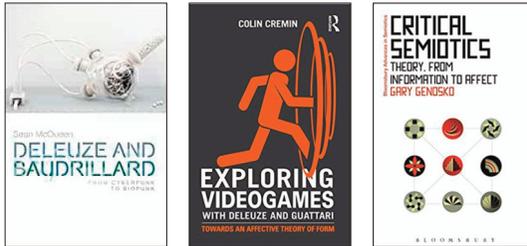# Review Essay

The Deleuzian Century?

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Deleuze and Baudrillard: From Cyberpunk to Biopunk. *By Sean McQueen.* Edinburgh, UK: University of Edinburgh Press. 2017. 288 pp. ISBN: 9781474414371.

Exploring Videogames with Deleuze and Guattari: Towards an Affective Theory of Form. *By Colin Cremin.* New York, NY: Routledge. 2016. 166 pp. ISBN: 9781138925533.

Critical Semiotics: Theory, From Information to Affect. *By Gary Genosko.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury. 2016. 200 pp. ISBN: 9781472596369.

It is not surprising that in this period of advancing informational and communicational systems—where platforms and algorithms shape our daily lives; where the terraformation of the planet by cloud technologies, server farms, and the proliferation of smart cities (at least conceptually if not always practically) appears to be interpellating people more as data inputs than as subjects; and where the possibility of full-scale militaristic warfare is being displaced by much more covert cyberwarfare—there is a growing turn toward the analytical and theoretical systems developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their canonical volumes on capitalism and schizophrenia. Both *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), as well as Deleuze's short essay, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1992), offer up a view to recognizing and coming to terms with the manner in which capital (both as fixed and fluid) and technology

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coalesce toward a new post-human formation that speaks to twenty-first-century de-velopments in information and communications media.

In an age that has moved us from information to affect (as the subtitle of Genosko's book suggests), where our lives have increasingly become biopolitical (a point highlighted now nearly twenty years ago in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* [2000]), and where our daily interactions with bots and algorithms, artificial intelligence, and screens only go further in challenging the constitution of human sub-jectivity, this movement toward a Deleuzian outlook makes a great deal of sense given the latter's interests in uncovering the manners with which our interactions with the nonhuman inform the underlying basis of our becomings. Three recent publications in Deleuzian media and communication theory are useful primers for the tools that critical media and communications theorists may take up to assess the current situa-tion. Each of these texts is not only useful as a conceptual point of entry but also as a representation of the state of critical media and communications theory in the zeitgeist of twenty-first-century capitalism. This century will be referred to descriptively, if not necessarily appreciatively, as Deleuzian.

The premise of Sean McQueen's (2017) book, *Deleuze and Baudrillard: From Cyberpunk to Biopunk*, is that science fiction offers a critical perspective for analyzing the formations of global capitalism. Within the specific subgenre of cyberpunk, spec-ulation turns toward the mutations of capitalism, as is often depicted through its rep-resentation of new and emergent technology and media. McQueen's book takes this to a new level, highlighting the arrival of biopunk as a new subgenre of cyberpunk sci-ence fiction. Biopunk, as McQueen explains, is animated by biopower, biopolitics, and the bioeconomy, all of which are component parts of a metamorphosis in late capital-ism toward a biocapitalism. The biopolitical moment of capitalism is one that appears at the high point of neoliberalism, when investments in the body appear to inform the kind of control that now reigns in urban environments as social factories of pro-duction. This conception expands upon previous renderings of technological control embodied in screen interpellations, from television to cyberspace. McQueen's book takes up this social and technological transition as a moment to evaluate a shift in the-oretical influence and import from the work of Jean Baudrillard to that of Deleuze.

