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BEYOND SUBHABITUALITY

Time, creativity and disambiguating capacity — after Deleuze, Foucault & Han

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*This paper takes up the onto-poetic device of the ‘subhabitual’, riffing off the Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition*, where he outlines three modes in which time synthesises. It proposes that, despite the ‘living present’ (the time of habit) being the most basic of Deleuze’s times, certain shared and acquired behaviours prevalent in digitalised, pandemic and/or neoliberalising moments may undermine it. This loss of the basic present, furthermore, isn’t offset by and doesn’t usher in an opening onto either of Deleuze’s other two temporal modes. The paper goes on to consider the later Foucault’s interest in practices of care-of-the-self as pertaining to ethical obligations. Foucault’s self-care practices may be read (almost slant to his earlier analyses of discipline) as pertaining to the performing of behaviours or acts that are the conditions for the capacity for ethical, even emancipatory, behaviours. Complicating this, however, Byung-Chul Han’s recent concerns about Foucault’s earlier lack of scepticism for entrepreneurialism cast a subtle light across the notion of capacity. The paper seeks to begin a disambiguation of kinds of capacity: Deleuzian-Spinozan; late-Foucauldian; and those ‘capacities’ for auto-exploitation that go under the name of being-productive in neoliberal compliance-speak. It argues for actions that might refuse (at least sometimes) to comply with, or which can abstain from, logics that — after Simon Springer — we might dub neoliberal. Creative-writing-as-practising offers itself as one of these — perhaps a practice of care-of-the-self, definitely a valid shape for practising.*

Introduction

In what follows I set going a temporal poetics named subhabituality,^[i] with the aim of framing a critique of certain contemporary conditions and logics. I’ll argue that these conditions and logics contribute to the erosion of the times to which we have access. Creative writing — as a good-enough mode of what will be framed as ‘practising’ — may work as a temporal intervention, as a way of abstaining from the impoverishments of these same conditions and logics. To position this argument, I use offerings about time from the 1968 work of Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (2004a), in order to emphasise that a human might wish to have access to *more times than none at all*.

Alongside this, in relation to the notion of practising, or practice, I'll turn to a later Foucault. In an interview in 1984, the philosopher intimated how ethical capacity might be linked to, or cultivated along with, practices of care-of-the-self:

what one might call an ascetical practice, giving the word 'ascetical' a very general meaning, that is to say, not in the sense of abnegation but that of an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being. (in Fernet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 113)

Regarding what this 'mode of being' enables, he later says:

I think that both with the Greeks and the Romans — and especially with the Greeks — in order to behave properly, in order to *practice freedom properly*, it was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one's self ... and to improve one's self, to surpass one's self, to master *the appetites that risk engulfing you*. (in Fernet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 116; emphasis added)

In our current moment, there are numerous interests and organisations working very seriously and intentionally to harness and indeed stimulate certain appetites; and these appetites — as Foucault notes — do risk engulfing something we might call 'you', or even an 'us'. Scholars and critics have coined a descriptive term for this process and its related agendas: *surveillance capitalism* (see Zubhoff 2019).

Practices such as those Foucault indicates — in our current moment, and depending on how one reads him here — could then be, rather than new forms of dominating discipline, instead conditional for our ability to act, decide and remain steady as humans in a civil society. The nuanced *inflection* of this self-care will be crucial here. There can be so-called 'self-care' that merely ramifies a particular neoliberal subjectivity (say: the tendency to overwork in self-isolation, which might be experienced as caring for one's ambition, but which may or may not impact one's ethical capacity), and there can be modes of 'doing' — which I name practising — which are steadying, rhythmic, temporally impactful, and often creative and surprising. They may look from the outside a lot like discipline(s) and they may emerge in habit's register, to which I now turn. The latter, as I'll try to show, is arguably not guaranteed.

Habit's basic time

Bearing a clear relation to habit, the notion of subhabituality (as both complement and partially overlapping notion) has emerged in my research after close readings of Deleuze's three syntheses in his work *Difference and Repetition*. It serves as a kind of cipher for operational tendencies that forgo even the very basic stabilising and often-assumed functions of habit more generally. To understand how something could not quite reach the threshold of habit's typical inertias and methodologies, I will outline a closer definition of habit, to allow subhabituality (as that which *isn't quite it*) to emerge as generative provocation.

Habit names a mechanism or operation in Deleuze's account, in this work, of time and how it

synthesises. I want to abstain from any hasty inflection of it as negative or positive. Habit-as-operation is rather another way to understand the first level of *synthesising* discontinuities (or instants) that constitutes a foundational kind of time: his account of the present. Deleuze calls it the ‘living present’ (2004a: 91) and emphasises its reliance on contraction. Synthesis here occurs via contraction’s mechanism — a holding-together. Contraction ‘refers to the fusion of successive tick-ticks in a contemplative soul’ (2004a: 94).

