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Affective Labour and Alienation in *Up in the Air*

The neoliberal phase of capitalism has been typified by its ruthlessness in its treatment of labour and this has been captured dramatically by *Up in the Air* (2009), directed by Jason Reitman, and adapted from Walter Kirn's novel (Kirn 2001), which focuses on a corporate consultant, Ryan Bingham, whose job is to fly around the United States firing workers. He does this in such a professional and unthinking manner that the reality of what he is doing does not preoccupy him. His world becomes unsettled, however, when two women come into his life both professionally and personally. One is Natalie Keener, a new employee in his firm, who introduces the new technology of videoconferencing as a way to sack people in order to cut costs. The other is Alex Goran, a female mirror image of his own corporate self, with whom he has a relationship that appears to develop a degree of emotional empathy, but within which Bingham finds, to his great cost, that the labour he has been involved in when sacking people suddenly rebounds on him within the realm of his personal life. The alienating aspects of these labour activities begin to dawn on Bingham and Natalie both professionally and personally, forcing them to re-assess their lives along more humanist lines.

To this end, I explore the film utilising Hardt and Negri's notion of affective labour, which is labour that produces an emotional affect in another person, to illustrate how the very intimate relationships we form with each other can be corrupted by the instrumentalism that can pervade the workplace. The theory of affective labour as applied to this film carries a normative import to suggest that the world of work and our personal lives are intertwined, so we should always treat people as ends in themselves rather than as a mere means to be sacrificed on the altar of corporate capitalism. The fact that Bingham's firm exists solely to offer corporations the service of sacking their workers for them, perceptively pinpoints the brutal consequences of neoliberalism when firms collapse and their employees are thrown on the scrapheap. Marx accounted for this with his theory of the tendency for the rate of profit to fall and excessive investment in constant capital, technology, machines, etc., and the expulsion of living labour from the production process leading to a decline in profit, risky investments, business failures and full-blown economic crises (Marx 1991: part three; cf. Fraser and Wilde 2011: 198-99). Indeed, the recent financial crash of 2007/8 and the massive expansion of what Marx called 'fictitious capital', money unrelated to the reality of producing actual commodities, is a further consequence of this process once debt is used to overcome crises in profitability in the real side of the economy (Marx 1991: 595-601; cf. Burnham 2010). As David Harvey also explains, these destructive tendencies are accompanied by an aggressive neoliberalism that attempts to redistribute wealth away from the poor and the public to the rich, leading to a crisis in over-accumulation as barriers to profit-maximisation lead to fraudulent investments and less people being employed (Harvey 2005: 159; Choonara 2009; cf. Hardt and Negri 2009: 266). Endorsing this theme, Hardt and Negri also see neoliberalism as typifying the 'postindustrial economy' where labour and products are becoming increasingly immaterial, the world of work ever more precarious and the expulsion of labour a perpetual probability (Hardt and Negri 2009: 266, 132-7). Against this background of an unstable and brutal capitalism that the film expertly exposes, affective labour can be seen as a means to manage the process of capital's production of human waste. I begin, therefore, by outlining Hardt and

Negri's theory of affective labour, and then utilise this framework to consider the change in Bingham's identity in his interactions with Natalie and Alex.

Affective Labour

In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri interpreted a new phase of an increasingly globalising capitalism. They defined 'Empire' as a sovereign power governing the world and regulating global exchanges, a new form of rule in which sovereignty has begun to take a global form given the declining sovereignty of nation states (Hardt and Negri 2000: xi). Empire, unlike imperialism, has no boundaries or any centre of territorial power and the 'object of its rule is social life in its entirety' (Hardt and Negri 2000: xi). As part of this new Empire age, they assert that it ushered in an age of 'immaterial labour', which is labour that 'produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication', and is mostly present in the service sectors of the economy (ibid.: 289-90).

One aspect of immaterial labour relates to the increased use of computers, which has redefined all forms of social practices and relations, particularly in advanced Western societies (ibid.: 291). For Hardt and Negri, humans 'increasingly think like computers' as 'communication technology and their model of interaction are becoming more and more central to labouring activities' as 'interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds and a lens through which to redefine our bodies and minds themselves'. They endorse the work of Robert Reich here who sees this form of immaterial labour that engages in computer and communication work, "'symbolic-analytical services'", involving a "'problem-solving, problem-identifying'" approach (Reich 1991: 177). Reich sees this type of labour as having the 'highest value', according to Hardt and Negri, but he also realises that these jobs can also lead to low-skilled, or low-valued work involving word processing or data entry, ushering in a crucial division of labour in the realm of immaterial production (Hardt and Negri 2000: 291-92).

