

Towards a Grammar of the Recreative Industries

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Towards a Grammar of the Recreative Industries

Valeria
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Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not

Recreation, Audre Lorde

In this paper I want to take the Radical Open Publishing (ROA) conference up on its generous invitation to both play with the format of this pamphlet - its modes of production, composition and distribution - and to think about alternative modes of organizing in the cultural sector. I will therefore use my contribution as an opportunity to outline the contours of the pragmatic and theoretical proposition that I call the "recreative industries." To do so I will bring the latter proposition into dialogue with the experience of MACAO, the independent centre for art, culture and research in Milan, as well as the Italian Cultural Occupations' extended network. These cultural centres have, for about a decade now, constituted one of the few living political horizons in the Italian context - where the ruling classes can be extremely violent towards anything that is minoritarian, erotic or opaque (or new, innovative and creative, to put it in neoliberal terms).

The Italian context is not, however, particularly exceptional in this respect (although, the dominant national discourse very much likes to think that it is). This means that many of the points I will be making about the recreative industries can be adapted for use in different contexts, including those of the ROA Collective.

The Italian Cultural Occupations often describe themselves in terms of "new cultural institutions." Yet the hostile environment in which they operate can only be fully grasped if the conditions that turn them into industries of some kind are taken into account. This is because the Italian Cultural Occupations do not enjoy total, or even continued, public support. Consequently, they are forced to preoccupy themselves with questions of how to generate an economy capable of maintaining the existence of the collectives of which they are comprised. Nevertheless, through engaging in the struggle to reorganize the processes of cultural production, these occupations both perform a materialist critique of the capitalist economic environment in which they operate, and actively expose the entrepreneurial mythologies as bogus.

As part of the Italian diaspora, my interest in MACAO and the Italian Cultural Occupations goes beyond any disinterested scholarly inquisitiveness. Instead, I see such concern as implicating me in a form of thinking as care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012). What I have to say about the "recreative industries" is thus form of a public call to rethink the continuum between cultural production and the regimes of labour, maintenance and property. But it is also a formulation of political love for the potential that the recent Cultural Occupations contain to turn the cultural sector itself into a site for the production of political love.

Anti-work

The recreative industries emerge from my long-standing preoccupation with thinking what a refusal of labour might look like as a generative proposal; one that can then be incarnated in practices, subjectivities and organizational forms understood as collective repertoires. Many of those post-work scenarios that have considered the technological problem of automation and digitalization have addressed the issue of *free labour* quite effectively. They have had noticeably less to say, however, about those forms a workforce *freed from labour* can take. In this respect, I believe the current debates around post-work would benefit from a more granular description of what anti-work activities and ways of organizing might consist of, what their subjects, procedures and objects (in Marxian terms, their political and technical composition) could be.

Prefiguration

The politics of a refusal of labour is an area of reflection that draws from both autonomist Marxism and materialist feminism. Both of these traditions offer a fertile range of concepts and tools for positioning the question of a freed labour force as a key issue when it comes, not only to thinking about what a revolutionized society might look like, but more crucially, when it comes to thinking about the matter of transition in relation to that of revolution. This is one of the main problems with regard to intervening in the production of different, non-teleological futurities today. If, for Marx, the transition prepared the revolution, and for Lenin the revolution prepared the transition, my research explores what can be generated and sustained by the available practices of labour refusal in the process of *working this problem out*. What figures of revolution do we imagine and perform while occupying the terrain of both new and old mechanisms of capture, extraction and depotentiation? In more anarchist-inflected thought, this has been addressed in terms of prefiguration, a theme I have explored in some of my recent work. How we can conceptualize techniques of counter-organization as prefigurative practices capable of intervening in and modifying relations of power as they exist within institutional ecosystems? At stake here is not only how to find viable forms of resistance - and to do so always anew against the constant mutations of capital - but how to make politically available for a revolutionary horizon beyond the particular experiences that generate them. It is in this sense that I explore prefigurative practices: by looking at their current articulation in what I call the recreative industries.

