

# Reality television, *The Hills*, and the limits of the immaterial labour thesis

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*Abstract: This paper will examine the immaterial labour thesis as proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri through a case study of reality television production practices, specifically those of the MTV program, The Hills. Because immaterial labour is rooted in individual intelligence, affect, and social communicative capacities, Hardt and Negri contend that economic value in the form of labour power can no longer be adequately measured and quantified and that this immeasurability contains revolutionary potential. But, given the current global economic meltdown, and the persistent and very material suffering of people all over the globe, how legitimate and responsible are these claims? Drawing from interviews with reality television workers and the work of George Caffentzis, Massimo de Angelis, David Harvie and others, this paper will test the limits of the immaterial labour thesis, arguing that, rather than disappearing, capital continues to impose measurement systems to determine socially necessary labour time no matter how diffuse or social that labour might be, and that this imposition continues to produce the alienation and exploitation of many for the benefit of a few.*

*Keywords: immaterial labour, reality television, television production, self-branding, value, immeasurability*

*Acknowledgments: Thanks to the reviewers at triple C for their extremely helpful suggestions, and to Matt Stahl, David Hesmondhalgh, Jonathan Burston, Sasha Torres and Nick Dyer-Witheford for their thoughts and encouragement. Very special thanks to Jonathan Handel and to the reality television workers who agreed to be interviewed for this paper.*

*“there is no way to get out of capitalism via a massive fraud, however tempting that might be.”*

*George Caffentzis 2005*

## 1. Introduction

The claim that we live in ‘an information age’ and a ‘weightless economy’ is now axiomatic. Since the late 1970s critics of all political stripes have written about the growing global markets in services, symbolic products, personal experiences and care, and, perhaps most importantly, knowledge, asserting that these developments constitute an entirely new state of affairs. Marxist thinkers, specifically, have worked to produce “new theories for the new reality” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 140), mapping a shift to a “post-Fordist” mode of production based on knowledge and service work, advanced technology, and networked, decentralized, and just-in-time production. Critics such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt

argue that the hegemonic form of labour under post-Fordism is now “immaterial”, insofar as it involves the application of an individual worker’s personality and intellect to the production of an immaterial commodity, such as an idea or a feeling. Because immaterial labour is rooted in individual intelligence, affect, and social communicative capacities, these critics contend, economic value in the form of labour power can no longer be adequately measured and quantified. In addition, immaterial labour inevitably produces a shared excess of human creativity, constitutes new grounds upon which to build a revolutionary subjectivity, and provides the potential for a “kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 294). Given the

current global economic meltdown, and the persistent and very material suffering of people all over the globe, how legitimate and responsible are these claims?

This paper will test the limits of the immaterial labour thesis with reference to reality television programming, specifically the hit MTV show *The Hills*. It will outline the origins and substance of the thesis as posited by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and will examine its claims about the immeasurability of value and the revolutionary potential that allegedly accompanies this immeasurability. The paper will then test these claims through a case study of the labour performed in the production of the reality program *The Hills*. Drawing from a preliminary field study of reality television workers, the paper will examine the types of labour conducted by the show's on-air participants and its 'below-the line' workers.<sup>1</sup> Arguing that *The Hills* is a site of, both, material and ideological production, the paper contends that the labour of the on-air participants involves modeling how to live a perpetually productive life inside the social factory by becoming a 'branded self'. The labour of these participants will then be considered in relation to the labour of the precariously employed, non-unionized loggers, production assistants, and editors who work behind the scenes to produce these television programs. Inspired by arguments developed by George Caffentzis, Massimo de Angelis, David Harvie and others, the paper will argue that, while *The Hills* mythologizes and, indeed, generates new forms of immaterial labour, it remains captive to the law of value and to strict measurement mechanisms; every aspect of the labour involved in producing this specific cultural commodity is, in fact, measured and monetized and remains

thoroughly conditioned by the edicts and values of capital.

Reality television programming like *The Hills* can provide insight into these more general claims about the changing nature of work on a global scale because reality television is, itself, a significant site of production. On the most obvious level, reality programming is a product in and of itself, to be bought and sold on the market for television content, and, on another level, reality programs are significant cultural texts, which produce ranges of social meanings, lessons, and ideological messages. Reality programming is productive in another sense as well; on the forefront of product placement and integration, specifically in the North American context, reality programming is "advertainment" (Deery, 2004), playing a central role as a "marketer for other goods and services" and a conduit for the generation of revenue streams beyond the show itself (Burnett, 2001). But, perhaps most significantly, and on yet another level, reality programming provides the means for individuals to produce their own image personae, or "branded selves", which, potentially, can be traded for cash down the line (Hearn, 2008). Insofar as the production processes of reality programming draw on the flexible, communicative and affective capacities of their participants, and, insofar as these participants work to produce an immaterial product (a show, a set of meanings, a product promotion, a personality), reality television has much in common with other immaterial workplaces, such as computer software design companies or call centers.

The hit MTV program *The Hills* seems the apotheosis of these processes of immaterial labour and production, as it tells the story of white, privileged, twenty-somethings in Los Angeles who live their "real" lives in front of MTV cameras. Simultaneously "self" and "actor", working and living, the individuals featured on *The Hills* are hybrid "person-characters" (Bellafante, 2009); their work/ lives are, apparently, one seamless flow of value generation. Here, "being" *is* labour and produces value, both for the individual person-characters and for their producers, the MTV network. The "person-character", or model

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'below-the-line' originated as an accounting term in early Hollywood film production and refers to all those jobs that appear below a bold line on a budget sheet. Stars, directors, producers are usually 'above the line', while those workers 'below the line' include the usually-unionized craft/ technical workers, such as editors, cameramen, production assistants and sound engineers. See Raphael (1997) and Paul and Kleingartner (1994).

