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Experiences Without Me or the Uncanny Grin of Precarity

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I.

We will start with a story that probably many have already experienced in much the same way. It relates to the production of social meaning through forms of address[1]. A person applies as a freelancer for a job as proofreader for a publication. The person does not know those offering the contract, but the job has been passed on through networks of various personal contacts, so this person makes a phone call and speaks with a representative of the editorial team for a publication on an academic conference, of whom it may be assumed that this is not the person to make the final decision, and offers her work. She introduces herself and addresses this representative informally. The response from the other side is a moment of hesitation, then the respondent takes a breath and answers with a formal mode of address. The moment of a brief communication crisis arises, but our applicant quickly assesses the situation and switches – naturally without making an issue of it – to formal address. She thus subordinates herself to her conversation partner, who has taken a position of distance through

the mode of address. With the informal mode of address, the freelancer's offer anticipated, one could say, the resource of trust, the portion of the informality of the work she was applying for, which in her experience represents a conventional requirement of these kinds of jobs. What she was to supply is a non-standardizable final product, because no one will be able to check whether she has done the editing well. What distinguishes her as a "good worker", in comparison, although this will be evident, at most, in a future, reactivated working relationship, is that she does the job in a way that could be described from the perspective of her employer as trustworthy and skillful self-responsibility. The aspiration to equality with a potential contract employer, which this contractor activates through the mode of address, represents an almost essential precondition for the manner in which the work of single persons within the project framework, in which mostly knowledge and cultural workers are active, becomes productive. In fact, the working conditions in these areas presuppose a more casual relationship between non-designated production and standardized forms of utilization as "normal": individuals are knowledgeable and active in the areas in which their labor is utilized at certain times.

The crucial negotiation between the informal and the formal modes of address is what struck us as interesting in this story. It indicates the instability, the flexibility, the mutability, but also the risk of a "false", inappropriate or possibly ineffective mode of address, from which there seems to be no escape. This is specifically because it also always *simultaneously* indicates both the intactness of the social places and relations offered by this mode of address and that it is no longer possible to operate solely with these social places and relations with these work requirements: an informal mode of address among equals or an informal mode of address directed upward and marking a challenge – and opposite to

this a formal mode of address in a certain or indeterminate social situation enabling a radical difference among equals. Someone can address me formally and indicate specifically in this way that they are indeed the boss.

The rejection of being addressed formally by a boss and in its place the attempt to generalize an informal mode of address as an addressability among equals, which characterizes our freelancer, could be taken in an expanded narrative context of the story of modes of address in work situations as a criticism of the rigid hierarchies of fordism and the places they offered in institutions of so-called normal working and living conditions. The informal mode of address as a type of behavior relating to the production conditions has meanwhile largely become established in cultural or knowledge production. The institutions in this field themselves, however, appear to be oddly unaffected by this. In terms of her authority, for instance to sign a work or fee contract, the formality of the response of the representative of the editorial team on the telephone, speaking with the voice of an institutional place, did not, in fact, occupy this place at all. The informal mode of address, according to our thesis, characterizes a new paradigm of productivity, but one which, on the other hand, does not have an external relationship to the institutions: the demands on the skills and abilities of the subjects are immediate and equal; they *are* the person addressed informally and hence also represent "*more*" than what is expected from a person addressed formally.

In a sense, the performative "informal address" of our freelancer holds aspects of what could be called an instituent practice, where the level of recognition does not consist of the prospect of a place (in an institution), but rather a recognition "as an equal" through an increase in productivity and the activation of the abilities employed – as the freelancer is contacted again, for instance, or

recommended somewhere else, thus circulating in the network of contracts as a potentiality that can be actualized at any time. It is at the point of this potentiality where the implicit threat also starts, which resonates in the communication crisis between the informal and the formal mode of address or in the distancing formal mode: it already articulates the possibility of exclusion – specifically at the level of no longer appearing as one informally addressed – from a future past that defines the present. Inherent to the instituent practice of our freelancer are thus not only traits of productivity, assets and promise, but also the creased brow of a fear that stems from the search for a protective closeness in being informally addressed.

So if we develop the thesis with this story that a kind of formula of the crisis of subjectivation in precarity is evident within the intact and simultaneous appellations as one informally addressed *and/or* formally addressed, then the question of the location of instituent practices cannot choose *between* self-precarization or self-exploitation on the one side and possible resistive or even affirmative forms of self-institution on the other, but must instead address exactly the *arrangement* that covers the informal appellation and the formal appellation *equally* and enables a compulsively desiring subjectivation in precarization.

II.

