

Routledge Studies in Media and Cultural Industries

CURATION IN THE AGE OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

**THE VALUE OF SELECTION, NARRATION, AND
EXPERTISE IN NEW MEDIA CULTURES**

Panos Kompatsiaris



Curation in the Age of Platform Capitalism

This book employs the figure of curation—the selection, arrangement, and display of objects, concepts, and things—to explore the cultures of platform capitalism. Considering its rise in the global art world as an authorial, meaning-making activity and an organizational-entrepreneurial endeavour, it looks at curation as the interweaving of innovative concepts, elaborate storytelling, and trusted experts leaking out from galleries to hashtags.

Its logic encompasses diverse spheres ranging from high-brow art and the fashion world to low-brow experience economies and economies of authenticity, from confidence cultures and relationship gurus to algorithmic spectacles. More than an economy, “curate and be curated” is a diffused imperative amidst the disorienting spread of information that digital platforms enable: What to post, what to wear, what to eat, what friends to have, what music to hear, what films to watch, what places to visit, what socks to choose, and what opinion to have about serious issues like climate change, military coups, AI, genetics, space colonization, and cryonics, or everyday issues like football, fashion, and diet. Drawing on critical platform theory, material culture, and multi-sited ethnography, the book examines curated worlds of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration, including the luxury fashion brands Vetements and Balenciaga, Airbnb food experiences, and the figure of the life coach. The book argues that the curatorial imperative endorses an aspirational class imaginary and the idea that handling self-narratives is a strategic means of socialization that can assist upward mobilities as well as neoliberal narratives of well-being, promotion, and success.

This book will be of key interest to academics, researchers, and advanced undergraduate and graduate students in the areas of cultural studies, media studies, communication studies, curating, contemporary art theory, critical management studies, and art history, as well as to more general readers interested in new media, platforms, and digital culture.

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Part 1

Homo Curatorius



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1 Introducing the Curatorial Imperative

1.1 Do Socks Have Personalities?

On their website, the wool company Smartwool explains to its customers that while “plain white socks are just that—plain”, the curated socks it offers can demonstrate how “your life is packed with everyday adventures” (Smartwool, nd). Unlike plain white socks, the curated socks have a unique character; they are “bold” and “sure to liven up your sock drawer”. Smartwool has “sustainability targets” for its curated socks aiding customers to “recycle” their “old socks into new goods” (Smartwool, nd). A curated sock is a sock with personality; rather than a boring and ignorant sock, it is bold, animated, and ecological, and by wearing it, the potential buyer can also inhabit these traits.

Socks are not the only items that can have such wonderful personalities in today’s cultural economies. Countless other curated products, services, and experiences promise to lift consumers to greater and loftier states with their charismatic touch: a curated diet helps to “restore the nutrients you are missing”—in contrast to the “poor diet” that “can cause further damage” (Szarka, 2019); a curated ear is “more than multiple piercings” and transforms piercings “from a single accessory to a personally-styled gallery” (Pierced, nd); a curated bookshelf “creates a unique storage solution that also tells a story” (CapitalOne, 2021); a Sotheby’s curated wine cellar promises “fun and personalization” and a “story you should be telling on your own” (Miller, 2018). In information-laden capitalism, the mandate for such stories is—to paraphrase Fredric Jameson—a “cultural dominant” (1991: 3), promising to turn consumption, identities, and lifestyles from contingent and aimless to purposeful and unique. Curation’s promise is to guide, to distinguish, to elevate, to restore, to customize, to add spice, and to carefully pick the best and most appropriate items out of all the surrounding noise and wrap them in an elegant package that leads to self-improvement.

The market employment of the term reflects its overall fashionability. The very usage of the word “curating” in the English-speaking world has increased by more than fivefold since 2010 and by 16-fold since 1985.¹ In broader culture, similar references span from low to high; the “curator boyfriend” was the hottest accessory of the year 2020, according to the women’s

magazine *Elle* (2019), while the film *The Square*, featuring a museum curator as the main hero, won the Palme d'Or at the 2017 Cannes Festival. Recently, hit audiovisual productions grapple with the exclusive, curated worlds of consumption, including hospitality services in *White Lotus* (2021–), luxury cruise ships in *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), high gastronomy in *The Menu* (2022), and the wellness industry in *Nine Perfect Strangers* (2021–2022). In the academic world, the number of subjects that can be curated in the past ten years is truly astonishing. Apart from broadly art-related activities, like “opera” (Mould, 2022), “architecture” (Chaplin, 2009), “pop” (Baker, Istvandy, and Nowak, 2019), “contemporary music festivals” (Farnsworth, 2021) and “dramaturgies” (Eckersall and Ferdman, 2021), curating also applies to spiritual undertakings, like “worship” (Baker, 2010) and “pilgrimage” (Murray, 2021), religious cultures, such as “lived Islam” (Malik, 2023), or even whole countries, like “America” (Rabinowitz, 2016), political spaces, like “(post-)socialist environments” (Schorch and Habit, 2023), “lively objects” (Muller and Langill, 2021), “oral histories” (MacKay, 2017) “trauma” (Micieli-Voutsinas, 2022), “the future” (Newell, Libby and Kirsten, 2016), and even “human remains” (Giesen 2013). Countless more paper titles in refereed and nonrefereed journals capture this moment of curating vis-à-vis almost anything.

Ranging from colloquial to academic uses, references to something “curated” mostly designate the grouping of cultural items, from music to food and films to news. These hand-picked, or sometimes algorithmically picked, selections by authorized experts are expected to place these items within organized narratives. To gain legitimacy, these narratives need to be bound to the authority of experts, that is, either specific persons who enjoy symbolic capital (e.g. “Tom Ford’s curated gift sets” [miamidesigndistrict, nd]) or companies, institutions, and platforms (“Apple News brings you the world’s best journalism [...] curated by editors, and personalized for you” [Apple News, nd]). These narratives are shaped by, and themselves shape, the impressions around curated content and the entity that curated them. For instance, when one encounters Matt Groening, the creator of the Simpsons, curating the line-up of the music festival All Tomorrow Parties,² this encounter informs narratives both about the curated content, the line-up, the bands, and the music they perform (e.g., “Matt Groening chose them so they must be cool”) as well as Groening himself (e.g., “Groening chose both Hope Sandoval and Daniel Johnston, therefore Groening has an eclectic taste”). Or, when one encounters curated news from a platform like Apple News, they may make assumptions, implicit or explicit, both about what they read (e.g., “The news I read are customized by expert editors of a trusted platform”) as well as about the ultimate guarantor of these groupings (e.g., “Apple is now an expert in news selection”). There is then a mutually constitutive relationship in distributed curating between the items and the narrative that are certified by the authority of the expert.

I should then say from the start that the omnipresence of curating, as I understand it here, is not merely linked to the increase in the usage and traffic of the very word “curation” and its linguistic derivatives. This book will discuss how this omnipresence echoes a larger cultural economic logic that exceeds the employment of the particular word(s). It is a logic of value production which, via forms of selection, narration, and expertise, mediates labor practices, self-identification, and patterns of consumption intertwined with techno-social affordances and the impositions of platform capitalism.³ I will speak in more detail about how I employ platform capitalism in Section 1.2 and in Chapter 3, but for the sake of clarity let us now say that the term intends to highlight the centrality of platforms in the circulations of the digital economy, that is, of corporate digital infrastructures of data extraction which bring together multisided markets, with Google, Apple, Amazon, and Meta being some of the leading examples (Langley and Leysdon, 2017; Srnicek, 2017). Platforms mobilize the mass production and circulation of communications (that they then capture as data and value), effecting in what Mark Andrejevich describes as “infoglut”, a disorienting social space of constantly contested meaning and information narratives (2013: 38). In order to generate new forms of value, platforms offer curatorial affordances to everyday users or themselves offer curated services. Platform capitalism, I assume, is a dominant productivity model which privileges, encourages, and generates “cultures” in the anthropological sense, that is, forms of interaction, values, meaning, and symbol-making. I use the term “curation” as an overarching concept that allows us to speak about and shed light on these cultures.

Based on these initial assumptions, I conceptualize curation around two main axes that will interweave and feed off each other throughout this book, and the areas to which I apply the term—fashion, food, and life coaching (Chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively). First, curation is a free-floating signifier sounding vaguely positive (similarly to say “creativity”), the employment of which indicates a progressive, forward-looking activity. Curation is an art-related concept that suggests sophistication and up-to-datedness and thus potentially generates customer desire across media markets. This, as I will show in Chapter 2, owes to the global ascent and popularization of the contemporary art curator, an independent, semi-institutional and authorial persona that both creates and organizes.⁴ In the artworld, the ascent of the curator to a creator-auteur, instead of merely an institutional worker, owes itself to the institutionalization of avant-garde art since the 1960s (I refer to the employment of Duchamp and Warhol as suggestive figures of this process throughout the book). Curation implies a guided creativity instead of a chaotic one, a more prudent form of creativity that triggers bohemian-bourgeois or middle-class aspirations. Curators are perceived as neither boring bureaucrats, like blue- and white-collar workers or nerdy academics, nor autonomous workers, like artists. They speak about “posthumanism over pizza”, to refer to the curator boyfriend of the *Elle* article, and are

simultaneously self-reflective, knowledgeable, organized, and partygoers, to refer to the protagonist of the film *The Square*. In this sense, this first axis looks at distributed curating in relation to the popularization of the term itself, which inscribes, as I will suggest, the affective and historical registers of creativity and organization at once, which correspond to some of the hegemonic subjective investments in contemporary capitalism.⁵

Second, as mentioned, curation indicates a logic of value production, self-presentation, and performance, according to which selected items are conceptualized under the vision of an expert. In platformized cultural activity, the spread of this logic, once mostly confined to the corporate world of branding and advertising, diffuses sociality at large; it sprawls from presentations of the self in social media, ranging from posting texts, photos, and videos to mentioning, tagging, and location-sharing, the boom of industries of positivity, life coaching, and mindfulness, the sharing of cool imagery of traveling, art openings, and other “exceptional” moments, the potentially constant updating of friends, followers, and fans, the gearing of aesthetics and design to attention-grabbing quests and the overall commodified artification of life. Digital platforms mediate the intensities and degrees of all the above. The logic of curation also informs popular culture discourse, including headlines such as “I have a smaller penis than my girlfriend’s exes—should I get surgery?” or “17 Cute Bikinis Options for Bigger Butts”, published in newspapers as diverse as *Guardian* and *Cosmopolitan* respectively, and occupies even the biological futurology, as in the case for instance of CRISPR where people could potentially curate bodily and psychological aspects of their offspring by editing their DNA (Greely, 2022). In a nutshell, the curatorial logic inhabits the imperative of *what to choose* amidst the extremes of mass conformity and informational chaos that are both accelerated outcomes of the internet economy. It deepens the ideology of neoliberal capitalism and what Illouz calls “the self as a ‘chooser’” (2013: 79); since consumption promises to be a status-bearing practice with ramifications for one’s future, the chooser-self is symbolically uplifted and legitimized. If we zoom out to the larger picture of social class, the imperative to curate and be curated directs working class desire into an aspiring middle-class ecosystem in which meaningful choice is critical for actualizing one’s social identity. Thus, at the anthropological level, the logic of curation, that is, the stories to select and present to the self and others, pushes not only market actors but also everyday users to think of their practices, emotions, and life paths as expressive of a higher vision, “the story you should be telling on your own”, a vision that they choose amidst disorienting complexity, instead of living through random moments.

While curation is a concept that, I argue, can help us codify the cultures of platform capitalism, including the cultures of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration that I will discuss later, this does not mean that these cultures are *sui generis* or totally new. Quite the opposite: pre-existing cultures are mass communicated, magnified, re-purposed, spread, and diversified across

local offline and online settings resulting in new qualities in attitudes and behaviors as practically anyone with an internet connection and a smart-phone encounters platform impositions and affordances. In his reading of an astrology column of *Los Angeles Times* of the 1950s, Theodor Adorno likewise argued that while superstitious irrationality existed before the formation of mass societies in varying geographies and degrees, it was in mass societies that its “institutionalization has reached, by means of mass production, a quantity which is likely to result in a new quality of attitudes and behavior” (1974: 15). I follow a similar line of thinking in the book. The impositions and affordabilities of platforms recycle and popularize pre-existing values, which were specific to restricted or niche milieus. For instance, the value of meaningful consumption, that is, the idea that a choice should be innovative, authentic, inspired, cool, experimental, individual, or customized, which was limited to exclusive cultural formations, becomes massively dispersed through platforms as vehicle for aspirational class belonging.