“self-brand” produced by *The Hills* marks a distinct innovation in the nature of immaterial work, which takes place on an already well-established site for the production of goods, services and brands. In this way, *The Hills* provides an ideal limit case for an inquiry into the concept of immaterial labour.

## 2. The Immaterial Labour Thesis

### 2.1. Origins of the information society

Critics have been touting the rise of a ‘post-industrial’, ‘knowledge’ economy since the 1970s. As Nick Dyer-Witheford outlines in his book *CyberMarx*, early writing about the “information society” emerged from Japan as a “centerpiece of Japanese economic planning” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 34) and gained momentum in the 70s and 80s in the West largely in response to economic recession. As theories about the rise of a “post-industrial society” attempted to move away from the societal and environmental crises of the 1960s, theories about a new “information society” heralded the makeover of industrial capitalism all together. This makeover was credited to technological developments, such as computerization, and involved economic and political initiatives, such as deregulation and the privatization of the public sector.

Daniel Bell, Alvin Toffler and other proponents of the “information age” celebrate this transition, claiming that it signals an entirely “new stage of civilization [...] comparable to the earlier shift from agrarian to industrial society”(Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 38). They argue that growing scientific knowledge and technological innovation has shifted the terrain of human production away from concrete material products toward ideas, theories, data and symbols; knowledge and ideas increasingly become the source of wealth. According to Toffler and others, this new economy based on computerization and conceptual innovation overcomes the strife and alienation characteristic of more traditional forms of work, in the material world of the factory for instance. The rise of the information society, these writers claim, ends the exploitation of physical la-

bour, labour disputes and class divisions. Because work in the information society relies on worker’s unique intelligence and creative capacities, workers will experience “new dimensions of autonomy and job-satisfaction” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 49). In effect, “the information economy is eliminating the factory – and with it, Marxism’s historical protagonist” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 47). Advocates of the information society proclaim the global triumph of capitalism and with it “the end of history”.

To be sure, it is difficult to dispute the fact that computerization and new technologies have made over the world of work in profound ways over the past several decades and that knowledge and symbolic production have become central sites for wealth production. But, it is also clear that exploitative working conditions and class struggle have not disappeared. Many critics on the left, such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and others, highlight this fact, parting ways with celebratory advocates of “the information society” as well as with more traditional Marxist views about the progressive march of human history and technological development. These critics, often affiliated with what is called ‘autonomist Marxism’, view the struggles *between* labour and capital to be the driving force of history and view the position of the worker as “ the active subject of production, the well-spring of the skills, innovation and cooperation upon which capital must draw” (Dyer-Witheford, 1994, p. 89). Hardt, Negri and other critics from this tradition argue that workers’ efforts to resist capital’s control, and capital’s ever more ingenious methods to capture and contain these efforts produce cycles of struggle; struggles which can be found in many different sites of ‘immaterial’ production - call centres, software design firms, retail stores, maquiladoras, digital ‘gold-farming’ operations<sup>2</sup>, universities, and reality television production companies to name only a few. So,

<sup>2</sup> ‘Gold-farming’ involves playing a specific video game repeatedly in order to acquire virtual goods and gold, which are then sold to other players for ‘real-world’ money. Recent studies show that over 400,000 people were employed as gold-farmers in 2008, the majority of them in China. These workers typically earn around 250\$ a month and work 10-12 hours days. See Heeks (2008) and Davis (2009).

while these critics agree that digitization and computerization have transformed the economy, they remain convinced that the plight and the potential power of the worker is as present as ever, perpetually adapting itself to larger societal changes. They have set about, then, to formulate an understanding of the transformed world of work with an eye to “confronting information age capital with a radically alternative vision of community and communication” (Dyer-Witheford, 1994, p. 52).

## 2.2. Immaterial Labour

A central component in these new formulations is the concept of immaterial labour, which originated in the late 1990s in the work of autonomist Marxist critics writing in and around the journal *Futur Anterieur*. Anxious to contend with the changing composition of the post-Fordist workplace, these critics attempt to define a “new revolutionary subject that might succeed the craft worker and the mass worker” (Dyer-Witheford, 2001, p. 70).

Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno and others argue that post-Fordist capital has seen the realization of the processes originally described by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, where knowledge and sociality have become “the lifeblood of fixed capital” (Wright, 2005). In the age of heavy industry, Marx writes: “the social individual appears as the great foundation stone of production and of wealth” and “labour time ceases and must cease to be the measure of value” (Marx, 1993, p. 705). These conditions mark, what Hardt and Negri call, “the social factory” (Hardt & Negri, 2000), where labour extends far beyond the temporal and spatial limits of traditional workplaces, eluding effective measurement, and capital’s productivity penetrates ever more deeply into all, including the most intimate, aspects of our lives. With the diffusion of work and the production of value across all areas of life and increasingly conditioned by computer networks “whose abstract, digitalized operations render intellectual activity directly productive”

(Dyer-Witheford, 1994, p. 95), we see the rise of the ‘socialized’ worker.

The productive activity in which the ‘socialized’ worker is primarily engaged involves immaterial labour, which, as Maurizio Lazzarato has famously written, “produces the cultural content of the commodity (and) involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work” – in other words the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and [...] public opinion” (Lazzarato, 1996, pp. 133-34). Hardt and Negri outline three general forms of immaterial labour: industrial labour processes which have been transformed by computerization, analytical, symbolic or linguistic work, which can include creative work or routine symbolic tasks, and affective labour, which “produces and manipulates affects, such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 108; Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). Most immaterial labour involves some combination of these three forms. Hardt and Negri stipulate that the term “immaterial” refers to the product of the labour – “knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 108) - not to the labour itself, which is always in some sense physical, mental, and material (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 109).