Informationalisation and development of immaterial labour produces a 'real homogenisation of labouring processes', which they contrast with Marx's time when labour was heterogeneous, such as tailoring and weaving, for example (ibid., p. 292). Homogenisation was only possible then by abstracting from the concrete differences of the labour employed, which Marx grasped with his notion of abstract labour (ibid., referring to Marx 1998: 131-37). For Hardt and Negri, the increased computerisation of today has involved a reduction in the heterogeneous aspects of concrete labour as the 'worker is further removed from the object of his or her labour' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 292). The computer has become the 'universal tool' through which all activities pass and so points labour towards the 'position of abstract labour'.

Hardt and Negri reflect that the role of the computer is only one aspect to immaterial labour and they identify three other types driving the service sector at the apex of the informational economy. One is where informationalisation and communication technology permeates industrial production so much that the production process itself becomes transformed. Another is the analytic and symbolic tasks constituting creative and intelligent manipulation on one side, and routine tasks on the other. The final form of immaterial labour produces and manipulates affect, using either virtual or actual human contact and labour in the bodily mode, '*affective labour*', which involves the use of contact and interaction to cause an affect in another person, which can be either actual or virtual but must involve the 'creation and manipulation of affect' (ibid.: 292-93). They argue that this type of labour can be

found in the caring services, such as health provision and the entertainment industry, where the labour is immaterial because ‘its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion’ (ibid). Affective labour goes far beyond the computational aspect of immaterial labour and ‘produces social networks, forms of community, biopower’ (ibid.: 293).

Hardt and Negri see these three types of immaterial labour driving the postmodernisation of the global economy, involving cooperation and social interaction contained within the labouring activity itself, rather than imposed on it from the outside (ibid.: 294). Consequently, they claim that ‘in the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labour thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’. There is therefore a positive connotation to affective labour because it allows those who refuse the rule of capital, the multitude, to create spaces for their own autonomy in and against the system that attempts to dominate them.

Five years later in *Multitude* (2005), Hardt and Negri revisit the issue of immaterial labour to reiterate much of their understanding of the concept they made earlier and to re-assert how affective labour is present in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants and fast food workers, for instance, which they capture with the phrase ‘service with a smile’ (Hardt and Negri 2005: 108). Nonetheless, the slightly overoptimistic understanding of immaterial labour as an embryonic form of communism is now tempered as they emphasise how alienation can occur when affective production becomes part of waged labour, when something as intimate as forging human relationships is sold to the ‘command of the client or boss’ (ibid.:111). As they also said in *Empire* and repeat here, they do not mean to claim that immaterial labour makes all work rewarding or pleasant nor do they deny that hierarchy and command are still present in the workplace. Indeed, they contend that the notion of alienation, which they suggest ‘was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers’, is now a ‘useful conceptual key’ for understanding exploitation in this realm of affective labour (ibid).¹ Nevertheless, they do not take this much further in this work, which gives the impression that the positive aspect of affective labour is more their concern, especially as this negative aspect is not explored to any great extent four years later in *Commonwealth* (Hardt and Negri: 2009). Instead, as Melissa Gregg observes and endorses, they point to love as a possible antidote to corporate capital’s corrosive and corrupting power and she attempts to relate this, albeit briefly, in the final pages of her excellent book, *Work’s Intimacy*, to *Up in the Air* (Gregg, 2011: 172-74; Hardt and Negri 2009: xii). However, in doing so she depicts the film as offering the negative aspects of an emasculated intimacy rather than the affirmation of love, but declares that this can be ‘overcome’, although not, she contends, within the context of this film (Gregg, 201: 174). Consequently, I now want to explore the role of immaterial labour in relation to *Up in the Air*, to suggest it is mainly the alienating aspects of affective labour that explain the operations of capitalist corporations rather than the positive moments Hardt and Negri emphasise, but contrary to Gregg’s point, there are moments of hope present. I begin with the main anti-hero, Ryan Bingham.

Ryan Bingham

The alienating aspects of affective labour are evident at the opening of the film. Successive shots show a number of people looking just to their right of the camera talking to someone we cannot see yet. They all use ethical responses to their plight

and aim their hostility and general disbelief at the firer, later revealed as Ryan Bingham. Expressions indicating the injustice these people feel are: 'this is what I get in return for 30 years' service for my company'; 'I don't know how you can live with yourself, but I'm sure you'll find a way while the rest of us are suffering'; to 'fuck you!' and finally, 'who the fuck are you?' In a voice-over Bingham states, 'excellent question', and then asks: 'Who the fuck am I?' So the rhetorical question can be seen not only as introducing his character to the audience but as a possible questioning of his own identity, although he is in no state to engage in critical self-reflection about what he is and does just yet.