Baudrillard's conceptions of hyperreality and simulation were all the rage in 1990s renderings of the internet, portrayed, of course, in countless films and texts about vir-tual reality, such as Lana and Lilly Wachowski's (1999) *The Matrix,* Josef Rusnak's (1999) *The Thirteenth Floor,* and Kathryn Bigelow's (1995) *Strange Days.* McQueen (2017), in fact, notes that Baudrillard was perhaps the most cited theorist used to in-terpret this awareness and influence of cyberspace in the popular culture, and partic-ularly in studies of cyberpunk culture. But with the emergence of biopunk, Baudrillard, according to McQueen, is being surpassed by Deleuze as the theorist of biocapitalism. The names Baudrillard and Deleuze, therefore, come to figure, for him, the shift from cyberpunk to biopunk.

McQueen (2017) highlights this shift through the two sections of the book: control and contagion. Control societies are, according to McQueen, those of late capitalism and cyberpunk. Cyberpunk, he writes, deals with mass-media technologies and virtual

realities. In this section, McQueen looks at the radicality of cyberpunks, which for him comes from their anarchistic, even libertarian, penchant for information liberation, and the collective governance, as opposed to the corporate control, of cyberspace. Contagion, which McQueen deals with in the next section of the book, refers not to an abandonment of control; it is rather a matter of seeing how it "crosses the border," so to speak, from mass-mediated power to the biopower of biocapitalism. That is, a shift from the power of screens to the integration of media and information technology into the body, which is itself a shift from late capitalism to biopolitical capitalism, or biocapitalism. Contagion thus implies a much more direct connection between things—bodies and technologies—a breaking of boundaries between the two.

This division in McQueen's (2017) book makes sense insofar as it points toward a separation in focus from media spaces to mediated bodies, even though each is still implicated in the other. This, more or less, responds to two prominent poles in the postmodern literature and theories about cyberpunk that have challenged and questioned the essence and depth of both reality and subjectivity, which are both central to the ontological challenges posed by postmodernism. Both Baudrillard and Deleuze figured heavily on questions such as these. But as McQueen's book shows, and the case studies he addresses throughout the book indicate, the shift here has been in the nature of the subject matter of the genre, a shift from an emphasis on media to one on bodies, which is exemplified, for instance, by the work of Ballard and David Cronenberg. Concretely, this is seen in earlier incarnations, too, in films such as Andrew Niccol's (1997) *Gattaca*, but also more recently in series such as Charlie Brooker's (2011) *Black Mirror* (2011) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller, 2017), where a biopolitical relationship between bodies and technology (or bodies as technology) is more readily identifiable. This is the reason this century has become Deleuzian for McQueen.

It makes sense to think of twenty-first-century capitalism in this way, when our compliance is compounded by the translation of our bodies into informational torrents—when representational semiotic systems (as Gary Genosko [2016] illustrates) are decoded and re-articulated as a-signifying intensities of affect—that is, as stimulations rather than interpellative simulations. McQueen, in this way, sees biopunk science fiction as a kind of cognitive mapping rather than as an ethics. It is more a snapshot of capital, a representation of something in the middle between here and there. For Colin Cremin (2016) (who has since changed their gender identity and now goes by the name of Ciara), video games, too, operate in such a register, as a form of cognitive mapping.

One thing that stands out in the conclusion of McQueen's (2017) book is his emphasis on the role of contradiction, which may be paradoxical in the realm of Deleuze. Contradiction is, for McQueen, a condition of the possible; and so, he reflects on that tension between vitality and misery. We cannot, he writes, experience the former without risking the possibilities of the latter. There is, of course, a commitment to vitality in the Deleuzian reading, and, therefore, what is puzzlingly overlapping in these texts—yet revealing at the same time—is their understanding of where to locate contradiction and negation. For all of the authors cited here, there is an alliance between contradiction and power. This is true, as well, for Cremin (2016).

