02 2007

The “Good News” of Precarization

On the Symbolism of Superheroines in the Era of a Post-Fordist Flood of Signs

Efthimia Panagiotidis

Translated by Mary O’Neill

Three days before the 1st May 2006, *Spider Mum, Operaistorix, Superflex* and *Santa Guevara,* together with their precariously employed superhero colleagues, raided the Hamburg delicatessen “Frische Paradies” and filled their baskets with champagne, ham, haunches of venison, fancy chocolate and other luxury items. As they left the shop, they handed the sales assistants a bunch of flowers with a note marked *5 stars to go II* in which they explained: “Whether you’re a fully networked long-term intern, or a call-centre angel, or a cleaning lady without a residence permit, or someone in a one-euro job* with no prospect of a place on an apprenticeship scheme, you just won’t survive in this city of millionaires if you don’t have the powers of a superhero.” And they go on: “Although we produce this city’s wealth, we ourselves barely get anything out of it. This cannot continue. From the gourmet breakfast at the exclusive *Süllberg* restaurant to the haunch of wild

boar and champagne from “Frische Paradies”, the locations of wealth are numerous as are the opportunities to take this wealth for ourselves.” The superheroines shared out the delicacies among carers and parents at a day nursery, interns at an advertising agency, cleaning ladies at Hamburg University and women working in one-euro jobs, all of whom can barely manage on their earnings, let alone afford such luxury.

“People were thrilled to bits”, was how the “precarious superheroes” replied to the interviewer from *Stern* magazine, who diagnosed this symbolic act as “little more than an adolescent prank” and condemned the activists as “thieves and robbers”.1 In doing so, he completely misses the symbolic dimension of this action. At the same time, by infantilizing the agents involved and criminalizing their political actions, he restricts the degree to which that action can resonate. Obviously, he wasn’t particularly affected by the “Robin Hood”-like heroic deed. Yet the whole point of this action is, in my view, less about the distribution of successfully purloined luxury items amongst the poor, a gesture that appeals to a politics of social justice. What actually moves me is the moment that brings a quiet little smile to my face, a smile that marks a break in the continuum of powerlessness. If only for a moment, this little smile cancels out the victimizing gaze to which the protagonists of poverty are subjected. The precarious superheroines claim the right to make a show of strength.

On the Piracy of Messages

Michel Serres, the scientific philosopher, is generally not impressed by the moral ideas of powerful ownership regimes. For example, he approves of “parasitical” strategies such as illegal downloads or hacking into knowledge bases. “Of course that’s quite a good thing.

Perhaps the time will come when the Third World hoists the Jolly Roger and that too would be good thing. To my mind, it can never be a crime to steal knowledge. It is good theft [...]. The piracy of knowledge is a good piracy."2

Serres outlines an answer to the question "What can we do?" in his book *Atlas* (2005) in the form of a drama in three acts: "Carrying", "Heating up" and "Transferring", which are portrayed by a series of symbolic figures. Atlas the Titan, who carries the heavens upon his shoulders, or the demi-god Heracles, for whom no act is too daunting, act as the bearers or handlers of solid shapes, although the deeds of both heroes differ in that Atlas carries and Heracles generates movement. During the Industrial Revolution, Serres continues, what causes work to change into the liquefaction of things is heat. "Heating Up" is symbolized by Hephaestos, the god of fire and the forge or by that friend of mankind, Prometheus, who steals fire in order to bring it to humans. Hermes, messenger of the gods, symbolizes in the sequence the fleeting, invisible transfer of signs in the complex universe of information. Hermes is the protector of pathways, of travellers and of tradespeople, and also the god of thieves. "Communication, interference, transitions, translation, sharing, disruption, noise [...], transfers and networks. The era of static carriers is over. After its initially cold, then warm, *transformation*, the *information* age begins."3 According to Serres, the work resembles the activities of (arch)angels ("Angeloi" = messengers), who set off to deliver messages. But in the age of precarity, who are the bearers of good news? For if the superheroes set their masks aside sometime, the ghost of an everyday heroine's cynical smirk lingers on their faces.

Run Paola run … **and keep running**

In periods of social upheaval, the longing for messengers of hope does not remain absent. It can have a therapeutic effect in a resigned everyday existence. The question “What can we do?” to keep the nightmares at bay nags us more insistently than ever. If you wake up at night because fretting about your existence wrenches you out of sleep, then all is no longer quite right in your life. In the mythical world, the accumulation of strengths was always a response to vulnerability. But what do superheroines have to wrestle with in the post-Fordist flood of signs?