Let us however first encounter a question that one can ask vis-à-vis the project at hand: why to choose the very term “curation” and its offshoots to speak about cultures of platform capitalism? Why to call this logic “curatorial” and not choose other adjacent concepts to describe it, such as “artistic” or “editorial”? This question has two intertwined aspects. The first is related to the question of how does the employment of a term help reveal and reconstruct aspects of the subject at hand and how is this very choice justified given that it overlaps with other concepts laying in its immediate vicinity? This aspect is elaborated in Chapter 2, where I discuss the historical, discursive, and affective conventions surrounding the concept; for now, it suffices to say that, from a critical theory perspective, theoretical concepts are constructions that help us say and see larger things about the world or participate in polemics for social formations (Held, 1980). Theoretical concepts are thus relays that allow critical reconstructions of the past, present, and future. The question of which concepts to choose (or introduce) for examining phenomena matters not only for determining scientific accuracy but for mobilizing affective, historical, linguistic, and material assemblages into paths of critical thinking. I hold that the term “curation” can effectively generalize and register issues around aspirational consumption and production, class subjectification and ideology, new regimes of labor and economies of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration, that is, of the cultures of platform capitalism I will be speaking about. This is partly so because, curation, in my reading, is a term that, as mentioned, combines the seemingly opposed tendencies between creativity and organization, which are injunctions that shape a dominant ideological horizon of neoliberal capitalism.⁶ Deploying the term “artistic” to speak about the cultural logics of platform capitalism, for instance, would highlight assemblages of disorganization, individual genius, and impulsive creativity, which, while present, do not sufficiently account for the organizational part that this imperative encompasses, for example, to set up oneself as entrepreneur, network, set up pricing mechanisms, among

others.⁷ In contrast, the “editorial”, which is often used by media studies theorists to refer to similar phenomena (e.g., Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018), underemphasizes the fashioning of the self as a work of art or the convention of creative genius. The terms curating, curation, and the curator are more appropriate as they suggest anthropological cultures, solidified to what we can call *homo curatorius*, which are both inspiring and rational, fun and organized, creative and reasonable. Lastly, as noted, the practice of selecting, displaying, and authorizing content is a ubiquitous composition of value in platform capitalism. In short, I choose to speak about the distributed curatorial logics as many of these practices I describe explicitly mobilize this term, and, on the other hand, I want to highlight the rationality beyond the descriptiveness which sheds light on platform-based social interaction. The platform economy offers the possibility for ordinary users to curate themselves in a myriad of ways, including the potential to (aesthetically) organize Airbnb experiences, to become a life coach from scratch or to come up with food storytelling on Instagram, which are some of the curation examples I will be discussing in the following chapters. This productive curation interweaves with consumptive curation, that is, to organize a life around a concept, live the best and most customized tourist experiences, self-actualize, or eat the most unique and authentic food. Productive and consumptive curation combine in platform capitalism. A good case in point here is tourist destinations that are (sometimes inadvertently) curated by everyday users who are curating themselves to their audiences via the use hashtags and location tags. The island of Santorini in Greece, a typical photogenic destination known for idyllic sunsets, for instance, gets massive hashtag curation on Instagram from everyday users striving to showcase their exceptional moments to their followers. This crowd curation has real effects as it makes the island more desirable, exclusive, and unaffordable for locals while producing unsustainable touristic practices from an environmental point of view.

If we were to visualize the curatorial imperative, we can imagine two very different modes of arranging a commercial space: the flea market and the concept store. The flea market is the utmost non-curated space, as the sellers simply sell their products without having the imperatives of selection, narration, and expertise in mind. There is no expectation that the products will intervene in the general vision or identity of the customer or that the seller’s “unique vision” will be communicated to the customer: the underlying agreement between sellers and consumers is that market exchange is merely functional. Thus, decisions around selection and display in a flea market are mostly hands-on, having to do with fitting as many products as possible in the vendor’s limited space and usually selecting the top selling products to be displayed in the front. On the contrary, the selection and display of items in a concept store are regulated by a theme, a concept that echoes the larger vision of the brand or the owner of the store. The items are expressions, representations, or documents of this concept, and their arrangement in space seemingly conveys an ordered narrative, the customer

consumes a story that can intervene in their social identity. To go back to Adorno, it is not that similar shops or curated practices did not exist before but that the increasing diffusion of digital platforms in social and economic life intensifies curated forms of social interaction quantitatively and qualitatively. In the rest of this chapter, I present the theoretical points of departure and methodological perspectives informing this book.

1.2 Theory on Platforms, Cultures, and Curating

The first point to be made after this conceptualization pertains to the role platforms in molding the curatorial logic and its related cultures. I understand platforms, from Google to Facebook and from Airbnb to Uber, as infrastructures mediating production, consumption, and exchange as well as business models involved in the processes of capitalization (Longley, 2017). When I speak of platforms throughout the book, I refer to commercial enterprises; this is not to say that non-commercial platforms do not exist but that it is the commercial platforms that unconditionally govern the internet space (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2022). There are two approaches to platforms that I will be drawing from, a broader and a narrower one. The broader focuses on platforms in macro sociological terms, as the digital manifestations of capitalist firms that bring together different multisided markets, including advertisers, developers, creators and users, and largely rely on the extraction and processing of data (Srnicsek, 2017; Sadowski, 2019).⁸ Apart from GAFAM (Google [Alphabet], Amazon, Facebook [Meta], Apple and Microsoft), the term covers companies that have massively invested in digital services and make use of user data for productive ends, such as media conglomerates, like Walt Disney and Warner Bros, consumer electronics corporations, like Sony and Samsung, and broadcast and subscription on demand video streaming services (SVOD), like Netflix, Disney+ and HBO. There is a narrower approach that puts emphasis on how platforms enable the *creative capacities of users*, according to which platforms are “data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers” (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022: 5).⁹ Here the focus is on platforms as digital infrastructures which allow and enable cultural producers and everyday users to produce content within a larger “platform ecosystem” (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018:12), including creating apps in Google Play Store and App Store, videos on Amazon’s Twitch or Google’s YouTube, performances of the self in Meta’s Facebook, Instagram and ByDance’s Tik-Tok, to name a few. While the first approach mostly focuses on the macroscopic shifts in the political economy of capitalism, the emergence of new value chains or the command of algorithms, the second explores specific socio-cultural practices involving human actors, such as the rise of new cultural intermediaries and experts bypassing the filtering of traditional gatekeepers (Maguire and Matthews, 2012; Patel, 2020), the different forms of digital labor (Kneese and Palm, 2020), the

content creator ecologies (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020) and crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and other digital forms of economic circulations (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Without losing sight of the former macroscopic role of digital industries throughout the book, I will be mostly referring to the narrower function of platforms, as this is helpful for emphasizing their role in shaping *cultural activity*. The cultural production and general activity in fashion, food, and life coaching which I examine is shaped in a way that is constantly tending toward curation.

Furthermore, the book rests on the assumption that technological formations are not neutral or free floating but are conditioned by the political and economic forces that invent and regulate them (Marcuse, 1941; Sadowski, 2020). Commercial platforms have one and only one motive, that is, the maximization of economic profit. When it comes to user activity, they strive to achieve this by making the user engage in productive work for them (e.g., spending time, attention, and data traces in social media) or consume the services they offer (e.g., buying a YouTube Premium subscription or an ad-free subscription on X), among other strategies. A result of this striving is that new areas of social life are gradually subsumed into the commodity relation.¹⁰ Platforms break down user communication into measurable units, such as comments, reactions, messages, posts, and time spent in watching, listening, or scrolling, which are then subjected to metrics, probability curves, prediction models, analytics, diagnostics, and other tools. Communication then becomes data for feeding algorithms ready for being deployed for value-producing ends.¹¹ Platforms reify user communications through the use of such tools, they turn them into a “thing” whose meticulous processing and integration into the productive activity promises economic returns. Thus, a like on Facebook, apart from a communicative-affective approval of a post, an opinion, an idea, or a picture, enables data for more adequately profiling the particular user; the more likes, reactions, and comments performed in the platform by this user the more accurately Facebook can understand their background, interests, and opinions, among others, and act upon them accordingly.

I will also be assuming that one of the effects of platformization is the development of a “centralized, proprietary mode of cultural production” (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4279), which intensifies capitalism as a rationality of governance. This is of course not to deny the agency of users to organize their own spaces or the strategies for resistance these formations give rise to (e.g., Velkova and Kaun, 2021). Some of these spaces and strategies are transient, dwelling on the deterritorializing logic of the swarm, while others help building more stable organizational forms that correspond to offline networks. These are all significant, yet the priority here is to contribute to a discussion on the links between platforms, as social-technical apparatuses, intermediaries, and capitalist businesses that dominate the internet, and the cultural forms they enable (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). The employment of the term “platform capitalism”, instead of more positivist terms, such as the

“sharing economy” or “virtual community”, highlights the commodification of digital circulations (rather than offer a totalizing account of the contemporary economic moment), that is to say a “contrary trend” in respect to the more techno-utopian moments of the 1990s (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4279). Using this term, I also wish to accentuate Marx’s own adage that capitalism is a dynamic system caught in a process of continuous transformation of its productive forces (Read, 2022), which also results in transformations in ideological interpellations, as well as to question the more romantic ideas of a networked economy that could lead to non-industrial forms of production or even post-capitalism (for this argument see also, Mosco, 2015; Fuchs, 2021). This cyber-pessimist perspective does not subscribe to fatalism but intends to offer a critical questioning of the present—a present in which tremendous changes in human-technological worlds occur at a dazzling pace and bring forward an “unprecedented” anthropological mutation and a “terra incognita”, as Shoshana Zuboff puts it (2019: 18–23). In this sense, the critical mapping of the terra incognita of platformization is indispensable for gauging the production of subjectivities in contemporary capitalism and thus for understanding the limits and potentials of radical collective knowledge and organizing.

Recent critical literature on platforms and digital technology argues that platforms not only express an accumulation paradigm but exercise significant power over social life and transnational public spheres (Van Dijck, 2013; Van Dijck, Poell and De Wall, 2018; Sadowski, 2020). This power, theoretical and empirical studies argue, is generative, in the sense that it shapes people’s acting upon the world (e.g., Bucher, 2018; Gregory and Sadowski, 2021; Woodcock and Graham, 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Armano, Briziarelli and Risi, 2022). There are some overlapping strands of critical literature on platforms which concern us here. The first primarily focuses on platforms as enormous conglomerations of data, which, by processing and operationalizing vast amounts of the latter, herald a new model of capital accumulation (Mosco, 2015; Fuchs, 2021; Sadowski, 2019). Here, data are extracted from the activity of users (and in this sense, it is a form of labor [Miconi, 2022]), stored in massive data centers and valorized. To account for the interplay between data and value, I will be employing Jodi Dean’s concept of “communicative capitalism” (2013), as it allows me to theorize online communication as a potential reservoir of economic value. In turn, the operationalization of big data gives rise to what Shoshana Zuboff has notably popularized as the age of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019; Linder, 2019). According to this thesis, platforms and other digital corporations adopt data extraction and prediction strategies, track user behavior for optimizing their business practices and upgrading their products, and sell this profiling to third parties. Based on this information, platforms attempt to refashion user behavior so that it becomes more productive for them, in other words they engineer “behavioral modification”, which orients all online activity and operations toward value production (Zuboff, 2019: 68). This insight is useful as it links

platforms with an active intention to outline subjectivities, and can thus support the idea that platforms, as profit-oriented enterprises, “curate connectivity” and by doing so enable specific cultural formations (van Dijck, 2013: 6). Karen Gregory and Jathan Sadowski, for instance, discuss how the food delivery platform Deliveroo makes its couriers assume “perverse virtues” in the domain of work, including “flexibility, vitality, and legibility” through the constant algorithmic surveillance, data processing, and profitability targets—what they call “platform biopower” (2021: 3). In this sense, platform surveillance shapes the worker and the wider user activity in an industrial fashion according to the demands of algorithmic governance while resistance to this surveillance can be fragmented and difficult to organize (Walker, Fleming and Berti, 2021; Vallas, 2019). Likewise, Tanja Bucher uses the notion of “programed sociality” to argue how, via the categorization and ordering of data inputs, platforms “link database architecture and algorithmic operations to subjectification” (2018: 5). Platforms then organize social relations for their benefit, for instance, increased user engagement by nudging, reminding, and creating obligations to everyday users (e.g., notifications about a friend’s post or Facebook birthday reminders) that would not otherwise exist in the same form in offline friendships (Bucher, 2018). As offline and online activity are not strictly separated spheres but intertwined continuities, these insights are important as they allow us to turn attention to the cultural, subjective, and even larger anthropological shifts that platform capitalism enacts upon the world. There is a third strand of literature which focuses on the link between content creation and the specificities of platformized cultural production, especially as it regards bloggers, micro-celebrities, and influencers (e.g., Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018; Pitcan, Marwick, and boyd, 2018; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015; Duffy, 2022; Dumont, 2017; Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022: 5). I employ this strand of literature (especially in Chapter 6) to explore the micro-entrepreneurial aspirational possibilities which platforms afford in the domains of production and consumption.