There are then two further syntheses, which correspond respectively to a kind of deep past and an open futurity. Thus, Deleuze presents his reader with three kinds of time, of which one is the ‘living present’. Its time is foundational, but not *a priori*, and not at all idealised. (Deleuze, in other words, does not fetishise his present, in the way that can mark certain popular discourses.) This ‘living present’ has certain qualities and is simply one facet of time, one way in which time makes itself. I would argue that, although it is not particularly transformative, nor at first glance *expansive*, it remains crucial for us as temporally-constituted creatures. Habit’s time *steadies* — or is rather the very mechanism of continuity’s production, synthesising a stretch that has duration. If there is an effect of self — if we validate its fiction — it is produced, after Deleuze’s argument, by dint of this synthesis. *Habits are not what we have, rather habit’s movement constitutes what we are*. Habit, in this wider (temporal and operational) definition, is that which allows an entity to remain recognisable even while integrating the changes that any entity must. Grosz, in her engagement with Ravaissou, Bergson and Deleuze on this question, emphasises this aspect of habit’s enabling face (2013).

Thus I’d surmise: we *do do better* with a present, but to inhabit *only* the present is not much of a life. My relation to habit, too, in its casual sense, can be ambivalent. I might know its complicity in behaviours I struggle to shake, while at the same time associating it with that which ensures my regular, steadying rhythms, those which allow for lived continuity — habits of rising, washing, eating, walking, working, my heart’s beating, intestines processing, and so on. Extended to its philosophical register, this very ambivalence lies, too, at the heart of habit’s very mechanism. As Malabou notes, the latter resembles Derrida’s Pharmakon; it can be a remedy or a poison. (Ravaissou 2008: xix) The same mechanism of habit, which enables compulsion to set itself going, is also that which stabilises our *selves*, in phases of upheaval and challenge. I call it *a basic time in which to dwell basically*. It, therefore, needs to be roomy enough.

This paper is motivated by the concern that even this humble, non-flashy mode of time may be becoming less accessible. The idea that there could be something (or that we could be constituting ourselves as something, nudged algorithmically or otherwise) that doesn’t quite attain this basic threshold of the habitual, or which would be its most impoverished and desiccated expression, is an onto-poetic ploy. I propose it as a helpful way for rethinking the kinds of time *to which we have access*. The ploy, thus, includes within it the proposition that one can, indeed, live different kinds of times, or *as* different kinds of time. Said another way, we are *constituted* by times, times from which our stability, layers of complexity, and our capacity for newness or creativity are woven. An interest in habit and in time dovetails with what I tend to call Practising.

Practising: beyond habit

Practising, as I've framed it elsewhere (see Attiwill et al. 2017; Pont 2016), is an approach to doing that goes through habit's mechanisms — after Ravaissou (2008), Grosz (2013) and Deleuze (2004a) — to invite particular kinds of transformation (without coercing, or even striving for, these) alongside a suffusing stability. Practising starts with intentionalising habit (structure + repetition), which it then extends and complicates. Practising may court the baffling spin-offs of steadiness *and* capacities for unanticipated change *at once*. That is, that 'fitness' (at times, also) to become other to 'oneself', but without gross destruction. It is change via subtractive strategies rather than clumsier and scattergun destructive impulses.

In practising, furthermore, one arguably subtracts oneself from the perspectival (see Smith 2005: 10; Pont 2016) in order to court a fluency for cadenced transition. In practising, within its alert, whimsical and tenacious laboratory, the very weave of temporality — its texture as far as it can be 'encountered' — comes to the fore. Put more simply, artists and artisanal-makers, practitioners (of doings that may not typically be classed as artistic in a 'Western' frame, but which are absolutely 'practices'[ii]) end up learning, even despite themselves and their ostensible intentions, *also* about time. Practising is, even without our necessarily knowing or honing it, *also* an onto-temporal adventure. Practitioners, as time-workers, research — usually through actions and curated doings (which can be those of thinking and writing, in other words, philosophy, creative writing, articulated theoretical grappings) — the way time feels, how it might work, how it can be different, and how they (themselves) are differently constituted by various temporal conditions, and through which they come to be able to cycle with increasing ease.

I want to consider what it might mean to lose sure access to habit's basic time under neoliberal conditions, arguably exacerbated by digital behaviours and coercions, in other words by surveillance capitalism, and in the midst (as this paper is being written) of a global pandemic.

