

Interview with Steven Shaviro*

by Cesar Kiraly** and Diego Viana***

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The current interview took place in the context of the publication, in 2011, of the book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Zero Books). It is as originally an exchange of ideas over the phone, recorded for the production of a piece published at Valor Econômico, under the title *A Sensação do Século* (14/10/2011), in which only part of the questions was elaborated in a fluent text of Diego Viana, and not in the shape of questions and answers. To avoid confusion, we have agreed to refer to the interviewers in the plural's third person, even though that wasn't the case in original. As the reader shall notice, Steven Shapiro received our questions uncommon disposition and the result has exceeded our expectations, as well as the limits imposed by the original format. Convinced as we are of the importance and permanence of the debate I, we have decided to make the present edition. Besides that, it was produced a version of the interview in Portuguese. The reader shall notice that most of the material is new, both in English and in Portuguese.

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I'd like to develop the phrase "how it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century", which is, I believe, the core of the book and the vantage point for the article. The notions usually associated to the contemporary lifestyle are "fragmentation", "immediacy", "virtuality" and so on. Our time is seen as a time in which Google replaces memory and the like-button replaces friendship. According to your research, how could we summarize the "ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society"?

Steven Shaviro

The qualities that you mention – fragmentation, immediacy, virtuality, the scattering of attention, the hallucinatory sense that things are more intense in the short run, but less consequential in the long run, the decay of any deep sense of "duration" and the transformation of personal and historical memory into a meaningless conglomeration of data, the transformation from a text-based culture to one that is multimedia and audiovisual, etc. – have been widely noted and discussed. The real question is how we can get a perspective on all these characteristics, so as to understand them as producing a new kind of sensibility; and beyond that, how we can describe the causes of this sensibility.

More than fifty years ago, the great Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan argued that a change in the media we used meant a change in the nature of our experience; each new medium, he said, created a new "ratio of the senses." McLuhan was trying to describe the effects of television, which was relatively new at the time. Today, we live in a world dominated by technologies of globalized computation and communication networks, cell phones, the Internet, and computerized financial networks; not to mention international trade with the help of cargo containers, GPS tracking, and computerized inventory management. So part of the answer has to do with the way that these new technologies don't just help us to do the same old things more efficiently. Rather, they lead us to do new things. We develop new expectations, and express new desires. These

new technologies affect us intimately and in depth; they reorder our immediate sensory experience, rewire our memory, create new habits while destroying old ones, and so on.

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In addition, there are the urgent questions of social, political, and economic power. These new technologies affect the entire world; but they are not equally available to all the people of the world. As the science fiction author William Gibson has put it, “the future is unequally distributed.” In addition, the new technologies are accompanied by – or better, synergistically coordinated with – such things as neoliberal economic policies, the irrational flows of international finance, the shift of industrial production from North America and Europe to the historically poorer countries of the Global South, and the intensification of surveillance.

So, broadly speaking, there are massive shifts in how it feels to be alive – shifts in mood, sensibility, modes of attention and memory – together with massive shifts in how the world is governed, economically, socially, and politically; and both of these are enabled and facilitated by the massive changes in technology of the last thirty years or so. There is no easy way to bring all this together, and give a synoptic overview of what is happening in our world. My own effort is to use recent cinema and music video (mostly from North America and Western Europe) as a lens with which to view and focus upon these epochal shifts. The aesthetic power of the particular movies and videos that I discuss allows them to register and respond to some of the deep complexities of our experience.

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This process of turning affects into emotions, that is, giving them sense which is at the same time psychic and social (Simondon would have said transindividual) is exactly what Bernard Stiegler points out as missing in the hypercapitalist and consumerist societies up to the current crisis, which is thus a crisis of precisely this model. In your book, you point towards a shift in the means of this genesis of “structures of feeling”. How do you see this change happening? Is it the end of a model? Do you think we might be climbing out of something?

Steven Shaviro

Stiegler’s formulations are highly useful for thinking about our present moment, but I also think that they are incomplete. He describes certain powerful and disturbing effects of our current media situation. But, even as he rightly calls for a “new critique of political economy,” he fails to discuss the processes of exploitation and capital accumulation that are the driving forces of this transformation. In other words, despite the very title of his book, he doesn’t pay sufficient attention to the workings of political economy. In consequence, his formulations sometimes have the ring of a merely moralistic condemnation of the new media – a pattern of response that has recurred in the West for thousands of years, all the way from Socrates’ denunciation of writing to contemporary warnings about the allegedly corrupting effects of hip hop music and video games. Though Stiegler clearly intends much more than this, his polemics are always in danger of falling flat in this way.

