## The Hidden Labour of Reading Pleasure

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Take this panel's framing question as a provocation to polemicize on the disciplines and regimes of reading rather than exploring its potential resistances and rabbit holes. In what follows, I want to challenge a bourgeois image of reading as pleasure, escape from reality, or *leisure* and instead bring reading pleasure into focus as hidden *labour*, increasingly necessary to the realization of capital. Particularly in the current era, a protracted romanticization of reading inside the Academy as a subversive practice and pleasure arguably constitutes an institutional disavowal of the historical correlation of reading and relations of production, a denial of the ways that the recreational time of reading has been subsumed into the workings of late capitalism and of what might be called the political economy of reading.

Right off the bat, then, allow me to lop the "like that" off of the question and truncate it to "Why do I have to read," period. In other words, I won't try to speak to the competing orders of the day which aim to fill the institutional prescription to read with this or that particular agenda, be it to keep reading the literary in a discipline gone awry with theory or to keep reading theory in a discipline backsliding into a formalist infatuation with the literary. Rather, it is our profession's taken-for-granted and bare

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imperative to *keep reading* which I'm interested in historicizing. I want to bring it into critical view as a biopolitical pressure which produces reading subjects and populations who unwittingly labour for capital in and through the seeming leisure time of their reading.

Now, on the one hand our profession acknowledges that reading is labour—the very insistence upon reading as a *discipline* has historically functioned to distinguish an intellectual class of serious scholars from a popular, lax readership. But *discipline* is still suggestive of an aestheticized labour that can be differentiated from mere *work*, since work connotes wage labour embedded in economic relations of production. Among the myths of purity which remain normative in our profession is that of a disinterested discipline which labours in the service of cultural knowledges distinct from economic ends. To recognize reading as work, then, is to institutionally recognize that our discipline is now immanent to a market economy and, more specifically, to a knowledge or information economy. It is also to begin acknowledging the toll that the so-called "immaterial labour" of reading takes on subjects (Hardt and Negri 25)—how it can vampirize one's sensual and intellectual energies instead of replenishing them, as the romantic image of reading pleasure would have it.

Before continuing, let me provisionally define both reading and biopower, since it's an intimate relationship between the two that I'm groping toward here. Biopower, Foucault tells us, is "what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations" (143). Continues Foucault, "This biopower was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (141). Reading, in the most diffuse sense bequeathed by cultural studies, might be defined as a form of attention to or reception not just of literary texts but visual signs, cultural artifacts, and social practices. I find it significant that at this historical moment of late capitalism, when reading is massified and refracted through nearly every social activity, an aestheticized image of reading as subversive pleasure continues to obscure its recognition as labour.

The recent work of Jonathan Beller in his book *The Cinematic Mode of Production* inspires my interest in excavating for the hidden labour of reading pleasure; Beller theorizes a relationship between attention and biopower in studying the "attention economies" of postindustrial capitalism. In Beller's view, bodily attention—particularly the visual attention of the "kino-eye" which processes filmic images—functions to produce

value for capitalism through the organization of what he calls "attentional biopower" (4). Beller brings cinematic viewing (which, like reading, has been recreationally framed as what we do after work or as escape from work) into sight as a form of value-adding labour which in effect extends the capitalist work day into the "free" time of leisure and social life. Beller writes that

the historical moment has arrived that allows us to grasp that looking is posited by capital as labor. If, in the early 1990s, the idea was difficult for academics to fathom, corporations have been faster on the uptake. What I will call "the attention theory of value" finds in the notion of "labor," elaborated in Marx's labor theory of value, the prototype of the newest source of value production under capitalism: value-producing human attention. (4)

To demonstrate how attention is harnessed within current relations of production, Beller gives the example of the American company Mypoints.com which recently ran a newspaper ad stating, "We'll pay you to read this ad" (5). As Beller contends, this particular ad makes explicit that "to look is to labour" (2).