Cremin's (2016) book, *Exploring Videogames with Deleuze and Guattari: Towards an Affective Theory of Form,* is intriguing follow-up reading to McQueen's (2017) text, as it is a text about screens and media. In McQueen's register, video games might fall into the realm of the cyberpunk culture, which for him was much more aligned with Baudrillard. But in the hands of Cremin (2016), video games are very much the terrain of Deleuze. This has to do with the fact that, for her, the form of the video game, and its ability to distribute affective intensities through its form, makes the player a part of a larger machinic assemblage. If for McQueen (2017) biocapitalism and biopunk culture are what animate this era as the Deleuzian century, for Cremin (2016) video games are an extension of that logic. The twenty-first century, as she says, is the century of video games.

Cremin's (2016) text is explicitly about methodology. Unlike McQueen's (2017) text, it is more directly about advising readers on what makes a Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of texts worthwhile as part of the project of ideology critique. It is, therefore, useful to readers not yet fully immersed or acquainted with Deleuze and Guattari, but it will also appeal to those well versed in their approach, or those seeking to further engage their work in critical media studies.

What makes video games Deleuzian, according to Cremin (2016), is the fact that their aesthetic is one of a form-in-motion. Her book returns us to the conclusion in McQueen's (2017) text, where the dialectic of vitality and misery is brought to the fore. It is that aspect of vitality that animates Cremin's writing about video games. For her, as it is for Deleuze and Guattari, desire is a generative, vitalist force, and because of this the adaptive force of video games offers up an aesthetic of liberation.

According to Cremin (2016), a proper understanding of video games requires a non-representational theory of affect to more adequately grasp the integral role of action. Affect needs to be regarded as a force that exceeds socially constructed bodies and identities. As such, it is a force that is constantly in the process of producing the new. Cremin compares this force to the relationship between the mind and the body in urban environments, which overwhelm the sensory with constant stimuli—where, in another place, it might be worth comparing to George Simmel's (2002) writing on the blasé, or Walter Benjamin's writing on shock (1968), or even Marshall McLuhan's (1964) writing on the review mirror and autoamputation. Mind, Cremin (2016) writes, acts as a filter, and video games operate similarly as media of spatial experimentation not merely limited to the frameworks of representation that arrest and fix flows of desire, or intensities of affect. Video games are, therefore, distinguished from other screen media to the extent that theirs is an aesthetic that is only realized in process. Read against McQueen (2017), Cremin's (2016) text offers another useful line of distinction between cyberpunk and biopunk: whereas cyberspace is a space for the exploration or experimentation of the mind and thought, biopunk incorporates the body into the landscape of the social factory or even the smart city. Significantly, this is one way that Cremin's (2016) book even considers the relationship between the affective intensities of the body explored by video games and the landscape of the social factory of capitalist production.

Cremin (2016) provides an assemblage theory of video games that considers the player, the designer, and the industry as all integrated into the complex global nexus

of twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism. She writes about video games as ideological texts, but pressingly as an avenue into discerning what the player is invested or integrated in. As Cremin (2016) puts it, "we are desiring-machines plugged to a more massive machine of accumulation" (p. 31), namely capital. Exploring this connection between the video game aesthetic as a flow of intensities of affect and the video game industry itself as a "megamachine" into which our desires are invested for capital accumulation brings Cronenberg's (1999) biopunk film *eXistenZ* to mind. The film crosses that border that McQueen (2017) talks about, between control and contagion, between the cyberspace of virtual reality and the biocapitalist space of the body in the social factory. It intriguingly depicts the overlap between the biological inputs into the game that play with our desire, while at the same time narrativizing the relations of violence and competition within the video game industry itself. This might be seen as an expression of how Cremin (2016) describes capitalism as a libidinal economy "that thrives on decoded flows of desire" (p. 31), while at the same time, capitalism functions as "a system of anti-production" (p. 37), in the sense that it is constantly forced to destroy in order to maintain the lack necessary for accumulation. Therefore, on the one hand, capitalism expands by liberating flows of desire and affective intensities; but on the other hand, it then produces or creates lack through reterritorializations. In this sense, for Cremin (2016), as well as for McQueen (2017), contemporary capitalism exists as a dialectic of vitality and misery, or of destruction.

