

Uncanniness Management and Figures of Corporeity at the Age of the Aesthetics Capitalism

A gestão do estranhamento e figuras de corporeidade na era estética do capitalismo

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Abstract: *Drawing upon the articulation of two recently published works in Brazil: A estetização do mundo (Le esthétisation du Monde) by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2015) and O circuito dos afetos, by Vladimir Safatle (2015), this paper aims to rise a discussion about what types of corporeities are being arranged accordingly to the major Neoliberal Political and Economic current demands. Therefore, we try to develop one specific problem: how our very capacity of uncanniness has been organized in this system?*

Keywords: *uncanniness management; aesthetic capitalism; corporeity*

Resumo: *A partir de uma análise que busca articular duas obras recentemente lançadas no Brasil – A estetização do mundo, de Gilles Lipovetsky e Jean Serroy, e O circuito dos afetos, de Vladimir Safatle –, buscamos problematizar neste artigo que corporeidades estão sendo dispostas em acordo com as demandas político-econômicas que ora se estabelecem como neoliberais. Dessa forma, perseguimos uma questão específica: como vem sendo organizada, nesse cenário, a nossa capacidade de estranhamento?*

Palavras-chave: *gerenciamento de estranhamento; capitalismo estético; corporeidade.*

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Introduction

The transformation from a society of production to a society of consumption, especially after the Second World War, unraveled something new in the relation between capitalism and aesthetics. Guided by a system of credit, by the organization of speculative capital and by an intense process of internationalization of the markets, affluent societies stopped detecting that the relations between sensitive and economic began celebrating a new hedonism and the belief that finally everyone could live freely with their individuality, in a way that the kitsch and the mass culture could be surpassed as sensitive standards of this new era. No more “customers”, as Theodor Adorno would say, “hungry for cinema, radio and illustrated magazines” (ADORNO, 2001, P. 97), but entrepreneurs of self. Something deeper on how to feel, how to be affected, how to experience corporeity² in times of consumption capitalism joyfully linking with their demands, including and mainly labor demands.

Political rearrangements were vital so that this economic system could face this new ethos, no longer strictly based on these premises pointed by Weber or Marx around the world of labor, the repressions and energetic and corporeal safeguards, in a way that the model of State in a social welfare were letting itself of entertain or dismantle for a new speech of liberalism. Until the late 70’s, with the indication that the own notion of modernity was deteriorating, it was clear that the masses shouldn’t be uplifted as an indiscernible collective, but the minds and hearts of the so-called “individuals”.

A Thatcher’s premise that would begin to allow, in a near future, that these individuals were thought as a possibility of investment and no longer as subjects for exploitation. This individual would begin to be thought as a company. The focus would not be only on the work “force”, but in the affective dimension of bodies as an object of entrepreneurship: their intensities and libido. A new rhetoric around success and a worthy

2 I use the notion of corporeity because I believe in it more as a dialogic meaning and less as determinative than the term body. I anchor myself in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (2006), since it seems better that the body is not thought through isolated spheres (biologic, cognitive, spiritual) but in its relation with the world.

existence would emerge then and, with that, a whole new sensitivity - including new models of corporeity.

Despite a persevering idealism of this political-economic system, not everything in the corporeity of this individual becomes subject to integrate docilely to their models and aesthetics. The capacity of uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*) of the subjects, for instance - while promoter of experiences of negativity and about which we will talk later - becomes a challenge for the organizational and managemental philosophies blooming in the 90's. Ideally, within this new regime of production-consumption, such individuals, with their bodies irremediably affective and pulsing, should understand, elaborate and organize this capacity of uncanniness (facing themselves, their work and their social normativities) as a way of a valuable property to their successful subject.

Based in this context, this paper seeks to articulate the notions of “aesthetic capitalism” and “uncanniness management”, based on two texts recently published in Brazil: *A estetização do mundo (Le esthétisation du Monde)*, by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2015) and *O circuito dos afetos*, by Vladimir Safatle (2015). Such discussion, that is nothing more (for now) than a theoretic essay, will have as context an issue that seems bigger: Which type of corporeity would interest to the full functioning of the so-called neoliberal democracies?