Although Beller takes the image to be paradigmatic of current social relations of production, print material continues to accumulate as a cultural object clamouring, alongside visual material, for readers' refining or value-adding attention. And here, in short, is my contention: if historically it has been considered a luxury to escape from economic reality into reading, the terrain of capitalism has changed to such an extent that it now might be more accurate to say that it would be a luxury to escape from reading into a space or time of leisure that is not productive of capital. The supersaturation of social space with literary and visual signs demanding to be read—that is, the utter logoization of social and physical space in late capitalism—can now only be escaped by those privileged few with the means to elevate themselves out of the semiotic crush and into less noisy or attention-grabbing social space. Indeed, if global underclasses continue to be barred from the imperial *discipline* of reading, they are now also most intensely trapped within logoized spaces within which the capitalist work of reading cannot, arguably, be avoided. This contention requires that we recognize the degree to which the realization of value for capital has become one with the realization of meaning which reading mediates. Moreover, a shift in our discipline to acknowledging reading as work would have far-reaching institutional and pedagogical ramifications, compelling us to rethink, for one, our prerogative of instilling a desire to

Consider
Oprah's Book
Club ...

read in students without addressing the economized spaces of reading or "attentional biopower" within which they now constantly desire/labour.

Let me wrap up by anchoring my remarks on reading in two concrete observations, one cultural, one personal. Consider Oprah's Book Club, a popular vehicle for propagating the pleasures and disciplines of serious reading that we like to think is our exclusive turf. Oprah's Book Club has been supremely successful in racheting up the reading tastes of a middleclass American public from the consumption of Harlequin romances or pulp fiction to works of what we would call *serious* literature: Toni Morrison's Beloved, Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Oprah's Book Club might be described as a social technology geared to biopolitically producing reading subjects and populations who solve a potential crisis of literary overproduction through their expanded attentional capacities (it is common knowledge that sales of books which make the Oprah list skyrocket). Yet, perhaps less obviously, Oprah's Book Club also enlarges the once-elite pool of immaterial labourers who freely focus their value-adding attention upon the realization of literary value. This ramping up of levels of reading pleasure/labour in the general population has repercussions on what Len Findlay calls "academic capitalism," inasmuch as to maintain their disciplinary distinction academics must likewise read MORE, whether that "more" be measured in terms of sheer quantity or value-adding critical attention. (For another recent discussion of Oprah's Book Club within the pages of *ESC*, I refer you to Julie Rak's Introduction to the "Reader's Forum" in volume 32, issue 4, 2006).

The second observation springs from my own dawning yet belated labour-consciousness this past year, as, in the first term of a tenure-track job, I flopped exhausted into bed each night only to face a stack of toread books on the bedside table pressuring me for attention; or, found myself trying to read snatches of a critical essay while I did the dishes; or, anxiously scanned the catalogues of university presses for cutting-edge books in my field that I knew I probably should know, while standing in the checkout line at the grocery store; etc. I sketch an ambivalent self-portrait in which a determination not to forget the privilege of getting an academic job, nor the difference between the so-called immaterial labour of teaching and research and the far more grueling forms of material labour upon which our profession is contingent, conflicted with the growing somatic strain of upholding a myth of reading pleasure as my academic working day stretched across every hour of waking life through a self-imposed reading regime. I suspect that others both new and more experienced in the profession can recognize themselves in this portrait of reading

governmentality, since the conscientious pursuit of a receding horizon of to-get-to texts—a horizon which is constantly enlarged by the market and which infinitely exceeds the attentional capacities of an individual reader—constitutes a form of biopolitical pressure which can be visceral in its nerve-wracking effects. Indeed, the viscerality of reading's regimes belies the "immateriality" of the informational and affective labour which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify with the new world order of capitalism.

Needless to say, graduate studies trained me into my current situation, insofar as I dutifully accepted that devouring a book per week per seminar was a disciplinary rite of passage, enabling, I now realize, a fetishization of reading labour as a species of sadomasochistic pleasure rather than pushing for its institutional recognition as work. And isn't the seeds of a reading governmentality which we strive to sow in undergraduate students under the assumption that they can never read enough an assumption also underlying the logoized environments which relentlessly hail them as readers, and thus one which neglects to consider that our incoming students may in fact never have been more intensively subject to the value-adding labour of reading? Beyond training ourselves and our students as critical readers of their mediatized environments, then, I'd like to suggest the importance of turning the institutional prescription to read itself into an object of critical attention. Might we then begin to engage not just with the political economy of reading but with the *biopolitics* of producing reading subjects and populations within current contexts of capitalism?

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