, "symbolic production" (Hardt, 2005; Hardt & Negri, 2005), the "laboring of communication" (Mosco & McKercher, 2008), or what many scholars, myself included, call creative labor.

Contra Andrejevic (2009), Hardt and Negri (2005) claim that the rise of "immaterial" labor renews the relevance of alienation to social analysis. Still, Hardt and Negri's (2005) discussion of alienation, quoted below, is painfully slim:

Alienation was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers, but here in a realm [the regime of immaterial labor] that many still do not want to consider labor—affective labor, as well as knowledge production and symbolic production—alienation does provide a useful conceptual key for understanding exploitation. (p. 111)

If alienation is to prove useful in understanding platformized creative labor, then we need to know what creative labor processes alienate.

To properly understand platformized creative labor's specific alienation requires a brief discussion of alienation under capitalism, beginning with Marx. For Marx, capitalism alienated workers both psychologically and through material dispossession including workers' alienation from their selves, tasks, the products of their labor, and fellow workers. Over the 20th century, Marx's alienation concept went through numerous updates from both macrosocial theorists of reification (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 2007; Lukács, 1971) and researchers who focused on particular labor processes. Among the latter, Braverman (1974) showed how deskilling or the separation of planning and execution of tasks and processes in factories heightened workers' alienation from their tasks. Later, Hochschild (2003) extended Marx's self-estrangement by showing how interactional service work alienates workers from their most intimate emotions after long days performing emotional labor. More recently, self-estrangement has been extended to include identities (Kunda, 1992) and personal narratives (Costas & Fleming, 2009).

These alienations provide possibilities for resistance and so, again, I ask: What do *creative* labor processes alienate? First, we need to understand what comprises creative labor. Following management scholars (e.g., Adler & Obstfeld, 2007; Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Straw, 2005), theorists of "cognitive capitalism" (e.g., Boutang, 2011; Lazzarato, 2014), and social media scholars (Baym, 2015; Guarriello, 2019), creative labor requires cognition and rational intellect alongside intuition and feeling. Intuition and feeling fall within what contemporary cultural theory calls affect (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002) or what autonomist Marxist philosopher, Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009) calls the "soul." In *The Soul at Work*, Berardi (2009) focuses on the relationship between alienation and affect, claiming that over-absorption and overstimulation of our senses is the "alienation of our times." Defining "soul" in opposition to "reason"—"sensibility" or affect in contrast to ethics—Berardi (2009) argues that cognitive capitalism alienates the body's vital impulses—the "soul" or "the sensibility animating the body" (p. 133)—while capturing value from cognition and communication (i.e., creative labor). Lazzarato (2014) makes a similar claim in *Signs and Machines*, arguing that creative labor "involves the non-discursive focal points of subjectivity" or affect; embodied feelings, not just "cognition," "knowledge," or judgment (pp. 222–223).

I agree; however, I maintain that creative labor ought to best be thought as a combination of affect *and* judgment. Per John Dewey (2005), creative expression stems from an initial impulsion or impingement on the body's senses—what Berardi (2009) calls the "soul"—and, when modulated by reflective thought, this initial impulsion or bodily impingement yields what Dewey terms expression. Dewey's description provides something of an instructive example of non-alienated creative labor wherein an initial impulse to produce appears attenuated by the working subject's autonomous judgment rather than that of a manager or consumer. Berardi (2009) and Lazzarato (2014), in contrast, ignore this second-order modulation and its interaction with workers' sensed, embodied experiences. Assuming workers to be affectively alienated, Berardi (2009) argues that judgment, "reason," or "ethical consciousness" cannot form a basis for the political mobilization of contemporary labor (p. 133). Instead, Berardi (2009) argues, opposition to contemporary capitalism needs to be built on an "aesthetic paradigm, since it must take root in sensibility" or affect (p. 133).