Reading Deleuze through Cremin (2016) and McQueen (2017), capitalism comes to be seen as a force that introduces negativity, lack, and contradiction into the dynamic and vitalist flows of affect in the assemblage. Capitalism, in other words, feeds on the dynamics of social machines, but at the same time it imposes contradiction through the introduction of negativity. Reterritorializing representational systems are in this sense destructive rather than productive forces; and, as Genosko (2016) illustrates, this explains why the Deleuzian political ethic is one that rails against the imperialism or tyranny of the "despotic" signifier. From the Deleuzian perspective, lack is a contingent and artificially imposed condition rather than a constitutive one. This is what distinguishes it, for instance, from the Lacanian perspective, which sees lack and contradiction as constitutive and necessary.

The Deleuzian perspective, as Cremin (2016) identifies, distinguishes between the plane of consistency or immanence, which is one of liberated flows of affect, and the plane of organization, which is one of reterritorialized structures of capitalism that, for instance, tries to stop or fix or interrupt libidinal lines of flight. Video games, for Cremin (2016), therefore, do remain ideological insofar as they are structured by the goals and achievements that define what players lack rather than by what they possess. They are, as she puts it, in this sense "Oedipalized" (p. 129), tying players' desires to lack.

Gary Genosko's (2016) *Critical Semiotics: Theory, From Information to Affect* follows the approaches developed by McQueen (2017) and Cremin (2016); and, although Deleuze is not a central figure in this book, the book is animated overall by a Deleuzian trajectory. Unlike Cremin's (2016) book, which is a primer on Deleuzian methodology, Genosko's (2016) book helpfully provides an introduction to key thinkers in the poststructuralist tradition of critical communication theory. It is for this reason a useful

tool for anyone hoping to broaden their understanding of this significant approach to media and communications theory.

For Genosko (2016), a critical semiotics is distinguished by its aspiration to move away from the how questions of meaning-making toward the why questions. Why questions inevitably have to do with those of power. In Genosko's (2016) view, this question falls toward the struggle with the "despotism of the linguistic signifier" (p. 5) and the theorists he discusses in this book, including Guattari, Baudrillard, Maurizio Lazzarato, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and others, are all in some way enraptured by an anti-structuralist politics baited on liberating the flows; a semiotics, that is, that wants to undo the threading of representation.

Genosko (2016) refers to Foucault's conception of "obstacle-signs," as opposed to "factories of desire" (p. 8) to explain how a critical semiotics challenges the power of representational systems. This is where informational and affective dimensions of communication are championed over those of representational forms of communication. The obstacle-signs of the signifier have, for Genosko, the characteristic of being anti-desire; and it is not hard to tell that his politics are that of exploding the signifier. Critical semiotics are, then, for him, the study of signs needing to be destroyed or torn down. However, what this perspective glosses over is the fact that every destroyed signifier inevitably creates a new one. Every destroyed norm is always at the same time the imposition of a new one—the one from which the critique of the norm is based. Therefore, in the same way that capitalist dialectics are those of a desire for development, so too are Deleuzian politics unwittingly modern and thus can easily be co-opted by capital. Capitalism has, since the publication of Anti-Oedipus (Culp, 2016) in 1972, "embraced its schizophrenia" (p. 48). If the Deleuzian methodology is at all convincing, it is due to the fact of its descriptive acumen for the economic and libidinal dynamics of capital, rather than anything resembling their critical interrogation.