Re-

The prefix *re-* here refers not only to those activities of recycling and reuse that are key to ecological reparation (as in Serge Latouche's 8 R's, 2009), or even the re- of social reproduction, but the question of "re-appropriation, revolt and revolution," too, as inspired by the slogan of the Ri-Maflow occupied factory (Rimaflow n.d.). At the same time, *recreative* points to the way the use of the term *creativity* by much of the current rhetoric around innovation needs to be subject to political critique and reappropriation. Finding ways of freeing creativity from the realm of production is an urgent matter today. Similarly, the issue of *industries* raised by the term *recreative industries* is designed to serve as an ironic marker for rethinking what an "entrepreneurship of the multitudes" could be (Hardt and Negri 2017). Finally, the nod to the *recreational* points to what is crucially at stake in the liberation from work, namely the availability of pleasure as a political factor.

Do you remember how we became so creative?

In recent years the ideology of the creative industries has been subjected to intense critique that has highlighted its processes of gentrification and dispossession, as well as a certain neocolonial posture of extractivism in which countercultural scenes are mined in order to be marketed on the circuits of global copyrighted culture and branded products (Lovink and Rossiter 2009). I will therefore not add to that critique here. Instead, I want to position the recreative industries hypothesis as a way of thinking about what comes after the collapse of the benign horizon promised by the creative industries paradigm, which portrayed them as perhaps the first policy framework to provide an explicit formulation of the libidinal experience of the economic sphere: not only in regard to consumption, but in relation to work as well. The creative economy sold us an original script of emancipation in the guise of social progress. In doing so it managed to re-orientate those practices of pleasure that people invent for themselves as techniques against labour, into a desire for the realization of such pleasures through work itself.

Borrowing from Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who defined maintenance as “keep[ing] the dust off the pure individual creation” (1969), I want to remove the dirt from the inheritance left to us by the creative industries. Although I am referring to them here in the past tense, I am aware the creative industries live on in many contexts in the formatting of cultural production. However, the creative industries have been bankrupt for some time now, effectively and affectively. At the level of governance they are largely deployed nowadays as a fig leaf to protect a prudent public consciousness from the pornographic violence of financial speculation. Often their discourse is a broken record that just keeps being played within the cultural and educational sectors, the arts and humanities - all areas under attack and in desperate need of a justification for their existence.

Despite the crisis of credibility, the ideology of the creative industries thus lingers on: as a toxicity tainting the imaginal and what is a stake in the possibility of creation itself, here limited to a productivist proprietary model, rather than a generative and ecological one. At this juncture, another framework is needed if we are to think about what is desirable, possible and usable in the composition of imaginaries (this is, after all, the primary production of the creative industries); and especially if we want to provide a viable alternative to a mounting conservatism that can only dream about “going back.”

Creative Reproduction

The recreative industries hypothesis is thus a political framework for reclaiming those organizations that, under the current regime of capital, are primarily dedicated to semiotic, affective or relational production. In this respect the recreative industries refuse to think of the cultural value they generate as content, product or service in a mode separate from how they engage with their own economic mode of existence. They also understand that any production under the current regime of governance is directly cultural, insofar as the object of the productive process is the subject as such: her social relations, her social cooperation and her form of life.

Moreover, and somewhat crucially, the recreative industries refuse to sequester creativity solely in the realm of production, and insist instead on its import for the realm of social reproduction. This apparently innocuous shift has the potential to undo one of the founding, and most persistent, cultural techniques of the western canon: that which separates the event from the conditions of its production in order to shift the latter into the background. By contrast, the recreative industries promote a militant conviviality in which those who prepare the food are also invited to join the *convivium*, to drink wine and discuss with the philosophers.

The recreative industries fight the private property relations with legal, informal, paralegal and illegal means; they articulate “the difference between constructing a common object or just sharing it” (P2P Foundation 2012, 36). By pirating, borrowing, appropriating, practicing “*la perruque*” (de Certeau 1984, 29), and also by means of a patient engagement with the law, the recreative industries emphasise the relation between the construction of commons and their subtraction from private enclosing. By valorising creativity as something that can be applied to regulations, they take commoning beyond its invocation as an ethical effort to a level where its principles become encoded in jurisprudence.

The recreative industries also protect their own commons from the vicissitudes of their immediate collectivities and organisations. They know that processes of disassembly, variations in endurance, and exercises in composition and recomposition are as important as the constituent, initial act of coming together. The recreative industries strive for making what they have learned available as partisan knowledge.

Riparo: Shelter and Repair

Whereas the creative industries ideology focused on ideas of virtuosity, productivity, excellence and disruption, practices that are the handmaiden of “corporatisation, flexibilisation and militarisation” (Holmes 2007, 177), the recreative industries organize dwellings characterized by amateurisation, gestation, eroticism and regeneration.