In contrast to these largely theoretical discussions, empirical research discussed above consistently shows workers caught in work's "flow" or what I elsewhere term *aesthetic enrollment* vis-à-vis work processes (i.e., Cetina & Bruegger, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Kaiser, Müller-Seitz, Pereira Lopes, & Pina e Cunha, 2007; Siciliano, 2016, 2021, 2022; Snyder, 2016). Far from alienated by workplace affects, workers' sensibilities often appear highly attuned to the demands of technologically dense, cognitive or creative labor processes. Thus, research from economic sociology and organization studies reveal quite the opposite of Berardi's (2009) assertions, suggesting, instead, that the labor processes of cognitive capitalism incorporate or enroll workers by modulating how workers feel.

This contrasts with autonomist Marxism as well as certain strands of what has come to be called "affect theory." In the latter, affect tends most often to be held in tension, if not in opposition, with "rational" modes of knowing—what Mazzarella (2017) calls the "affect/ethics impasse." Here, affect tends to be thought of as immediate and full of resistant potential, while cognition, reflection, "reason," and judgment tend to be treated as always already incorporated in dense webs of discourse and ideology (e.g., Massumi, 2002, 2015). While I acknowledge that these two modes of experience—affect and judgment—can never be so neatly parsed, I find it analytically useful to think with Kant's (1951) distinction between reason (conceptual, reflective thought, the faculty of judgment) and nonconceptual processes such as intuition and imagination. An experience that excites or one that "immediately satisfies the senses" may be "mediately displeasing" (Kant, 1986, p. 165) on reflection or the mediation of sense experience by the "faculty of reason" or, to use a less loaded term, judgment. Separation between sensual satisfaction—an affect—and reflective judgment leaves room for workers to feel both attached or affectively bound to work processes, yet, on reflection, critical of their work and its products. Workers may be aesthetically enrolled, incorporated sensually or affectively, yet intellectually alienated from their work.

Below, I illustrate how platformized creative labor processes require yet alienate workers' judgment. Waged creative labor requires workers subordinate their capacity for autonomous judgment to the demands of employing firms, clients, or—in the case of YouTube production—capitalist interests embedded in the governance and affordances of infrastructure (Postigo, 2016; Wasko & Erickson, 2009). Work may *feel* interesting, exciting, or engaging, but workers lack control over the content and form of a final product due to their inability to autonomously exercise any critical judgment of quality or value.

Method and Case Information

This article draws on 10 months of participant observation in the YouTube MCN mentioned earlier, The Future. This includes 57 interviews with managers and office staff at The Future (25), managers and executives at other MCNs (6), and The Future's content producers or "creators" (26) across the United States. I also attended a YouTube industry convention (VidCon) in 2015 and 2018. My analysis began during data collection and proceeded abductively (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), using theoretically relevant codes along with inductively generated codes in search of findings unexplained by extant theory and research.

From 2012 to 2017, MCNs were central to YouTube content production. During this time, many MCNs were purchased by global media corporations for nine-figure sums (Ball, 2014). MCNs aggregated, associated with, and managed thousands of YouTube channels, often by seeming to offer services akin to

conventional talent management in exchange for a percentage of the creators' YouTube-derived revenue (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). MCNs provided services such as data reporting and access to "copyright free" media assets (e.g., music, photos, etc.) for use in YouTube videos. My coworkers and I used industrial search and data-analysis tools to find ("prospecting"), recruit ("outreach" and "signing"), and format ("optimization") creators' content in line with YouTube search algorithms. We convinced "creators" to sign multiyear management contracts—often a 70%/30% profit split in favor of creators. Since 2017, other "social media intermediaries" arose to perform similar management functions for both YouTube creators and content producers using other platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

I entered The Future as an unpaid intern after explaining to hiring managers that I was a sociologist studying work in media industries. Necessary consent forms were given to management and workers as I slowly "came out" as an overt researcher (Grindstaff, 2002). I spent two to three eight-hour shifts per week for 10 months while writing up detailed fieldnotes after each shift. I also conducted a field survey ($N = 78$) among staff with open-ended questions about everyday experiences at work and close-coded questions modeled after Amabile and colleagues' (2005) study of workplace affects. I do not report these survey findings, however, workers' responses informed my interview questions.

