

FUTURE FUNCTIONS: ASPIRATION, DESIRE AND FUTURES

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SOME FUTURE FUNCTIONS

The future doesn't exist (yet), that much we know. Speaking of the future can never be matter-of-fact, since it always means to posit something that is to come, thus to make claims on the present. People speak of the future when they want to call something into being: it's not by coincidence that these are mostly politicians, advertisements, NGOs or activists.

Doing the work of the future archive – getting people to speak to their futures – reveals different tendencies of speaking to and of the future. Three of those could be: progressivist, speculative and desiring. While the future archive method focuses primarily on the function of desire, it constantly works through the former two, since they are an important part of most people's understanding of the future. What does it mean to speak of the future as a function?

We take the concept of a function from Foucault's idea of an 'author-function'. Foucault understands this primarily as a function of the subject, saying we should ask 'under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?' If the future is a function of discourse, it can configure the speaking subject in different ways. To speak of the future is to position oneself in different ways, depending on how one speaks of it: in determinist, speculative or desiring terms (this list may not be exhaustive).

The progressivist mode of speaking of the future has been commonplace across what we may call modernity – centring around ideas of technological advancement and linear historical developments. An example would be the

Futurama at the New York World fair in 1939, showing the future in collective-determinist, techno-scientific images and architecture. The subtext of the futurama – as an architectural as much as filmic, textual and relational entity – is that the future is coming, like an unstoppable wave, carried by 'progress', restricted to the capitalist 'west' yet sooner or later to hit the rest of the world. This type of future function is based on representations, predictions and promises, asserting that populations as much as individuals have to tune up to it. Whether it's a device for governing populations via their expectations and hopes, a literary device that helps produce grand scale science fiction, or a futurism that resonates murkily with fascism, this mode of future is particularly visible in 19th and 20th century industrializing nations.

The second function here is that of speculation, which corresponds to contemporary cultures of speculation and finance, variously called post-modern, post-fordist, liquid, etc. It is a mode of thinking futurity based on a multiplication of scenarios, calculations of profit and risk, both on a macroeconomic scale – the stock exchange being the paradigmatic space where this function is exercised – and on an everyday scale, via the projection of individual opportunities and risks. This future resides in micro-movements rather than large images. Where the picture of the modern future outlines a collective scenery, the speculative mode is an individualizing one based in small calculations, functional to neoliberal governmentality. In this mode, the future is something every individual struggles to gain privileged access to, having to invent and plan for every minute – to tune up individually, competing with everyone. This is a more fragmented version (on an ideological level) and vision (on a subjective level) of futurity, based in cultures of projects, credit and debt. There's no big promise here but rather an incentive to speculate and compete.

Thirdly, the desiring function of the future. This is much more slippery. It lies in the bodily and psychic modes of being fascinated by or attracted to possibilities. When we relate to the future in a desiring way, we don't end up with images but with sensations, feelings, maybe ideas. While large scale images and manufactured hopes are often used to activate, and in the same instance capture and channel desire, this does not make desire less of a function since all of the three functions outlined here have propensities to blur – for instance desires can also activate large scale images or speculations. What is of interest is the question of how to stay with this desiring modality. It's a way of relating to the future through our present bodies and souls, letting ourselves drift to imagine what things may open onto. It's a matter of tuning into rather than tuning up to. Desire carries the vague sensation that often brings forth moments of invention, and as such is the level that the future archive method tries to access, even if it never entirely 'succeeds'. Unlike success in speech acts, the force of articulations of desire is never just a matter of external conditions being right, but of resonances within the self as much as those between self, others and world.

Living in neoliberal societies, we are used to a predominance of the speculative function, to advertisements and policies inciting us to invest, risk, project. This shapes our subjectivity and life in many ways, making us anxious, precarious, hyper-flexible. How may this translate to China – or to ask based on our future conversations in Shanghai during the Transit Labour project, how may it translate to young Chinese workers of an industry that epitomizes neoliberalism – the Creative Industries? The work-life experiences we were told about didn't seem too far off from the self-exploiting, nervous tone of what some call post-fordist labour. While places like the Expo still seem to be very determined by the second mode of futurity, the realities of young people that have migrated to the city to work as creatives seem to be filled with speculation, projects, insecurity, unpaid labour and investment into CVs. The creatives (workers and students) we spoke to were not too preoccupied with China's future at large nor with the ideological project that the communist party sets out. Their struggle appeared to be an individualized one.

THE FUTURE IS NEON?

Shanghai has large stakes invested in her projections of the future – the city she has already become for the millions living and working within her territories, and the futures she encourages as the 'next great world city'. Since May 2010, millions of people have travelled across

China to participate in her grandest scenario, the Expo, to consume the imaginaries laid out in pavilions by hundreds of nation-states and corporations. Here tourist-citizens fill their Expo passports with the paraphernalia marking their collective constitution of the coming worlds envisioned for and by them; worlds dazzling with new technologies for 'sustainable urban ecologies'. This is Shanghai's vision of becoming. Over the past several years, millions have migrated to Shanghai for the chances they believe she holds for them. One young migrant working at Baoshan Electronics Market told us that he moved from the Anhui province not for better pay, housing or work opportunities, but for more fun and excitement. The social imaginaries and the experience economies that circulate around and through the city are magnetic, and the speculations and desires of the young people coming to Shanghai call into being her many possible trajectories.