Drawing on these critical platform theory perspectives, I would like in this study to explicitly connect platforms and the production of systematic forms of cultural activity—in terms of style, aesthetics, posture, performance—and highlight how the structural imperative of profit in the regime of platform capitalism is not simply a political economic matter but coordinates adjacent practices, subjectivities, and lifestyles. The curatorial imperative is a central notion I want to underscore in this process. As my main case studies refer to phenomena that are global, diverse, contextual, and prone to adaptability, this book aims to be a step toward initiating a broader scholarly discussion around the cultures of platform capitalism.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I speak about “cultures” that are coalescing in and around the curatorial imperative, namely the cultures of fashion, food, and coaching. The notion of platform cultures then denotes the concretization of forms of cultural interaction which are accentuated or evolve as an

effect of the usage of platforms. The plural “cultures” instead of the singular “culture” acknowledges the irreducibility of cultural formations to a single logic, leaving space for heterogeneity, agency, and change. In this sense, while I argue that platform capitalism accelerates the subjective investments in curating and being curated, subjects have agency to negotiate this shaping or evade it in other spheres of life where the mandate of self-presentation is not as strong.

There are two forms of cultures that I am interchangeably concerned with, the everyday and the industrial. The first comes from an understanding of culture in anthropological and cultural studies traditions, ranging from the Chicago school of sociology and the Birmingham cultural studies school to social and cultural anthropology, as composed by the meanings, values, rituals, and symbols embedded in vernacular forms of social interaction (Williams, 1981; Hall, 1997; Hebdige, 1979). These everyday forms through which users, communities, and individuals communicate and make meaning on and off platforms intersect with more organized forms of cultural production, that is, the industrial production of symbols and texts aiming at generating forms of capital (Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Banks, 2007). The industrial production of culture regards the intentionally commodified “production of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘symbolic’ goods and services” that is to say the “commodities whose core value is derived from their function as carriers of meaning in the form of images, symbols, signs, and sounds” (Banks, 2007: 2). On platforms, the industrial cultural production is visible in the performances of brands, micro-celebrities, restaurants, hotels, tour guides, and content creators, among others. In this book, I explore it in luxury fashion brands and designers in Chapter 4, the organizers of Airbnb Experiences and restaurant social media accounts in Chapter 5, and the life coaches in Chapter 6. Yet, in platform-based cultural production the distinction between the everyday and the industrial is complicated as everyday users can amass symbolic capital that can be later translated to forms of economic capital by monetizing audience or customer desire. In this sense, platform-based affordances drive everyday cultural production to assume practices of industrial cultural production, in which “the production of meaning is seen to be deliberate and self-conscious, designed to appeal to aesthetic preferences, or related to existing or emergent economies of taste, style and distinction” (Banks, 2007: 2). This is a key point here as platforms imbue everyday activity, which can often take unintentional forms, with entrepreneurial reasoning by turning the self into a constantly performing social, economic, and cultural actor. A complementary concept to think through this indefiniteness between industrial and non-industrial platform production is the term “platform practices” that Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg offer (2019: 2), which regards “the *strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labor, and citizenship* that shape cultural production through platforms” (Duffy, Poell and Nieborg, 2019: 2). Here, the emphasis is on the action, the “doing” that crisscrosses everyday and industrial platform cultures.¹²

I also use theoretical perspectives for analyzing the case studies and curation as a larger phenomenon (see below on theory as “medium”). In this respect, I employ the art sociological perspective of “artification”, which is suggested by Shapiro and Heinich (2012), to describe an ongoing process of expanding art-related tropes to an increasing array of social fields. This expansion develops by partially extracting objects from previous contexts and subsequently re-classifying, individualizing, and intellectualizing them in contexts traditionally associated with art (Shapiro and Heinich, 2012). To give some examples of artification, museums artify archaeological or heritage objects, which once had a functional usage, by putting them on pedestals accompanied by conceptual-historical reasoning, or Instagram users can artify food by posting unique and individualized photos of dishes. The idea of artification does not entail assuming that “now everything is art” or “now everyone is an artist” but points to a value enhancing process in capitalism according to which the association with art-related tropes promises symbolic uplifting.

A key reference in this book is the work of the sociologist Eva Illouz on the commodification of emotions in capitalist public spheres (2013). Illouz argues that, rather than abolishing emotions, as is commonly believed, capitalism in fact does the opposite; it constructs public spheres which allow the self to be performed in overwhelmingly affective ways, with anger, happiness, sadness, and frustration being some of the emotions that are regularly shared across internet-mediated publics (2013). This, as we shall see in Chapter 6 in more detail, compels people to discover and perform their emotional selves in front of audiences as a vehicle for self-validation. However, while contemporary capitalism releases an “unprecedented intensification of emotional life, with actors self-consciously pursuing and shaping emotional experiences for their own sake”, at the same time it makes “rationality into a pervasive feature of human action” (2017: 5). “Emotions”, Illouz continues, “have become smoothly imbricated in rational modes of conduct promoted by ever-deepening grip of economistic forms of thinking in various realms of life” (2017: 6). As emotions become public, emotional reactions become data used by corporations, while, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, various online entities perform specific emotional tinges to curate atmospheres around them (we will elaborate on the concept of “atmospheres” in Chapter 4), including the atmospheres of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration. Furthermore, Illouz’s idea highlights the market rationalization that is a constitutive element of contemporary public spheres, an idea that helps to look at how art-related tropes in the curatorial imperative are undergoing similar rationalized routes in order to achieve particular results instead of being free-floating (similarly to Illouz’s argument about emotions). The artified restaurant dishes shared on the social media accounts of everyday users and especially restaurants, for instance, as we shall see in Chapter 5, are not spontaneous reactions but calculated forms of self-presentation.

Another phenomenon I highlight is that of the diffusion of expertise (or in more optimistic scenarios “the democratization of expertise”, e.g., Fulbright, 2020), a phenomenon which is augmented by the internet economy where individuals are given a stage. Expertise, and the forms of authority it gives access to, can be claimed by anyone on any possible topic, from wines to perfumes and from pranks to magic tricks. The critical literature on bloggers and micro-celebrities discusses this expansive claiming of expertise as a platform affordance (see for instance, Presswood, 2019; Patel, 2020), as platforms turn everyone into a potential expert, therefore magnifying the curatorial imperative. In this sense, we can speak of a public sphere undergoing a process of curatorialization instead of artification, as a more appropriate term to address platform practices and cultures.

The work of Michel Foucault on social technologies as part of neoliberal governmentality aiming to create positive desiring investments to subjects is also helpful for the study at hand. Foucault uses the term *dispositif*, or “apparatus” in English, to describe an ensemble of institutional, administrative, regulatory, discursive, and epistemological structures through which social power operates. As a form of a distributed imperative, curating is part of a creative *dispositif*, as Angela McRobbie calls the neoliberal injunction to fabricating positive, free, and self-fulfilling subjects (McRobbie, 2018). I refer to the work of Foucault mostly in Chapter 6, but the tradition of Foucauldian cultural studies runs through the pages of the book in general (e.g., McRobbie, 2018; Gill and Organ, 2022; Wilson, 2017; Littler, 2017). Finally, I employ the idea that social perceptions of class are inscribed in cultural exchange (Skeggs, 2013) to account for the aspirational class identities and the middle-classifying drive surrounding the curatorial imperative. In this context, I will be often referring to concepts from the work of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic and economic capital, distinction, and habitus. The curatorial imperative in its performative and aspirational dimensions relies on objective positionalities which are predisposed on class but also on gender, ethnicity, and ability. For instance, the performance of a “respectable” instead of “cool” self as part of upward mobile aspirations is conditioned by respective class affordances (Skeggs, 2013; Pitcan, Marwick, and boyd, 2018). In their research around upwardly mobile younger people from low socio-economic status in New York, Mikaela Pitcan, Alice Marwick, and danah boyd (2018) argue that these people have to edit an online “vanilla self” that abides to social norms and is less socially risky in order to achieve their aims. The idea here is that insofar as lower-class populations want to become respectable members of the community and compensate for their socially stigmatized class, they are in principle obliged to perform more normative online identities. Beverley Skeggs similarly shows how the inscription of notions of self-worth in aspirational femininity involves a repudiation of working-class lifestyles (Skeggs, 1997; 2013; McRobbie, 2018). The politics of self-curating, whether they pivot around respectability, coolness,

authenticity, or inspiration, are in this sense always inscribed within particular notions of class and broader or narrower milieus of cultural exchange.

1.3 Methods and Perspectives

The concept of curation, as stated above, is used to codify the behaviors, values, practices, and meanings around platform cultures as well as to draw attention and initiate a larger discussion around adjacent postures and rituals. Therefore, I set out to investigate a diffused and necessarily open-ended phenomenon, one that can be adapted and modified by diverse agents in equally diverse contexts. Since diffused curation is neither given in advance nor territorialized in a specific location, I had to reflexively construct the field of research, including the sites I would set out study. The methodological perspective I follow is multi-sited ethnography, a perspective which recognizes the decentralizing role of modern technologies in organizing social reality as well as the task of the researcher to trace the adaptation of these technologies across contexts of interaction (Marcus, 1995; Pink et al., 2015). Pertinently, George Marcus speaks about how cultural logics (such as curation),

are always multiply produced, and any ethnographic account of these logics finds that they are at least partly constituted within sites of the so-called system (i.e., modern interlocking institutions of media, markets, states, industries, universities-the worlds of elites, experts, and middle classes).

(1995: 97)

To understand these logics, in turn, the researcher develops strategies of “quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships” (1995: 97). I thus followed the logic of curation in its multiple manifestations by constructing the manifold and heterogeneous sites where it appeared as my research went along.

I also employ what Karen O’Reilly calls an “iterative-inductive” approach, which implies beginning the research process with as few presumptions as possible, allowing theoretical considerations to emerge in the course of research and employing a spiral research design where theory and the material inform each other in a mutually constitutive loop (2021). In this context, the different stages of research are not independent from each other, namely “data collection, analysis, and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked” (2021: 5). Theory in turn is at the same time a “precursor, medium and outcome” (2021: 29), that is, it helps initiating the study process, mediating between data and analysis and eventually being the end product of the inquiry. In this regard, I did not determine the problem-space in advance but inductively iteratively constructed it during the research process. While O’Reilly and Marcus position themselves within an ethnographic context, Celia Lury proposes her similar “compositional methodology” as

larger cultural theory method, where the phenomenon that is being studied “*becomes* a problem as it is investigated” rather than being predetermined (2021: 2). For Lury, this research design is pertinent for investigating phenomena that take shape in and across platforms (such as, in our case, platform curation), as platforms bring about changes in our “epistemic infrastructure”, including the ways that knowledge is produced and distributed (2021: 113–115). The constant remixability and recursivity of knowledge claims which are accentuated by platforms, according to Lury, exposes sites of knowledge to uncertainty: platforms “mutate the topologies of knowledge of problem spaces”; they tend to modify the phenomena they convey and in turn transform the problem-space associated with these phenomena (2021: 13). Compositional methodology then takes into consideration this changeable condition vis-à-vis the main components of research design, what she calls the “givens” (a priori assumptions), the “goals” (research aims) and the “operators” (theory and method), regarding them as open to transformation (2021: 3). In my case, the given was that curation, as a concept and a logic, has sprawled in the last decade as a form of value-adding from the artworld to the online economies. The goal was to explore what this sprawling does—in the anthropological sense—in wider cultural landscapes. The operators of critical cultural and media theory and multi-sited digital ethnography led me to focus on platforms as principal sites where this sprawling takes place. Thus, the operators were in constant dialogue with the givens and goals. This relatively elastic relationship between the givens and goals and the operators helped to maintain an open-ended problem-space that could be re-examined as theory and the research material shaped each other.