The alienation produced by affective labour is revealed in the way Bingham responds to such attacks and begins with Steve, who is on the verge of a breakdown when he is told he is being let go. When Steve asks what he did wrong or what he could have done differently, Bingham has the ready answer that he should not personalise this as it is not an assessment of his productivity. Steve sees through the jargon but Bingham hands him a packet that will answer all his questions. Steve is wise to this as well, and ironically mocks Bingham by suggesting it is bound to be really helpful. Bingham then uses his classic line when he has to get people back on track and accept what is happening to them in a more positive light. He states: 'anybody who ever built an empire, or changed the world, sat where you are now. And it's because they sat there that they were able to do it'.

It seems to work, because Steve suddenly looks hopeful, and seizing the moment, Bingham asks him for his key card. Steve asks earnestly how he can contact him, to which Bingham lies by responding that he will be in touch, but his voice-over betrays this assurance by remarking he will never see Steve again. So the alienating insincerity of the affective labour engaged in by Bingham is clear from the outset, and dealing with a traumatic event in people's lives does not bother him at all. Indeed, he smiles almost self-satisfied on a job well done.

The realm of immaterial labour haunts the film as we are next transported to Bingham's world where he informs us that to know him is to fly with him. At the airport he marvels at how running one of his cards through the automated machines prompts a desk clerk to automatically greet him with the alienated, affective labour smile and line of, 'pleasure to see you again, Mr Bingham'.

On the aeroplane, Bingham luxuriates in his executive business class surroundings as he is approached by a female flight attendant who is pushing along the drinks' trolley. She is meant to be asking Bingham, 'do you want the can sir?', but he hears it as, 'do you want the cancer', which perplexes him, until she shows him the can of drink, which he declines. In this instance, the affective labour that should be producing a comforting affect in offering Bingham a drink instead disconcerts him by his misapprehension of the words. Accidentally, affective labour becomes an alienating force against him rather than in the worker who is meant to be producing a more enhancing response in the client, but there is also something else relevant here. From the outset, the film is structured to elicit our sympathies with those who have been or will be fired, and so it engages in a form of affective labour with the audience to make us see Bingham's work as deeply alienating. The symbolism of the cancer is indicative of the alienating, affective labour that he is engaging in, a cancer he is spreading, and he is being asked if he would like the same treatment too. The cancer could therefore be symbolic of the cancer that is capitalism, which treats people instrumentally through alienated, affective labour and then throws them on the scrapheap when they are no longer needed.² Unfortunately for Bingham, he too will become a victim of the alienating consequences of immaterial labour. To explore this

further I now want to consider the impact Natalie has on him before confronting his ultimate nemesis in the form of Alex.

Natalie Keener

As we have seen, one aspect of immaterial labour Hardt and Negri see as crucial in the new age of Empire is the role of the computer, but in this film it is the negative consequences rather than the positive prevailing. For example, when Natalie is first introduced, her initiative of using videoconferencing to cut costs is presented utilising her concept of 'GLOCAL': the firm's global aspects must become local. Too many people are on the road costing far too much money and it is an inefficient way of firing people. She shows a PowerPoint slide displaying multiple monitors linked to a central switchboard that will allow people to be sacked virtually all round the country, and in the process deny Bingham his executive travelling lifestyle. So the increase in technology Empire ushers in is certainly transforming production, as Hardt and Negri contend, but in a very negative manner. It is making firing people even easier and less personal and so deepening the alienation of affective labour.

Bingham tries to talk his boss, Craig Gregory, out of it by challenging Natalie to a role play in which she is meant to fire him, and as Bingham expects, she does not do a good job of it. Unlike Bingham, she forgets the way language is employed in the process of affective labour is crucial, and she uses the word 'fired', when, as Bingham indicates, she should say, 'let go'. Once alone with Gregory, Bingham's reasons for rejecting the new technology are as personal as the reasons people give for not being sacked. His boss advises Bingham he is becoming 'irrelevant' and warns him he is 'too young to become a dinosaur', in language Bingham would never utter when sacking someone. Bingham's response is to recognise what he does is 'brutal' and does leave people 'devastated' but there is a 'dignity' to the way he does it. Gregory will not let him off the hook and asks him, you mean by 'stabbing people in the chest instead of the back?' To add insult to injury, his boss then forces Bingham to take Natalie on the road to experience what he does. So Bingham is being confronted with the reality of the alienating effects of affective labour but is still too cocooned in the comfort of his own world to realise or even care about it yet.