Immaterial labour is flexible, precarious, and mobile, as it works within the increasingly decentralized “global dispersal of productive processes and sites” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 297) and the global mobility of capital. Immaterial labourers, or socialized workers, are cyber-subjects, integrated into machines and interactive networks (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 146), even as their work often involves the manipulation of their emotions, bodies, creativity, and communicative capacities. Immaterial labourers can include everyone from software designers to waitresses, sex trade workers to academics. Information, computer and knowledge workers, performers, artists, technicians, service workers, and even those who do not receive a wage, such as care givers within and outside families, are immaterial labourers.

Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Hardt and

Negri argue that immaterial production is, at its core, biopolitical. As it draws on the subjective attributes of workers, such as creativity, intelligence, caring and linguistic skills, immaterial labour produces distinct communities and relationships, social networks, social meanings, “and ultimately social life itself” (Hardt & Negri 2004, p. 109); it blurs the lines between the economic, the social, the political and the cultural. Most often, immaterial labour is strictly shaped and disciplined by dominant economic and political interests, producing capital’s docile bodies. In the global social factory we see “a rationalization of the totality of human activities and its subordination to the M-C-M (money-commodity-money) circuit.” (de Angelis cited in Dyer-Witthof, 2001b, p. 168). Hardt and Negri, however, argue that, in the case of immaterial labour, the disciplinary equation is not always so clear; while the interests of capital have collided with human affect, sociality and communication, “communication has not been impoverished, but production has been enriched to the level of complexity of human interaction” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). Significantly, they contend that all immaterial labour involves communicative action that is not imposed from above, but, rather, is “immanent to the labouring activity itself” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 295).

“The immateriality of labour implies an activity that emphasizes and is self-aware of its cooperative nature that is biopolitical, that produces affects; hence a cooperation that is far more likely to be of a horizontal, rhizomatic nature, organised on the basis of informal workgroups, networks, peer-to-peer relationships, social ties even...” (de Angelis & Harvie 2006, p. 2).

In their book *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri argue that immaterial labour has changed the conditions and grounds for the organization and structure of all work around the globe; we have moved “from the linear relationships of the assembly line to the innumerable and indeterminate relationships of distributed networks” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 113). Today, both, work and society as a whole have to “informationalise, become intelligent, become affective” (Hardt & Negri

2004, p. 109). In this way, they assert that immaterial labour has become “hegemonic in qualitative terms”(Hardt & Negri 2004, p. 109).

### 2.3. Subjectivity and Immaterial Labour

The strategic deployment of affect, expressive self, or personality is central to the concept of immaterial labour. Jason Read defines immaterial labour as “the production of subjectivity (tastes, desires, concepts) by subjectivity” (Read, 2003, p. 11). Virno and Lazzarato see individual virtuosity, defined as a capacity for linguistic and communicative improvisation and innovation, and the continual self-(re)creation of subjects, as core components (Virno, 2004; Lazzarato, 1996). Many other critics from other theoretical traditions, including Brian Holmes, Ernest Sternberg, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello and David Harvey, also note the ways in which flexible self-performance and image construction have become central features of the post-Fordist workplace. Elsewhere I have made the case that dominant forms of impression management, or self-branding, constitute a new, distinct form of labour (Hearn, 2008, p. 194).

Insofar as “subjectivity [...] becomes directly productive” and “productive labour, in its totality, appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist” (Virno, 2004, pp. 54-55), the work of the culture industries becomes centrally important; they are “generalized and elevated to the rank of canon”, paradigmatic of the post-Fordist mode of production (Virno, 2004, p. 28; Lazzarato, 1996, p. 142). In addition to being significant sites of production themselves, the culture industries, such as television production, provide templates for the communicative and image skills required for profit-generating self-performance in all sectors of the economy. It is to a specific example from the culture industries, then, that we will soon turn in order to test some of these claims about immaterial labour.

### 2.4. Immeasurability and the end of the law of value?

A central element of Hardt and Negri’s immaterial labour thesis is the claim that immaterial labour is fundamentally immeasurable and

that, as a result, the labour theory of value is no longer tenable<sup>3</sup>. As the nature of labor changes, so does the constitution of value; if work is dispersed across bodies, subjectivities, communicative actions, and machines then value can no longer be determined by the socially necessary labor time required to produce commodities. Under the new hegemony of immaterial labour, value has moved both outside of, and beyond, measure. On the one hand, global capitalism can never fully calculate and order production, especially immaterial production, because it is so diffuse and individualized. On the other hand, because immaterial labour creates “not the means of social life but social life itself”, and “because capital can never capture all of life” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 146), this new form of labour has the capacity to exceed capital and, potentially, reappropriate the means of production. Under these conditions, Hardt and Negri contend, “the ontological terrain of Empire, completely plowed and irrigated by a powerful, selfvalorizing, and constituent labor, is thus planted with a virtuality that seeks to be real” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 259). In this way, the socialized worker becomes a part of the “multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2004).

Debates about Marx’s labour theory of value have been raging in some form or another for a very long time (See Caffentzis, 2005; Kiciloff & Starosta, 2007; De Angelis, 2007; Dinerstein & Neary, 2002), and it is well beyond the scope of this paper to review them all. Hardt and Negri’s assertions about the impossibility of retaining Marx’s labour theory of value in the new world of immaterial commodity production, however, have produced much recent criticism<sup>4</sup> even among the ranks of other autonomist Marxist thinkers. Some of the critical arguments of writers such as George Caffentzis, Massimo de Angelis, David Harvie, and Steve Toms will inform the analysis of reality television production taken up here.

<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Hardt and Negri (2004) claim that Marx himself predicted this in the *Grundrisse*.

<sup>4</sup> See Balakrishnan (2003) and Pasavant and Dean (2004).

Leaving aside the fact that there is no consensus about the ‘correct’ meaning of Marx’s law of value in the first place, many critics argue that the global reach of biopower and the blurring together of sociality and labour do not magically result in an end to capital’s measurement and imposition of socially necessary labour time. As George Caffentzis contends with reference to Eudoxus’ and Euclid’s theory of proportions, “the ‘irrational’ is perfectly measurable (a.k.a. ‘rational’), the problem is simply that the methods of measurement cannot be limited to ratios and whole number units” (Caffentzis, 2005, p. 101). In other words, as labour becomes more diffuse and ‘immaterial’ capital’s attempts to quantify and measure it will not end but will simply become more ‘innovative’ and ‘complex’.