Yuppie bodies...

Michel Foucault (2008) decided to dedicate part of his course entitled “the birth of biopolitics”, released in 1979, to the exploration of that so-called *homo oeconomicus*: the active, individual citizen, thought as capital, species of investment in the business society. The man had as a self-entrepreneur, or rather, entrepreneur of a “self” transformed into company. Not even the aesthetics of existence or life lived as work of art - that were considered ways of escaping thought by Foucault for the disciplined and controlled world -, but life taken as an object of calculated management, that would characterize the basic function of his version of biopolitics.

It is ironic that this phenomenon starts to arise in the 80's, the so-called decade of plastic, of the disposable, of the post-modern, that was not a Foucauldian subject. That decade was also the decade of the yuppie, the executive that saw himself in the movies, a strong man, master and slave of himself, unconsciously socio-darwinistic... It is a type of self-entrepreneur, whose performance was condensed into one entrepreneurial intelligence, the youthful energy and a MBA mentality that was still in the beginning as an object of North American exportation: It is the American Psycho, ironized in the famous book of Bret Easton Ellis in 1991, or the woman of with shoulder pads, masculinized, as the one played by Sigourney Weaver in *Working girl*, movie by Mike Nichols in 1988.

These narratives already brought, under the form of pastiche and parody, the seed of a type of corporeity that would become normal with the internationalization of the North American culture. The means of communication used to spread ideas, models of corporeities and appearances capable of grouping all this new idealized aesthetic form: the multifaceted, accomplisher of many concomitant activities, ambitious, scheduled, meritocrat and passionate about his work, protected by a widely integrative educational and work speech.

Foucault did not testify this celebration of the neoliberal homo oeconomicus. He could not see how the professional world and the advertising world, as well as the mediatic culture as a whole, would start aestheticizing him. He did not imagine that the capitalism would begin to produce their own little myths decades later, for example, Andrea Sachs, main character of the best-seller of Lauren Weiberger *The Devil wears Prada* (2003), or Chris Gardner, played by Will Smith in

The Pursuit of Happyness (Gabriele Muccino, 2007). Narratives about the painful and, at the same time, charming process of management of their vulnerabilities and ambiguities.

It was the post-modern, while a updated field of understanding of this new world, that started to think this aesthetization of our economic system to, often times, worship it. One of the names behind this perception

was Gilles Lipovetsky. When he wrote *O império do efêmero* (2009) in the 80's, highlighting the modal character on which capitalism itself depended, the author defended, in a certain way, that the self-expression of the democratic individual worked through his individual freedom of living hedonism and the little luxuries of a consumption market that is now accessible.

Status and ostentation could relatively be lived by almost everyone. And, in the end of all that, a certain social dignity would be reached, in which the subject who lives the extravagance of fashion as the main driving force of a consumption society, instead of being considered as someone passive or alienated, would begin to be seen as someone who is capable of reinventing, in a certain way, their relationship with others, and, in addition to that, creating new meanings for the notion of elite, that would continue to dictate trends, although now it would also happen in a more dialogic way.

In 2003, Lipovetsky, along with the sociologist Jean Serroy, goes on disserting about the capitalism itself as an aesthetic form, or what he calls "artist-capitalism". In the text *A estetização do mundo*, a compendium of small commentaries on the society of consumption based on an update of the theory of the spectacle of Guy Debord – in which words such as "hyper-spectacle" and "hyper-consumption" are contextualized –, is assumed that the creativity begins to have an important role in a world that was thought as predestinate to unsurmountable massifying oppositions between art and industry. In the age of the aesthetic capitalism or trans-aesthetic era, as the authors would call it, the multiplication of trends and spectacles points towards a certain ambiguity of the capitalism in which some beneficial results would be created.