When Natalie goes to her first assignment with Bingham, she displays visible signs of nervousness. He warns her to keep quiet, watch him and hand over the packet when prompted. There is a scene with Bob, whose response to being fired is to show them a picture of his two children. Natalie intervenes inappropriately by suggesting to Bob he is perhaps underestimating the positive effect this could have on his children, because studies have shown that children suffering a mild form of trauma become more academically minded in order to cope. Bob suggests she go and fuck herself. Natalie is dumbstruck but Bingham rescues the situation by reminding Bob that his real passion before he worked for this firm was cooking and asks him how much he was first paid to give up on his dreams. Bob elucidates that it was twenty seven thousand a year, and Bingham, realising he has sparked something in him, asks when he was going to return to doing something that made him happy. Seizing the moment, Bingham uses Bob's children to press home the point and asks him to do it for them even if not for himself. Bob is almost tearful and Bingham quickly nods to Natalie to hand over the packet, which Bob accepts. The use of affective labour by Bingham in this situation by playing on emotion and using the reason why Bob was upset at losing his job, the consequences for his children, clearly indicates the alienating aspect of human interaction involved here. As for Natalie, she is not proving herself to be

equipped with the necessary acumen required in the exercise of her affective labour, which suggests a spark of humanism is present to undermine the instrumentalism she must embrace to do her work.

The contrast between Bingham's self-assuredness and Natalie's nervousness and clumsiness in her role is contrasted repeatedly as the film progresses. When she first attempts to fire someone, she is confronted by Miss Barnes who is calm and guesses immediately she is going to be sacked. Natalie ignores her and begins to parrot the prepared lines emanating from the affective labour process. Barnes cuts Natalie short to ask what they are offering. Natalie explains the severance package but Barnes quickly deduces it is worthless. She then announces she is very sure of her plans and Natalie perks up thinking that she will have completed her task satisfactorily. Unfortunately for Natalie this is short-lived, as Barnes calmly explains she is going to go to a bridge by her house and throw herself off it.

The next shot is of Natalie running out of the building in a distressed state with Bingham chasing her and calling her back. She sits on a bench and is in shock, so Bingham tries to comfort her by explaining that people make these threats all the time. Natalie is not so convinced because she noted the woman was very calm, which Bingham thinks is probably a good sign. Natalie, still unsure, persists and asks him if they ever go through with it. He replies in the negative saying it is all just talk. Natalie questions how he can know this and asks him if he follows these things up. Bingham is caught out and admits he does not because nothing good can come of it and she should not worry, but Natalie does not look reassured. Bingham tries to make her confront the reality of what they are doing and accept it by understanding that they 'take people when they are most fragile and send them adrift'. He then asks her if she is ready to go back in and she stands up and nods, but again not wholly convincingly.

Natalie was weak in her use of affective labour to make Barnes accept her fate, but this is because she has a spark of humanism as she is genuinely worried that she might commit suicide. Bingham, at this stage of his journey, is content not to think about the consequences of his actions as long as he gets the work done.

Natalie is beginning to doubt her job and this is quickly reinforced when she and Bingham visit another firm. When they enter the main office there is a bedraggled secretary sitting at a desk but behind her remain only the few remnants of what used to be the office floor. The camera has a close-up of Natalie as she views the surroundings and she gulps, indicating how uncomfortable she is becoming with what she is doing. This is followed by a number of quick shots, one of which shows Natalie working alone and handing the redundancy packages to the workers. So it seems she has settled back into her previous state and is again engaging in alienating, affective labour. Yet, a montage of shots of workers reacting badly to being told they are getting fired, ends by cutting to Natalie sitting alone in an office that is crammed with office chairs and symbolic of all the people who have lost their jobs. She stares ahead, contemplative and looking somewhat perturbed. Bingham appears and snaps her out of her reverie but the implication seems to be she is having second thoughts about her role.

Natalie is, for the moment, disguising her feelings well, but she begins a conversation with Bingham about marriage and having children and she cannot believe Bingham desires neither. Natalie starts to cry and confesses that her boyfriend has finished their relationship. They are now in the hotel lobby and Natalie is bawling very loudly. Bingham looks embarrassed and is forced to comfort her, although it is clear from his hesitancy he feels awkward doing so because he is not accustomed to caring for anyone except himself. Alex appears, he introduces them to each other,

they go for a drink, and Natalie shows them the text message from her boyfriend stipulating their relationship is over. Bingham suggests, 'it's like firing someone over the internet', to show Natalie that her videoconferencing idea lacks the personal touch of a face-to-face sacking. So the realm of affective labour operating in the workplace is contrasted nicely here with the trauma it can cause in its alienated form. Now Natalie knows what it is like to be rejected, although for her it is in a personal relationship and not her job. The crossover, though, between the work and the personal realm is an important one because it again displays there should be a certain sense of dignity in the way we treat each other as human beings.