While Hardt and Negri would not dispute that capital continues to impose abstract measurement mechanisms where it can, they remain convinced that value inheres in each one of us as creative, thinking subjects and in our collaborative, communal activities; our actions not only produce value for capital, but also produce an ‘excess’ of sociality, which has emancipatory potential. In this characterization of contemporary work, however, Hardt and Negri conflate labour with all human action. Steve Toms and George Caffentzis point out that human agency and the power to act are not new problems for capitalists and certainly do not imply that workers’ creativity resists measurement. This fact is evidenced by the whole history of ‘human resource’ management (HRM) controls and strategies, specifically the human relations tradition, which includes such programs as total quality management, organizational seduction, or job ‘enrichment’ programs (See Dulebohn, Ferris & Stodd, 1995; Lewicki, 1981; van Maanen, 1978; Toms, 2008). These mechanisms actively work to condition and align individual worker’s creativity and subjectivity with the goals of the employer and the results of these management strategies are handily tracked, measured and quantified. Indeed, as De Angelis and Harvie (2006) argue, the category of socially necessary labour time is, itself, fluid and contested as workers’ struggles take place exactly at the point where these meas-

urement mechanisms are imposed. The conflation of labour with all human activity, then, produces a contradiction in which Hardt and Negri “retain a notion of socially created value” but “reject the notion that there is some amount of labour that is socially necessary for that value to be created” (Toms, 2008, p. 3). As Caffentzis points out, Hardt and Negri reject Marx’s law of value while hanging on to a notion of value that is “both immeasurable and beyond measure” (Caffentzis, 2005, p. 96).

Hardt and Negri’s claim that value is no longer measurable as socially necessary labour time neglects the connected and global character of capitalist production in general. While it may be true that production is increasingly networked and socialized and that this might lead to a reduction of dependence on the extraction of surplus value in some areas of the economy, “this situation will not automatically lead to a fundamental breakdown in capitalism” (Caffentzis, 2005, p. 105). Rather, the ability of some sectors of the economy to disengage the price of their commodities from the measured labour time needed to produce them is entirely dependent on the “surplus value created in other branches of production” (Caffentzis, 2005, p. 106), usually in other parts of the world where labour can be more intensely exploited:

“In order for there to be an average rate of profit throughout the capitalist system, branches of industry that employ very little labour but a lot of machinery must be able to have the right to call on the pool of value that high-labour, low-tech branches create. If there were no such branches or no such right, then the average rate of profit would be so low in the high-tech, low-labour industries that all investment would stop and the system would terminate” (Caffentzis, 2005). The analysis that follows will take up these criticisms of Hardt and Negri’s immaterial labour thesis in its exploration of the labour behind the reality television program *The Hills*.

### 3. Reality television: *The Hills*

In the simplest sense, “reality television” names a set of cost-cutting measures in broadcast television production enacted by management as a response to the economic woes faced by broadcast television trans-nationally in the late 1980s and 1990s: increased competition in media markets and growing audience fragmentation, legislative deregulation, the weakening of public broadcasting, and, specifically in the case of American-based broadcast television, spiraling costs associated with the inflated demands of already existing media celebrities. The production and business models of reality television offer radically lower production costs by reducing the labour time required to make television programs; productions not only cut out the work of actors and writers and bypass union labour, they also summon participants to ‘be themselves’ on television for free by mythologizing the processes of creative, innovative, virtuosic self-performance and highlighting the television industry’s centrality to these same processes. Reality television’s production practices are ground zero for the socialization of labour - a prime example of capital’s “perennial attempt to free itself from dependence upon labour” (Wright, 2005) and the wage relation. Reality television can be read, then, as, both, a representational expression of, and ideological legitimation for television’s economic rationalizations and post-Fordist capital’s desire to externalize its labour costs.

With the advent of reality television we also see Dallas Smythe’s claims about the audience commodity, whose attention is bought and sold by advertisers and brokered by television networks, evolve one step further. Here, audiences are not only working as they watch but are clamoring to labour at *being* watched by others. In this way the labour of watching television is intensified as audiences watch in order to learn how to be seen by television cameras, which might be parlayed into profit-producing work in the future. As Mark Andrejevic reminds us, with the rise of reality television programming we see consumers summoned to participate in the “rationalization of their own consumption”, which is then sold

back to them “as empowerment” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 15).<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1. *The participants/ performers of The Hills*

*The Hills*, a hybrid or semi-scripted reality show, is a unique example of these practices; it not only produces the ultimate blend of life and work, it works to narrate and mythologize the hegemony of immaterial labour. MTV’s most highly rated program, drawing over 3.9 million viewers regularly by its second season (Zetchik, 2007) and more than 5 million online (Gay 2008, 42), *The Hills* follows the lives of four young, twenty-something women as they work and live in Los Angeles. *The Hills*, which premiered in 2006 and is now in its sixth season, is a spin-off of MTV’s first hybrid-reality series, *Laguna Beach*, which followed the lives of white, privileged high school students in Laguna Beach, California. MTV president of entertainment, Brian Graden, asserts that *The Hills* is “the most influential show (they’ve) ever had” (Gay, 2008, p. 40).