Now, if one considers the second limb of this essay, namely care of the self — following a later Foucault — as well as its arguable link to our ethical capacity, caring for the self also matters for pleasure. But what kind of pleasure? Although one might easily read Foucault's account in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* as being mostly about dominating the body, he repeats that those who 'cared for the self' (which I will link, in the paradigm of practising out of which I operate, to the notion of acquiring benign habits, or self-care actions that do not harm the body itself), were interested in possibilities for enjoyment, in pleasure possibility's in adversity, to technologies for navigating certain kinds of fear (of deprivation) and the dependent reactivities these prompt.

Caring for the self can complicate what 'discipline' might seem to designate, insofar as it can be a discipline of deciding *against* self-harm, a discipline of abstaining from modes of being that entrap us, and which atrophy the breadth of our experience.

Interestingly, Bogard has a resonant take on contemporary distraction (or *diversion*): namely, that it is always a strategy of trapping or hunting (2013: 468ff). Gesturing at our complacency in relation to the devices that watch over us at night, which promise a dubious pleasure, or deliver 'pleasure' in addictive throbs and rhythms, and which even sleep in our beds, he writes:

The authorities, like *trappers*, know that the lure of escape is usually the most powerful

apparatus of capture. Money, prestige, indulgences, sex, these are all traps at the same time as they are means of flight. (2013: 468, emphasis in original)

Those in antiquity who were caring for the self by working with the body and its demands in particular ways, especially that of *askesis*, were arguably also testing the ways that escape and capture are linked together inextricably. They were wary of *the appetites* (inherent or groomed) *that risk engulfing us*.

I turn now to Deleuze, to consider briefly the times that his account opens out. His three syntheses offer a poetic scaffolding against which one can contrast the possibility of a shrinking set of temporal conditions.

Deleuze's Three Syntheses in *Difference And Repetition*

In his 1968 work, Deleuze outlines three syntheses that can be mapped as three kinds of time, and which are labelled as such: the 'living present' (aligned with habit's mode); the deep past (aligned with memory, Bergson's lineage, with erotic climes and relaxation); and the pure and open future (explored with reference to Nietzsche's provocation in the Eternal Return). Intimated in what follows is that one kind of oppression one might live, without noticing it, is that of having shrivelled access to time's variation: that is, since one is differently constituted in each 'time', if one of them *goes missing*, one won't necessarily miss the evaporated inflections of the 'selves' that are no longer accessible. The conditions for noticing what disappears *themselves disappear* with the lost times, with those lost modes.

The first passive synthesis of habit, which involves a contracting mechanism, creates a present whose past mode is the 'just gone' and the future mode is a kind of up-ahead anticipation. As this synthesis moves out of its passivity, into its reflective moment, it evolves to become memory and prediction (Deleuze 2004a: 102). In a Bergsonian spirit, what is *present* is what is useful to the organism in its current form. It, as an habitual operation, supports and preserves the version of me *that I am right now*. It creates the nowness of a possible stable self. It filters out (as it often must, but hopefully not always) other extraneous things. Habit's present remains with the practically-necessary (even when its logic produces exaggerations and distortions such as compulsion and addiction). 'A' self seems to cohere and prevail. There is continuity along with stability of an important, if not thrilling or always wholesome, kind.

Deleuze explains the living present in relation to the passive capacity for contemplation (which can come apart in fatigue), and to habitudes as contractions. One reads:

We could no doubt conceive of a perpetual present, a present which is coextensive with time. It would be sufficient to consider contemplation applied to the infinite succession of instants. But such a present is not physically possible ... The duration of an organism's present, or of its various presents, will vary according to the natural contractile range of its contemplative souls. (2004a: 98)

From the point of view of practising, care of the self, and regarding what undermines an organism's contractile range, this passage is revealing. Deleuze explains that there may be various presents, and of various durations. This duration will depend on an organism's *capacity* to contemplate, or to hold — via habitude or habit's mechanisms — disappearing instants together in a stretch that will effectively be the only time that exists. Hughes notes eloquently in this regard: 'Our contractile range is the index of our finitude' (2009: 110). Our present, then, is also determined by our fatigue, our sometimes-failing capacity to hold instants together. Gods might hypothetically dwell in an endless present (elsewhere Deleuze links this to *Chronos* — see 2004b: 186), due to their infinite capacity to contemplate and to contract. Deleuze says that for most organisms — and I think to my own vulnerable and mortal one — this is physically unfeasible. And yet, the question is: 'what is possible?' — or to leap for a swift moment to Deleuze's take on the Spinozan provocation: *we do not yet know what a body can do* (see Deleuze 1992: 218). Although we may not be gods, we do not have to go so far as undermining the capacities we *do* have. Our presents, then, can edge towards the divine, or remain minutely larval. For me, the subhabitual designates the reduced end of that spectrum of capacity.