Unlike other stages of humanity, in which art worked towards the gods (ritual artelization era), than for the royalty (aristocratic aesthetization) and for art itself (in Modernity), in the trans-aesthetic capitalism, art and market work together and, contrary to that idea that was talked among apocalypics of the society of production and the cultural industry, instead of unidimensional men, we would have individualities with great

creative potential, based on an intense and accessible circuit of sensible experiences and artistic that only the contemporary man (concomitantly homo aestheticus and homo consumericus) would be capable of living.

Once again, Lipovetsky is on a certain duality around the good and the bad of an aesthetization of our economic system in which affection and sensibilities are disposed according to the demands of a market that is, at the same time, source and ending for fun and pleasure, or, paraphrasing Guy Debord (2003, p. 8): spectacle as “total justification of conditions and ends of the existing system”. Trait that seems significative for our discussion, since we believe there is a corporeity that molds itself in an auto-regulated or auto-organized way in this interdependent tension between work, sensibility and pleasure that seeks to conceive itself as an individual and liberal form.

This form would not imply, however, in a life goal with ends of a hierarchically superior concentrated wealth (that would mean, for Lipovetsky himself, a dated ideal and through what we imagined, for example, the image of the yuppie), but in the thesis that the capitalism artist would be based on “the order of the company projects and strategies” (LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2015, p. 41). i. e., instead of being stagnant within a rational calculus of economic activity around which our lives would be decided, he opens himself to the body and heart of his consumers through pleasures, dreams, challenges and emotions assumed as enterprising objects. The traditional functions of the art turn to be assumed by the business universe. Now, hyper-spectacle, entertainment and publicity become categories commonly associated with art and are elements that demand an entrepreneurial attention.

Unlike what was said by the detractors of this regime and other apocalypticals, according to Lipovetsky and Serroy, it is as if the “creepage” to the same trans-aesthetic capitalism would be democratically available to those who live it. This hedonistic and ephemeral universe of brands and companies which conduct our experiences and our own symbolic life would not be established in a desert of values or deny the potency of affectionate relations nor be condemned to an empty nihilism. This

enterprise around the sensitivity would also be a “sign of advance towards the de-traditionalization and secularization of the moral sphere” (LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2015, P. 414) in which the “lack of investment in projects of revolutionary transformation was filled by a more immediate engagement, by the protection of human life and their dignity” (LIPOVETSKY and SERROY, 2015, p. 415).

Paraphrasing Alexis de Tocqueville, the two authors end up endorsing that one of the consequences of the individualistic democratic culture would be the development of a general compassion by the human species capable of generating an imaginary participation in the other people’s disasters, even if it was through “fleeting and epidermal” emotions. In short, the beautiful, good life would not be in the mere compulsory consumerism of distractive sensorial-bodily pleasures, but in the opening of this liberal individual for the perfecting and enrichment of self, especially through a careful transition between a capitalist paradigm of quantity over a capitalist paradigm of quality.

... to the capture of the monsters of uncanniness

The conciliatory tone is fought by authors who we can classify as “new apocalyptic”, but with hegelian-lacanian tradition instead of freudo-marxist, for example, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou or Vladimir Safatle. The latter was already saying that the only way in which the capitalism can conciliate norm with transgression, what can be thought of, in another key, through the pair work/pleasure, would be through the development of a dominant cynical rationality, summarized by the already known ideologic formula by Peter Sloterdijk: “they know what they do and they do it anyway”. This type of speech duplicity capable of sabotaging the perlocutionary force of a given speech and guarding the subject of the commitment with what he says (SAFATLE, 2008).

In his last book, *O circuito dos afetos*, released in 2015, the relation capitalism/body starts to be thought of in its affective and libidinal dimension. In general, the text invites to a deep discussion about the premise according to which there is no politics without body and says

that the way in which the affection circulate in society will have a direct connection with the model of politic-economical body that runs it. Therefore, Safatle brings up reflections, for example, about the unavoidable price to pay for a society based on the model of the liberal individual, that would go through the same definition of another as a type of potential invader and, consequently, in the management of fear as the most efficient political affection.