Managers and office staff whom I interviewed worked in The Future's Los Angeles office, where I conducted fieldwork. Creators whom I interviewed worked in their homes or private production studios across the world. The Future employed more than 100 full-time office employees who worked a mandatory 50 hours per week while earning close to the U.S. median annual wage of \$35,000. Creators' earnings ranged from \$0 to \$10,000 per month. Illustrative of broader entertainment industry employment trends, most interviewees were males (38) aged 23–35 years, with significantly fewer female interviewees (19) in the same age range.

In late 2015, I began interviewing creators in Southern California before expanding the project in 2017 to include in-person interviews in the Southwestern and Midwestern United States and interviews via Skype with creators in Europe and the Eastern United States. During in-person interviews, I typically spent several hours with creators in their production studios. In addition to varying my interviewees in terms of geographic location, I aimed for maximum variation across genre, gender, sexual identity, race, and audience size as measured by total subscribers. I concluded interviewing and data collection on reaching thematic saturation.

Producing "Dumb" Content for The Future

At The Future, workers' judgment tends to be subordinated to YouTube's metrics (quantitative abstractions such as "likes," "views," and other engagement measures that determine YouTube content's economic value when selling advertising space). This subordination applies to both routine office staff and the "creators" whom I focus on in this section. Creators first encounter the platform's metrics through the platform's user interface. Creators described affective engagement or attachment to metrics—described by one creator as "the best videogame ever"—not unlike journalists described by Angèle Christin (2020) who chase "clicks" or data-desiring financial analysts described by Cetina and Bruegger (2000). However, unlike journalists or analysts whose professional education and training mediate their experience and interpretation of metrics, creators learn to orient toward metrics from the platform and The Future's staff.

Both YouTube and The Future's staff orient creators toward metrics (views, likes, subscriber increases, watch-time, etc.) while encouraging creators to both adhere to a regular production schedule and produce thematically consistent content. Producing creators' metric orientation occurs through training materials provided by YouTube and "optimization" suggestions from The Future's office staff. The staff provide their suggestions through phone consultations and written "optimization" reports provided to creators—tasks with which I was often charged during fieldwork. In our consultations and written reports, we regularly told creators that thematic consistency and regular production schedules aid audiences in "surfacing" or finding content. Alongside consistency, the platform's training materials or "Creator's Academy" emphasizes procedures for creating metadata such as titles, descriptions, thumbnail images, categorizing tags, and geocoding. Thus, a regular production schedule and "proper" metadata seemed bound up in formatting (Callon, 1998) content to meet the demands of the platform's algorithms as creators hoped to increase their metrics. The Future's staff encouraged this behavior to increase the MCN's profits—what The Future's executives described as "extracting the maximum amount of value" from creators.

YouTube and The Future subordinate creators' judgment by orienting creators toward metrics and, more broadly, the audience. Orientation to the platform's metrics rather than, for instance, a relatively bounded group of content-producing peers or social milieu (cf. Becker, 1982) renders content always already heteronomous (see Bourdieu, 1993); bound to a relatively fast-paced production schedule while oriented to metrics determined and calculated by YouTube. Becky, a wine/lifestyle vlogger, illustrated subordinated judgment very clearly when she described her most popular videos. She explained to me that she often gets requests from fans to produce content that they want to see. Doing so increases engagement metrics (comments, likes, etc.) and thus would be beneficial for her as well as The Future. As she said, "I'm just like 'Ew, I don't want to do that,' but then I'll just do it." Explaining why these suggestions from fans elicit such a response, Becky said,

I just want to have quality content that's entertaining and informative. And, I'm not trying to get a viral YouTube video although my manager would like me to have one. You can't go in thinking "I'm going to make a viral video." A lot of my most watched videos are ones that are just kind of dumb. Like, my drunk dating advice or my haul videos where I go to a store and get a bunch of shit and drink it and give my opinions on camera. Those aren't even informative.