I initiated the research process by exploring sites where the very term curation and its offshoots were mobilized as an explicitly business endeavor in online economies, such as Steve Rosenbaum’s *Curation Nation* (2011), *Curate This: The Hands-On, How-To Guide to Content Curation* (2014), and Michael Bhaskar’s *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess* (2016). This material, which I look mostly in Chapter 2, offered insights into the business construction of curation as a monetizable remedy against information overload. The insights helped me to draw links between art curating and the market usage of the term and thus to look at the phenomenon as a larger cultural economic logic that creates value via the figures of selection, narration, and expertise. Following this logic in its diverse manifestations, I constantly encountered the role of platforms, as massive techno-social apparatuses of self-presentation, which dramatically intensify the imperative to curate and be curated, as I discuss in Chapter 3. After identifying the connection between platforms and curation, I had to choose the focus of the case studies. I decided not to look at case studies highlighting the daily or industrial self-curation strategies of specific users or the audience responses to specific curated content as this would narrow the exploratory character of this research. Instead, I opted for a wider approach that grapples with the ways curating is performed in diverse cultural-economic fields in

terms of production and consumption. While this strategy risks generalizing certain aspects of the phenomenon, it is also, as a result of its enlarged scope, suitable to account for the aim of the book, which is to explore the curatorial imperative and stir debate around the cultures of platform capitalism. There are several sites of cultural production where the curatorial imperative operates, online and offline, such as, indicatively, music, design, fitness, eating, and architecture. I chose to focus on fashion, food, and coaching, which are fields gathering some of its most typical aspects, including the overlapping cultures of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration.

I gathered and examined material from these settings, which I chose on the basis of first purposeful and then theoretical sampling, selecting therefore cases that “can best contribute to the developing theory” and can be explored “along with the emerging theoretical concepts” (Moser and Korstjens, 2018: 11). Thus, the selection of settings was “based on the emerging findings to ensure adequate representation of theoretical concepts” (Moser and Korstjens, 2018: 10), that is to say, most principally the curatorial imperative in platform capitalism. In this sense, the selection of cases, settings, and material constitute what Sean Cubitt calls “anecdotal evidence”, according to which “the importance of the uniqueness and of working from the particular to gain understanding of broader phenomena is stressed” (Skjulstad, 2020: 185; Cubitt, 2020). In Chapter 4, I followed the Instagram accounts and online performances of agents whose activity brings into the fashion system avant-garde provocation, underground tropes, and social media driven imagery. Particularly, I followed the online activity of the brands Vetements and Balenciaga, principally in Instagram, and the online presentations of Demna Gvasalia, the co-founder of the former and the creative director of the latter. In Chapter 5, I followed several Airbnb Experiences and food sharing accounts in social media, particularly on Instagram and Facebook, to delve into the imagery and practices of these cultures; I also participated in an Airbnb Experience of online cooking by an Italian grandmother and observed the Facebook interactions of a restaurant in Thessaloniki, Greece that exemplifies the food curatorial ethos. In Chapter 6, I followed the online activity of life coaches and coaching schools, including their various Facebook and Instagram accounts, podcasts, online certificates in the educational platform Udemy, and YouTube videos; I participated in two online courses and got two certificates for becoming life coach myself. I manually coded these materials according to the theoretical considerations described above and the constellation of themes I wished to underline.

Lastly, while the book discusses cases from a limited amount of countries, including Greece, the United States, Russia, Italy, the UK, and France, it does not claim a regional focus, assuming that internet technologies spread and territorialize discourses and practices across disparate localities. Curation is what Ong and Collier call a “global form”, that is, a worldwide circulating logic coding “heterogeneous contexts and objects” yet whose movements are always limited “by specific technical infrastructures, administrative

apparatuses, or value regimes” (2008: 11). Curation in platform economy is thus a phenomenon which develops in tandem with the techno-socialities of capitalism yet whose movement and adaptability by certain locales is contingent upon the availability of internet technologies (e.g., the digital divide), the access to metropolitan and urban imaginaries and familiarity with middle-class codes, among others. While I assume that there is no single center coordinating how these practices and discourses shape subjectivities or are adapted by users, I also wish to highlight the structural imperative of value production (economic, symbolic, social) organizing this process. Instead of a non-hierarchical ontology of networks and actants co-shaping each other in the information space, however, which is most often used in internet decentralization approaches, the book claims the tradition of critical theory which pays attention to hierarchies, power relations, and the structural effects of socio-economic organization (Malm, 2020). Speaking about the cultures of coolness, authenticity, and inspiration that platformized fashion, food, and coaching amplify, I will thus be prioritizing the structural imperatives of commodification, value, and the profit-motive in regulating online circulation.

1.4 Chapter Breakdown

Although I have touched on the chapters above, here I give a more methodical breakdown of the content of this book. Chapter 2 explores the figure of the curator from its early appearance in ancient Rome to its genealogies in art, museum, and biennial contexts and its subsequent widespread circulation in contemporary mediascapes. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the cultural and aesthetic registers via which curation enters platform cultural economies. I argue that the rise of curators to an expanded value-adding figure relates to the popularization of the term itself as well as their practice of presenting items as experts. The market employment of the curator is thus capitalizing on its rise in the discourse of the creative and art industries as an independent, nomadic, and refined cultural intermediary. Drawing on material culture approaches, I look at how expertise constructs social and economic value around objects by grouping them under historical, epistemological, and scientific narratives. Platform curating draws from and expands the process of valorizing and capitalizing on expert narratives which is specific to the histories of the Duchampian readymade, the institutionalization of conceptual art, and the rise of the curator as an authoritative intermediary in the art field.

Chapter 3 turns to curating in and through digital platforms. Platforms, and especially social media, curate landscapes of incessant communication which results in information overload as they strive to acquire data, generate network effects, and grow. In turn, they offer co-coordinated possibilities for self-curation both to ordinary users and micro-entrepreneurs who want to monetize their online activity. I look at curatorial labor and curated consumption as practices that harvest aspirational lifestyles of flexibility and

individuation respectively. Platform capitalism is thus not simply a regime for accumulation but a structure mediating the formation of larger social practices and identities.

Chapter 4 looks at the curatorial imperative in the field of luxury fashion. More precisely, I explore what I dub “banal luxury”, which includes the milieus around the brands Balenciaga and Vetements and the designer Demna Gvasalia. I employ the concept of “the Warhol economy” to talk about the highbrow interweaving of art, fashion, avant-garde aesthetics, and the underground in these milieus, which is evocative of the interdisciplinary crisscrossing of Andy Warhol around his studio Factory. Banal luxury curates atmospheres of coolness in digital platforms that qualify a memsavvy, subversive, forward-looking, extrovert, and socially aware outlook. In the chapter, I discuss Gvasalia as a figure actualizing these elements in his self-presentations, the function of the selfie as a counterintuitive lowbrow portraiture in Vetements’ Instagram account and the launch of provocative luxury items aiming to create internet buzz especially around youth cultures. Platform connectivity and participation here are the raw materials that actors of banal luxury curate for inscribing atmospheres of streetwise coolness in luxury undertakings.

Chapter 5 examines gastronomic curation as part of the economies of experience and authenticity. In particular, I look at Airbnb gastronomical experiences with grandmother instructors, which promise “real” cooking, including a Russian babushka and an Italian nonna, and the Facebook posts of a conceptual Greek restaurant, which involve elaborate dish descriptions and pictures. These cases, which echo countless others in mediatized foodscapes, curate food through forms of storytelling and which present it as a bearer of symbolic value and status. Curated gastronomical experiences offer the consumer not only distinction fixes but also the potential to share food moments among their followers in social media. In this way, curated food and curating oneself through food are parts of the endless circulations of platform economies in which daily activities and industrial production constantly feed off each other.

Chapter 6 looks at the curatorial imperative in the field of life coaching by analyzing material from podcasts, coaching school websites, and the two coaching courses I studied. I analyze both the self-curation strategies from the side of coaches as well as the curation strategies which the coaches preach in their platform-based interactions. In this regard, I look at how platformized life coaches are on the one hand curating themselves as micro-celebrities by making a claim to spiritual charisma and monetizing their services on this basis. On the other hand, I look at the narratives that coaches advocate to followers, students, and general audiences that emphasize self-curation as a quest toward personal vision and which should encompass qualities of self-discipline, confidence, and resilience. In the last section, I focus on the coaching address that aims to curate men in the intimacy and dating scene inscribing traditional gender roles in light of newly updated optimized and

streamlined masculinities. I argue that the coach is an exemplary figure of the curatorial imperative as the cultures of inspiration, rationality, and self-focus they disseminate endorse adjacent curated lifestyles while helping them to curate their own professional credentials as spiritual guides in contemporary platformscapes.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the book emphasizing how the curatorial imperative confronts users with questions of who to be, how to appear, and what to consume. This questioning shapes an anthropological horizon, a *homo curatorius*, whose “story that you should be telling on your own” supervises desirable prospects of class, status, and belonging.

Notes

- 1 This is according to Books Ngram Viewer: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=curating&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=0
- 2 See: www.discogs.com/fr/master/922324-Various-All-Tomorrows-Parties-31-Curated-By-Matt-Groening
- 3 David Balzer similarly spoke of this “curatorial *impulse*” as becoming a “dominant way of thinking and being” in modern societies since the 1990s (2014: 2–3). The term “impulse” implies an instinctive action or reaction that is almost uncontrollable. Similarly, the impulse to “curate and be curated” is ingrained in contemporary social worlds to the point that it is invisibilized.
- 4 The 2019 post by the women’s magazine *Elle*, arguing that the “Curator Boyfriend” was the hottest accessory of the year, is indicative of the popular understanding of curators and their lifeworlds:

The Curator is endowed with qualities that include, but are not limited to: the business savvy to navigate the high-stakes art market, enough sensitivity to appreciate the latest Marina Abramovic performance piece, and the occasional invite to party on a boat with Stavros Niarchos. They’re well-read, worldly and engaged in shaping critical dialogues of our times. The kind of guy you can discuss post-humanism with over pizza, who comments on the decor while ordering you a cab but letting you split the bill. We’re about to enter a new decade, and being self-aware and socially conscious has never been more attractive. Someone who can point to a favorite Louise Bourgeois sculpture or be brought to tears looking at an El Anatsui assemblage is not only in touch with his emotions but also cares about wider social, geopolitical and cultural issues. A Curator may still ghost you, but it’s probably because he’s doing something legitimately interesting with his time, like scouting in the foothills of the Himalayas.

(ELLE, 2019)

- 5 The theorist David Levi-Strauss argues that the curators “have always been a curious mixture of bureaucrat and priest” (2012), they crisscross modalities between the extremes of bureaucracy and spirituality, rationality and emotion, administration and care.
- 6 These political powers depend on the distinct places concepts occupy in wider social imagination, especially at the specific time and space when their evocation

occurs. To claim that there is a singular social imagination occupying the world is of course a politically problematic—if not colonial—gesture; the task of critical theory is to mobilize these concepts that effectively account for a critical view of the present, questioning structures of exploitation, capitalism, and power.

- 7 The chef protagonist in the film *The Menu*, to give an example, is not only a creative (and paranoid) genius composing eclectically elite tastes for trained palates but a rational entrepreneur conceptualizing dishes and heading an extremely demanding business.
- 8 The digital market, as any another market field in capitalism, demonstrates monopolistic tendencies.
- 9 This approach does not regard media conglomerates, entertainment corporations, and SVODs as parts of platforms as the latter are the digital manifestations of corporations and do not encourage users to create their own content.
- 10 In market parlance, the invention of new areas of commodification goes under more positive terms, such as “market innovation”.
- 11 In the post-2000s critical theory, there are varying concepts used to refer to the non-hands production in capitalism that point on how the “immaterial” aspects of labour, including emotions (Illouz, 2013), communication (Dean, 2013) and cognition (Moulier-Boutang, 2012), become a key terrain for capital’s valorization.
- 12 One can ask why to refer to “platform cultures” instead of capitalist or neoliberal cultures, which are relatively established terms? These terms are closely related and often I make reference to terms neoliberal or capitalist cultures throughout the book. In fact, the so-called sharing economy that platforms mobilize “appears as almost the neoliberal ideal” as it turns everyone into a potential entrepreneur (Hall, 2016: Chapter 2). By speaking specifically about the platform cultures, I want to highlight the globalizing pervasiveness of platforms in shaping contemporary cultural production and identities, which occurs independently of Western neoliberalism. Platforms are key to global cultural circulations, including those of non-liberal political formations (see also Chapter 6).

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2 From Galleries to Hashtags

The Aspirational Imaginary of Curating

2.1 Everyone Is a Curator

“Imagine”, the curation guru Steven Rosenbaum tells the readers of his book *Curation Nation*, “a time when your love of travel, fine wines, and collectable lunch boxes each provides a revenue stream” (2011: Ch.1). “Imagine”, he continues later, that you not only get a revenue stream but also empower society, harnessing “the power of formerly powerless consumers and pick a topic, brand, or endeavor to aggregate and curate” (2011: Ch.4). Curating is not just about making money by filtering and organizing what you enjoy doing; it is also about guiding, impacting, and bringing about change. This curatorial imaginary stands at the crossroads of good taste, global travel, educative judgment, and middle-class aspirations; as a general anthropological paradigm, it celebrates innovativeness, entrepreneurialism, and nomadism while hinging on the promise to turn one’s passion into a business: curators are now as diverse as “rappers, DJs, and bloggers” and generally anyone able to “create value from personal passions and niche expertise” (Rosenbaum, 2011: Ch.1). They even entertain a higher purpose, that of purifying society, removing the garbage of digital chaos, and making sense of “all the content that others are creating” (2011: Ch.1). In Rosenbaum’s enthusiastic account, which typically echoes Silicon Valley’s tech-optimism, curating helps professionalizing your passions while empowering society.