There would not be, thus, the possibility of building political bonds without a regime of aesthesis. This way, the author develops a deep discussion about the differences between fear and helplessness and the relationship between hope and enjoyment while transformers or maintainers of a given status quo.

What the author thought since *Cinismo e Falência da crítica* about the force of absorption of differences and indeterminations by the capitalism goes through a careful inquiry, in which the political economy and the libidinal economy establish a relation of commutation. In summary, the current economic system would no longer demand that the subject would safeguard their pleasure and donate all their energy to a repressive and imperative workforce, as in the times of ethos described by Max Weber, but it would finally be in consonance with the pulsional polymorphism that is common to each and every body – which includes the vicissitudes of pleasure and the ways of malaise that are established in the rut among culture, libido and instinct.

A subject developed by Safatle seems useful specifically for the development of this understanding: the notion of psychic spoliation of uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*). It reflects well how the aesthetics of capitalism, while entrepreneurship of all spheres of existence, is capable of producing a way of neoliberal corporeity that is highly performative and functional. For uncanniness, in general, the philosopher implies that the capacity of the subject to come across with the awareness of vulnerability and exploration of the ambiguity of everything that seems familiar for, with this, confide, perhaps, to the own exercise of criticism while

being a negative construction of new principles in the interior of what it seemed, until then, well known.

In this management of the uncanniness, this power of the subject to find himself uncanny through an experience of transforming negativity should be managed by increasing chains of philosophy of entrepreneurship, of organizational psychology, the psychopharmacologic industry for, in worst case scenario, capture the conscience of vulnerability in itself, common to all of us, for the interior of a psychiatric scenario of depression, anxiety, stress, etc.

Thus, everything that can be associated with experiences as the “contingency” in Hegel, in the field of politics, or of the “helplessness” in Freud as “original biologic data”, or the “joy” of the real in Lacan while psychologic register that suspends the symbolic order, will have to praise an entrepreneurial intelligence with their promises of a successful life. In this life thought to be lived inside of offices and job agencies, all the driven excess and the existential contingency will be synonyms of abnormality, disease and, to the last extent, weakness.

It is possible to say that the power makes us melancholic and it is in this way that it submits us. This is the true violence of power, much more than what the classic mechanisms of coercion and domination by force, because it is about the violence of a social regulation that takes the self to accuse himself in its own vulnerability and paralyzing its capacity of action. (SAFA-TLE, 2015, P. 83).

It is not only to transform the vulnerability into weakness as premise that operates behind the notion of “beauty” of the neoliberal life, but to try to manage all the forms of identification of the subject with himself and with the others, including there its uncanniness. A management that, for Safatle, will invest especially in narcissistic identifications in which the ideal of self will rest in a corporeity that works as a highly fetishized type of media crossed by the flow of capital and information. That is, the great pathology or the great malaise of this time of the aesthetic capitalism will be characterized by the lack or impotence of the subject in assuming their own mechanization or cybernetization:

those who begin to be called loser. Reason for even more shame and self-punishment.

The neoliberal individualism creates narcissistic and possessive corporeities even when post-modernity has been challenging the idea of monadic subject endowed with a certain fixed identity. And this uncanniness that the post-modernity promises is praised by our economic system in the precise moment when it becomes sensitive facing this new condition in which indeterminations and mutations turn to be constant in our lives. Safatle explains that the continuous reconfigurations of the bodies in the current societies need a notion of property that is entrepreneurial and that let itself supplant by the “promise of absolute plasticity of forms of life that the same way the intensification of the performance and the performances demanded for the neoliberal economic rhythm transformed into a peculiar subjective mode of joy” (SAFATLE, 2015, P. 199). In this case, whoever does not accept facing the risk of always getting updated becomes a loser - or a “moral coward”, as the author would say.