The political ethic that Genosko's (2016) book espouses is poignantly expressed through his rendering of the work of Lyotard. Through him, Genosko (2016) gets at the question of whether or not semiotics, or "sign theory," is at all capable of expressing immanence without "inflicting damage on it by fixing it" (p. 10). As Genosko notes, Deleuze and Guattari praised Lyotard for his critique of the signifier in this vein; and, perhaps key to Genosko's project is his evaluation of Guattari's system of a-signifying semiotics, which provides a valence into our potential ability to infer the non-representational sign relationships of information and affect. It is, therefore, appropriate that he begins by explaining this work. In the process, Genosko uncovers the relevance of this system in its more recent expressions via the writings of Maurizio Lazzarato, who approaches this system as a way to challenge the representational determinism involved in critical theories of subjectivity, which Lazzarato himself despises for the fact that they separate us too far from the immanence of the machinic assemblage. Machinic enslavement, Genosko (2016) writes, "permits us an escape from social subjection" (p. 46). Critical Semiotics (Genosko, 2016) brings to mind some of the connections between the structuralism-subject debate and the post-structuralism/post-humanism nexus. For this reason, it is essential reading for anyone hoping to gain ground in understanding the terms of these most recent developments in critical theory.

The difference between the dialectical approach and the vitalist/affirmationist approaches that the books reviewed here all represent or dissect in one way or another concerns the place of negation in relations of power and subjectivity. This difference has to do with a question of origins of sorts, of whether or not it is the subject or the signifier that first introduces negation. From the affirmationist perspective, it is power that imposes the negation of positive, productive flows; therefore, its politics are that of destroying the force of negation, and of contradiction, releasing the flows of vitality and pure immanence. On the side of dialectics, it is the subject who introduces negation in a primordial and foundational act of an affirmative choice, which inevitably negates the unchosen and forms the subject, itself, in the process as desiring. Negation is here seen as constitutive of subjectivity and of reality, making contradiction an assured inevitability. Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge is, in this sense, a perspective that finally comes to accept the inevitability of contradiction. From this perspective, as Todd McGowan (2019) explains, power and domination originate in the attempt to eliminate contradiction and to impose an artificial harmony (see also Flisfeder 2019).

Genosko's (2016) book takes the side of the affirmationists. This is illustrated, for instance, in his support of Guattari's system of a-signification: "Guattari's rejection of the emphasis that Lacan put on the paternal metaphor in his theory of psychosis," he writes, "is positively anti-Oedipal and anti-semiological" (p. 157). Losing structure, as Genosko explains, is akin to the anarchy or the autonomy of particles. But these particles are mere particularities that are already overdetermined by the signifier. If, therefore, they seek their liberation, it is adequate to propose the hypothesis that every negation of a despotic signifier is still ultimately the project of imposing one anew.

All of the various approaches in these books seem to chide the Hegelian-Lacanian conceptions of contradiction, negativity, and lack, if not necessarily explicitly then at least implicitly. However, each book, in its own way, shows that at the heart of the Deleuzian methodology there is a deep reliance on obstacles that form as necessary conditions for the productive flows of affect or desire. Obstacles function like barriers to capitalist production—each new one becomes a propeller for the self-revolutionizing needed for growth and expansion. For McQueen (2017), misery is a necessary condition of vitality; for Cremin (2016), the representation of a goal is the underlying determinant of affective intensities; and, for Genosko (2016), the linguistic signifier simultaneously blocks desire while creating the conditions for its possibility. The Hegelian point not to be missed here is that once we even attempt to express immanence, it has already been lost. Or, as Gregor Modor (2017) puts it, "immediacy of the beginning is only lost immediacy" (p. 76).

In this case, far from being merely contingent, contradictions and lack are constitutive, and it is only by reconciling ourselves to this fact that we stand any chance of escaping the problematics so clearly laid out and defined by the Deleuzian century. The Deleuzian perspectives elaborated upon here certainly do represent the zeitgeist of twenty-first-century capitalism. As Genosko (2016) puts it, "with a-signifying semiotics one enters the plane of the post-human" (p. 29). But when so much of what makes us human becomes an obstacle to capitalist production—including our struc-

tures of subjectivization and representation—might it not be appropriate to acknowledge that for capitalism to survive into the twenty-first century it has to become post-human; that is, it has to become Deleuzian?

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