A few scenes later Natalie asks Bingham what sort of relationship he has with Alex, and he answers that it is casual. She mocks him with: 'it sounds pretty special', to which he responds that it works for them. Natalie persists in trying to make Bingham take his relationship with Alex more seriously without realising Alex is happy with its casual nature. He denigrates Natalie who is now riled and accuses him of having a 'bullshit philosophy' with his 'isolation' and travelling, questioning him if he thinks it is meant to be charming. He retorts that it is 'simply a life-choice' but she calls it a 'cocoon of self-banishment'. Bingham declares, 'wow, big words' to which the frustrated Natalie blurts out, 'screw you', which he repeats back to her. She is furious and concludes that he has a life that makes him incapable of having any kind of human connection, which is why he is using Alex, and calls him a 12 year old. Natalie does not understand it is precisely Bingham's 'bullshit philosophy' that allows him to do his job without any qualms, and even act as a justification for it.

Back on the road, there is an icy silence between them in the car that matches the frozen snow on the ground outside, but their visit to another firm, in Detroit, means they have to communicate with each other. Indeed, the white colour of the snow is an intermittent but important indication of the harsh, cold world that waits those who have become victims of alienating, affective labour that occurs throughout the film. It is also present and complimented by the dominance of the colour blue, indicating coldness, and brown, representing a subdued aura, in many of the shots, whether in the clothes worn or the surroundings shown.

Bingham warns her that these people can be difficult so she must make sure to get the packages in their hands and get them out of the door as quickly as possible. When they enter the building they are escorted to an office and to their surprise find a computer ready for videoconferencing and Craig Gregory, their boss, talks to them through it. He decides he wants to try it out, much to the annoyance of Bingham, who is rattled further when Gregory explains he wants Natalie to do it. Bingham does not think she is ready but Gregory insists. He asks Natalie directly whether she is up for it and after a slight hesitation she smiles and concurs.

As Natalie gets ready, Bingham advises her not to apologise or talk about herself when she is firing the workers, because how he and she can in no way compare to what is happening to them as it is the worst day of their lives. This is an indication of the change taking place in Bingham who would not have expressed such thoughts before Natalie started to challenge him about his relationship with Alex. He counsels Natalie to be professional and everything will be fine.

Natalie sits at the monitor in a room opposite to where the workers are being called in to be fired. Mr Samuels is first; he seems startled by the screen and asks what all this is about. Natalie talks to him through the monitor and attempts to put him at ease but she is nervous and falters in her affective labour role and eventually, after explaining he is 57 years of age and has nowhere else to go, Samuels begins to cry. Natalie carries on with her prepared speech with empty advice but is visibly pained

when doing so, while at the same time trying to be professional as Bingham advised. Samuels continues to cry and she repeatedly attempts to ask him to leave but he simply sits and sobs. Natalie can bear it no longer and raises her voice as she shouts out his name, which shakes him from his sorrowful, stationary state. He gets up and leaves the room unknowingly passing them in their office as he goes back to collect his things.

Bingham has sat alongside her watching the whole process and praises her for doing well. Natalie looks like she is holding herself together but obviously on the inside she seems to be in turmoil given her pained expression and the fixed stare of her eyes. Bingham senses this and offers to take over but she assures him, again unconvincingly, that she is fine. She attempts to compose herself, turns to her left and suddenly sees the long list of all the people she must sack. She looks awestruck but again tries to compose herself and puts a line through Samuels' name, but cannot resist displaying an apprehensive gulp. This gulp occurs again in the next scene when she is standing by the car in the snow as though in a trance staring straight ahead at nothing and looks close to tears, while Bingham is on his phone to Gregory. The shot of her shows someone who is beginning to realise that what they are doing cannot be right but she has done so well that Gregory decides to pull them off the road and implement the new immaterial, computational technology of videoconferencing. Bingham looks a forlorn character at this point as his reason for living, his travelling, his 'isolation' as Natalie called it, is over.