Becky's aversion to fans' ideas suggests a cleavage between her judgment of quality content ("entertaining and informative"), the content demanded by the audience, *and* the content valorized by the platform. Platform metrics and audience desires may be strongly correlated, but they never resolve to an identical unity. She tends to produce content that she finds distasteful when oriented toward engagement metrics (likes, number of comments, watch-time, etc.), fan suggestions (comments), and indicators of audience size (views, subscribers). At the end of the day, her most popular videos are, as she said, "dumb"—a comment echoing journalists who describe their stories as "trash" when forced to subordinate their professional logic to pursue a market logic of "chasing clicks" (Christin, 2020).

Creators also tended to link the rigor of maintaining a consistent production schedule with a lack of attachment to one's product—another facet of alienated judgment. While creators may care very much

about their personal "brand," and the production process may be engrossing, they often seemed unattached to any particular video. Creators learn to willfully disentangle themselves from their products. Remember, the platform instructs creators to maintain a regular production schedule of thematically consistent content. Creators often voiced concerns about quality due to keeping up with the rapid pace of producing one or more videos per week. Angela, a female lifestyle vlogger said,

A lot of times I just don't have enough time, so as soon as I come up with the idea I'm just like, "OK, I'm going to go do it," which has been really hard for me. I like things to be perfect, but I can't do that with YouTube, especially with my timelines of every Tuesday and Thursday. I'm posting a video today because I didn't have time to post it yesterday. It's supposed to be out yesterday, but sometimes it just happens that way.

Likewise, Bobby, a male vlogger, expressed concern about his use of time. Focusing solely on short videos that he can finish in a day allows him to maintain a regular, daily-release schedule and steady engagement metrics. Even so, Bobby preferred making longer, more intricate videos that require more time:

When you're a one-man show you have to do the editing as well. I have to justify to myself that "you're doing the right thing by being inside right now. You're doing the right thing by sitting down for five hours and you're doing the right thing by taking a week to make a video." When I'm doing the news, that's a video a day. Here, [working on longer projects] I'm sacrificing four videos for the sake of one. When I look back I'm always happy I did it, but in the moment there's that panic of "are people going to forget about me." You know?

Somewhat differently, Leland, a male digital video artist, expressed a need to balance speed and quality. Below, he wishes for "perfect" content but says that "perfect" content demands what he considered an unsustainable amount of time and effort.

My relationship with creating is very different now. I know what I can do to hide things. I know how to hide, like shortcuts. I used to just be like "It's important that I work forever on this thing and make this beautiful thing and who cares if nobody notices all those little things." Now I've gotten a lot better at being I'm not going to do that because that's killing me. You know? So, I need to not work for 20 hours. In the process, it's made me like things less. Maybe? And maybe like kind of hardened me in certain ways to the realities of being a creator that needs to be successful and productive. I can't edit a video for 3 months and be like, that one-minute video is [whisper] perfect.

Part of Leland's statement simply illustrates skill acquisition, but Leland's comment also suggests a wish to spend more time on his content, time that he does not necessarily possess due to fiscal challenges. Leland also suggests that he no longer feels as strong an attachment to any one particular product, a sentiment shared by other creators such as Dennis, a male animator located in Western Europe.

Dennis expressed a similar lack of attachment when speaking to me during a Skype interview. He said that he “did not think too much” about his quite complex animation videos, and so I asked him to elaborate.

MS: You don’t think that much?

Dennis: I don’t feel [that I think] so much. I just want to get it done so I can start with the next project.

MS: So, in some way, you don’t feel attached to any single video?

Dennis: That I’ve done? No, I don’t think so. [laughing] Maybe in the future. Maybe if I do something that goes to the, how do you say, cinema? Yeah, the cinema. It will probably never happen, but you never know. [laughing] That would be quite cool.

Dennis, like Angela and Leland, simply wants to get on to the next piece of content. While he suggests a hierarchy of cultural forms in differentiating “content” from “cinema,” he also highlights a material difference in how these forms come to be consumed. Cinema, he suggests, tends to be consumed far beyond its initial release date whereas content tends to be fleeting, even disposable or, to use an industry term, “snackable”—a sentiment shared by The Future’s office staff.