This chapter addresses and assembles this aspirational goal of contemporary curation, which involves the entrepreneurial mandates to professionalize your passion, make money, and benefit society. I argue that the spillover of this aspiration from contemporary art to media, business, and popular culture involves two complementary areas: the “artistic” and the “organizational”. The former privileges genius, inspiration, and creativity, which are traditionally art-related tropes, and the latter rationality, administration, and networking, which are tropes pertaining to organization. The artistic encompasses the affective and cultural predispositions of the figure of an independent curator, which emerged with the institutionalization of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s. If, according to the conceptualist motto, “all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists

conceptually” (Kosuth, 1993: 843), then any concept perceived as appropriate by the artistic milieu can hold, one way or another, artistic value. The curator, as the author of artistic events instead of a behind-the-scenes caretaker and museum staff member, embodies the institutionalization of this “after Duchamp” moment, which has the potential to assign artistic value through selecting, arranging, describing, and displaying works (Alberro, 2004).

In the post-1990s globalized visual arts field, the selections, arrangements, descriptions, and displays of the independent curator are creative gestures with the potential to span from city to city and biennial to biennial, from Athens and Dakar to Taipei and Sao Paolo (O’Neill, 2016; Green and Gardner, 2016). The work of the independent curator is both intellectual and inspirational, combining the Western (and globalized) imaginary of nomadism and cosmopolitanism with attention to local sensibilities and knowledge. While the ascent of this figure to a global art mediator cannot be reduced to a single cultural-ideological paradigm, the space it primarily inhabits is linked to the Western-driven cultural and even geographical imaginary. For instance, traditional trendsetting biennials, such as *documenta* and the Venice Biennale, occur in contexts that favor Western and middle-class mobility and affordability, ranging from the Schengen visa requirement to familiarity with liberal-intellectual codes. Western curators, or graduates from Western institutions, are disproportionally represented in international exhibitions (Philimonos and Kompatsiaris, 2021; Chao and Kompatsiaris, 2020). Similar to the 19th-century travelers and explorers that Mary Louis Pratt describes in her book *Imperial Eyes* (1992), the “global”, English-speaking curator can produce the rest of the world for art-curious publics by simplifying and storifying the complexities of local “contact zones” (Pratt, 1992: 5; Buurman, 2018; Clifford, 1988). The curatorial figure and their artistic sphere already inhabit the middle-class values of education, cosmopolitanism, improvement, and a desire to map out the “other”.

The artistic is certainly not exhausted in the curatorial aspirational address but has been infiltrating the political economy of capitalism in various ways at least since the 1970s, such as in the rise of mass advertising and consumption, and later the precaritization of labor and mass customization. Indicatively, and notably, Jean Baudrillard highlights the dominance of sign-value over use-value in post-war consumer societies (1998). Later cultural study theorists (drawing from Baudrillard, among others) show that the self in these consumer societies is increasingly aesthetically fashioned (e.g., Featherstone, 1987; Lash and Urry, 2002; Skeggs, 2013). What these debates tell us is that aestheticization is an arena of contestation, as class, gender, and ethnicity, among other variables, are marked via consumption practices (more in Chapters 3 and 6). Shapiro and Heinich maintain that aestheticization is part of an overwhelming process of what they call the “artification” of social life in modernity, affecting not only persons but a “motley collection” of phenomena, including “painting, printing, crafts, cartoons, graffiti, tribal art, outsider art, cult objects, national heritage,

photography, cinema, theatre, circus, breakdancing, magic, luxury fashion, gastronomy, and jazz” (2012: 3). As mentioned in the previous chapter, artification refers to the process of individualizing, recategorizing, and intellectualizing social phenomena by linking them with art-specific tropes. There is, for instance, the example of luxury brands, which cannot simply increase supply to cover demand as they pursue growth as this would inflict damage to their luxury status (Kapferer, 2014). One way to do that, for Jean-Noël Kapferer, is to strive for artification, described as a “growing multiplication of associations of luxury brands with artists, galleries, and museums”, as a means to safeguard their status (2014: 372). Luxury brands artify themselves through these associations by linking their name with an atmosphere of exclusivity and uniqueness, traditionally associated with the art world. As we shall see in Chapter 4, fashion’s artification increasingly exploits the “sub-cultural capital” and bohemianism of artistic figures, as with the examples of Balenciaga, Burberry, and others (Thornton, 1996). In areas such as gastronomy and life coaching, as we shall see in Chapters 4–6, the artification of an entity (e.g., a dish, a chef, a coach, a client) is processed via curated photoshoots and highlighting discourses around individuality, inspiration, and creativity. From a political-economic perspective, artification is an outcome of the growth imperative and market competition in advanced capitalism (a point that Shapiro and Heinich do not themselves emphasize), with uniqueness and singularity being potential value adders.¹

Curation merges artification with the imaginary of organization, in contrast to that of the artistic; the curatorial is more pragmatic and its rationale is structured by practices of setting up, arranging, networking, administrating. The curatorial thus bears fewer connotations of an independent creative process, free from institutional constraints, than the artistic does, including its reliance on market institutions, sponsorship, and funding, which are essential aspects for the curatorial mandate. To simply bring in the process of artification, for instance, to speak about the organizers of AirBnB Experiences or apps that promise to make you “the most interesting person in the room” by customizing the news you read,² fails to account for the new business models that entrepreneurs of the platform economy should undertake or for the organizational labor standing behind inspirational content. Similarly, in the self-help and wellness literature (Chapter 6), the construction of the self is not simply an aesthetic process; it is also operational, rational, and guided—setting up the ideal of a higher better version of the self. In other words, if the artistic is magic and the organizational is logic, the curatorial is somewhere in between, combining rational decision-making with contingency, lack, and serendipity.

This chapter places curation in its historical, ideological, and affective registers as it plays out in contemporary mediascapes. I start with a brief historical overview of the curator, from their administrative function in ancient Rome and spiritual role in the Christian Church to that of an expert knowledge worker in museums. In this latter role, apart from caring about objects,

curators group them together under narratives of historical, stylistic, or archaeological anchoring points. I focus on these expert narratives from the perspective of material culture highlighting the negotiation of values in institutional formations and human interaction. In this regard, a museum object amalgamates wider networks of expert knowledge to become a document of something that human societies regard as valuable. In this sense, there is a degree of contingency between a museum object, or any materiality, and its cultural and symbolic value.

This brings me to the discussion of the readymade and the “contingent object of contemporary art” (Buskirk, 2014: 5), whose value relies even more profoundly on expert curatorial mediation as it often does not carry visible traces of style, technique, or skill (that is, features through which people are socialized to understand art). In a context where mediation becomes an arbiter of artistic value, art curation develops into a practice mediating increased symbolic capital, which can elevate individual curators to the status of auteurs, that is, authors of original works of art in the literary and (later) cinematic tradition (Lubar, 2014). The rise of the independent curator to a creator is attendant on the conceptual moment that “liberated” the profession in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly via the biennial circuit. In the final section, I discuss digital curation practices, arguing that the popularization of the inspirational and semi-intellectual persona of the independent curator is key for turning curation into an object of desire, investment, and fascination. I also argue that the business appropriation of the term should not be (merely) lamented as a moral aberration, neoliberal abuse, or misrepresentation; instead, the market imperative of platform curation already inhabits the entrepreneurial figure of the independent art curator.

2.2 Curators from Ancient Rome to Modern Museums

The profession of curator has a long history, which, for the most part, unfolded independently of the gallery and the museum—the institutions with which curating is mainly associated today. The curator’s career as a professional title goes as far back as ancient Rome; etymologically the word derives from the Latin word *cura*, meaning care, assistance, and guardianship but also treatment or cure. In the Roman Empire, curators were appointed public servants with administrative, caretaking, and protecting duties in regard to humans, objects, and institutional entities (Madžoski, 2013: 13). Curators could be guardians or overseers of minors and lunatics, financial custodians of cities, or overseers of public services such as sanitation and water supply (Hunter, 1803; Peachin, 2005). Throughout Roman history, their titles and roles were in a state of flux, a fact that signifies the richness and multiplicity of the term from its early uses. For instance, curators were appointed by an official to protect a person past puberty, who was declared unfit to manage their civic matters, including spendthrifts, minors, the mentally ill, and even “the deaf, the dumb, the incurably diseased” (Hunter, 1803: 732).³ In turn, a

figure like the *curator rei publicae* was an appointed, and later elected, government official of relative prestige, whose main function was to “investigate and supervise, on a short-term basis, the finances of individual civic communities” (Mennen, 2011: 69). The work of a *curator rei publicae* was mainly administrative, involving “the investment of town funds; the retention of public assets within the public domain; the prompt execution of bequests to the town; the integrity of town lands; and the application of grain funds to their intended purpose” (Duncan-Jones, 1987: 253). Other curatorial titles were *curatores annonae*, who were caretakers of food supplies, *curatores regionum*, who were overseers of Roman city districts and *curatores aquarum* who were in charge of water supplies and aqueducts.⁴

The curator’s caretaker role in ancient Rome was multiple yet mostly administrative; starting from the Middle Ages and in the context of the Catholic Church, this role became more explicitly spiritual: the cure of the soul. In the Middle Ages, “curate” (as a noun) was a title given by bishops or other high clergy to another member of the clergy who was in charge of the spiritual well-being of a parish (the title still exists today). The curate’s tenure, permanent or temporary depending on the circumstances, was a period of training on curing the souls in the form of a shared ministry, which works in and through the larger collective of the church rather than as an individual endeavor. Indicatively, in a 1964 letter titled *Letter to the New Curate*, the Irish poet Conleth Ellis addressed their new local curate as someone for whom the community has “an awe of the powers of your hands and your voice”, someone who they look to as “the incarnation of His powers, a continuation of His work among men”, assuming that he is “uninterested in money and the good things of this world” (1964: 494). Implying asceticism, the curate’s role concerns the well-being of members of the ecclesiastical community, catering, preserving, and elevating their souls to a loftier, godly state. In this religious context, the curate inhabits a figure of spiritual power and prestige, with the tropes of asceticism and sacrifice potentially confirming his (and later hers) legitimacy: to better curate souls.

In the 20th century, with the birth of national and later modern art museums, “curator” became a title given to permanent museum staff⁵ in charge of the institution’s collections varying from art, national, and natural history to technological, heritage, and ethnographic exponents. In museum cultures, the curator is expected to rationalize and give meaning to a museum’s collection, that is to group, archive, and arrange objects under a common narrative (Horie, 1986). They are expected to be experts in the area related to the collection, an expertise which should result in the effective cataloguing and contextualizing of objects. Effectiveness here relates to how successfully a museum performs its prescribed public role, which is mainly to educate the public and enable knowledge which improves, in one way or another, human societies. The objects in these collections, as we discuss in more detail in the next section, are not random but selected for their capacity to stand as testimonies which index a specific age, space, or culture. This

documentary value of objects, a materiality *standing for* a larger history, endows museums with an identity, a “brand”, so to say, which the curator is both subservient to and the co-creator of. An archaeological museum on ancient Egypt, for example, would consist of a collection of objects expected to enable knowledge on this specific civilization; if it does not, it will be publicly perceived as a failed museum. The curator’s role here is crucial, as they need to mobilize their expertise for making objects speak, connecting objects with narratives, and placing these narratives within the museum’s larger identity. Since the early museum days, the role of curator was to give additional meaning to certain material objects through their expertise.

The most obvious documents in this discussion consist of historical, archaeological, or art objects, whose value tends to be considered irrefutable and often part of the national or universal heritage. Yet with the rapid industrialization of material culture, the acceleration of technological advances and the rapid obsolescence of technical devices, the timespan within which an object can be metamorphosized from an everyday object to an object worthy of appreciation becomes dramatically reduced. A “Nokia phone” or a “Soviet toy” are now artifacts of technological archaeology, indicating distinct cultures from the contemporary zeitgeist. Museum objects can expand to literally anything, ranging, from

catalogues and advertising literature, [...] posters, badges, public health notices, greeting cards, [...] patent models, patent specifications, and prototypes of objects, [...] scale models, two and three-dimensional miniatures, drawings and prints, [...] memorabilia, [...] innovators, ethnic groups, and special practices”, as well as “objects currently in use, or recently invented, especially if they may become significant.