We next see Natalie with Bingham back at headquarters where the videoconferencing to fire people is being practised ready to be operationalised by the end of the month. She seems confident and happy advising people on the best way to talk to the people they are sacking. It seems as though she has bypassed the trauma that befell her when she was in Detroit and is now firmly back within the realm of alienating, affective labour in the computational age. However, we eventually find out from Gregory, talking to Bingham, that Miss Barnes has killed herself. Bingham asks if Natalie is alright only to discover she has quit. Bingham does not seem surprised and Gregory confirms she did so by text message, concluding that no one has any manners any more. So there is an expectation of dignity from Gregory that he does not think should transfer to those being sacked on behalf of his own company, which illustrates further the endemic nature of alienated, affective labour. Bingham seems concerned and intends to give her a call as Gregory announces that he wants him back in the air, which is met with an air of melancholy rather than pleasure. We then see Natalie who is in an interview for a job and the interviewer is perplexed how someone as bright as her, who could have the pick of any jobs on offer, could choose a job that fires people for a living. Natalie tries to conceal the real reason by suggesting it was challenging work, which the interviewer ironically responds with, 'I'll say', and adds that he cannot imagine doing that day in and day out, especially in this climate of major unemployment. Natalie realises she should speak the truth and admits she followed her boyfriend. The interviewer seems to understand her more now and agrees that we can all do that at some time in our lives. He then reaches for a letter which turns out to be a reference from Bingham who has said they will be lucky to have her as an employee. The camera then focuses on Natalie who lets out a satisfied smile. The interviewer leans across the table to shake her hand and declares, 'I sure hope he is right'. Natalie jumps up to attention and reciprocates, again with a smile on her face.

So Natalie finally breaks out of the realm of alienating, affective labour perhaps in its most extreme form of constantly sacking people, although we have no

idea what work is involved with her new firm. The hope is she has turned a corner and realised that in our affective dealings with each other we must try to avoid the instrumentalism that can lead to alienation. Her experience has also eventually made Bingham think more seriously about what he is doing but as we shall now see, it is Alex who is the main catalyst for his possible redemption albeit via a more brutal route.

Alex Goran

As I mentioned earlier, Hardt and Negri make the pertinent point that the ability to make human relationships is a very intimate activity, but in the realm of affective labour it can be deeply alienating when it is sold to the power of the boss or client. The alienation affective labour produces, which is lost on Bingham in his day-to-day activities, can seep into the relationships we forge in everyday life, and it is with his relationship with Alex that Bingham finds this out to his own cost.

When they first meet their conversation centres on the best hire cars and their various cards, the prize of which for Bingham is his graphite American concierge card which records the air miles he has travelled, and which excites Alex. As a joke, Bingham suggests it might cheapen their relationship, and true to her straightforward self and a realisation of what she is, Alex retorts that as they are both people turned on by elite status they may have to settle for cheap. Bingham's surprise response is there is nothing cheap about loyalty. So we are transported back to the beginning of the film when the sacked worker asked Bingham if this is all he could expect for 30 years of working for the same firm. Loyalty meant nothing then to Bingham in the realm of implementing the alienation of affective labour.

We see them enter the hotel room with the intention of having sex together, albeit after Bingham cannot find the correct card key. We are then shown a fully made up bed, Alex appears, naked, with only Bingham's tie round her waist. She goes onto the bed to find a sexually exhausted Bingham lying on the floor hidden beside it. The instrumental nature of their sexual gratification is akin to the instrumental nature they operate with in their corporate world they both inhabit. Symbolically, though, the tie indicates she is at one with his supposed identity and in fact subsuming part of it into her more assured self, a self she is at home with, and certainly a more assured self than he will be once he has succumbed to the affects she will produce in him. For instance, after Alex surmises she should probably return to her room to wake up there in the morning, he agrees and escorts her back. He kisses her and says, 'nice meeting you', and she responds with 'pleasure', as though they have done each other a service in the realm of affective labour. Once she is inside, he takes, what we can presume is a 'do not disturb' sign from a door opposite, and places it on her door. So he is beginning to be affectionate towards her, but oblivious to causing problems for the person he has taken the sign from.

Their relationship develops tentatively at first because Bingham is worried she might be more demanding than he thought and also whether it is appropriate for him to ring her. Alex quickly disabuses him of that by saying the word appropriate has no place in their vocabulary and he can call whenever he wants, 'think of me as yourself...only with a vagina', she explains. They then meet when they can and Bingham still has difficulty finding the right key to open the hotel bedroom, which might indicate all may not be well.

When Natalie is told by her boyfriend their relationship is over, both Bingham and Alex attempt to console her, but Natalie asks Alex what she looks for in a man.