The task of critique is incredibly difficult. On the one hand, we need to be fully aware of the radical, disruptive impact of new technologies and new modes of production. We cannot pretend that everything remains the same through all these changes. On the other hand, and at the same time, we need to avoid thinking that the new is entirely unique, so that its problems have no relation to anything that came before. This latter

attitude threatens either to turn us into unreflective cheerleaders for the latest “cool” technologies, or else to drown us in a sort of creepy nostalgia, in which we imagine that things were fine in the good old days, so that we see the new developments only in terms of decadence and loss.

In the present case, we are faced with a radically new technological situation; and yet this situation continues to be shaped by the same imperatives of capitalism that have been at work for several hundred years. I certainly do take to heart Stiegler’s warnings about how the social and technological forces that can be subsumed under the rubric of “neoliberalism” are dangerously short-circuiting the processes of individuation and transindividuation -- processes that, as you say, involve turning affects into emotions, and giving them psychic and social meanings. Stiegler is correct that this development is a kind of extermination of thought, and that it threatens to eliminate the very possibility of democracy and social solidarity.

But at the same time, I do not accept that Stiegler’s account gives us the whole story. The individuating processes of which Stiegler speaks cannot (short of literal concentration camps and genocide) be altogether abolished. Even as capital tends to reduce or short-circuit these processes, it still needs them as a source of surplus-value extraction, and of what David Harvey calls “appropriation by dispossession.” This is because, although the business schools love to speak of “creativity,” and of Schumpeter’s “creative destruction,” capital in itself cannot truly be creative. It needs to mobilize, organize, and draw upon, a creativity – or productivity – that always extends beneath it or beyond it. It is this dimension that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and also Paolo Virno, are getting at in their notion of the “multitude.” It is also this dimension that Deleuze and Guattari are reaching towards when – amplifying certain of Marx’s speculations about machinery – they speak of “machinic surplus-value.” Both in the formation of the multitude, and in the increasing complexity of socio-technological machines, we find new processes of transindividuation. And these processes, to some extent, offer us a countervailing force to the short-circuiting of individuation described by Stiegler.

I myself tend to feel that Hardt and Negri are excessively and unjustifiably optimistic when they discuss the transindividuation of the multitude, and the formation of a new commons and a worldwide “general intellect.” Nonetheless, I think that we need to join together Hardt and Negri’s optimism with Stiegler’s pessimism, if we are to get a grip on the affective politics at work today. Moreover, we need to remember that the movement between unqualified affect and personalized emotions is a two-way process, as Deleuze always insisted. Affects are continually being captured as personalized emotions; but these subjective feelings are themselves continually releasing new flows of impersonal affect. Or, in Simondon’s own terms, every process of individuation also generates, concurrently, a new and open field of potentiality: this is why the process is never closed or completed. Individuation is never fully accomplished, once and for all.

What this means is that new technologies and new relations of production also offer us new opportunities for struggle and invention. The new media define the terrain within which everything now must happen; but they do not predetermine what, in particular, actually takes place on that terrain. The media are the field of battle itself, you might say, and the weapons available to all sides, rather than being just instruments of domination. Evidently, this means that how to use the new media forms actively (rather than just passively responding to them, or “resisting” them) is a question of political strategy and

tactics. But I insist that it is also a question of aesthetics. Artists need to engage directly with these new technologies and these new relations of production, in order to explore them in depth, and to discover or invent new ways of deploying them and making feelings and meanings with them.

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In the introduction, you also cite the emergence of a different media regime as being at the same time the emergence of “a different mode of production”. How different is this mode of production? Are you talking about immaterial labor, as in Hardt, Negri and Lazzaratto? Do you imagine a post-capitalist mode? Or do you mean that contemporary capitalism (financial, neoliberal etc.) is indelibly attached to this new media regime?

Steven Shaviro

As I have already suggested, it is crucially important to remain aware both of the novelties of the current situation, and of its continuity with what has come before. I do not think that “immaterial labor” is something entirely new; just think of how many domestic servants were employed by the affluent classes in Great Britain throughout the nineteenth century, at the time of the most intensive industrialization. Nor has heavy industry disappeared, although a lot of it has been shifted away from the United States and Western Europe, to places like China, Indonesia, and Mexico. What’s most changed is the organization of production. Thanks to instantaneous global communications, and vast computing power, we have seen the development of flattened business hierarchies, of just-in-time production, of much more intensive advertising and promotion than ever before, of the surveillance of consumer habits on a micro-level, and of the multiplication of enormous, and largely unregulated, financial flows. Whether this is enough to constitute a new “mode of production” is largely a matter of how broadly or narrowly we define the term. In any case, economic life is still driven by the basic imperative towards ever-greater capital accumulation, with the simultaneous production of great affluence and extreme deprivation. But the way that these extremes are “unequally distributed” has changed, and the way that we subjectively experience them has changed as well. And these changes are very much tied to the new media and the new technologies, which enable both the new organization of production, and the concomitant new forms of subjective experience.