*The Hills’* story arcs are pre-planned with the cast members at the beginning of each season and are based on anticipated events in the participants’ lives. Cast members are filmed from 12 to 14 hours a day, approximately four days a week, with multiple digital cameras. *The Hills* does not attempt to look like a documentary, however; the show’s glossy, filmic presentation, com-

plete with the latest L.A. bands as soundtrack, is as slick as its Hollywood setting. In fact, the style of the show, with its “cool-evening look”, is based on the films of Michael Mann (Gay, 2008, p. 44). A senior editor interviewed for this paper who has chosen to remain anonymous describes the way *The Hills* captures “lightening in a bottle” by having “a character find out some jaw-dropping piece of news, while the perfectly lit steadycam circles around them as the sun goes down” (Anonymous 2). In this way, *The Hills* expresses the ultimate blend of the television industry’s aesthetic determinations with individual affective flow - this is how life is lived “inside” television. The production practices behind *The Hills* (and all reality television programming for that matter) are heavily guarded secrets, protected by iron clad non-disclosure agreements, which everyone, from the executive producer to the lowly logger, is forced to sign.

Although the “drama” of these young women’s lives is intended to feel like a soap opera, nothing much ever happens on *The Hills*. The show is remarkably boring and events move at a glacial pace. The girls shop and gossip and talk on their cell phones. They work, although their jobs at places like Teen Vogue, Bolthouse Productions, and Epic Records are “producer-arranged”; the girls drop in as “freelancers” and are given a project to do whenever MTV can arrange for the cameras to be there (Gay, 2008, p. 46). Most importantly, the girls go to clubs and restaurants (the names of which are promoted at the bottom of the television screen), talk about their relationships, party, fight with each other, and then talk some more. They are wealthy, young, beautiful and deeply uninteresting, but narrative is not really the point here. Lauren, Heidi, Whitney and Audrina are showing viewers how to successfully “live” on camera in a way that reflects and promotes the values of consumption and image savvy now dominant in the West. Not only are these women the very incarnation of Hardt and Negri’s hyper-socialized cyber-subjects, they are promotional objects for the ostensibly labour-free world of the attention economy. The spectacularized lives of the girls on *The Hills* are comparable to the model kitchens or living rooms

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<sup>5</sup> In his excellent book *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (2004), Mark Andrejevic explores the ways in which reality television performs important cultural work within a surveillance society based on ‘mass customization’ and ‘hyper individuation’. He argues that reality television “serves ... as a form of acclimatization to an emerging economic regime predicated on increasingly unequal access to and control over information” (p. 111). The analysis undertaken here is indebted to Andrejevic, but focuses explicitly on the labour relations of reality television production, arguing that these programs, both, narrativize and enact the productive conditions of the social factory. Reality television production practices encourage participants to engage in their own objectification as branded personae and to align their interests with the authorizing institutions behind these processes. As a result, reality television production actively contributes to the enclosure of subjectivity by capital and to what Christian Fuchs calls its “infinite exploitation” (Fuchs 2010, p. 144).

on display at Ikea or Pottery Barn. Like these marketing displays, the directive to viewers is simple: insert your “self” here.

*The Hills* chronicles these women’s quotidian ups and downs, but the real story is happening beyond the show, as they develop their own person-character, image-commodity, or self-brand. Elsewhere I have defined the “branded self” as an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment. The self as commodity for sale on the labour market must also generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. It is, in the words of Andrew Wernick, a self “which continually produces itself for public consumption” (Wernick, 1991, p. 192). Self-branding is a form of affective labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention or notoriety; it is often intended as a way to establish some form of security in the extremely precarious work world of 21st century capitalism (Hearn, 2008, p. 200). The goal of self-branding is to produce profit.

Self-branding has much in common with Barry King’s concept of “becoming modular.” King critically examines the widely-used metaphor of “actorly performance” and the values and meanings attached to it, which include ideals of personal “expressive latitude”, glamour, and “intrinsically rewarding work” (King, 2007, pp. 320-321). When applied to the work of labourers, such as call centre workers or waitresses, King argues, the metaphor of performance and its attendant connotations serve to mythologize the real conditions and constraints of immaterial labour, where “the exercise of ‘personality’ is closer to the fulfillment of a task specification than a process of expression” (King, 2007, p. 320). As the performance of personality and job-appropriate selfhood becomes a form of commodity labour power, immaterial workers are encouraged to see themselves as image entrepreneurs (Hearn, 2006). “Becoming modular” describes a performance of selfhood that conforms to a format dictated by external disciplinary structures: “to

perform to a format”, King writes, “is to seek to be a functional unit, or a module.” In the case of *The Hills*, the performance of selfhood enacted by Lauren, Whitney et. al is completely conditioned by television’s narrative conceits, aesthetic concerns, production exigencies, and sponsorship imperatives. As King contends, “to be modular is not about self-expression”; it is “to be a model of a model that has been intensively structured for mass approval” (King, 2007, p. 335).

The young women on *The Hills* are models of models, offering their lives up week after week to the MTV cameras, becoming profitable self-brands and modeling how effective self-branding might be done. Their lives are rendered perpetually productive, serving as extended promotions for the MTV network and their own celebrity brand; Lauren, Whitney and Heidi have all developed their own clothing lines, Heidi has made a pop album, Audrina is now appearing in feature films, and Whitney recently debuted her own spin-off reality show on MTV entitled *The City*. Lauren Conrad has also become a New York Times best-selling author with her novel *L.A. Candy* about the life of a young reality television star and her girlfriends living in Los Angeles. In addition, all the performers make money by appearing at various events around the country (Laporte, 2009).

As with many other forms of reality television, *The Hills* brand is also highly productive in its own right as it is elaborated and dispersed across media platforms and para-texts, such as websites, blogs, youtube parodies, and gossip magazines geared toward capturing the lucrative 14-25 market. The show has a virtual world and online community, where fans can interact with cast avatars who offer to help them develop their own “in-world story arcs and virtual experiences” (Mayberry, 2007). The Virtual Hills also has relationships with various consumer brands and participants can earn “in-world” virtual dollars by watching ads for these sponsors (Siklos, 2006). *The Hills* has launched numerous musical careers; it includes several pop songs per episode, with the song and artist names posted on a graphic super in the corner of the screen. It has also spawned a wildly popular ‘aftershow’ hosted

by MTV vee-jays, who confab with the audience, rehashing the show and replaying events with all the precision of sports announcers, complete with tele-strators.