We will later discover that Alex is in fact married and has children, but here she lies to both Bingham and Natalie and talks in general terms about what her ideal type of man would be like. She identifies a number of characteristics before concluding that a nice smile might just do it and looks at Bingham who smiles in response. Unbeknown to Bingham, the affective labour entering the realm of the personal, the face that Alex shows to the world in the life away from her husband and family, means he is misunderstanding the signs. Just as he uses affective labour to disguise what he is really doing to those people he needs to fire, so Alex is using her own affective labour to disguise her own background and produce the desired response in Bingham.

Even worse, during a night out dancing and drinking at a convention in the Hilton, Bingham gives Alex a key to his apartment, and she pronounces, 'wow, I had no idea we were at that point in our relationship', to which he replies, 'oh, yes'. Alex repeats the word, 'wow', and toys with the key card in her hand. The music being played is 'Sign your Name', by Terence Trent D'arby, which has the opening lines: 'fortunately you have got someone who relies on you. We started out as friends but the thought of you just caves me in'. The lyrics indicate how badly Bingham has misread the situation through the affective labour seeping into their relationship.

Bingham has a sideline to his main job where goes to conferences and lectures people on how they should operate in the world of corporate capital. He advises the audience that 'relationships are the heaviest components in your life' and asks them to imagine putting all of them into one backpack, feel the weight of it and the way the straps will cut into your back. He explains how humans are just like sharks rather than monogamous swans because the 'slower we move the faster we die'. His 'bullshit philosophy', as Natalie called it, is based on an extreme form of individualism that advises us to look after ourselves and eschew any binding relationships or commitments, but his feelings for Alex will soon undermine such certainties.

We next see Alex and Bingham on a yacht. She reveals she knows about his backpack speech. He reflects that he cannot remember what originally sparked it, but thinks now he had to empty it before he knew what to put in it, the implication being Alex. Back at the hotel, they spend the night together, and Bingham awakes to find Alex almost dressed as she has to catch a flight. He seems disappointed and Alex teases him by asking if she has made him feel cheap. He rejoinders by asking her to leave the money on the dresser, but then reveals he likes her; she reciprocates. So there is a realisation that the intimacy of the sexual act can be treated instrumentally by both of them, but the close-ups on Bingham's face as he looks adoringly at Alex suggests this may not be totally true for him. This becomes clearer when he eventually asks Alex if she will come to his sister's wedding and admits for the first time he would like someone to be with him, especially her. Alex initially thinks it would not be appropriate for her to do so. This links back to the start of their relationship when she chides Bingham for wondering whether it was appropriate or not for him to telephone her. She said then the word appropriate was not in their vocabulary, and then made the comment of her being like him with a vagina. The reason it is not appropriate is because she is married with a family, but she goes along with it anyway and meets his relations. He takes her to his school where, in what appears to be a touching moment between them, Alex discloses she is happy she came here, to which he concurs. She then attends the wedding and at the reception they are both shown to be enjoying themselves and being intimate with each other. Bingham even gives Alex a spare wedding bouquet at the end of the night, but he has misread the supposed signals of shared affection here in the personal realm as badly as the people he fires misread his purported concern in the realm of affective labour

They are going their separate ways at the airport, and when she asks him when she will see him again, he asks her to come and visit now he has been grounded due to the introduction of videoconferencing. Alex seems perturbed and proclaims, 'you are so settled', and worries if he is going to change on her. He responds by declaring he is the same guy but now with one address, and she replies, fine, call me when you get lonely. Instantaneously he confesses he is, leaving Alex to laugh as she walks away. The warning signs should be evident to Bingham because Alex is concerned he is going to let emotions get in the way of their instrumental relationship. Alex's laugh can be interpreted as affecting Bingham in a positive way, she thinks his need for her is touching, but given what we will find out about her real life, it is more likely she thinks he is joking, which of course he is not, because he has fallen in love with her.

He is booked in to do his backpack speech but falters at the start of it, runs off and heads to Chicago to call on Alex at her home. He rings the bell, she answers the door and he jokes that he was just in the neighbourhood. Her face is one of shock, and as she stands looking at him, two young children run up the stairs behind her. Bingham is visibly distraught and backs away. A voice, obviously Alex's husband, asks her who it is, to which she replies that it is just 'someone who is lost', which Bingham is because he has become the victim of the alienating, affective emotions that Alex has expended on him without even realising it. The next shot has Bingham in a hotel room having a drink and staring aimlessly out of the window. The camera pulls back showing him framed in the window as a picture of an isolated self that before he was happy with, but now seems an alienated self who, as in Alex's words, is 'lost'.