“Slopping the Trough” in The Future’s Offices

Alienated judgment cuts across class fractions of creative labor—a shared experience of both expressive content creators and their counterparts in The Future’s offices. During fieldwork, I regularly accompanied my coworkers on their afternoon cigarette breaks. On these breaks, Wally—a male member of The Future’s content strategy team—often wanted to chat about his current readings in social theory, which included Deleuze, Badiou, Žižek, and Sloterdijk. One day, he instead asked me what I was reading. I mentioned Trebor Scholz’s (2013) *Digital Labor: Internet as Playground and Factory* and he said, “I’m way interested in the factory part of that, especially because of working here!”

“The Trough!” exclaimed Laura, another employee at The Future, with a squeaky laugh. “Sometimes I’m overwhelmed by the Trough. I mean, it just builds up. There’s no drain, so it just sediments, I guess,” said Wally. They both laughed before Laura explained, “The Trough. That’s what we call it. The Trough, [it’s] such a great metaphor!” Laura and Wally are referencing a common English-language metaphor—“slopping the trough.” In this common metaphor, “trough” refers to a long shallow vessel or channel commonly used around the world to feed farm animals while “slopping” refers to serving the animals’ food (“slop”), which is often inaccurately assumed rotten and unfit for human consumption. Thus, informants used the metaphor to liken creators’ content to “slop” and media consumers to farm animals, which devour slop.

In another instance, Wally referred to The Future’s content as “a constant stream of trash” and said, “I can’t imagine anyone knows everything that we represent [and manage]. I mean there’s no way to

be familiar with all the thousands of people that we deal with here.” Laura agreed. I ventured an interpretation, “Well the same goes for all the other MCNs, right? Thousands, tens of thousands of channels. You can’t realistically deal with them all.” Wally and Laura, almost in unison, said, “And [MCNs] don’t!”

Wally and Laura explained that so long as creators structure the form and metadata of their videos while avoiding copyright infringement, YouTube and The Future seem content with any content. Rather than focus on content, The Future focuses on formal “optimization”—formatting or selective exclusion of certain aspects of objects (framing) to define a commodity’s boundaries (Callon, 1998; see also, Burgess & Green, 2009). As part of the team in charge of formatting creators, Wally and his coworkers attempted “to figure out why things get big” and how to avoid the “the tennis ball drop graph.” By this, he meant an initial spike followed by several, exponentially smaller spikes until viewership reaches zero—much like a tennis ball’s bounce. He explained that regardless of formatting, some videos do not attain the desired degree of popularity. The Future cannot explain why this occurs, according to Wally, “because we don’t pay attention to *what* the content *is*” and because the platform’s algorithms lie upstream from The Future. As Wally said, “Yeah, so we don’t, we can’t see anything, but, you know, if it’s not recognizable to the algorithm the turd just drops to the bottom of the Trough.”

Though Wally felt overwhelmed by the “turds” he tended, other employees described immersive, “zen-like” experiences wherein they “worm-holed” or “deep-dived” into the digital ocean of “crap” with great enthusiasm (see Siciliano, 2021, 2022). Scatological metaphors aside, workers enjoy the process of finding and aiding in the production of that which they dislike. They do so by following the platform’s logic of valuation and categorization as mediated by the management’s directive to meet monthly metric goals.

Following the platform’s logic, The Future’s management orients workers toward metrics rather than the content itself. Workers deploy their creativity in deciphering the platform’s inscrutable algorithms—“disappearing” as they unlock the underlying logic by which videos may rapidly accumulate views, an experience echoing the subjective absence experienced by both other routine workers in culture industries and those suffering from addiction (cf. Moser & Hennion, 1999; Schüll, 2012; Siciliano, 2016). Doing so requires that workers subordinate their judgment to the logic of the platform’s metrics.