Spinoza could be suspected of anticipating precarity when he thinks of the addressability of the subject as an attributability, which can prove to be a pleasure as well as a pain; they are emotions that are both equally indeterminate on the one hand and tied on the other to the project that the subject adheres to. With Spinoza we can imagine the same origins of hope and fear in

precarity as a social pulsing of the relationship between pleasure and pain: "Hope is an inconstant pleasure, arising from the idea of something past or future, whereof we to a certain extent doubt the issue. Fear is an inconstant pain, arising from the idea of something past or future, whereof we to a certain extent doubt the issue."[2] Our idea here is to grasp precarity as an outrageous indeterminacy, in other words as the wavering of the affection between the familiar, informal addressee of a possible pleasure in the future and/or past of equals, and a pain, always brought about through this same past or anticipated future, over the formal mode of address as a moment of fear that grips the one informally addressed. The latter's pleasure, however, has long since been inscribed in the production paradigm of postfordism. Less attention, though, has been given to her pain and its productive inscription. It may be observed that this pain is immediately coded out or recoded as a pleasure. Pain is the compulsion to make pleasure capable of being articulated, being utilized and distinguished, and even to increase it. It is something like being overcome with doubt about the good issue of something that I can nevertheless not avoid pursuing. It is as when something that I do with pleasure is not commensurately honored, and I do it despite that as though it were being commensurately honored, because I do not have the nerve to articulate the conflict. In some mysterious way, it seems that the pain irritatingly accompanies production processes of subjective labor. What is vacillating, indeterminate about precarity is, in our opinion, linked with a politics of pain, even fear, which reveals itself as the debate about security: what is scandalous about precarization, according to most critical discourses, is found in the absence of guarantees for places. This form of criticism is a disambiguation – informal or formal mode of address – because it reduces the indeterminacy. We also argue in favor of a determination, a disambiguation, but in the exactly

opposite direction of scandalization. It relates less to the pain, in other words the anxious concern for security, but more to the pleasure that paves an insecure path with fear. Because we think that fear, seen in the context of security, generates more fear.

Back to Spinoza, who was no melancholic and thought of the indeterminacy of the emotion, of pleasure and pain, in modalities of time: "However, as it generally happens that those, who have had many experiences, vacillate, so long as they regard a thing as future or past, and are usually in doubt about its issue" – who are in other words exactly there, where our experience with precarization currently is - "it follows that the emotions which arise from similar images of things are not so constant, but are generally disturbed by the images of other things," - perhaps the images of furnishings that would make the indeterminate space of precarization more inhabitable – "until men become assured of the issue."[3]

III.

Taking recourse to the distinctions between fear and anguish in Kant and Heidegger's works, Paolo Virno develops the thesis that the difference proposed by these authors between a specific, socially immanent fear of something and an absolute anguish that accompanies being-in-the-world is currently vanishing, because experience in postfordism is coupled with a changed dialectic of fear and security, as Virno says. He identifies indicators of this transformation in the fusion of fear and anguish into a fear that "is always anguish-ridden"[4] and in a life that assumes "many of the traits which formerly belonged to the kind of terror one feels outside the walls of the community"[5]. A virtually mythic image of fear is presented in the film "The Village" by M. Night

Shyamalan. The film is about the village of Covington in an indistinct period, which is reminiscent, however, of the early US American colonial period in its atmosphere. In the middle of a forest, cut off from possible other villages or inhabited zones, a community live a simple, autarkic life.

On the basis of this film we want to take a closer look at the fusion of fear and anguish, specifically as a differentiation of the way in which fear and anguish reluctantly conjoin in various moments of the transformation of the sociality of this village.

The rules in the village are reproduced through the fear of the inhabitants of the forest surrounding the village, called only "those we do not speak of". They are the threatening outside of the community, with which a pact has been made: as long as no villager enters the forest, "those we do not speak of" will not attack the village. The village recognizes social forms of care, ways of dealing with fear, but also the subjectivation of courage, as when the young men standing with their backs to the edge of the forest open their arms. The first dramatic turn of the film then consists of the emergence of fearlessness, yet it does not grow out of some kind of a violation of the rules, but rather out of their subjective embodiment, which only just misses them.

Lucius Hunt is a member of the village who even goes beyond the mere fulfillment of these rules. He is so much and so seriously preoccupied with them that it leads to his wish to leave the village, to overcome the limitations of the community. The argument for this that he presents to the ruling council of elders is the vulnerability within the community. He states that he wants to obtain medication from the city beyond the forest to heal another member of the village, Noah Percy. His wish qualifies the boundary to the forest as an instable one. Lucius is fearless in this respect,

because he believes that by embodying the rules immanent to the community he can counteract the fear, that he can be "pure" and invulnerable.

The second figure of fearlessness is Noah. The proposed healing is intended for him. However, he is not actually depicted as sick, but rather as someone who is "different", as someone who, for some undefined reason, embodies and lays bare what is monstrous about the rules. Unlike all the others, he does not fear "those we do not speak of", but seems instead to await their arrival. The color red is a forbidden code, the color of "those we do not speak of". Everything that has to do with this color is carefully avoided in the village, because according to the rule it attracts "those we do not speak of"; the color yellow, on the other hand, has a protective effect. Noah wanders through the area between the village and the forest collecting red berries, which he enjoys carrying secretly around with him, even in the village. He laughs with delight when the others tremble.

The third figure of fearlessness is Ivy, the daughter of the head of the village. She is blind, but she can feel colors. She has a view of that which remains hidden. She surmises, "Sometimes we don't do things we would like to do, so that others don't know that we would like to do them."