It is interesting, therefore, to this body to maximize its performance through the internalization of a business way of experience. A shapeless body, highly flexible, willing to comply the most extreme social demands: “the neoliberal subject is much more a calculating agent of costs and benefits of what a citizen of who waits the conformation to the social norms”. This moral flexibilization translates, according to the philosopher, the violence of the pulsional polymorphic structure and, that way, organizes and prepares a type of subjectivity that is capable of dealing with what seems to be more final, namely, their relation with difference, including the one who inhabits it.

Safatle will continue a study that he performed in the 90's to explain this form of management of the uncanniness when he reflects about the mutations of body ideals in the globalized rhetoric of consumption, that was based on, until then, the hegemony of Aryan, healthy and heteronormative bodies. In the foundation of his explanation lies the idea

that a globalized imaginary of consumption could not happen through a simple massive repetition of stereotypes.

The publicity would need to put on the center of its rhetoric the fragmented and dissolved reality of the contemporary self in a way that the body, previously thought as housing of a fixed identity, could be finally thought through its infinite plasticity, of everything that would cause uncanniness: “through the mediatic cult to diets, gymnastics, cosmetics, liposuctions, and plastic surgery, a species of rhetorics of the plastic re-configuration of self at a low cost that was being consolidated as a main piece of the contemporary social discourse” (SAFATLE, 2015, p. 213).

The body becomes, thus, project, design object, an enterprise of self that goes through a series of investments that seek to optimize it in both its function and its hedonistic capacity: Entrepreneurial care that brakes heteronomies and uncanniness of the subject with the body without having a determining image to be copied, but rather an idealized capacity of reconfiguration of the notion of identity while forming the most valuable form of property. To illustrate such thesis, Safatle analyzes some social representations of body that arise as unseen reconfigurations proposed by the advertising discourse starting at the 90's.

As an example of such analyses, he appeals to the sick and morbid bodies of Benetton and Calvin Klein ads; the body as a surface or device for the development of multiple personalities, in the case of Playstation; and, finally, the body as a sexually ambivalent object in advertisings of Versace and, once again, Calvin Klein. Statements that allowed the release of ideas that were then unexpected to an advertising discourse, such as the self-destruction of the image of a body, in a purely spectacular kind of “rebellion” when, paraphrasing Debord, satisfaction itself becomes a merchandise.

In this case, would advertising, the expressive standard of aesthetic capitalism, be flirting with the negative? Supplying subjective instruments to deal with our own uncanniness? With previously protected ideas to the intimate experience of the subject with contingency, with the real, with the death drive?

It is not fortuitous that the polemic and the transgression are constantly put as rhetoric norm of advertising defiance. A type of joy that will care very little about the defense mechanisms of subject's self and that will be there as nothing more than the possibility of psychic and bodily overcoming. The shocking experience of uncanniness will be, within this logic of overcoming and challenge, being fleeced and managed by one other whose demands for acceptance, dignity and success paralyze the subject from their own existential thoughts: "Capability to face risks, flexibilization, malleability, resultant un-territorialization product of infinite processes of re engineering, all of these values compose a new ideological core" (SAFATLE, 2015, P. 264).

Characteristics for a type of corporeity that has in images such as the manager or the coach their most valuable mentors. The sensitive capitalism values the flexible and plastic shapes, shapes that can make transgression and norm coexist, shapes capable of adapting to the biggest adversities, mainly those which arise from the subject himself. Thus, the image for this system is no longer the image of an exploited man, alienated, swallowed by machines of a system of voracious Fordism, such as the image mocked by Charles Chaplin (1936), nor the iron man, the businessman, whose armor takes him to battle with a phallic war tank, for instance, the yuppie executive, but, rather, a body that adapts and overcomes himself as human; a body whose excess fall in the promise of a possible organization; a body that reinterprets itself in an infinite plasticity of libido and the violent drive towards an updated self. The body that the aesthetic capitalism dreams to capture is strangely a body without predefined form, it is a non-human body, the corporeity in itself, as the one from Odradek by Franz Kafka or from Alien by Ridley Scott.