(Davis, 1980: 98)

Already within the museum context, the scope of the curatorial profession has expanded both quantitatively, as experts need to be found for all these types of increasingly different objects, and qualitatively, as more informed narratives are needed for museums to be distinguished from other forms of visual display, including social media accounts, digital galleries, or blogs.

Narratives about collections have what we can call anchoring points, including morphological, chronological, and geographical registers (or all of the above), around which they are structured (such as, “sculpture in ancient Mesopotamia”, “burial objects of the Hellenistic Period” or “rock posters from the 1970s”). We will meet these anchoring points also later in the case studies discussed in Part 2. As a museum official, the curator applies their expert knowledge to produce a coherent narrative. Yet, a museum curator as permanent or semi-permanent staff needs to follow the institution’s broader agendas, which is in turn related to its funding bodies, board of trustees, governmental power, and the “truths” structuring respective national identities.

As for any act of interpretation, grouping things together under a common narrative is not an objective process free from larger museum politics. As we shall see, it is precisely through this unhinging from institutional dependency that independent curators gain the status of public intellectuals.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's idea that every document of a civilization is also a document of barbarism, Vesna Madžoski argues that in the context of colonial museums these precious objects stand for a representation of history written by the victors: "the acquisition of the majority of those objects is anything but innocent; they were brought from somewhere, taken from someone, dead or alive" (2013: 32). The narratives of colonial museum objects as unique artifacts of a civilization, for example, in the Louvre or the British Museum, conceal the barbarity of their acquisition inflicted by violence and colonialism.

The Sarr–Savoy report (2018), commissioned by the French government, stirred a potent debate in European museum and acquisitions discourse related to the unconditional return of museum objects that were acquired through looting.⁶ A curator at the Musée d'Orsay cannot possibly admit that the collections they host are results of colonialism or looting as this would create the discursive conditions for colonized countries reclaiming these collections ("why you do not give them to us if you admit they are stolen?"). The curators' role then in these museum environments can even entail something more sinister, that is to enable "educated" narratives that would neutralize, if not silence, the colonial relations that made the appearance of these objects possible. Thus, apart from being caretakers of collections, curators are also tamers of objects, or sharpen the edges of collections by positioning them in discourses and institutional rituals. This is not to say that objects inhabit some "vibrant matter", which, if left uncontrolled, will spread havoc to their museum hosts (Bennett, 2020); but to say that—as in every representation of knowledge—the act of positioning objects within organized narratives presumes that some of their aspects are highlighted while others are silenced. Ethnographic or national Western museums are an obvious case in point, but one can think of representations pertaining to knowledge of national cultures in general. For instance, the representation of victory against Nazis in World War II is a case in point of conflicting interpretations; American museums highlight the role of the American army, Russian museums the victory of the Red Army and the liberation of Auschwitz, National Museums in the Baltics tell a story of competing totalitarianisms, and so on. The curatorial storytelling of objects chooses which stories to tell and which to exclude, which to highlight and which to undermine.

The curators in these national spaces must adjust, more or less, to national narratives as they are state employees who need to accommodate their story to the larger imperatives of nation building. The "liberation" of the profession of the curator from institutional shackles marks a symbolic revolt precisely against this figure of the curator as an institutional and state employee.

2.3 Expertise, Value, and Materiality in Museum Spaces

Before continuing with the evolution of the profession of the curator after the 1960s and 1970s in art contexts, I shall make a short, yet crucial, detour to theorize curating vis-a-vis value production as this will prove helpful in the later chapters. The main idea I would like to examine is that the selection, display, and storytelling of items—all key aspects of curating—are gestures producing economic and symbolic value. We will return to this process of value creation throughout this book as it is particularly relevant to the contemporary curating economy. According to the material culture perspective, objects do not inhabit essences which position them in unambiguous ways within a social order (e.g., Kopytoff, 2017; Hooper-Greenhill, 2020; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2020; Kompatsiaris and Chrysagis, 2020; Attfield, 2020). Instead, their meaning and positioning is to a larger or lesser degree contingent upon the interpretations, framing, and discourse enabled in and through social interaction. This is even more so for objects that are perceived as documents or testimonies of knowledge. The status of a document is not self-explanatory or given; from a discourse theory perspective, objects must be inserted within discourses in order to be considered as documents in the first place. For the media theorist Nico Carpentier, discourses are defined “as knowledge structures that consist out of systemically articulated signifiers that together form reasonably stable entities” (2022: 94), that is, ritualistically repetitive claims of knowledge which shape an interpretative stability regarding entities. To give an example, an advertising poster from the 19th century needs to be positioned within a relatively stable discourse, say of “early printing technologies” or “modern marketing methods”, so as to become a document. Once it is a document, it can further highlight or challenge this discourse. In this regard, the role of the curator in a museum is key as it carries the expert narratives through which an object is discursively constructed as worthy of appreciation rather than “mere stuff”. As experts are key in formulating knowledge—precisely because they occupy a higher plane of prestige within fields of knowledge—expert narratives offer stability to particular discursive formations.

This does not mean that the materiality of objects is irrelevant; on the contrary, materiality provides a given platform with specific possibilities for interpretation, which in turn can dictate which interpretations can be more plausible, popular, or preferred and which can be ruled out. In other words, materiality is not a secondary aspect in shaping knowledge but “intimately knotted and entangled, and in permanent interaction with the discursive” (Carpentier, 2022: 96). Materiality then has a *forensic* value, so to say, as the given materiality of a displayed object allows it to be framed in a specific way so as to be convincing and thus authorize a regime of value, present or future. The advertising poster, to return to the example above, has certain irrefutable material properties, which can evidence a number of things, such as the technologies used for its production, the style employed by its creators in terms of shapes, colors, and forms or the very material it uses as its medium.

The display of an object as a museum document does not emerge out of an objective truth; while attributes like scarcity, age, uniqueness, and the capacity to index a culture do play a role, its display is ultimately a gesture of selection with social, political, and cultural implications.

The cases we can discuss here to highlight this point are many but let us see how a natural object, such as a moon rock, becomes a valuable museum object (Pearce, 1994). For anyone apart from those with expert geological knowledge, a rock taken from the moon would appear as an ordinary rock that would probably arouse little or no interest. That is, if seen in an environment where there are no narratives about it, anyone could mistake it for an earth rock, which most probably would entail indifference. Its materiality, in other words, would be insignificant. Once a moon rock is *selected* on the basis of its physical properties by an expert institution to be a museum piece, however, its very materiality transforms in front of our eyes. From the ordinary object it once was, it changes, almost magically, into something precious, upon which all sorts of political, social, and cultural investments can be projected. Politicians can describe it as a national treasure, museum audiences can take selfies in front of it, people can discuss it over dinner with friends, argue about its origins, implicate it in conspiracy theories, and so on. The same materiality is suddenly animated by expert knowledge, which elevates it from mere stuff to an object indexing the moon. Referring to a moon rock displayed in the National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C., the cultural theorist Susan M. Pearce says that

the moon rock is an actual piece of the moon retrieved by the Apollo17 mission. There is nothing particularly appealing about the rock; it is a rather standard piece of volcanic basalt some 4 million years old. Yet, unlike many other old rocks, this one comes displayed in an altar-like structure, set in glass, and is complete with full-time guard and an ultrasensitive monitoring device.

(Meltzer, 1981 in Pearce, 1994:10)

It is “through its selection and display” that the moon rock has “become a part of the world of human values, a part which, evidently, every visitor wants to bring within his own personal value system” (Pearce, 1994: 10). What then “distinguishes the ‘discrete lumps’ from the rest”, Pearce continues, “is the cultural value it is given”, as “the crucial idea is that of selection, and *it is the act of selection which turns a part of the natural world into an object and a museum piece*” (Pearce, 1994:10, emphasis added). Framing the rock’s materiality in expert language turns this otherwise tedious object into an exceptional piece that stands apart from the rest in an altar, it individualizes and artifies it. The materiality of the rock—its surface, chemical composition, shape, and so on—can provide possibilities and limitations for its interpretation and framing, but ultimately it is the expert discourse that inserts it into the world of human values (see Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 The Moon Rock in National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.

To expand on the relationship between expert discourses and a document's value beyond the walls of the museum, one can think of how the material culture of past civilizations is curated in the context of prevailing epistemic paradigms, as they circulate and get localized in spatio-temporal contexts. In this vein, the archaeologist Yiannis Hamilakis discusses the transformation of Greek antiquities from ruins or mere stuff to valuable objects indexing a glorious civilization (2009). For Hamilakis, this metamorphosis was the result of an expert discursive formation, an epistemic paradigm, that is to say the Enlightenment ideas, the rise of the political formation of the nation-state and Greece's invention by Europeans as the cradle of Western civilization. Asking, "what [...] ordinary people of the Hellenic Peninsula [thought] of antiquities in the centuries before the dissemination of the ideas of the nation and the foundation of the Greek nation-state", Hamilakis argues that during the Ottoman years and before Greece's War of Independence in 1821, the classical antiquities for ordinary people were a "peculiar otherness" rather than indexes or documents of knowledge (2009: 65). As such, they were "tightly integrated in the web of daily life", either as architectural structures for fortification purposes, ancient temples becoming churches or statues invested with legends or myths (Hamilakis, 2009: 65). As the privileged signifier of

the “Greek nation” gained currency among intellectuals and some elites in Europe, the same ruins were now elevated from the domain of everyday life to highly significant documents that had to be preserved and enclosed through ticket admissions and special lighting or by developing knowledge around them, such as in conferences, catalogues, and visual memoirs. By “reworking and recasting western ideals, a process of interweaving these ideas within the cultural matrix of pre-modern society” (Hamilakis, 2009: 75), these ruins underwent a process of artification, as Shapiro and Heinich describe it, indicating European glory. The Enlightenment discourse, as an epistemic formation emphasizing a “return to the classics”, granted to Western and then local experts the authority to curate ruins, metamorphosizing them from everyday stuff to extremely valuable documents of a civilization.

2.4 The Rise of the “Curator as Author” in Contemporary Art

This detour to material culture approaches underlines key aspects of the curation economy regarding the relation between value and expertise, namely it indicates the relatively contingent character of value production for objects on display and its reliance on trusted authorities. This is crucial to note, as this contingency between symbolic and economic value, displayed objects and trusted experts is more apparent in contemporary art, which is the context within which the curator is elevated to the level of an auteur. In contemporary art, this mode of assigning value pushes contingency to its limits, as potentially *any* materiality can become art in a gallery space, provided it is conceptualized and contextualized as such. This is what Martha Buskirk notably calls the “contingent object” of contemporary art (2014), as the metamorphosis of mere stuff to art depends on the ability of an art-expert to construct convincing concepts and contexts around this object.

The figure of the readymade, mass produced, industrial object nominated—rather than made—as art and the legacy of Marcel Duchamp are here key. Duchamp suggested with the readymade that the *idea* to exhibit a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, or a fountain—that is, “random” cultural objects—merits artistic value. The materiality of an object, the skill used to produce it, or the aesthetic style it inhabits matter less (or do not matter at all) when compared to the conceptualization and contextualization of this materiality. It is a legitimized authority, an expert—that is the artist themselves—who can nominate random stuff as art. The groundbreaking reception of Duchamp in the high art of post-war America and Europe, in the post-retinal art movements of minimalism, conceptualism, and the pop art of the 1960s and 1970s, which has been also dubbed as the “Duchamp effect” (Buskirk and Nixon, 1996), gave currency to the idea that the gesture of selection potentially merits authorial value.⁷ The artist here is an alchemist, as “Duchamp transforms industrial vulgarity into a work of art” in the same way that an alchemist endeavors to transform the physical properties of matter (Moutsopoulos, 2021: 49). In short, the legacy of Duchamp’s readymade tells

us that any object, even if industrially produced, can be elevated into an art object through appropriate framing. In this process the category of the artist and thus of the artistic authority is transformed. As Thierry de Duve puts it:

it had become legitimate to be an artist without being either a painter, or a poet, or a musician, or a sculptor, novelist, architect, photographer, choreographer, or filmmaker. A new “category” of art appeared—art in general, or art at large—that was no longer absorbed in the traditional disciplines. Now, it is to this “category” that, clearly, Marcel Duchamp’s unassisted readymades belong, the earliest of which—the bottle rack—dates from 1914. A bottle rack is neither a painting, a poem, nor a piece of music; it’s art, or else it’s nothing. If it is not impossible to see it as a sculpture, that’s on the condition that one initially viewed it as art.