Cesar Kiraly and Diego Viana

The point about generating subjectivities (emotion as affect captured by a subject, thus subjectivity being generated precisely by the technics or technology that operate this transduction) made me think about the responsibility of media forms, both in the sense of “being responsible for” and “being liable for”. If media are (or can be seen as) the ultimate tool for actualizing the affectivities, then it is also a major (or the major) political battleground. How is this battle fought? What do we see about this in the movies you study? How about in the, so to speak, “real world”?

Steven Shaviro

In David Cronenberg’s prophetic film *Videodrome*, which came out nearly thirty years ago, we are told that “The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena – the Videodrome.” Today we have expanded well beyond video, to all sorts of new digital computing technologies. But the premise that I have quoted – spoken in the

film by Cronenberg's McLuhanesque media guru, Dr. Brian O'Blivion – remains largely accurate. Media form a battleground, because they are many things. They are parts of the apparatus of production; they are tools for generating and modulating subjectivity; and they are instruments of communication, which is to say of both connections and disconnections among individuals and among communities. There are struggles, therefore, over both the content and the forms of media: questions of who owns them, who is able to speak through them, to whom they are addressed, how widely they are distributed, not to mention what they imply by virtue of the way they operate, regardless of the intent of those who use them. (This latter is what McLuhan was referring to when he proclaimed that "the medium is the message").

In my own work, however, I am only dealing with a small subset of these issues. When I write about particular films and music videos, as I do in my book, I am less interested in how these works actually operate within the larger economy of media control and resistance, than I am in the singular ways that the works in question reflexively track and register those operations and this economy. The way that the works function is less important to me than the way these works help me to think about this functioning. That is to say, my concerns are aesthetic rather than sociological. I would be the last person to deny the significance of the sociological, but I think that the aesthetic dimension provides a crucial supplement to what sociology can tell us.

The American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson says that the task of art today is to provide us with an aesthetic of "cognitive mapping": a project that "seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system." Jameson's former student Jonathan Flatley adds that a practice of "affective mapping" is equally necessary, in order to take account of the ways that our presence in the world, within the "global system" of capital, is always inflected by "a range of intentions, beliefs, desires, moods, and affective attachments."

Following both Jameson and Flatley, I am concerned with how the movies and videos that I study "theorize" the world situation in which we find ourselves. I have to put the word "theorize" in quotation marks, however, because this theorization is less a question of explicit knowledge (in the form of philosophical propositions or empirical observations) than it is one of something far more impalpable: moods, atmospheres, implicit assumptions, auras of significance. All these are expressed as much by a movie's formal procedures as they are by its explicit narrative content.

Let me give a concrete example of this. In the film journal *La furia umana*, I recently participated in a [roundtable discussion](#), with several other critics, on the *Paranormal Activity* series of low-budget horror films. The feeling of dread in these films comes from a disruption of normal relations of time and space. Demonic forces invade upper-middle-class private homes in the California suburbs. They come at night, disturbing the sleep of the protagonists, and subjecting them to new temporal rhythms of dread and anticipation. The films' protagonists attempt to dissuade the evil forces by using the technologies of their laptops – digital video cameras, surveillance cameras, and so on – in order to capture their activities.

Now, in fact, the technologies used by the characters within the *Paranormal Activity* movies are the very same technologies by means of which the movies themselves were produced. Within the movie narratives, digital technologies are employed in order to gather evidence. But from our point of view as viewers watching these movies, it very much

seems as if these digital video technologies are themselves channeling and conducting the very forces against which they are supposed to have been deployed. The technology itself is what links the private home of the affluent nuclear family to sinister forces from Outside. In the films' narratives, the intrusion seems to be the result of a demonic pact signed by an ancestor, who acquired wealth at the price of sacrificing a future generation's firstborn male child. But figurally, for us as viewers, the scenario suggests the ways in which digital technologies carry along with them all the social and economic relations that are implicate in their invention and production.

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Could we say that through representation, in film and other forms of art, one is put before something which precedes one's subjectivity, something more singular and thus disturbing, revealing, pulsional (to use Freud's term as employed by Stiegler)? Would that be true even of the least compelling works, like Hollywood blockbusters or musicals?