Practitioners, then, most obviously, would indeed be time-workers in relation to a Deleuzian present, and Deleuzian times more generally. By honing various kinds of capacity, *one* of which would be habitudes, they work at enhancing their contractile range, to expand the present to which they have access, to cultivate and refine its atmosphere and stability. The present can be a stable time. Onto-poetically, it offers a time in which to dwell — a good-enough temporal home-base.

'Care of the self' — given Foucault's emphasis on its social and shared aspects as ways of researching living, of learning living, and living with bodily 'demands', appetites and capacities — is something done both alone and independently, as well as together. Indeed, it might even constitute various benign, satisfying and generative ways to spend *and to make* time with others. I'd further argue that this living present of Deleuze's, and its variable duration — which depends on capacity of an organism, as emphasised by Hughes — is something that can be stabilised and cultivated, *or* run-down by shared, social practices. One *makes* the living present to which one has access. This differs from certain lay exhortations to 'be in the present', since this is not about *being in* a present which exists *per se* with a fixed, objective duration (that you avoid, or muddied and so on), but rather says: *make yourself into the kind of organism that has a bigger contemplative stretch*. Grow your living present, its stability and the temporal atmosphere that accompanies it. Make yourself, if not divine, at least not the most compromised version of a human organism.

A central argument of this essay is that, if we can grow the stretch of a living present via certain honed practices, we can certainly also decimate it, or have it decimated for us, co-opted into an unending labour of fragmented quasi-passivity or brittle productivity-agendas. Many readers of this paper will be, I'd suggest, regularly experimenting (whether intentionally or not) with both growing and/or dismantling this present, with *how this lurching feels*, as well as probing our own preferences for what one wants to do about it. If one is a writer, one may be constantly asking about this enablement and/or decimation of the capacities for writing, reading, and for growing the *quality* of practice in both realms.

My concern is for a present we might lose — and this would be no ‘imaginary’ present, no present of fantasy or temporal piety, not a New Age present, but rather a basic, plain-enough but crucial, present for living in. To put this loss into a broader context, and to argue for the degree of impoverishment pending, Deleuze’s account offers two further syntheses, as noted above. These, as I see it, offer a schema or way to think about the richness, the many-ness of temporal atmospherics to which a person or group of persons may have access in a life.

Deleuze opens his discussion of the second (passive) synthesis by asking in what element the passing presents of the first might indeed be able to pass: *‘that there must be another time in which the first synthesis can occur...’* (2004a: 100ff; emphasis in original). Deleuze’s thinking here draws heavily on the Henri Bergson of *Matter and Memory* (1991), and references that particular sensibility animating Proust’s literary oeuvre. Deleuze names reminiscence as that which would allow us to save this this mode of time ‘for ourselves’ (2004a: 107). As I read his poetics here, which are nonetheless quite precise, he articulates a very curious, not rare, but perhaps less-usual state that humans (and our non-human companions, arguably) may drift into. I’d argue that it is a feature of, and atmosphere encountered in, deep meditation or profound and lazy sensuousness, in bouts of unpressured dreaminess, or within absorbed creative work (such as writing, drawing, painting, making ceramics, music, etc.) or during soft-enough but concerted attention to the body and its sensations. Deleuze is clear that this past *never was present* (2004a: 101). It is not a past that has gathered after having passed through the present’s habitual aperture. Marked by a series of profound paradoxes in Bergson, which Deleuze rehearses for his reader, this kind of memory is a pure past, in which presents may pass but which is not constituted by past versions of them.

We’ve hopefully lived its timbre: those strong flushes of imagery, seemingly once-lived (but not), which float through our bodies on holidays, during the deliciousness of surrendered and safe fatigue, and as that which we’ve never *lived as present* because habit’s mode would not have admitted them. Perhaps they feature in moments of aimlessness that mark a pandemic? Non-essential, peripheral, non-utilitarian, they were never part of the ‘living present’ at all, since the latter concerns the necessary, rather than the erotic, the lushly useless, the willingly errant. If there is access to this pure past, if reminiscence is its portal, it is arguably to do with time’s relaxing, where pasts that-never-were rise like smoke through the body, as grainy imagery and frissons of uncategorisable memory.