As Laura explained, she rather enjoys her job’s “creative” aspects, finding immediate pleasure in her daily tasks. However, like many others, she expressed disgust when reflecting on the products of her creative labor. Asked what she disliked about her job, Laura said,

Well, the opposite [of what I enjoy] is a lot of our channels are absolute garbage. A lot of the talent is garbage. The pranks are garbage, misogynist, racist garbage. Actual garbage. I had to cut a sizzle [or promotional montage video] for some prank channels and I actually, it was the worst thing. Even another channel, I hate them. I generally hate a lot of the talent and don’t want them to be successful. So there’s that. I have to cut sizzles for stuff that’s garbage that I think shouldn’t exist. So there’s that. [laughing]

Likewise, Leo, a male employee, enjoyed providing “optimization” tips, but also said,

Most of the stuff we do is garbage. It's garbage! That really popular vlogger? I didn't know who the fuck he was before I came here. Most of this stuff, I don't know who that is. It's some guy talking about his fucking life. What do I care? I hate that. And pranks man, that's crap too. Yeah, some of those are funny, but it's all mean-spirited. It's just going into public and fucking with people or provoking men. Or they're like "it's a social experiment." OK, you pissed someone off by being weird and then you say, "Oh, it really makes you think." What the fuck were they trying to make you think about? I mean seriously.

Leo and Laura both refer to prank channels. Prank channels often feature videos in which creators engage in a mostly abandoned sociological method: the breaching experiment. In these "social experiment" videos, creators go into public settings and break social norms to create videos ranging from the comically absurd to glaringly problematic in which they engage in racist, classist, and sexist behavior to gain more views. For instance, one channel featured hundreds of videos of a man propositioning random women for sex. In another, a man played gunshot sounds from loudspeakers while driving through majority Black neighborhoods that the White creators called "The Ghetto." The White creators laughed when the sounds caused Black people, fearing for their lives, to duck and cover.

These videos illustrate how, despite social media's heightened diversity and a diverse workplace, racism persists both on and off screen due to the subordination of workers' judgment. The Future's executive and managerial staff were all White men. This contrasted sharply with The Future's nonmanagerial staff who were diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual identity. As part of their job, The Future's diverse office workers provide labor in support of creators' racist and sexist videos. In response, staff often looked for opportunities to promote content more in line with their values or to support marginalized groups (e.g., progressive political content, Spanish language content, and young adult content that centers BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) as well as those who identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and questioning). Angela McRobbie (2016), borrowing from Deleuze & Guattari (1987), describes media workers' pursuance of these opportunities as following "lines of flight." In my fieldwork, workers had very few opportunities to enact their values or to support marginalized groups. Thus, workers' experience of alienated judgment tends to be shaped not only by their class relation vis-à-vis the platform but also gender and race vis-à-vis both the platform and organizational hierarchies of race and gender. By no means guaranteed, a collective resistance built on a politics of judgment must then articulate both the generality of creative labor's alienation as well as workers' intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991; see also, Collins, 2019).

As with creators, the labor process subordinates office staff's judgment to the platform's affordances and governance as mediated by an organizational hierarchy dominated by White men who support racist and sexist content. Workers often enjoyed their work processes, yet the content they help produce confronted them as excrement, something far less "alien" than Marx and other scholars of alienated labor might presume. On reflection, they found no joy in the products of their labor. Though they exercise judgment, they judge using others' standards.

Conclusion

Above, I argued that the alienation of judgment within platformized creative labor processes provides the possibility of collective resistance across class fractions of platformized creative workers ranging from very visible, expressive workers on our screens to behind-the-scenes office workers and “ghost workers,” who make decisions about the content appearing in our social media feeds (Gray & Suri, 2019; Roberts, 2019). In addition, workers compartmentalized their taste to earn a living and managed to find pleasure in “slopping the trough” just as other platform workers who moderate content learn to “understand the difference between their own values and those of their client, and to be able to compartmentalize the former while on the job” (Roberts, 2019, p. 145). All experience the subordination of judgment to capital, suggesting a shared experience among class fractions that, if articulated, might overcome culture industries’ endemic “narcissism of minor differences” (Deuze, 2007, pp. 122–123).