After EuroMayDay 2005 4 in Hamburg, Paola continues fighting her way as a self-employed single mother. It’s not a question of material wealth, nor is she plagued by boredom. Paola just can’t bear the idea of going to the same job at the same time every day. She is creative and has great ideas: when things are going well, her ideas are used in the various projects that she works on or is planning. She’s always on the go and keeps up her multiple social contacts. Over this period, she has also developed admirable organizational skills in order to manage her various commitments: her casual work, child-rearing, political involvement, etc. In concrete terms, this also means getting some help and bringing together the right people for whatever matter she’s dealing with. She doesn’t have time for politics anymore. But she won’t seek regular waged employment in order to plan for some voluntary political work in her “free time”. Yet the phrase that crops up again and again in Paola’s story – “It’s just not enough for me” – gives voice to her real wishes, and her enthusiasm for politics is clearly visible. For her involvement to be possible, however, the forms of political work would have to change to fit with her flexible and unpredictable everyday life. She’s finally had enough of feeling that she can never get to an event on time because her child is not yet in bed. She’s fed up of feeling guilty for sometimes missing regular

preparatory meetings and worrying that she won't be able to slot properly into the organizational process.

Situated Desire Rather than Depressive Obligation

This type of experience is without doubt at the very core of the neo-liberal wave. It is important to pause here for a moment to dwell a little on this politically incorrect, opportunistic attitude. In his *Grammar of the Multitude*, the Italian philosopher Paulo Virno deals with the various moods of this network of singularities. They can swing between a form of consent and a form of conflict, and remain trapped in the ambivalence between "resignation" and "critical unease". Today, Virno finds that the articulation of "[...] the emotional situation of the multitude [...] manifests itself with 'bad sentiments': opportunism, cynicism, social integration, inexhaustible recanting, cheerful resignation."[5] Yet the "antidote" is only to be found in "[...] what for the moment appears to be poison." Virno works on the assumption that the conflict or the protest of the multitude "[...] sift through these 'bad sentiments', recognizing in them a way of being, which, in and of itself need not necessarily express itself in unappealing forms."[6]

A politics that aims to fit with the everyday reality of people's lives faces the challenge of dealing sensitively with this very situation. But Friedrich Balke, following Spinoza, asks "how can we successfully produce *active* affections, [...] instead of restricting ourselves solely to a concern to eliminate (sad) or preserve (joyful) emotions"?[7] He rejects in no uncertain terms the Frankfurt School supposition, which anticipates in idealized form the melancholy of the neo-Keynesians, that Deleuze is an "uncritical theoretician", guilty indeed of betraying "philosophy's critical mission". The affirmative appropriation of the word in philosophy "binds it to a

gesture of giving, of the gift. The affirmative gesture that Deleuze talks about must not be confused with the acquiescence of the donkey for whom no burden is too heavy, and on whom Nietzsche heaps scorn and derision in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*."[8] The Deleuzian "yes" is expressed as a "selective strength" that can also choose to say "no" and is capable of creating new spaces where people can be themselves. Nietzsche too explains this elsewhere, at the point where the spirit first becomes a camel: "What is the heaviest thing, ye heroes? asketh the load-bearing spirit, that I may take it upon me and rejoice in my strength."[9] But bearing the burden of the search for truth leads him to the lonely wilderness and to the second metamorphosis into a lion: "To create new values – that, even the lion cannot yet accomplish: but to create [for] itself freedom for new creating – that can the might of the lion do. To create [for] itself freedom and give a holy nay even unto duty: for that, my brethren, there is need of the lion. To assume the right to new values, that is the most formidable assumption for a load-bearing and reverent spirit. Verily, unto such a spirit it is preying, and the work of a beast of prey."[10]

The "no" in precarization certainly does not mean downing tools in a strike. But how can the fluid subjectivities in post-Fordism create spaces for themselves when they feed into the flows of different intensities and speeds? By creating disturbances through the passing on of false information? By looking for an exit in the "capacity to tarry with time", as Tsianos/Papadopoulos suggest?[11] Or by pursuing the surplus of "excessive sociabilities" which, according to the authors, fails to inspire fear whether it be in the form of the political party, trade unions or micropolitics"? Even if the present politics of difference remain trapped in the "failure of representational politics", the problem of the materialization of the

body raises questions about the tools of the microbiopolitical gaze, in the attempt to trace the imperceptible dimensions of the local.