The kind of memory which marks this synthesis, importantly, is also *involuntary*; its generative aspects and breadth can only be *courted*, with a very soft, even indirect approach. If much of (creative) practising, as I’m framing it, involves close, nuanced work at the level of sensation, desire/longing and attentiveness — a simultaneously wide-seeing and precise absorption — then it may (and *does*, when lived out) offer fleeting brushes with that which *conditions time’s passage* (as Deleuze scholar Graham Jones [n.d.] has put it) — the medium in which the present appears to pass. This requires a profound relaxation without abandoning a steady alertness — a classic combination encouraged by wisdom texts in Zen and yoga, for example. Thus relaxed, held by the repeated shapes of the practising (which is an intentionally acquired habit, *par excellence*), and yet more free, and roaming within it, a practitioner may touch the time that Jones describes.

So, let’s say one might like a life to include at least the stability of the ‘living present’ as well as a

sometimes-inclusion of passages of reminiscence (as framed here). It is a matter of a balanced temporal repertoire. Not enough of the living present's practicality and structure — as the 'foundation' of time (Deleuze 2004a: 101), alongside too much of the pure past is also not a comfortable way to live, but neither would one want a too-dominant 'living present'.

I now turn to Deleuze's third synthesis, in which he explores that which pertains to the future and its opening up, and to our ability to withstand, with less reactivity, its howling opacity. This last synthesis is especially important for creative practitioners, but indeed for anyone who imagines they'd like to live a creative or generative life. Despite the muddying of these terms under a neoliberal order that slants them in insidious ways and links them to production and to subjects as *prosumers*, recalling Han's culture of 'can' and an achievement paradigm, creativity remains exactly what it has always been. It involves brushes with the infinite, intimations of the eternal within usual time, as well as the arrival of the new into a weave that appeared to offer no gaps, no spacing for surprise or fresh loss.

The third synthesis in *Difference and Repetition* is famously opaque, and readers risk misreading it, and thinkers risk imprecision when attempting to articulate its mechanisms. However, quite aptly, a certain stance of risk is *exactly what it is about*. If habit is about stability, regularity and even compulsion's press to avert loss, and if the deep past nourishes us with something aside from the utilitarian, the third synthesis opens up the idea of a future that bears no relation either to habit or to memory. Deleuze guides us via the experiment of the Eternal Return in Nietzsche.

In the Eternal Return repetition takes centre stage. But it is a strange repetition, one that dances clear of its own conditions, and hurls its purported 'repeater' beyond its operations, rendering that very self (the do-er who repeated; who was habit, embodied) irrelevant. Into its future one cannot carry anything known. In that spirit, it is activated via an a-logical decision to repeat — to repeat everything, to intend everything that one has ever done, and seemed unable to stop doing. In places, Deleuze terms it a 'counter-actualization', the strange decision *to intend that which was inevitable ...* (2004b: 171). Its mechanism thwarts the strangle hold of habit's implacable logic, which only ever guarantees, via slight modifications (cumulative, no doubt), a creeping forward in known paradigms. The third synthesis is rupture *par excellence*, but I would argue that this rupture cannot be forced, cannot be a coerced event (thus it bears a subtractive relation to any pedestrian notion of violence or destruction). Rather it goes via a certain silent stillness. It is stillness in the extreme, from which a wild velocity is unleashed. The third synthesis is the rarest of Deleuze's times, and indeed, it would be hell to *mostly* live it. Yet a life without its unpredictable openings will surely sink into something equally hellish — a sculpted, glassy time that is *only* useful, *only* productive, defensively self-preserving.

James Williams paraphrases the specific method for futurity offered by Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche as: *connect with everything; forget everything* (2013: 5). Dan W Smith helps clarify this further, in his work on Klossowski in relation to Nietzsche's perspectivalism. On the latter and to my mind, he connects some of the dots in relation to my sketch of the Deleuzian third synthesis above and its relation to any one perspective. For Nietzsche, the latter is not a matter of *reason*, but of the *drives*. Our drives or impulses constitute the slant taken in any given moment, and what/who we think we are. I'd claim, building on this, that a robustness for this pure future (for having it feature in a life)

involves ‘inhabiting’ that which forgoes perspective, which forgoes a fixed notion of self. Quoting Smith: ‘When we talk about the “I”, we are primarily indicating which drive, at the moment, is strongest and sovereign’ (2005: 10).

The habitual self of the living present insists on *anticipating* its next (small, or incrementally adjusted) future. However, in futurity proper, what one invites — if the time of the third synthesis is included, able to be withstood — is to have any known self fall away, and therefore to allow the sheerness of a truly empty future. Arguably, in art, and in art-making, and in creative writing, there are accidents that align with this, there are moments when this occurs. The current article would frame these occurrences as *temporal* — a phenomenon of difference and repetition, in complex operations — thereby allowing a more workable articulation of what’s at stake.