*The Hills Aftershow* regularly features cast members as special guests, simultaneously extending and contradicting the illusion of *The Hills*' "reality" for any benefits the young women of *The Hills* receive as a result of their television celebrity are resolutely repressed in the diegesis of the show itself. There is never any mention of the other acting jobs, fashion lines, or red carpet events that the women enjoy, never any self-reflexive moment where they discuss how their lives have changed as a result of living on television for the past four years. These women's job is simply to "be" on camera and, in their mocked-up jobs as stylists, event planners and music industry promoters, to model the fabulousness of life as immaterial labourers. As Barry King writes, "the new social relations that descend from the new work order dictate that the simulation of commitment must not be revealed in itself to be a simulation" (King, 2007, p. 339).

But, are these girls *really* immaterial labourers or do they just play them on TV? While there is no doubt that the labour of the young women is affective, drawing from emotion, life energy, or personality, it can be argued that the nature of the affect has been completely disciplined over time by the presence of the television camera and its own instrumental, aesthetic and economic interests. As Audrina, herself, states, "because it's for TV, you push yourself to do things that you normally wouldn't" (Gay 2008, 46). A reality editor who has worked on *The Hills* insists that insofar as "the act of observation influences the result [...] (the participants) become the persona the show creates for them" (Anonymous 3). Lauren Conrad has happily surrendered her life energy to capital's standards of measure for the past 7 years, agreeing to do so in exchange for the chance to "grow" her self-brand into a lucrative business. What is ultimately privileged in the text of *The Hills*, then, "is the discourse of authority that rati-

fies the stylizing of the self" (King, 2007, p. 339), in this case the discourses and promotional values of the MTV network and, by extension, broadcast television in general. As King argues, "modular selves are locked in a life space in which the market is the dominant reality term" (King, 2007, p. 339). Lauren Conrad is not an "actorly performer", or "wild transgressor of romanticism," but is, rather, "an exemplary conformist who (has) accepted managerial objectives as the equivalent of a central life purpose" (King, 2007, p. 327). She is not a "star" in the traditional sense of the word, but is, instead, MTV's "star employee".

Indeed, nothing gives the lie to the 'reality' of *The Hills*' person/characters more than the impressive wage now paid to its cast members. Recent contracts reveal that the show's original star Lauren Conrad, earned 125,000\$ an episode in her last season, and that other show regulars are paid between 80,000\$ to 100,000\$ an episode (Laporte, 2009). These high wages not only recognize the value-producing labour involved in creating these self-brands but also clearly demonstrate that MTV has no problem measuring and monetizing this highly socialized form of work based on audience ratings and consumer demand. The fact is that the labour of the women on *The Hills* is, both, exploitative and exploited. Insofar as the show pays these women well and allows them to create and build equity in their own self-brands, it places them in an extremely privileged position similar to other 'above-the-line' actors in Hollywood. Also, as we shall soon see, the show's narrative celebration of the work-free world of celebrity-living plays a role in generating its own precarious and badly paid below-the-line workforce and in this sense can be deemed exploitative. But, insofar as these performers are not legally considered actors but are paid a generic 'fee' for each episode, they have no access to any of the rights or protections afforded by The Screen Actor's Guild or AFTRA. In addition, if the contracts of *The Hills* performers resemble other reality television contracts<sup>6</sup>, then these

<sup>6</sup> Extensive attempts to locate detailed information about *The Hills* contracts proved fruitless. Contracts for other reality television shows, which rely on changing

young women's right to publicity – their legal right to their names, voices and public personae – are closely monitored and controlled by MTV.

A celebrity's public persona is considered to be a form of property right under the law because the celebrity has laboured to produce it. As such, it is fully alienable and appropriable by others (Madow, 1993). Most participants on reality television sign away their right to publicity to the producers for several years during and after the show's airing. So, while these young women may develop other businesses or make money from appearances, chances are these must be vetted by MTV, which might also take a percentage of the money earned (Hearn, 2006). As entertainment labour lawyer, Jonathan Handel, describes it, "the producer has all the leverage and the participant has none. If I made these kids, why shouldn't I capture a portion of the economics and make sure that they don't degrade the exclusivity of the show?" (personal communication, May 7, 2010).

In the case of the labour performed by the women of *The Hills*, then, it is impossible to determine the line between what might be "internal to labour itself and external to capital" (Dowling, 2006, p. 1), what might constitute an immanent form of self-valorization "beyond measure", and what might possibly serve as the grounds for the creation of some "elementary form of communism" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 294). The example of *The Hills* seriously throws into question a central theoretical presupposition of the immaterial labour thesis that "affect" is some kind of pure human energy that exists prior to its forms of expression. It also challenges any claim that immaterial labour draws from our "autonomous subjectivity," understood to arrive on the scene of work untouched or unconditioned by other social relations. In the case of *The Hills* "creativity is the crea-

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casts of contestants, such as *American Idol* or *The Bachelor*, have surfaced online over the years. The *Hills* cast, however, has a vested interest in protecting the details of their contracts; they would not want to undermine the purported 'reality' of the 'struggling to make it' storyline of the show.

tivity of capital. This creativity is free insofar as it has introjected the needs of capital, the objective constraints of the market and its laws" (Aufheben, 2006, p. 35). Any affect, emotion, or personality on display is truly "lightening in a bottle". It arrives already highly disciplined, anticipating the demands and expectations of its producers and audience and existing in dialectical tension with its conditions of possibility.

The immaterial labour/life/sociality of *The Hills*' person-characters is monetized in terms of market share quantification systems and their related fee structures, and advertising revenue, and is, therefore, easily measurable. Insofar as reality television conditions individual behaviour, affect, and self-concept through its lessons about, and production of self-brands, it must also be seen to play a part in the reproduction of labour power and, therefore, to constitute one link in the complex value chains of transnational capitalism (Dyer-Witheford, 2001b, 168).