The exposé of the film, which follows these different embodiments of fearlessness, shows that the politics of fear do not at all function smoothly. Fearlessness is the intimate tie that binds Lucius, Noah and Ivy. It is restless and timid, yet it creates no fear. All three of these figures are potential violators of the boundary, but they do not attack the matrix of the village. The second dramatic turn comes with an interruption when something happens. It consists of a reterritorialization of the intimacy of the bond between the three

figures: three become two with the announcement of the marriage between Lucius and Ivy. It describes the moment when Noah realizes that he will then be alone with his matrix of fearlessness. He tries to kill Lucius with a knife. Due to Lucius' life-threatening injury it is Ivy who sees herself forced to continue his project of leaving the village in a different way. She wants to go away so that Lucius can be healed with medicine. The circumstances of her leaving have nothing to do with either exodus or the wish to evade being inscribed in the community of the village, nor with what is attributed to Noah. Her project is functional and it is formed step by step by the events that have been set in motion. At this point it seems that the dramatic secret of the film and thus of the village community must be revealed. It is none other than Ivy's father, the head of the village, who is supposed to most strongly embody the principle of the isolation of the village, who is confronted with the failure of security – especially that of his daughter – that is ensured by the politics of fear. He sees himself forced to articulate to Ivy the terrible secret about "those we do not speak of", so that she need not be afraid on her way to the city: "those we do not speak of" do not even exist, or rather they are red costumes worn by the members of the council of elders to frighten the others and prevent an exodus. Through her father's revelation Ivy becomes a subject of the knowledge of the initiated. And she is given safe directions for the path to the city. Her fearlessness is enlightened.

The third dramatic turn then relates to the appearance of anguish. Ivy finds herself in the forest according to all the rules of the plan – and she is approached by one of "those we do not speak of", which do not exist, as she knows. She tells herself, this is not real. This is not fear, but anguish. And yet there is no other practice with regard to the non-real than a thoroughly real, haptic action. "Being truly anguish-ridden," according to Virno, "is just a certain

way of confronting anguish."[6] She battles with the unspeakable, and falling into a hole it is fatally wounded. While Ivy was being initiated to make her way through the forest, by chance Noah discovered the red costume, with which he connects and becomes one of "those we do not speak of" himself. He embodies the founding myth of the community, affirms its fear, becomes its fear. With it he has set off into the forest to meet Ivy. The impossibility for Ivy to be afraid at the moment of encountering the unspeakable, is frightening. From this point on, she no longer goes, she flees. Yet her flight is not simply a practice of anguish, but rather this is where fear and anguish fuse together. Although the directions are still valid, she follows them driven by anguish, fleeing. In Virno's terms this is precarity. For the fusion of fear and anguish he proposes the term *uncanny*[7]. With our film example we can see that this uncanny flight represents a *weapon* of precarity. Fleeing along the coded path, Ivy encounters a wall, the existence of which she was not informed of – a further limitation, but one that remains unfounded. Since fleeing enables her to break through this wall, she shakes the foundations of the outrageous indeterminacy of precarity, one could say. With this breakthrough the filmic narration of "The Village" disambiguates its indeterminacy and determines it as a temporal, chronological confusion: we find ourselves not in the nineteenth century of the village, but rather in the present day. The terrible truth is that the village is nothing other than a reservation founded for protection against violence and guarded by security personnel. This determination in the narration of the film finishes with a happy end. The thorn of the uncanny that Ivy's story of flight bears is pacified, the village's identity-founding politics of fear are maintained, the rules of the village community are reproduced at a new level. Yet one could also imagine the return to the village

being accompanied by an uncanny smile or even grin on Ivy's face, in which the possibility of being something else begins to show.

At the end of her text on "Subjectivation According to Althusser" Judith Butler explores the boundaries of subjectivation, and taking recourse to Giorgio Agamben she raises the question of the lines of flight of desire, which remain at a distance from the determinations of being that entice identity. She is concerned with a willingness *not* to be, which can assume a form of linguistic survival to assure itself, as she says quoting Agamben: "In fact there is something that human beings are and have to be, but that is not an essence and not a thing in the narrower sense: it is the simple fact of one's own existence as a possibility or potentiality." Butler inscribes a desire into this statement from Agamben with her commentary: "Here the assertion can be read into this that this possibility must dissolve into something, yet without being able to overcome its own status as a possibility with this kind of solution." (123)

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[1] *Translator's note*: In German, as in other languages, the informal second person pronoun ("du") is different from the formal second person pronoun ("Sie"). Even though this distinction is obscured by the undifferentiated second person pronoun in English ("you"), the same kind of negotiation still takes place in comparable contexts.

[2] http://home.earthlink.net/~tneff/e3i.htm#E3DOE12

[3] http://home.earthlink.net/~tneff/e3c.htm#E3P18N1

[4] http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm#GrammarOfTheMultitude-div2-id2862819 / page 33

[5] ibid.

[6] http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm / page 35

[7] "We would need to find a new term here, different from 'fear' or 'anguish', a term which would take the fusion of these two

terms into account. What comes to mind for me is the term *uncanny*. But it would take too much time here to justify the use of this term (Virno, *Mondanita*: 65-7)."