(de Duve, 1994: 63)

It is upon this new category of “art in general, or art at large” that the independent curator becomes an auteur; in this new category there is a necessary and constitutive decoupling of art from the “burden” of handcraft technique or skill, which opens up the possibility of endowing artistic agency exclusively to intellectual associations. The theorist John Roberts sees the artistic valorization of intellectual labor as part of a dialectic of deskilling–reskilling in advanced capitalism (2007). This involves a process in which the artist as productive worker is deskilled (i.e., handcraft technique is not a prerequisite for being an artist anymore), and reskilling as conceptual art requires new skills, that is conceptual thinking, mediation, and elaborated interpretations. With art coming closer to theory, and vice versa, this also summons an epistemic paradigm upon which the authorial power of the independent curator rests. Under this epistemic paradigm curators from museum staff are transformed “to impresarios with an acute ability to make relevant the dizzying world of stuff around us” (Arnold, 2015: 317).

The independent curator is not simply an organizer, a meager nerd of history and archives, or a cog fixing national imperatives but a creative persona on their own, potentially an author in the literary or filmmaking tradition, that is, someone who has a vision, style, and informed viewpoint about how their practice converses with the world. This signals the curator’s “liberation in the conceptualist moment”, which is marked from a transition “from caretaker to connoisseur” (Blazer, 2014: 47), introducing the curator into the authorial canon as an actor (potentially) independent from institutional museum politics. “Liberated” curators do not have to merely be permanent museum staff but can be hired in project-based exhibitions or be guest curators in museums (Arnold, 2015: 327). This opens up the profession to the market economy and offers enhanced opportunities to control the curatorial narrative. In biennials, for instance, which are prestigious outlets of this new curatorial role, curators are typically not permanent institutional employees and have some creative freedom to set up their own discourse.

Thus, an independent curator does not have to describe a looted object in a museum in a way that conceals its histories of colonization, as mentioned above, but instead can denounce colonialism together with the institution's colonial histories (e.g., in the fashion for example of Okwui Enwezor or Adam Szymczyk in Documenta 14, see Kompatsiaris, 2020). These curators can make a name for themselves in the intellectual marketplace as critics instead of simply as bureaucrats.

Somewhere around the 1970s and 1980s, the professional title of the curator started undergoing a linguistic, affective, and cultural shift among art professionals and in the wider public debate:

Before World War II, the organization of exhibitions was the task of what was called the “museum curator”, with the title's implications of attachment to a stable institution and attention to building up and caring for a permanent collection. That role, as the etymological roots of *curare* or “taking care” imply, was mainly related to the interpretation of art and the preservation of artworks. In the decades after World War II, there was a shift from this type of “museum curator” toward what would eventually be called an “exhibition auteur”, which is to say, the role of the “curator” as we understand it today. [...] This shift and the debate about what a “curator” is and does only really began in the nineteen-sixties. [...] Over time, a curator's work thus proved to be less about “caring for” in the sense of preserving art than about “discovering” lesser-known artists, movements, and scenes, a veritable profession shaped by master courses, thematic symposia, and conferences.

(Martini and Martini 2010: 262–262, cited in Madžoski, 2013: 34)

The new authorial persona of the curator is well established not only in ordinary artworld chatter but in curatorial studies and prominent texts in the field (O'Neill, 2016; Bishop, 2023; O'Neill, Wilson, 2010; Altshuler, 1994). The rise of the curator as “creator” (Altshuler, 1994: 236), “auteur” (O'Neill, 2016: 5), and “producer” (Smith, 2012: 46)⁸ are demonstrative of what the critic Rossen Ventsislavov declares in a categorical way: the curator's work “should be understood as fine art” (2014: 83). Recognizable curators in the biennial and museum circuit, such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Candice Hopkins, and Katerina Gregos, to name just a few, produce authorial public discourse with exhibitionary and non-exhibitionary means. As all-round auteurs and public intellectuals, contemporary art curators compose texts, give talks, edit catalogues, and organize events that tend to grapple not only with art historical but also with social matters. Endowed with an aura of sophistication, artfulness, and cosmopolitanism, the figure of the curator signals an expansive, *independent* practice.⁹

“Independence” is a word that rings true in aspirational class discourse and there is no better example of an independent curator whose life and professional career inspires beyond the artworld's touch than the global trotter,

Hans Ulrich Obrist (HAU). In the last twenty years, Obrist has recurrently been included in the artworld's *Powerlist*, often figuring at the top; one can argue that the dissemination of the curatorial imaginary to the global artworld and its adjacent fields, owes much to Obrist's popular persona as mobile, path-crossing, interdisciplinary, cosmopolitical, networked, innovative, and experimental (Buurman, 2018). For instance, Obrist is credited with enlarging the boundaries of the art field through "infinite conversations" not only with artists but with figures arousing cultural interest as diverse as Björk, Michel Houellebecq, Ken Loach, and Tariq Ali, in marathon interviews as director of the Serpentine Galleries and in a series of books (Obrist, 2014: Ch.9). The interview format, a format associated with journalism or academic research, in the hands of Obrist becomes the primary material for establishing art curation as a more expansive practice (e.g., by selecting the participants, setting up the debates and themes, or designing the interview space).

The theorist Nanne Buurman captures Obrist's own self-fashioning in the autobiographical *Ways of Curating* (2014) that crafts a "hyper-mobile globally networking way of life" that not only feeds the curatorial global imaginary but "epitomizes neoliberal norms of subjectivity" (Buurman, 2018: 302). For instance, his autobiography refers to how his tireless art traveling taught him to sleep in unconventional places, like in night trains that he refers to as "a travelling laboratory for testing such practices", and drinking 50 cups of coffee per day to keep himself awake (2014: Ch.11). Instead of acknowledging the privilege of an educated Western middle-upper class professional with possible burnout symptoms, Obrist romanticizes these experiences as "attempts to try out alternative ways of organizing daily life" (Obrist, 2014: Ch.11). Here, Obrist exemplifies the new curator not only as an uprooted global auteur but also as a hyper-productive worker (Balzer, 2014), while his work ethic rhetorically demolishes one of the last frontiers of capitalist value extraction, that of sleep (Crary, 2014). As a more-than-artworld persona, Obrist performs the "implications of curating in times of neoliberal globalization" (Buurman, 2018: 301), and, as such, is an ideal bridge between the figure of the independent art curator and the distributed curatorial imaginary.

2.5 "Organize Your Passion", or Curating as Business

The distribution of curating as an affective and wider cultural modality in the post-2010s, borrows from Obrist's and generally the independent curator's creative, nomadic, and inspirational façade. Yet it more explicitly directs this persona to business rather than to the aimless drifting or the potential decadence linked to the artistic imaginary. Contrary to the independent curator's frequent questioning of the structures of domination, the discourse around internet curation is underpinned by a techno-utopian vision that holds the liberatory promise of technology. This is the spirit of the libertarian

Californian ideology as described by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996) yet lacking the countercultural and communitarian twist that the latter upheld, at least in its earlier years. If Californian ideology amounts to a “blend of libertarian politics, countercultural aesthetics, and technoutopian visions” (Turner, 2008: 208), then the curatorial imaginary voids out counter-aesthetic and political visions in favor of a positivist, technoutopian prophecy with an exclusively entrepreneurial outlook. In the digital marketing and business literature as well as in the countless online guides of the past decade with titles such as, “what media curation is” or “how to curate content”, platform curation and its satellite terms—internet curation, digital curation, social media curation, brand curation—relate entirely to business solutions (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2011; 2014; Bhaskar, 2016). In this discourse, curating, curation, curated, and curator denote activities of selecting, displaying, and authorizing content, including music, food, or film, so as to raise the value of a service or to make it more attractive to buyers; the language used is unashamedly entrepreneurial, with constant references to brands, networking, leadership, profit, and target audiences. Having been detached from the critical edge of the histories of museum and gallery space, the curator here becomes a blanket-title of an empowered, media-savvy, entrepreneurial expert, who can package the best for their clients or followers. As the curator moves from galleries to hashtags, there is a marked shift from curation as an activity intervening in the public sphere, or a sort of *Bildung* enterprise of civic cultivation, to curation as a streamlined activity for generating market value.

There is an understandable discomfort among professional art curators and critics about the seizure of the term,¹⁰ suggesting that the market is abusing the more ethical or morally elevated practice of gallery curation. In the 2017 article, *Curating and the End of Professions*, Lianne McTavish aptly captures this discomfort as now even “a dry-cleaning business”, that is an ordinary profit-making enterprise, “boasts of its ability to curate your laundry”:

How can these diverse and in some cases rather mundane activities be considered curating? Why does the verb “to curate” continue to be used so broadly, with apparently little regard for the skills, education, and training of professional curators?

(2017: 181)

On top of this, there is another abuse, McTavish continues, as media curators snub down the history of art curating not only by having “little to do with the identity of the professional curator” but also by considering it “largely irrelevant if not entirely defunct” (2017: 188); while “real” curators are the ones who have degrees, education, and knowledge on the subject of museums, media curators are sort of disrespectful imposters. This appropriation signals the broader blurring of the professional roles in advanced capitalism, as

job titles are fluid—if not irrelevant—in the context of a “post-professional world” (McTavish, 2017: 183).

Yet one can argue that the shift to the curator-entrepreneur was already implicit in the previous shift from the museum curator, an institutional employee, to the independent curator, who, as we saw, became an authorial figure shaping their own intellectual agendas. It was implicit as the profession—and thus the linguistic and affective usage of the term—opened up to the market, including competition, global opportunities, project work, and risk-taking as well as traveling, cosmopolitanism, and all-round conceptual thinking. In this sense, the term’s market appropriation and distortion are not straightforward, the seeds of this appropriation were present in the “liberationist moment” of the curatorial profession itself: as an independent actor, the art curator had already become an integral part of the capitalist economy of creativity, public relations, connectivity, and networking. While there is a certain misrepresentation of the profession in its entrepreneurial usage, it is also not entirely coincidental that so many market actors choose to employ precisely this term to speak about their business practices. The appearance of the independent art curator and the curator-as-entrepreneur are both an effect of the same growth paradigm based on the incessant production and valorization of objects and information, which in turn requires experts to sort out the mess and make communication purposeful.

This is also the implicit *raison d’être* of media curation in the entrepreneurial literature as its rise occurs at the moment when big data and digital abundance makes it extremely difficult for users to discern valuable content. These entrepreneurial guides, handbooks, or reflection pieces naturalize the growth paradigm that capitalism is based on, with the social role of the media curator framed, if not explicitly in terms of *Bildung*, then at least as a practice that improves societies by filtering out the noise. For instance, in *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess*, Michael Bhaskar reserves a unique role for curation: it is an empowering response that restores prudence and logic against uncontrollable excess: “in the context of excess, curation isn’t just a buzzword. It makes sense of the world” (2016: 45). Thus, curation is about knowledge and expertise not simply random selection: “it’s not just that curators are selectors; they’re expert selectors” and curation’s value “is never just about selection. It’s about knowledgeable selection, knowledge you can’t fake” (2016: 208–209). Curation, according to this market logic, responds to a social need, that is, the customer’s need for self-fashioning and belonging in the contemporary chaotic world, which emerges as an outcome of the “natural” development of capitalism. This is similar to the *Bildung* idea of self-cultivation, yet its fundamental unit is not the citizen but the consumer.

In this story, “real” contemporary art curators can be seen as the “founders”, the role-models who embody the inspirational, informed, mobile, and unique subject of the art field that strives for innovation, originality, great ideas, and

travel. For example, Bhaskar is fascinated by Obrist's "high-impact" activities, that is, his entrepreneurial abilities:

Hans Ulrich Obrist and Stéphanie Moisdon are two of the world's most celebrated curators. Known in the art scene as tastemakers and jetsetters—Obrist alone has made over two thousand trips in the last two decades—they are power curators. The fast-talking and hyperactive Obrist in particular, with his record of "high impact" shows, series of books, and globetrotting agenda, has become the model of a contemporary art curator. Clad in distinctive transparent glasses and scribbling endless notes, Obrist has topped the ArtReview Power 100, an influence bellwether. That a curator could top the list is an indication of how far curating has come. No longer niche players, curators are now what the German critic Willi Bongard has called "Popes of art".