Steven Shaviro

Yes, I am definitely working with this sort of model. However, I resist articulating it in Freudian terms. The confrontation with that-which-precedes-subjectivity is social in the broadest sense, rather than being focused specifically upon the patriarchal family. The process of individuation happens in many forms, and on many different levels. There is no warrant for restricting this process to the particular sort of drama favored by psychoanalysis (castration, the Oedipus complex, and so on). Today, for instance, it is probably much more appropriate to see individuation or subjectification in terms having to do with financial circulation and the accumulation of debt. Also, psychoanalysis — at least in its current Lacanian version — maintains that the Real (or anything outside of Symbolic articulation) can only be apprehended negatively, as a gap or rupture, or an undifferentiated mass. As such, our encounter with it can only be traumatic. I would argue, to the contrary, that what comes before the subject — Simondon's preindividual, a metastable field of potentialities held in tension — is highly differentiated or articulated in itself, and that the process of individuation, or the partial emergence of something like a subject, need not occur traumatically. It's not an all-or-nothing situation, but one with many degrees and gradations.

I think that films and music videos, and other media forms, explore these transformations, or transindividuations, in multifarious ways. Different technologies, different formal procedures, and different degrees of elaboration result in a wide range of affects, and a wide range of subjectivities. There is always the possibility that an unforeseen emergence will take us completely by surprise, and add new dimensions to our cognitive and affective mappings. This is not something that happens often, but it can happen anywhere; it cannot be correlated with the marketing distinction between self-conscious art films on the one hand, and things like Hollywood blockbusters on the other.

Cesar Kiraly and Diego Viana

Deleuze and Guattari say at a certain point of *Mille Plateaux* that contrary to what orthodox Marxists would affirm, from a micro-political point of view, societies are defined not by their contradictions, but by their "lignes de fuite" ("escape lines" is probably not how it's translated). Coincidentally or not, in this early 21st Century, media instruments have played quite a role in the perceivable "lignes de fuite", like in Wikileaks, the Arab

Spring, the Spanish 15M and even de English riots. What does that tell us about the means of resistance, contestation, nomadism, in the near future?

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Steven Shaviro

I need to begin my answer by saying something about the difference between “contradictions” and “lines of flight.” Metaphysically speaking, the reason that Deleuze and Guattari propose the second as an alternative to the first is that they are trying to replace a thought of negativity with one of positive and multiple differences. The classical Marxism notion of contradiction is inherited from Hegel, whose dialectic takes the form of simultaneous binary oppositions which can be resolved temporally, through what today we might call a sort of recontextualization, or broadening of horizons. Hegel continually “sublates” his contradictions by finding a larger perspective in terms of which both sides of the contradiction (the thesis and its negation) can be understood in terms of their own particular circumstances and assumptions. To this, French Hegelianism (deriving from the work of Alexandre Kojève, who introduced Hegelian thought in France) added the doctrine that labor, or production, consists in an act of negation: one negates, or literally destroys, the wood, in the process of transforming it into a table. For Deleuze and Guattari, both contradiction and labor-as-negativity are ways of taming and limiting difference. If all we could do were to negate and contradict a thing or a proposition, then creativity would be impossible. Novelty or positive difference would never be able to emerge. Things could only be made, and ideas could only be expressed, in terms set by the initial conditions out of which they grew. For Deleuze and Guattari, the carpenter does not negate a piece of wood when she makes a table out of it. Rather, she engages in a positive act of creation, working with the wood rather than against it, and bringing out aspects of the wood (its capacity to bear weight, for instance) that were only there potentially prior to her labor.

In the larger terms of political economy, it is all too evident today that capitalism is not destroyed by its contradictions. Rather, these contradictions – mass impoverishment as a consequence of the production of fabulous wealth, sorely exploitative overwork coexisting with high levels of unemployment, simultaneous invention and obsolescence, and what Marx called “the tendential fall of the rate of profit” – continually spur it on to new orgies of “creative destruction.” Intellectually speaking, the financial crisis of 2008 completely discredited all the premises of neoliberalism; but pragmatically, the consequence of the crisis has been an intensification of neoliberal policies – privatization and the destruction of the social welfare net – to a degree never imagined before. Also, as David Harvey has pointed out, the massive “destruction of capital” in a crisis paves the way for new movements of capital accumulation. Given all this, it is hard to believe that capitalism will be overcome, or replaced by something better, simply because it is so evidently absurd, inhumane, destructive, and wasteful.