The fascinating reading of Slavoj Žižek (2008) concerning these creatures, conceived as amorphous shapes e, consequently, as ideal images for the driven polymorphism, can teach us a lot about the attempt of the capitalism itself of "parasiting" or "colonizing" the most inaccessible places of a human being, something that turns the subject uncanny to himself. Odradek, as Kafka describes (apud ŽIŽEK, 2008, P. 158-159), is

the “broken remains [...] he is extraordinarily fast and no one could ever catch him”. A living thing that does not have where to live, But someone who is always lurking, in the cracks.

For Žižek, Odradek is a transgenerational object, without time and immortal. He understands him as the incarnated *jouissance*, the same way the famous Alien, which showed as a scary form from the movie by Ridley Scott in 1979. Paraphrasing Jacques Lacan in his seminary XX, Žižek would say that *Jouissance* is something that there's no use for anything, unattainable, but it is something we never can get rid of.

Therefore, he accepts Jean-Claude Milner (*Odradek, La bobine de scandal*, 2004) from Kafka's text, in which he says that, because he has legs and laughs, Odradek contains traces of the human being, even though he may look clearly non-human, configuring himself anguishly only as a partial object to which it does not seem to miss anything: “remains of living substance that escaped the symbolic colonization, the horrible palpitation of the headless heartbeat that remains”. It is the uncanniness incarnated in itself. Alien's monster lies in the same category: it is, for Žižek, now paraphrasing Stephen Mulhall (*On Film*, 2001), the nightmare of the incarnated nature, the personification of the animal kingdom that only wants to survive and reproduce. It is the drive that penetrates and parasites the body.

His reading of the Alien series, of the movie of 1979 until *Prometheus*, of 2012, also from Ridley Scott, performs a type of metonymic association with capitalism itself or what he calls *parallax* - his method par excellence that is configured as an exercise of perversion of objects of culture. Through endless cycles of alternation and reproduction/mutation between monsters and human beings throughout all the franchise, the philosopher advises:

This fascination for the monstrous alien should not be allowed to obfuscate the anti-capitalist side of the Alien series: Ultimately, what threatens the lonely group in a spaceship is not the aliens as is, but the way the group is used by the extraterrestrial anonymous company that wants to explore the alien form of life. The issue here is not to play with the superficial and

simplistic “metaphorical meaning” (the vampire-like monsters “actually mean” the Capital), but to conceive the bond in a metonymic level: It is how the Capital parasites and exploits the pure life drive. The pure life is a category of capitalism (ŽIŽEK, 2008, P. 163).

Final considerations

To reach the affection and the desires based on an idealized model of vital pureness is, on our point of view, the aesthetic ambition of our economic system. It is the object of its central enterprise. It is not only what makes it endowed with an intrinsically biopolitical characteristic, but rather with an advanced sensibility. Their new imperative, from the assumption of the consumption society and its acceptance of body not only as a fixed housing, but as a group of unstable drives, is that there does not have to be any separation between libido, work and pleasure anymore. There is no necessity of having uncanniness between these spheres anymore. Uncanniness does not only seem counter-productive, but also anti-aesthetic, indignant, ugly. The joyful and uncanny dimension that is proper to the human being, previously associated with the religious and artistic experiences that are contrasting to the normative social demands, is restricted to an organizational universe that begins to be inseparable to hyper-spectacle and entertainment.

The neoliberal corporeity assimilates this irresolute polymorphism, without function, but insisting in an idea of valuable property of self. This is the way that our capacity of uncanniness has been organized in this scenario. Something that unveils the sophisticated nuances of a political-economic system that is prepared to make progress with the support of institutions and governments and, more profoundly, with the admiration of their citizens/consumers. They marvel themselves, for example, with this advertising that accepts the negativity of bodies rejected by advertising itself: People who are overweight, gays, trans; they idolize a popstar that calls herself mother monster while she sells a perfume called Alien by Lady Gaga; they supply, while entertaining, algorithms

capable of calculating their most pleasant fears and memories to produce moving series, for instance what happened with *Stranger Things*, Netflix hit of 2016. It is the driven chaos that interests the system to rearrange within fascinating and fetishized packings.

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