***WLATA Digital Vortex, (im)material labour, electronic waste presentation***

***Chosen Text:***

Jack Linchuan Qui, Melissa Gregg and Kate Crawford, “[Circuits of Labour: A Labor Theory of the iPhone Era](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/en9b5worldlitanthropocene/qui_et_al.-a_labor_theory_of_the_iphone_era.pdf),” *TripleC: Communication, Capital & Critique* 12.2 (2014)

**1. Introduction**

-The iPhone as cultural and historical symbol along the ideological divide: to advocates of capital it is a marker of capitalism’s innovation and consequent rewards, whereas for leftist critics it symbolizes the exploitation and valorisation of tech moguls and immaterial labour over that of factory workers etc. (see: Foxconn).

- Qui et al. posit that the iPhone is both a global communications device intrinsic in modern social productive practices, and the end result of ‘multiple forms of labour’.

-Vertical and Horizontal circuits: vertical as capital accumulation, horizontal as revolutionary networking and body politic within the system.

**2. Labour and ICT: an Overview**

-‘Labour remains a blind spot in western communication studies’, despite the importance of ICT to contemporary economy. A signifier of workforce casualisation (e.g. freelancing) and outsourcing, weakening labour power.

-Lazzarato and Fortunati’s ‘immaterial labour’: labour becomes symbolic, affective and performed through diffuse work processes represented by a ‘creative class’ i.e. be your own boss initiatives, co-working spaces.

-Contested by post-Marxian scholars as reductive to discussion of commodification of affective or emotional labour, which itself is contested by Marxist Feminists such as Fortunati as ignoring the importance of the social reproductive sphere in the formation of immaterial labour.

-Stems from the first-wave feminist notion of public and private spheres: feminising of social reproduction.

-‘Self-programmable’ labour as opposed to ‘generic’ pre-existing types: high risk and unstable yet profitable, as opposed to survival circuit manual jobs. Defined by proximity to information streams, the closer the more cultural capital.

**3.The Need to Connect**

-Circuits of culture (du Gay et al.): representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation form the basis of Johnson’s tenants of cultural practice. Qui et al. criticize for its lack of acknowledgment of the connection between immaterial labour and material manufacturing. For instance, ‘prosumption’ posits the consumer as unwitting labour, with capital drawn from abstracted labour i.e. using the iPhone that has been developed by an outsourced worker makes money for Apple, but not for the worker.

**4. The Circuits of Labour**

-Despite the immateriality of labour in information systems, a body is still required to operate the systems, therefore Marx’s logic of surplus value extraction still applies. This abstraction has allowed capital to avoid the governance of tangible trade unions and public authorities.

-Programmable labour: labour-intensive, relatively low-skill ICT work such as software testing. ‘Grey’ collar as occupying a middle-ground between information-heavy ‘white’ collar creatives and survival-circuit ‘blue’ collar. Even white collar workers are not necessarily safe from exclusion from the formal circuit under certain economic situations.

-This contrasts against ‘informal’ circuits of labour (i.e. social reproduction) that often commoditise the bodies of women / minority groups. The iPhone creates a link between communicative technology and reproductive organism, which Qui et al. claim eradicates the boundary between paid and unpaid labour as labour becomes untethered from physical space and filtered through the iPhone.

-‘Bandit phones’: social media communication capable of rallying physical bodies into action, such as in the aforementioned London riots and also in uprisings in the Global South.

-Processes performed on the informal circuit where community and collective identity is created (playbour, location tracking) are siphoned off to feed the formal circuit (i.e. by the tech companies running the platforms)

**5. iPhone and Foxconn**

-A globalised circuit of labour filtered through Apple: white-collar Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs vs. grey and blue-collar assembly line workers developing the iPhones in EPZ’s in the developing world. These workers are a bodily input in the production process, their corporeality atomised to serve transnational capital while also being subject to physical harm as a result of lack of safety regulation.

-‘Playbour’ and Apple: the embodied experience of grey-collar workers in the first world asked to playtest mountains of software to make it fit for the hardware of the iPhone: a nexus of labour exploitation with the device at its core.

-NGO’s investigating Foxconn’s labour practices employed an informal circuit of labour that crossed national borders, circulating information using the technology whose very creation is the subject of the investigation. The game ‘PhoneStory’ repurposes Apple/iPhone fandom and resultant tropes to present a radically deconstructive ludic experience that seeks to impart information to the player.

-Finally, User Generated Content such as mobile phone footage has the potential to pass through large informal labour circuits, allows Western consumers to see ‘raw’ evidence from the Global South of working conditions and physical damage to workers.

**6. Concluding Remarks**

-The circuits of labour theory adapts the separate spheres concept, and its successive rethinkings and reformulations, to a world where the flow of labour and capital is as interconnected as the circuits in an iPhone. Recommends that geopolitical scholars need to do more to emphasise the growing ‘weightlessness’ of labour when approaching the intersection of corporate logistics and labour exploitation.