### 3.2. At the bottom of *The Hills*: reality television's below-the-line labourers and production practices

As mentioned above, *The Hills*' narrative about the glamour of life as labour and its participants' promotion of self-promotion is mirrored in the motives of many of reality television's below-the-line immaterial labourers. As a senior editor describes them, young industry worker-wannabes, "come to LA in droves every year, some use it as a stepping stone, most are enticed by the glamour of being associated with it, but in reality it's like working at Starbucks" (Anonymous 3). In another mirrored inversion, just as the recognition of the changed material circumstances of *The Hills*'s participants is repressed in the diegesis of the show, the conditions and nature of the labour that goes into making reality shows are actively disavowed by executive producers and broadcasters in the production processes of the shows themselves.

Reality television producers insist that these shows are "unscripted" and do not involve writers or story editors, but then proceed to ask editors to "build the story in the editing bay" (Anonymous 3), or simply re-name writ-

ers “segment producers” or “field producers” (Elisberg, 2008). Executive producers do this in order to avoid having to provide industry-standard wages, benefits, and appropriate working conditions. Indeed, reality television’s entire *raison d’être* is to bypass traditional production formats and business models in order to increase profit for producers and networks. Any insistence that “reality” refers to radical innovations in television show formats, or innocently depicts unstructured, free-flowing, improvised action is a red herring. As J. Max Robins writes, reality programs are “cast, plotted and edited as carefully as *The King of Queens* or *Law and Order*” (Robins, 2005, p. 3). And, as Patrick Verone, president of the Writers Guild of America West, argues, “every one of these shows falls under long-existing categories in the MBA (Minimum Basic Agreement), such as Quiz and Audience Participation, Comedy-Variety, Non-dramatic and Documentary” (Verone, cited in Heath, 2009). The deployment of the phrase “reality” is simply a promotional strategy that works to mask cheap, just-in-time production practices, which avoid unionization and attempt to extract as much unregulated labour as possible from workers. In this sense then, “reality” simply refers to the on-going reality of worker exploitation in the television industry.

The exploitative, sweatshop conditions that prevail in most reality production begin at the top of the television food chain, with broadcasters who develop concepts and then contract out their production to the lowest bidder. As a result, production companies are regularly competing with, and undercutting, each other; “everyone is pinching pennies everywhere. It’s very difficult to score contracts with the networks, so producers are under constant pressure to deliver top quality product under ever shrinking budgets and delivery timeframes” (Anonymous 2). Of course, the effects of this competition are downloaded onto below-the-line workers, such as production assistants, drivers, segment producers, assistant editors, and loggers. These employees are often asked to work 18 hour days, seven days

a week, and to go without lunch and dinner breaks, healthcare, benefits, pensions or overtime pay (Elisberg, 2008; Heath, 2009). A recent study by Goodwin Victoria Research entitled *Harsh Reality* shows that the supposedly non-existent writers on reality television work, on average, sixty hours per week and do not receive overtime pay (Writers Guild of America West, 2007; Elisberg, 2008). These exploitative conditions threaten the safety of all involved in the productions. For example, the non-union drivers employed on these shows also work eighteen-hour days and do not receive alcohol or drug testing (Elisberg, 2008).

Reality workers are forced to accept precarious short-term contracts, which can be easily terminated without cause. A former *American Idol* production assistant reports that, when he averaged his wage over the hours he was forced to work, it came to 4.50\$ an hour. He goes on to state that “when I even mentioned the possibility of getting a raise I was threatened with losing my job, told that I was replaceable, and that I’d be blacklisted from working on any other show if I spoke out” (Writers Guild of America West, 2007). An assistant editor, who worked on *The Hills* and has chosen to remain anonymous, describes the situation:

these reality houses are making a lot of money, but the person who owns the company is making the money, whereas the production company people aren’t getting health insurance and they’re working their asses off. They’re willing to do it because it’s a norm. MTV, especially, if they see a problem coming where they have to spend money they’ll just cancel a show” (Anonymous 1).

Producers know they have a steady supply of young workers who see the industry as glamorous and are willing to put up with the abuse to get a foot in the door. Even though “it takes a toll on them as people [...] with a young workforce, a bunch of people say they are going to kick butt and they’re cool with that, and so...just go full into it” (Anonymous 2). As a result of strict non-disclosure agreements, the lack of any traditional job protections, and a very informal economy of job dis-

tribution based on word of mouth, show producers are able to pressure these young people into silence and simultaneously demand they do “whatever it takes to get the job done” (Writers Guild of America West, 2007).

The implications of this new bargain basement production model extend beyond the shop floor of reality productions; arguably, they work to undermine the entire television industry. As Verone points out: “the growth of this low cost genre has also meant a decrease in the TV shelf space devoted to programming, which undermines our health and pension funds and diminishes writers’ bargaining leverage, collective and individual” (Verone, cited in Heath, 2009). In effect, the production practices of reality production function to de-stabilize the labour relations of the industry by producing a whole new bottom tier of industry worker who is willing to suffer under precarious and exploitative conditions in order to get their foot in the door. During the recent strike by the Writers Guild of America, the production of reality programming functioned as the equivalent of scab labour, helping the networks fill their hours and attract advertising dollars while undermining the bargaining power of the union. Ironically, organizing reality workers was one of the original demands of the WGA that they were forced to drop in order to reach a settlement (McNary, 2007).