Sub-habituality: unassuming the present

Habit’s inertias, arguably, provide the conditions for the constitution of a subject that is able to self-organise and to form intentionalities. Subhabituality, as emergent non-time, would name that which fosters the profoundly apolitical, a space beyond decision and mired in a soggy — or wired — reactivity.^[iii] It is not really news to suggest that neoliberalisation, under which many are living and have been living for some time, impacts those within it, not just at an economic, social and communal level, but also temporally in perhaps an equally devastating and impoverishing manner. This temporal impact, then — which is hard to spot and even harder to name — loops back to reinforce the nuanced enslavement that marks the subject’s experiential scope under this socio-economic set of heterogeneous logics.

In her work on the cruel optimism of neoliberalism, among other things, Berlant writes about the film by Bordowitz, aptly titled *Habit*. She describes what the characters (who are in various kinds of crisis, of health, ageing) must do to stabilise themselves:

all must inhabit the shared atmosphere of *dehabituating* and forced improvisation that an endemic and pandemic health crisis induces. Their solidarity around surviving this scene and *staying attached to life* involves gathering up diverse practices for adjusting to the singular and shared present. In a sense, *Habit* responds to an imperative to develop and to circulate as many idioms of the claim on life as can be imaginatively effective. Here, *habit is an idiom of the claim on life*. (Berlant 2011: 57; emphasis added)

Berlant is explicit: habit can be our claim on life, or as I would put it, our access to the most basic and non-negotiable kind of temporality — in which one can dwell, endure and *from which* one ventures out, takes risks and creates.

For Simon Springer, in his work on neoliberalisation (his preferred nomenclature), we read the following hallmarks, which will be familiar to most readers (and let’s hold them in mind, in terms of how they might undermine or render untenable various kinds of habitual rhythms, humane anticipation or communal basis for intentionality):

- the becoming common-sensical of competitiveness at all levels of human experience and encounter, and of free market logics / supposed scarcity (of time, opportunity, esteem) / and an emphasis on a discourse of efficiency (even when it is not, in actuality, what obtains) and productivity (or ‘being productive’) as internalised imperative / exploitation/precarity (marketed as ‘flexibility’), escalating debt-as-enslavement strategy.

The *becoming-commonsensical* is what explains his preference for speaking of processes of neoliberalisation, which occur in non-homogeneous ways, and which are taken up in various geographical locations differently, under the sway of multiple coercions, collusions and resistances. Berlant, similarly, has emphasised such factors in relation to the precarity which increasingly marks this mobile set of logics and the latter’s relation to dependency (Berlant 2011: 192). If many have argued in a digitalised and surveillance moment under capitalism, that devices are *primarily* habit forming (which this paper disputes), then I’m curious about the link between habit (as intentional capacity, cultivated, decided-upon) and independence, to offset Berlant’s emphasis on dependency in precarity.

I call on the neologism ‘subhabit’ because the rhythms of engagement engendered in the unwary organism trained to participate in surveillance capitalism’s gaudy jungle-gym (social media, slot machines, online shopping, notifications, porn, streaming entertainment, gamified ‘dating’, the intimate micro-modes of auto-exploitation, to name a few) can easily veer into a kind of non-rhythm and elision of *deciding*. (If I am more and more programmed to leap, and reach, and to respond on cue to the plethora of notification functions, for example, that I have set up on my devices — or not found the wherewithal to disable — then I cultivate fewer stretches of time that are not arbitrarily interrupted, not chopped up, slashed and fragmented by various worlds’ random demands.) If our electronic engagements qualify *at all* as ‘habit’-forming, they sit — I find — at the least-nourishing end of Ravaisson’s spectrum — a long way from his intimations of grace, or habit’s richest spaces which he hopes might open onto love (2008: 75).

Of course, one must simultaneously remain vigilant in the face of neoliberal promises and commitments to so-called transformation. It is worth thinking carefully the theoretical and practical distinctions which hold apart: i) the ontologically-inflected ways of working with time, which indeed — by dint of intentionality and the dropping of narrow identity — may open subjects onto sheer and empty futures and new selves; and ii) the subhabitual rhythms that would temporally deconstitute us into malleable units of consumption-production, or *prosumption*, to use Alvin Toffler’s now-famous term (1970).

Foucauldian directions and Han’s reservations

What I want to consider finally is the idea of care of the self (offered by Foucault and more broadly) in relation to our capacity as ethical subjects to take up a place in a polis, in a civil society and as creative humans, who may pass some time in creative engagements and with a cannily subtractive (perhaps!) relation to the ubiquitous imperative of productivity. Practices of Care of the Self, after Foucault’s readings of antiquity, I also note, seem interested in diluting the very dependencies flagged by Berlant.