Towards a Politics of Networked Affections

New forms of politics are based on an expansion of the conventional political, urban space. According to Nigel Thrift, "small spaces and periods of time" are becoming visible through new technologies, revealing their power to influence affects. He sees the emergence of the capacity "to track down these small physical spaces that permit us first of all to think of the body as a microgeographical set"12. Minor physical movements become comprehensible as a result. From the analysis of the most minimal gestures to the "cartography of body language", a new "structure of attentiveness" emerges. This is localized in performative acts "that have to do with anticipation, improvisation and intuition, with all the things that from one moment to the next relate to the body's creativity" 13.

Affects express a powerful form of "bodily thought". The space of embodiment is expanded through a fleeting moment: "a constantly moving [...] offshore border", which marks an "eminent political period"14. The grammar of this microbiopolitical territory, according to Thrift, fits together by means of three components. The first arranges the "attentiveness to the art of the self" in keeping with the Foucauldian view. The second introduces an "ethico-political perspective that seeks to promote generosity in relation to the world". The third calls for "greater focus on the creation of new forms of space and time", which will encourage a type of "emotional freedom" to become productive.15

The EuroMayDay movement assembled in Hamburg, promising to awaken heterogeneous desires and articulate current conflicts in precarization through networking – by raising questions rooted in a secret, imperceptible everyday reality. But how can people actually subscribe to an effective, consistent political practice within networks? There is all too often the underlying danger that this politics of networks which people aspire to will inevitably lead to alliances. Alliances however represent social groupings and they derive their effectiveness from institutional positionings that share equal standing.

Remember Paola: it is essential to pay closer attention to the points where she runs up against her boundaries as she attempts to get by, manoeuvring between multiple abstract, mostly interchangeable opportunities, while still maintaining a high degree of uncertainty. Which jobs is she always allergic to? What is so urgent that she just has to get on with it? The challenge of networking lies in the question of how to weave a rhizomatic net capable of calling up communicative abilities, which become productive within temporarily established, interlocking divisions of labour. Because Paola doesn't just give away her time and constant presence; the structure of her everyday reality is organized in too specific a manner for that. Yet she is prepared to give her affects and the "emotional freedom" she has won in this way for politics. And if a line of flight opens up, this worker in the art of becoming takes the time to dock with the war-machine, something a politics of the exodus from precarity makes possible for her.

The author would like to thank Macarena Gonzáles Ulloa, Astrid Kusser, Frank John, Norbert Oellerer and Vassilis Tsianos for their stimulating conversations and encouragement.

* Translator's Note: Government welfare scheme in which unemployed people work for up to 9 months at low-paid (and often menial) jobs.

1 Luik, Arno, *Protestaktion: "Wir suchen Orte des Reichtums heim. Aber uns geht es nicht ums Klauen"*, in: http://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/:Protestaktion-Uns/563642.html?nv=ct_cb (22.1.2007).

2 Hartmann, Frank/ Rieder, Bernhard, *Der Pirat des Wissens ist ein guter Pirat*, in: http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/3/3602/1.html (22.1.2007).

3 Serres, Michel, *Atlas*, Berlin: Merve 2005, S. 114.

4 Panagiotidis, Efthimia/ Tsianos, Vassilis, *Euro Mayday 005 - oder Paola rennt …*, in: http://www.20er.at/index.php?nID=x41adc3d0899c26.55092389&artID=1113214166__ID425a4cd67bef84.74001821 (22.1.2007).

5 Virno, Paolo: *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Cambridge/London: MIT Press 2003, p. 84.

6 Ibid., p. 87.

7 Balke Friedrich: *Gilles Deleuze*, Frankfurt a. Main/New York: Campus 1998, p. 103.

8 Ibid., p. 94.

9 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated into English as by Thomas Common http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1998 (21.2.2007)

10 Ibid.

11 Tsianos, Vassilis/ Papadopoulos, Dimitris, *Prekarität: eine wilde Reise ins Herz des verkörperten Kapitalismus. Oder wer hat Angst vor der immateriellen Arbeit*?, in: http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/tsianospapadopoulos/de (22.1.2007).

12 Thrift, Nigel: Intensität des Fühlens: Für eine räumlich Politik des Affekts, in: Berking, Helmuth (Hg.): *Die Macht des Lokalen in einer Welt ohne Grenzen*, Frankfurt a. Main/New York: Campus Verlag 2006, p. 232. [In English: Nigel Thrift: Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect, *Geografiska Annaler* 86(B), 2004, 55-76.]

13 Ibid., p. 233.

14 Ibid., p. 234.

15 Ibid., p. 231.