There can be no doubt that the work of lowly loggers and assistant editors is a central component of the fiscal, and ultimately aesthetic, rationale for reality programming and, therefore, is exploited as a matter of course. Assistant editors and loggers working on *The Hills* view and log thousands of hours of tape of Audrina’s and Lauren’s branded lives. They are often locked into rooms for hours at a time in order to protect the secrecy of the show’s plotlines. They work on short-term contracts, with no job security, benefits, or access to union organization, and can be fired on a moment’s notice should they complain; there are always other young workers to take their place (Anonymous 1). So, where the narrative of *The Hills* and its profit-producing person-

characters appears to promote the ultimate socialization of labour and the collapse of labour time as the measure of value, producers extract as much labour time as possible from the below-the-line workers who make the show. Ironically, show producers rely on the purposefully generated myth of the glamour of creative labour (the ideological message of *The Hills*) to procure their workers, who are then forced to tolerate exploitative and precarious working conditions in order to create greater profit.

#### 4. The Limits of the Immaterial Labour Thesis

As Marx argues in *The Grundrisse*, “(c)apital ...is a moving contradiction in that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other hand, as the sole measure and source of wealth” (Marx, 1993, p. 706). This moving contradiction gives us a “knowledge economy” and “immaterial labour” in the West, and the intensification of older, harsher and more exploitative forms of labour elsewhere, for example in the Free Enterprise zones of the developing world. As George Caffentzis argues, given the fact that the average rate of profit across the globe had been rising until very recently, we must assume that surplus value from labour-intensive sectors of the economy underwrites those sectors marked by immaterial labour: “the computer requires the sweatshop, the cyborg’s existence is premised on the slave” (Caffentzis, 2005). While it may not have the scope or moral force of Caffentzis’ example, the case of *The Hills* exemplifies his point in microcosm; the immaterial work of this “hybrid of semiprofessional personalities who play themselves camera” (Stanley, 2007) is under-girded and made possible by extremely exploitative labour practices behind the scenes. So, even while it may appear as though labour has become socialized to the point where it can no longer be measured and must cease to be the measure of value, capital continues to be “value valorizing itself through the exploitation of labor” (Aufheben, 2006, p. 33).

The labour of the participants on *The Hills* illustrates the limits of Hardt and Negri’s claims

about the creative and autonomous “common” lurking behind immaterial labor. While the labor of these women appears to draw from affect and creativity “immanent to the labouring activity” itself (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 295) and seems to be autonomous and self-valorizing, it is, in actuality, a prime illustration of the processes of self-branding, or modularity; it simply illustrates a situation where “professional or creative workers identify so much with the aims and interests of their business that they [...] become managers of it themselves” (Aufheben, 2006, pp. 33-34). No matter how socialized or affective the labour that constitutes *The Hills* might be, then, in the end it is still subject to “specific measuring processes, the rationale of which is the maximization of profit [...] and the correspondent minimization of cost” (Dowling, 2006, p. 10).

Over the last few years the Hollywood television industry has seen several labour disputes, including the Writers Guild of America strike in 2007-8 which attempted to organize reality television editors as writers, and lawsuits brought against the producers of such reality programs as *American Idol* and the *Amazing Race* by workers (Jolson, 2008). Clearly the imposition of measurement mechanisms for the determination of socially necessary labour time is alive and well in reality television production and have produced conflict over “the whats, hows, how much, whys and whos of social production” (de Angelis & Harvie, 2006, p. 12). Indeed, this conflict has occurred over forms of immaterial labour that are marginalized and exploited as a matter of course and whose normalized exploitation (the intensity of which would likely not be tolerated in any other field of work in the West, with the possible exception of domestic and migrant labour) appears to be directly tied to the ideological message of the immaterial commodity being produced – a message that celebrates the complete socialization of labour where simply ‘living’ has become one seamless flow of revenue generation. The labour practices and disputes that have arisen in relation to reality television production underscore Massimo de Angelis’ and David

Harvie’s claim that the category of socially necessary labour time does not simply express “a past given quantum of labour”, but is also marked by current struggles over processes of measurement (de Angelis & Harvie, 2006, p. 5).

The work of *The Hills*’ branded selves and below-the-line labourers are inextricably bound together in a logic that actively extracts value wherever it can, even while it might narratively repress and contractually disavow the labor that constitutes this value. As it mythologizes and fetishizes the end of labour and the hegemony of immaterial work in its narratives, as a cultural product the *The Hills* simply recapitulates a well-established truth dressed up in high heels and designer duds: “capital needs a class of people who materially benefit from the daily alienation of others” (Aufheben, 2006, p. 33). In the end, “immaterial production *needs* the capitalist in order to stay in existence” (Aufheben, 2006, p. 33). Contrary to what Hardt and Negri might have us believe, the measure of the value of this immaterial product remains utterly dependent on socially necessary labor power. In its cynical appropriation of life and living, emphasis on the necessary development of a persuasive, value-generating self-brand, and continued exploitation of below-the-line workers, *The Hills* sacrifices any possibility for self-valorization and communal solidarity on the altar of promotional self-advantage.

A focus on the radical potentialities of immaterial labour obscures the fact that socialized labour and intellect “are not invitations to go beyond capital, but have always been part of the work capital has exploited whether it is waged or not” (Caffentzis 2005a, p. 106). Capital has always depended on generalized creativity and intelligence to develop new forms of production. Indeed, nobody can produce anything without using the results of someone else’s labour; arguably labour has always been socialized. While there can be no doubt that recent developments within capital have seen the conflation of work and identity in new formations, such as the work of the branded selves on *The Hills*, it seems obvious that this new form of labour is not the well-spring of radical communal potential. Indeed

claims of this sort neglect history and ignore the dialectical relationship between individual subjectivity and objective historical forces, assuming some notion of a free, pure and unfettered human essence, or 'affect'. In the wake of the current economic crisis, precipitated by immaterial labourers producing fictional financial instruments with no real "value", we are all now experiencing the limits of the immaterial labour thesis in very

material ways. And so we might cheekily suggest, as Caffentzis does, that the immaterial labour thesis and its claims about the immeasurability and potential communal excess of immaterial labour, constitute a fraud - nothing more than theoretical razzle-dazzle. Could it be that the immaterial labour thesis, much like *The Hills* itself, is myth making of the highest order?

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