I recall furthermore that ethics of the care of the self does not refer to discrete moral behaviours, or any inventory of doings, but rather to the practices more generally which are the *conditions for the possibility of* ethical conduct in a given subject. This distinction is crucial. (I note, too, that Deleuze has designated the ability ‘to be not unworthy of what happens to us’ as ethics, *per se* — bringing together temporality in the event with decision, with intending rather than inclining — see 2004b: 169ff.)

In the introduction of their edited collection *The History of Habit*, editors Sparrow and Hutchinson refer to Jaron Lanier’s cautions as ‘philosopher and futurist’ regarding the erosion that social media and internet (sub)habits have on our ability to form more generative habits, such as the ability for sustained reading of complex texts (2013: 13). Speaking of their own book and its vulnerability — that is, of what would be necessary for its dissemination, for its success as a piece of live research — they note the following:

Without the various social habits that make solitary reading possible (with the introduction of new information technologies, political toleration of free thought and expression, and the economics of book publication) and the continued reinforcement of such habits in the neural structure of individuals (such as the accepted research methods of contemporary higher education), the habit of reading as we understand it could be very different. (2013: 13)

Writing, furthermore, while also a creative mode of practising, is another benign and acquired habit in its own right (like close and difficult reading). To write creatively, one first needs to write at all. The habit of writing takes time, effort and opportunity to acquire. Then it takes a further application of desire, decision and curiosity to stabilise and finally to refine. Perhaps an artefact of writing ensues. With Deleuze after Spinoza, I know ways to think the encounter between an artwork, which may be a piece of writing, and a body (as the reader’s body). The encounter generates, for Deleuze, an affect which is *a mode of thought experienced by a body*, and just prior to conscious thought (Attwill et al. 2017: 165). As Eckersley writes (in relation to painting, but it applies to the arts generally), ‘art’s affective power [is] that art has the potential to reveal to us qualities, relationships, properties and experiences of the world that we might not otherwise notice’ (in Attwill et al. 2017: 164).

I would agree, and add to this list: atmospheres, timbres of living, worlds-in-worlds, arcs of feeling, and *times* — and these extend the breadth of our lived experience, either making us capable of more or (as Spinoza explains, if the encounter isn’t ‘good’ for us) *less*. This more and less are delicate, however. I read Spinozan capacity as pertaining to quality, rather than productivity’s measures of *quantity* with which people mentally and *logistically* torment themselves.

In order to activate the doing-of-writing, one may need habit’s steadiness, and then what this process generates or unleashes may be other temporal orders — *times* which constitute a person newly. Just think to Proust, or to certain moments in Alberto Savinio, but also to many literary oeuvres. And either in the making itself, or in an encounter with a work, one may also in rare instances be flung clear of oneself. A gap may open in which we/the work can become something new.

With this Deleuze-Spinozan talk of capacity, it is a salient moment to nuance some inflections of ‘being-able’ in light of what Byung-Chul Han has termed the *Leistungsgesellschaft* — or

achievement/striving society with its genius for inculcating auto-exploitation. Han argues that our current achievement-society has followed on from the discipline-society so well-analysed by Foucault. It emerges when it becomes clear that it is more efficient to emphasise *should/can* than *must/have to*. Where Spinoza emphasises capacity, or *what a body can do*, and earlier Foucault speaks of all the disciplines that *a body must do*, Han notes that those under this regime have entered an age where the body/subject is positioned to constantly *self-oblige* to produce more, be capable of more. (When people assess their day in terms of ‘it was productive’ or ‘I was very unproductive’, this internalised logic can be seen at play.) Potentially, this mode has no limits, or its limit emerges as the mysterious depressiveness that many rue and grapple with. Han writes:

You can produces massive compulsion, on which the achievement-subject dashes him- or herself to pieces. Because it appears as freedom, self-generated compulsion is not recognized as such. *You can* exercises even greater constraint than *You should*. Auto-compulsion proves more fatal than allo-compulsion, because there is no way to resist oneself. The neoliberal regime conceals its compulsive structure behind the seeming freedom of the single individual, who no longer understands him- or herself as a subjugated subject (‘subject to’), but as a project in the process of realizing itself (*entwerfendes Projekt*). That is its ruse: now, whoever fails is at fault and personally bears the guilt. No one else can be made responsible for failure. Nor is there any possibility for pardon, relief, or atonement. (2017: 10)