The Expo has a lingering technodeterminism that takes the form of LEDs and UFO shapes, spectacles of size and color, placing China in a macro image of the future. Yet the Expo also shows an activation of speculative subjectivity – spectacle molded into civil modes of experience economy, discourses of sustainability, investment and globality. As such, the Expo seems to be preparing something not for the world to admire so much as for Chinese people to experience and take on – a pedagogical project of instilling logics of civil society, competitiveness and investment. Everyone gets to take away the desirable Expo packet, a box mixing older with newer futures.

THE DREAM OF SOMETHING MORE

Throughout China, young people are flocking to the metropolises in search of work in creative and communications based industries. Internal migration is most prevalent, with youths moving from rural or smaller townships to cities such as Shanghai – 'the city of other people's dreams'. This movement is configured through desires and aspirations, for escape perhaps, for capital gain and commodities, for a perceived elevation in social and personal value, for love, excitement and pleasure. Shanghai has done much to encourage these aspirations and the futures that can be found here. It is projected that creative sectors will generate 10% of Shanghai's GDP by the end of 2010. Whether this figure is accurate or not is less interesting than the particular confidence in continually expanding service economies it articulates, and the expectations it gives rise to.

The future Shanghai is reaching towards is one filled with workers of technology and invention. The innovations industry is underpinned by vast networks of often seemingly

unrelated occupations and sites of labour. This spans from the unregulated electronic waste collectors to the technicians in circuit board factories, the legions of factory workers assembling machine components to the interns at the photocopier and the marketing executive releasing viral propaganda. The creative supply chain is one productive of, and producing, invisible relations of commodities and services. The public face of this is often epitomised by, and stereotyped as, the in-demand successful creative designer or the corporate head negotiating a vertiginously paced lifestyle. Less fantasised about are the hordes of young assistants and graduates, migrants and casual workers that may struggle to coalesce their hopes in the present. The future is one of deferral. The promises inspired by these images of success drive an incessant searching out for a forward momentum, giving rise to a belief in a material concatenation of cause and effect: if I do this... then this... then this, then I will achieve what I aspire to.

During conversations with a few of the creatives that had migrated to Shanghai we found that none were satisfied with their current conditions, but all felt they were on the path for the eventual fulfilment of their potential. There was a common perspective that (self) exploitation, low or unwaged labour, competition and intermittent projects were a rite of passage that would culminate in capital security, socio-cultural and familial prestige. We found conflicting longings for freedom, time for individual creative praxis and enjoyment, which were quite active and positive in some people, as possibilities rather than sacrifices. One young woman who had been working for an advertising agency saw her future as a painter, an arts student wanted to make comics: these desires jostle together to create narratives of what may come, which overlap and grate against one another, complicated by external and internal pressures. For the young people we spoke with, their coming of age in Chinese capitalist systems and ideologies is steeped in contradictory forces that both elevate individualist achievement and commodity accumulation on the one hand, and a communitarian ethos of social reproduction on the other.

The method we used to open dialogue about desirable futures was a series of mappings: work/life balances, time budgets, social and work relations, zones of passage through Shanghai and bodily sites affected by labour. These mappings, while recalling social science techniques, are oriented towards the facilitation of exchange rather than the collation of quantitative information. The stimulus provided by the various maps affords a point of reference that helps to invigorate conversation through seeking clarification. This allows for a mode of interaction that is not founded on assumption, but on a dialogic and naive relation, which may shift depending on

the particular conversational constituencies. The maps themselves concentrated on intertwined psychosomatic, labour and social conditions. For some they served a quasi-therapeutic function, giving space for reflection on their own past and future processes of subjectivation as students, interns, workers, creatives and as civil and socio-cultural subjects.

THE ASPIRING CLASS

There have been critiques that the demographic of workers and interns classified under the rubric of the young creative class are a-political and wholly imbued with egocentric concerns of economic wealth, fame and social prestige. A number of the young creatives we spoke with described their background as working or middle class, often migrating from rural territories either with their families or alone for higher education. At the same time, the broad sweep of the cultural revolution and the attempted rehabilitation of the bourgeoisie means that class composition was fundamentally altered, thus making the tracing out of class history one that needs to refer back to serial generations rather than only to the most recent. Thus these industries contain diversities that cannot be homogenised. The effects that this seems to have had on the younger generations may contribute to the searching out for a different kind of relationship to social reproduction and capitalist accumulation.

The composition of this labour force must be seen from within this history, but without negating present labour conditions that challenge conventional Marxist conceptions of class constitution. The determined aspiration and idealism – along with cultural narratives around knowledge, experience and work – that underpins young workers' acceptance of unsatisfactory labour situations must not be necessarily dismissed as a-political.

This is not to deny the recognition of a rising elite in creative and innovative sectors, or the commercial potential in these industries, but rather to acknowledge the wide disparities of material conditions and wages within the sector that problematise meta-readings of class formation. In this context, the challenge seems to be about finding different narratives around knowledge, experience and work. Indeed, the negotiation of a sustainable desiring access to futurity is a huge one no matter where and when, and needs to be worked out on a collective level – in sync with the singular instances it is made of.

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