Recent events highlight the possibility of a labor politics of judgment for culture and knowledge workers. Perhaps most strikingly, well-paid tech workers in Silicon Valley’s affectively and aesthetically engaging offices formed a “minority union” in 2021. They did so for reasons quite specifically to do with ethical judgment or, as they said, “to examine Google’s role in society,” specifically whether or not “YouTube will continue to function as a vector for the growth of fascist movements if it persists in prioritizing advertisers while exposing the public” (Allyn, 2021, para. 14). Similarly, nearly 5,000 Google employees signed a petition against a military contract known as Project Maven, pressuring the tech giant to cancel the contract. Employees hoped to advance a “strong ethical framework that values human life and safety is inseparable from positive technological progress” (Godz, 2018, para. 59). Quite clearly, these responses to shared experiences across “creative” class fractions are cases of a politics of judgment: Opposition predicated on reasoned disdain for capital’s interests. The high-paid Google employees struggle for control over how to stay true to their “ethics” just as low-paid workers in *The Future* struggled to reconcile their opposition to racism and sexism with the “garbage” they doled out to social media users when “slopping the trough.”

While presenting a possible path to collective resistance across creative class fractions, *my data also suggest that a politics of judgment must also be an intersectional politics* (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991). The importance of workers’ intersectional identities may be seen in recent actions by Black social media workers on the Tik-Tok platform who briefly went on “strike,” withholding their labor in protest of cultural (mis)appropriation and demanding recognition for Black contributions to digital culture (Contreras & Martinez, 2021). As seen above, alienated judgment tends to reproduce the culture industry’s rampant sexism, racism, and hegemonic masculinity, perhaps further contributing to downstream (mis)appropriation. Thus, future studies need to ask how nascent labor organizations mobilize across shared class conditions of alienated judgment alongside and in conjunction with the struggles of marginalized groups for recognition, representation, and equity. Again, Google’s “minority union” appears instructive insofar as union members were compelled to act more quickly in their efforts to exercise non-alienated judgment to show solidarity with artificial intelligence (AI) ethics researcher Timnit Gebru (Allyn, 2021), whom Google fired for calling attention to racism in AI development (Simonite, 2020).

Possibility does not automatically result in solidarity or a functional “organization of alienation” (Tronti, 2019, p. 274), a well-known point for labor scholars studying the long history of division within

labor movements, most especially along racial lines (Roediger, 2017). Historically, judgment—especially aesthetic judgment—tends to be just as fractious and exclusionary (e.g., Bourdieu, 2000), often supporting domination and marginalization along intersecting lines of class, race, gender, place, and sexuality rather than solidarity. Likewise, judgment laid down by institutions—often celebrated as “rational”—dominates by foreclosing on emergent possibilities—a point well made by Deleuze (1998). As he said, “Judgment prevents the emergence of any new mode of existence . . . It is not a question of judging other existing beings, but of sensing whether they agree or disagree with us” (p. 135).

Even so, I want to hold onto possibility, to hope that platformized creative workers’ experience provides a path to resistance rather than to cynicism compelling us to nothing (Slöterdijk, 1987). Holding on to possibility, I end by acknowledging two major barriers to organizing creative labor’s alienation into a collective resistance to platforms, however, a full consideration of all possible paths and barriers to the organization of alienated judgment as collective resistance lies beyond this article’s scope. First, and foremost, the state often misrecognizes platformized labor as entrepreneurial, independent contractors rather than workers/employees. In this, YouTube’s workers share a classificatory struggle with Uber and Lyft drivers in the United States, where millions of dollars were spent by these platforms to convince their workers to vote against their labor interests and in favor of being classified as “independent contractors” rather than employees (Hawkins, 2020). Neoliberal scholars reinforce this barrier to resistance when they choose to ignore platformized labor’s subordination to capital and instead celebrate “entrepreneurial agency” (i.e., Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021). This article, along with the rest of this special section, provides a much-needed corrective to this mis-recognition. Second, creative labor requires a theory by which the class might apprehend its shared experiences. As Stuart Hall (2021) theorized, class consciousness never results from raw experience but from experience tempered by theory that provides the shared discourse needed to articulate shared problems. This article, I hope, contributes to such a shared discourse by articulating how alienated judgment provides a possibility for collective resistance in the absence of other factors conducive to mobilization such as shared occupational practices, narratives, identity, and physical copresence (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018; Huws, 2014; Sallaz, 2013; van Doorn, 2019).

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