How could a precise thinking be realised of that which distinguishes a Spinozan enablement (if indeed it remains a useful tool), from a late-Foucauldian register of self-care practices (that would assist us to be robust enough for real decision and ethical action), *from* — then — the auto-exploitative modes named by Han? Han watches the current moment like a hawk, naming the insidious ways in which it cheers us on for a ‘enablement’ that mostly smooths capital’s access to our capacities via our pseudo-consent with that operation. Han notes that a certain Foucault prematurely celebrated the entrepreneur’s seeming-freedom from disciplinary logics, showing insufficient suspicion of neoliberal *modi operandi* (Han 2017: 9). Indeed, the subject under neoliberalism is no longer, strictly disciplined, or the discipline has turned inside in ways that are hard to extricate without a confusing lurch into fretting about discipline’s so-called opposite: laziness. (I dispute and complicate this binary in Attiwill et al. 2017: 16ff). Perhaps the most cautious position is to hold open tirelessly the more specific question *for what are we ‘being enabled’ or ‘enabling ourselves’ to do?* And further, what this emphasis on a certain ilk of doing *means* for our scope to be or to become?

The practices for a care-of-the-self need to involve an active, critical stance. I may need to cultivate ways of saying, thinking and experiencing (*erleben*, as the name for transformative experience, as opposed to *erfahren*, as accumulative, additive experience, after Han — 2017: 51) that discern small differences in what I want to-be-able-to ... Practices, I’d argue, that open us onto *more times than none*, are a modest beginning. This would mean practising practices in such a way that steadiness obtains, that relaxation is not precluded, and in which the self is neither annihilated nor fetishized. These might be practices for constituting the kind of ‘self’, in other words, which is robust enough to play, and also to leave itself behind in creativity’s wake. Deleuze conjures this as the *saut sur place* — leaping in the one place (2004b: 170) — wherein, for the precise reason of being exactly-where-one-is, one lands somewhere unrecognisable and perhaps even somewhere newly *dignified* — with

intentionality, with less resentment, and with an ability to decide (and to lose discerningly), crucial to the weaving of any future.

Conclusion

According to Simon Springer:

neoliberal subjectification is the process whereby one memorises the truth claims that one has heard and converts them into rules of conduct (Foucault 1988). This process of internalisation functions to effectively lock in the rights of capital. (2016: 60)

Under the current and intensifying conditions of digital surveillance capitalism and parallel neoliberalising agendas, we are — I'd argue — slipping below the threshold of all of Deleuze's three kinds of time, and internalising nefarious rules of conduct, nigh *hosting* them. The subject — who is constituted by these times — is therefore arguably converted at a gross level into a patsy for dispossessing surveillance capital or, more direly, diluted in its very coherence and less able to intend, to decide and flung far from any capacity to act politically and ethically. This would be both as individual selves, who might desire expansive experiences of being alive, and also as subjects-among-others, able to navigate a shared world equipped with the conditions for ethical deliberation and follow-through. Practising, as ontological investigation, and with creative writing as a crucial, artistic mode of the latter, gives us access onto these times, and onto what they condition, while Foucault's care of the self suggests that there are *things* one must do (processes, rituals, routines, actions, interventions, pauses), in dire moments that are the very condition of ethics. That is, practices to ensure that one remains able to think, to wait, to act — and to become new to oneself in a future that is definitely not yet written. Han, finally, provides the necessary note of caution that one remains discerning in terms of what is classed too hastily and without sound critique as enablement.

Practices, then, have a subtractive relation to 'productivity'; they can ease us from the latter's paradigm and its guilt-riddled auto-exploitation, and with an invitation to become something not yet imagined, which is generative, even energetic, and which one may or may not prefer to monetise.

[i] Preliminary work on this notion can be found in Pont 2019 'With this body'.

[ii] Such as gardening, cooking, hiking, rowing, running, contemplation, listening to music, erotic sex, close reading, lithography, flower arranging, et cetera.

[iii] Indeed the 'subhabitual', as concept, may provide a lens for considering the proliferation (and increasing *celebration*) of gamification in relation to habit. Many apps are marketed on the basis that they can assist in habit formation (doing exercise, language learning, meditation, food/cooking practices, etc.). It remains open as to whether they deliver on the hopes we place in them, and whether they are structurally capable of cultivating the (temporal) stability, even a kind of subjective sense of being *nourished*, which can accompany habit's time. (Habit, we note, does not obstacle

more varied temporal registers; often it *founds* them.) Do mindfulness apps, for example, establish certain states of (lauded, fetishised, economically-approved) experience, or do they embroil the user in a gamified subhabit? I am grateful to colleague Dr Ellen Smith for discussions on this question and comments offered on a draft version of this paper.

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