To talk about the Italian Cultural Occupations in terms of the recreative industries is therefore to understand that this kind of experiment began from something that is already broken, dysfunctional, and unfit for purpose. I am referring not only to the failed promises of the creative industries, promises that a generation of precarious cognitarians trained for, but also the change that has occurred since the 1990s in the relationship between urban life, social movements and the Italian social centres. To echo Stephen Jackson’s notion of “broken world thinking” (2014), to coalesce

around the impossibility of forming a harmonious community, or achieving economic prosperity, or obtaining artistic excellence, has ethical and political implications. In a recent text, MACAO offered itself up as a “*rifugio*,” a refuge, a shelter (2018). In doing so it was not proposing culture as an escapist realm, away from the horrors of rising social violence and relentless pillaging of our future, but as a zone of momentary respite. In Italian, another word for this concept of temporary shelter is a “repair.” This double semantic meaning of *rifugio* establishes a rich and significant connection between a site of respite and rest, and one of mending and regeneration. It also connotes an awareness of the fragility of those structures that are able to offer repair (in both senses of the term).

It’s funny and sad that, despite the obsession of management studies with metaphors for talking about organizations¹, we still need to find an image capable of describing the latter as sites of production of the possibility of pleasure; or, more simply, as a *riparo* – a shelter and place of repair – from the underlying violence embedded in most institutional and infrastructural systems under capitalism.

Admin against managers

To be inspired by a word’s etymology is to make a traditional (rather than new) gesture in this context. Still, there is an interesting gap in the etymology of *industry* and *enterprise*. While the root of *industry* connotes diligence and zealous care, *enterprise* is an action that takes. One is about the giving of attention and dedication; the other is about laying claim to something as part of an activity.

As artists, as producers, as carers, as lovers, even as patients or the unemployed, we have been told it is of utmost importance that our self-worth and biographical gestures carry an enterprising responsibility. The recreative industries thus find themselves fighting the pressure of managerial rationality. As Schumpeter noted, the essential quality of entrepreneurship is precisely not to really care for the new, but for the game that leads to its possibility: namely, a repertoire that cares only for an incessant re-combination of already existing factors, including subjects and relations, techniques and machines, resources and affects. In order to function, Schumpeter’s figure of the entrepreneur (1934) however ends up in a conflictual relation with his big other, the mass of the rest of humanity whose sin is to be too “hedonistic” and thus not proactive enough in seeking opportunities of recombination.

By contrast, it would be possible to play with the notion of recreative industrialists as those who get in the game precisely for, and with, the cultivation of hedonistic regimes of practice: as pleasure-inventing modes of production, where experiencing the control over the rhythm of life is a source of plenitude.

In opposing managerial rationality, they challenge the normalized approaches to the division of labour within organizations, and reclaim the art of administration against that of management. Authors such as Rousseau and Saint-Simon have indeed explicitly counter-posed the former to the concept of government; while more recent theories of the common are now proposing administrators as the custodians of the use of inalienable goods (Dardot and Laval 2015, 213-215).

Recreation

Finally, let’s position “recreative industries” as also referring to these organizations opening up spaces of *recreation* proper, including activities of leisure, and of taking time for enjoyment, amusement, fun. It is significant that when the concept of recreation first appeared in the English language by way of French during the 14th century, it actually carried the meaning of “refreshment or curing of a sick person” (Online Etymology Dictionary). And indeed leisure has been considered to be a right of students or citizens more broadly in some legal frameworks (for instance, in the Charter of Human Rights).

By pointing to the political potential of the space that is opened in recreation, I mean to insist on the unique politics that become possible in this interval, when “the relative autonomy” that precarious intellectual labour has “in the acquisition and the enrichment of its linguistic-cognitive competences is destined to be overturned whenever the capitalist enterprise makes real use of them” (Virno 2015, 178). Virno argued that “the divergence between training and contingent execution is a distinctive trait of contemporary forms of life” and operates as “a seismograph of future conflicts.” The politics of recreation takes place in this gap between preparation and work. It is during this pause that different activities can be performed creatively and can be codified in our social re-production of pleasures.

¹ The well-known book *Images of Organization* (1997) lists organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformations, instruments of domination.

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