Alex rings him the next day, and is annoyed with him for turning up at her home. He is angry with her because she concealed her family from him. She admonishes him for not realising they both signed up for the same thing, to which he asks her what exactly it was they signed up for. She bluntly states that he was 'an escape, a parenthesis', and criticises him for nearly screwing her real life up. As weakly as one of his soon-to-be unemployed victims, he pleads that he thought he was part of her real life. Alex shows no emotion and informs him that she is grown up and if he wants to rekindle things again then he can call her. He hangs up. Bingham is as devastated as the people he has fired in his life. The affective labour he used to dismiss them with the minimum of fuss has suddenly rebounded on him personally, because the feelings he thought he had for Alex were not reciprocated. As Hardt and Negri indicate, the ability to make human relationships, which is a very intimate activity, can become deeply alienating when it is sold to the client or boss, but it can also carry that level of alienation into the personal level as it has with someone as calculating as Alex. So she was not Bingham with a vagina, she was, in the macho world of brutal capitalism, Bingham with a corporate cock.

Bingham's character begins to change for the better now he realises how painful it is to be a victim of alienated, affective labour that Alex has exercised on him. Back in the office, he arranges to give his air miles to his sister and brother-in-law so they can fly round the world. His boss, Gregory, enters and notifies him that one of the people Natalie fired, Miss Barnes, has killed herself by throwing herself off a bridge, which as we saw earlier finally made Natalie decide to leave. Gregory asks Bingham if he remembers anyone giving him signals, any signs of depression, to which Bingham, now in his altered and more sensitive state, replies that they are all depressed because they are being fired, much to the chagrin of Gregory.

The videoconferencing idea is now on hold and Gregory tells Bingham he needs him back in the air. Bingham seems nonplussed, and Gregory is surprised by

his lack of enthusiasm, especially as he is going to be allowed to 'sail and sail', but it is clear Bingham is having doubts about going back to his previous life of implementing alienated, affective labour.

The film ends, after another montage of those who have been made unemployed before, with Bingham entering the airport, not with the efficient swagger we saw at the start of the film, and staring up at the giant board of destinations. A close-up shows him as a crestfallen man unsure of his next move. Another close-up is of his hand gripping the handle of his suitcase that he suddenly lets go. In a voice-over, he seemingly laments that tonight most people will be greeted at home by their family, but he will be up in the air, as the stars appear, and one of those lights will be his wingtip, passing over. It is here that Gregg interprets this narration as conjuring an image that has an 'ethereal quality, suggesting a kind of death', 'transience, disconnection and melancholy' but cautions that 'it is an image that can be overcome', but not, it appears, within the confines of this film (Gregg 2011: 173-4).

However, a more positive interpretation is possible. A close-up shows Bingham letting go of the handle of his suitcase, which could indicate he is letting go of this life and the awful occupation accompanying it. So a glimmer of hope might be that he has seen the error of his ways, that the realm of alienating, affective labour within which he felt so comfortable, is no longer compatible in his new state of consciousness, and a new start is possible.

Conclusions

Hardt and Negri have captured an important moment on the postmodernisation of global capital, and the way they capture this with their notion of empire and immaterial, affective labour is of paramount importance for trying to understand the predicaments we face as human beings in such tumultuous times. They also recognise the deeply alienating way these forms of labour can be reduced to when subordinated to the client or the boss. Although they do not explore this form of alienation themselves extensively in their own work, what I have tried to do is illuminate this tendency by focusing on the corporate capital world of *Up in the Air* as an aesthetic representation of everyday realities in the realm of affective labour. Bingham may be an extreme form of the brutal nature of neoliberal capitalism but then that is a very brutal form of capital indeed. Only when the cocoon of his corporate existence was first pierced by Natalie and finally shattered by Alex does he see the world from the other side of the desk. Natalie, never comfortable with her role in the first place, began anew but still it appears within the system of corporate capital. From a Hardt and Negri perspective the hope is she will be more alert to how affective labour can become alienating and perhaps create autonomous moments or spaces against it. Alex, it seems, is set to continue along the same path, unless of course another 'parenthesis' was to bring down her real world and maybe make her think again about using people so instrumentally. As for Bingham, it seems he had to be, in the words of Alex, 'lost', in order to begin the process of finding a more authentic existence against the alienating processes of affective labour that he enacted on others but eventually engulfed him.

Notes

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¹ For a defence of Marx against their claim here, see Fraser (2007: 174). For critiques of their theory of immaterial labour in general, see Wright (2002); Thompson (2005); and Camfield (2007).

² For an excellent analogy that capitalism is like cancer, see McMurtry (1998). For the way capitalism makes human beings have no real reason to care about each other and the damage that can cause, see Sennett (1999).

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