I do not presume to say whether or not Deleuze and Guattari’s “lines of flight” actually provide an alternative that can succeed in bringing about meaningful positive change. But I think their articulation of this concept points to the general fact that new means of opposition, and new inventions of alternatives for the future, are sorely necessary. I do not think that the recent insurrectionary movements that you mention (from the Arab Spring all the way to the Occupy Wall Street movement that is taking place even as I write) are determined or explained by the new media technologies. But they can be understood as “lines of flight,” because of the ways they *pass through* the new technologies, and actively use and repurpose them, as they struggle to invent something different from, and better than, our current social conditions.

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At a first glance, one difference between “old” media (which would be cinema and television) and “new” media (games and internet) would be that you just watch the first, even if you can decide to change channels or leave the projection room, but you actually participate in the second, even if games, for instance, are framed by the programmers. How can this influence the construction of subjectivities and the means of action in the 21st Century world?

Steven Shaviro

This is obviously a significant difference, but it isn't one that I have a lot to say about. I argue in my book that movies are becoming more and more like video games, at least in a formal sense, even as this distinction between them remains. But, although a gamer clearly has more degrees of freedom than a movie – or television – viewer, the former is still constrained by the programmer's decisions in many of the same ways that the latter is by the director's. To win or complete a video game, you have to figure out, or “reverse-engineer,” the algorithms that mold the game's procedures and underlying structures. This isn't entirely unrelated to the way that, in order to understand a movie or a television show, the viewer must figure out its formal rules and underlying thematic assumptions. In both cases, you are faced with a series of constraints that define the aesthetic experience you are undergoing. With both games and movies, the danger is that (as William Burroughs said about both literal and metaphorical viruses) even if you cut it up and scramble it, it may simply reassemble in the same form. Both “passive” media like movies, and more “active” ones like video games, have roles to play in imagining and changing the future. They will necessarily have to do this in different ways; but these ways are not simply defined or predetermined by the sole difference between spectatorship and participation.

Cesar Kiraly and Diego Viana

If you don't mind, I'd like to turn a question of the book back to you, for speculation: “What action can still be meaningfully accomplished in the new ‘world space’ of endless circulation and modulation? (...) What sort of subjectivity can remain true to itself, in a world where body and mind are measured and defined as flexible investments of ‘human capital’?”

Steven Shaviro

I do not have any good answer to this – and I am not persuaded that anyone else has a good answer, either. This is why I express some skepticism in my book towards the idea that cultural work can involve “resistance,” or can be liberatory in any straightforward way. I do think that aesthetic works can make us more clearly and acutely aware of the difficulties we face, and also that they can imagine possible alternatives. This is why I am particularly interested in science fiction: the literary and audiovisual genre that is most directly concerned, not with predicting the future, but with *extrapolating* from the actual present moment, in order to bring to light both its potentialities and its dangers. But a work of fiction can only do so much; it is always partial, and it always leaves the most difficult work to us. Aesthetics is crucial, but it isn't everything. Rather, I accept Mallarmé's motto: “Tout se résume dans l'Esthétique et l'Economie politique” (“everything comes down to Aesthetics and Political Economy”). Neither of these can be dispensed with.

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Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes both wrote about stars, or the star-system. In which way does your reflection on the subject project the dialogue with this “tradition”?

Steven Shaviro

I try to deal with this question explicitly in my book, in the chapter on Olivier Assayas’ *Boarding Gate*. I compare the star of that film, Asia Argento, to earlier generations of female movie stars. Argento is a “post-cinematic celebrity,” in contrast both to the classical stardom of Greta Garbo, and to the more ironic modernist stardom of Marilyn Monroe. Barthes writes wonderfully about Garbo, whom he describes as a figure of essential beauty, “descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light.” Barthes then goes on to contrast Garbo with Audrey Hepburn, whom he finds to be “individualized” in a way that Garbo was not. Garbo is an “essence,” whereas Hepburn’s face “has nothing of the essence left in it, but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions.” I argue that Argento is a new type of movie star, one that Barthes did not live to see. Argento is different from Hepburn (or from Monroe) as these latter were from Garbo. For I claim that Argento’s performance, unlike those of her precursors, “is excessively immanent and embodied. Even her irony is too immediate, and too close for comfort.” Argento’s sexuality is not that of the icon, but rather a display of *virtuosity* – the quality that both Paolo Virno, and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, have seen as essential for workers under the regime of neoliberal capitalism. Barthes writes that “The face of Garbo is an Idea, that of Hepburn an Event.” Argento’s face is neither of these; it is rather a blank surface upon which all affects are able to play: even contradictory ones at the same time. Such is the carnality of her seduction of the audience.

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