(2016: 125–126)

The fascination for Obrist here expresses a business-savvy alpha-maleness, such as with words like "power curator" and "pope", combined with a sense of awe and wonder in respect to unstoppable traveling ("two thousand trips"), which in the context of global capitalism is essentially an upper-middle-class affordability. Bhaskar further praises Obrist's idea to endow curatorial agency to multiple actors and blow the profession "wide open" in the 2007 Lyon Biennale, which he co-curated. Here, the "genius" of Obrist feeds into the orbit of an entrepreneurial and innovative success story, which nevertheless maintains its philosophical playfulness and expressive freedom as it can be bold enough to perform a self-referential deconstruction of the curatorial profession, a sort of meta-curating:

But back in Lyon, Obrist and Moisdon wanted to be a little different. Rather than selecting and organizing artists and artworks, they selected a further sixty people to get involved. Many of these were curators in their own right and had now been designated players in an intricate art-world game. Each of these "players" would select an artist for inclusion in the program. Each player chosen by Obrist and Moisdon was a mini-curator. So, effectively what you had is—wait for it—curators curating curators curating. And then, given that they also made artists and critics curators, the whole category of curator had been blown wide open. Everyone was a curator. This was hyper-curation, curation cubed. The thinking behind the show was that, as the world becomes more complex, so no artist or curator can individually represent it.

(2016: 127–128)

Bhaskar speaks with a similar fascination about the genius of Duchamp: "Marcel Duchamp was a troublemaker", Bhaskar tells us (2016: 136), bringing to mind the now classic 1997 Apple *Think Different* campaign that was devoted

to “the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently—they’re not fond of rules” (Street, 2016). This embodies the wider cultural mandate to “think out of the box”, to innovate and to be different. The explicit market appropriation of their creative imagination is probably not what these artworld actors signed up for—Obrist himself warns against the boundless curatorial spillover from art to popular culture—this “contemporary resonance, however, risks producing a kind of bubble in the value attached to the idea of curating, and has to be resisted”, he says (2014: Ch.4). Yet the entrepreneurial fascination with the affective and sophisticated tropes of contemporary art is not something that can simply be attributed to a misrepresentation of the market actors: by becoming “independent” in the context of neoliberalism, art curating itself had already embraced entrepreneurial tropes and modes of subjectification (see also Esanu, 2021).

2.6 Conclusions

This genealogical reading of curators as professionals and curating as a socialized activity places the curatorial imperative in the context of a globalizing aspirational imaginary. From the 2000s onwards and especially after the 2010s, the title of the “curator”, through the symbolic capital it gained in art contexts as an expert of good taste, has opened up to explicitly embrace market actors, that is, actors who pursue economic capital. Curating in the post-2010s context has pivoted to a neoliberal rationality of individuals seeking to “galvanize and publish their passions and knowledge in a way that will create value from personal passions and niche expertise”, as the curation guru puts it (Rosenbaum, 2011: Ch.1). Curators are now the countless micro-experts of a new world of information abundance and creativity, personas who mediate value production via their own CVs, networks, and cultural capital and who can organize their passions as business endeavors.

I argue that the ascent of the media curator is not a simply a result of misappropriation nor is it irrelevant to the historical development of the museum curator, but instead, it is specific to how the art field has been both commodified and dematerialized in capitalist modernity. The very usage of the term curator and its linguistic derivatives is a vehicle of artifying a social relation, that is to say, adding value to a product or service by associating it with art-related tropes. The necessity to touristify cities through art events, grabbing the audience’s attention in an attention economy, and making “every business a stage” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, see also Chapter 5), is a market imperative capitalizing on creative-sounding language; this is not only linguistic appropriation by market actors but part of the historical development of consumer society (see also Baudrillard, 1998 and Featherstone, 1987). Caught at these crossroads, the ideal of the contemporary art curator assembles an inspirational, sophisticated, and well-traveled persona in contemporary culture: the curator boyfriend as the “hottest accessory”, the

sophisticated curator-protagonist of the Square, and Obrist's nomadic persona are some of the archetypes of this crisscrossing between art and neoliberalism, creativity and business.

There is yet another reason why the ascent of the media curator is not irrelevant to the ascent of the contemporary art curator as a professional category. The curatorial logic of selecting and framing objects under an expert narrative has been embedded in contemporary art curation, the histories of art, and the readymade and the contingent object of contemporary art, at least since Duchamp. Yet this is also a key productive logic of neoliberalism and platform capitalism, as we shall see in the next chapter. For instance, the mandate to organize one's practices, emotions, and life paths as if these were part of a narrative—as I defined distributed curation earlier—is a larger social imperative of platformized lives. The incorporation of this logic is not a deviation from a “real” curatorial norm as the norm itself is constituted through this logic; it is simply part of the process of expanding the market economy into more spheres of life. Curation, as a social technology which incorporates the artistic and the organizational, promises a re-enchantment of a world pervaded by computerized rationality through the guidance of an expert, a micro-guru of knowledge who can tell how to discover uniqueness amid the chaos. Finally, the engagement with the term is not just a mistreatment but arises out of the market necessity of unceasingly inventing new regimes of value. The necessity to invent regimes of value sets in motion concepts to linguistically accompany these regimes. While the two can be thought of independently, there is a dialectical relationship between the name which market actors use to describe their activity (“curation”) and the activity itself, that is, making value out of organized narratives in platform capitalism. It is in this latter configuration that we will now turn our attention to.

Notes

- 1 Overall, artification as a form of branding (and self-branding) expands the artistic imaginary, previously reserved for art milieus, to a plethora of social phenomena.
- 2 This was the slogan of Curio, whose advertisement I have encountered countless times in my social media feeds during this research.
- 3 In the case of “unfit” minors, curators had a similar role to that of tutors in Roman society, who were responsible for all matters around pedagogical development. Interestingly, this curator's role as guardian of an unfit person is still present in the legal system of some European countries (e.g., in Scotland in the figure of *curator ad litem*). See www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20150220162034/www.gov.scot/Publications/2006/04/12093822/10
- 4 This is according to Encyclopedia Britannica, see <https://theodora.com/encyclopedia/c2/curator.html>
- 5 And sometimes to zoo staff overseeing the well-being of the animals.
- 6 The case of the Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza, who was arrested and fined for dislodging a stolen artifact from Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 2020, illustrates how the objects in these museums have to “obey” national narratives,

with the narrative around the object impacting the material conditions of its appearance.

- 7 Of course, Duchamp was not alone in doing this, movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, with which Duchamp was loosely related, and the Soviet avant-garde were all, one way or another suggesting it.
- 8 The Curator as Producer was also the title of the Manifesta 10 Journal in 2010.
- 9 Here there is no space to discuss how this shift got institutionally legitimized, especially though the biennial system; for an excellent discussion on the topic, see O'Neill (2016).
- 10 This can be expressed by curators often switching to other professional titles, such as "art directors".

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3 Curating and Platforms

3.1 Cute Animals

In a video posted on the Facebook page of the animal organization *The Dodo*, titled “Baby Goat Covered in Tar Gets Baths For Three Days And...”, animal rescuers save a baby goat covered in tar and clean it up for three days in special oil baths.¹ After cleaning, the goat becomes happy, playful, and its fur shines: the rescuers transform it from a miserable goat to a carefree goat jumping around in a field. The video has received more than 2 million reactions, 38,000 comments, and nearly 70,000 shares on Facebook, with users overwhelmed by the rescuers’ kindness and compassion. The Dodo is an organization with countless other videos featuring startling numbers and enthusiastic user responses on various social media platforms. The Dodo curates these pages under the overarching concept of “cute animality”: we see a sloth befriending a dog after being rescued by volunteers, a “widowed” goose mourning her deceased partner, a “single” parrot courting another parrot, thirsty armadillos, clumsy donkeys, and scruffy cats displaying their cunning and goofiness. For its founder, Izzie Lezer, countless cute animal videos are circulated daily in all corners of the internet, but no one “really owned the space” (Castillo, 2017). Similar to countless other entities that use platforms to create content by claiming a niche online territory, The Dodo curates a space that recruits content with “the right emotional kernel” (Castillo, 2017).

In this chapter, I read platformized curation via the market imperative to shape a previously shapeless informational space in the “right emotional kernel”, either from platforms themselves or from platform-based entrepreneurs, as curation goes beyond the artworld and can apply to any topic, from high-end fashion to home-based blogging about perfumes. Digital platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Uber, or Airbnb, are typically intermediaries that bring together a large number of users and suppliers in order to profit from their interaction (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Sadowski, 2020a; Belleflamme and Peitz, 2018). Facebook, for example, benefits from pages like The Dodo because it attracts more users and engagement in the platform, which offers Facebook more data, attention, and overall positive

network effects (Belleflamme and Peitz, 2018; see also Section 3.3). In turn, by curating its page on a platform with massive traffic and an architecture that can commodify communications, The Dodo increases its visibility, followers, subscribers, and therefore revenue. Thus, by platformized curation, I mean the curation of a service, product, entity, brand, or even an individual on a platform whose coding architecture allows for economic or symbolic capitalization. Platformized curation furthermore encompasses the ways that the platforms themselves curate the interactions of the users algorithmically (e.g., recommendation systems, customized advertisements, software options) or enable their own curated services to further monetize user engagement (e.g., Apple News Plus, Spotify playlists). To varying degrees, then, platformized curation involves self-entrepreneurship initiatives, such as being a language teacher on Preply or a flat owner on Airbnb, a life coach on Instagram, or an Uber driver, on platforms that curate user interactions algorithmically as a means to maximize profit. As discussed in the previous chapter, curation in all these endeavors refers at least to both aesthetic decisions, for example, choosing photos, writing attractive descriptions, making self-promotional videos, and mobilizing emotions and affects, and organizational decisions, for example, arranging product placement, calculating profit margins, setting price and timetabling, and finding investors and financial resources.

The previous chapter examined the historical and conceptual extractions of curation and the curator; this chapter examines their actual deployment in platform economies. According to Jose Van Dijck et al., the internet experience for most users is increasingly determined by “platform ecosystems”, which refer to a nearly totalizing online arrangement of platforms regulating and exploiting online behavior (2018: 12). They make a distinction between the infrastructural platforms and the sectoral ones: The “Big Five”—Alphabet (Google), Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Meta (including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp)—are the infrastructural platforms at the heart of platform ecosystem (2018). These serve as online gatekeepers managing an array of fundamental online activities, including “search engines and browsers, data servers and cloud computing, email and instant messaging, social networking, advertising networks, app stores, pay systems, identification services, data analytics, video hosting, geospatial and navigation services, and a growing number of other services” (2008: 13). Services, apps, and other platforms can be built with and on these platforms. These other platforms include sectoral platforms, which depend on the services of infrastructural platforms (e.g., logins, payments systems, maps) and directed toward one (or more) niche market sectors, such as music, hospitality, education, health, and the moving image (e.g., Airbnb, Netflix, Spotify).² Platforms, whether infrastructural or sectoral, are sites which mediate aspects of social and economic life and the organizational models incorporated within systems of contemporary production, distribution, exchange, and circulation, the most important of which are the imperatives of profit and growth; or, as Langley and Leyshon put it, platforms are a “socio-technical intermediary

and business arrangement that is incorporated into the wider processes of capitalisation” (2017:11; see also Srnicek, 2017 and Nieborg, Poell and van Dijck, 2023). They accomplish this by developing sites which activate, curate, and capitalize on connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013: 12). They are not simply places where people interact online, but they harvest an environment of trust by processing payments, maintaining community guidelines, and enforcing restrictions (Woodcock and Graham, 2020: 23). Platforms appear to be reliable brokers where many stakeholders feel safe to invest their time, talents, or resources, while the mobile smartphone revolution offering easy-to-use apps accelerates their expansion (Bloom, Jones, and Woodcock, 2021).

The infrastructural and sectoral platforms gave rise to a new organizational and aesthetic category—what we can call platform curators—which are smaller-scale and sometimes amateur endeavors including micro-celebrities, influencers, or other entities like The Dodo.³ Platform curators usually maintain their own independent website, which serves as their façade and facilitates monetary transactions, while their visibility and operationality are almost entirely dependent on infrastructural platforms and, to a lesser extent, sectoral platforms. They typically do not bring together large-scale multisided markets (as infrastructural and sectoral platforms do), but they do amass a fan base that aids in the exploitation of advertising and data revenue (and in turn creates benefits to the infrastructural and sectoral platforms). A platform curator can range from a fitness coach who shares training videos on YouTube and photos on Instagram, develops their app in Google Play and Apple Store to micro-celebrities as cross-platform mentors (Chapter 6), chefs and cooking schools (Chapter 5), or high-end creative personas (Chapter 4). I am particularly interested in two aspects of platforms as they pertain to curation: first, one of the most important functions of platforms is the creation of countless markets which mediate between supply and demand (rather than only selling services directly), allowing ordinary citizens to become curator-entrepreneurs without having to invest heavily (if at all) in their own infrastructure. This condition generates a horizontal potential for ordinary people to become entrepreneurs, by taking micro-curatorial roles which combine aesthetic and organizational decisions. Second, social media platforms are places for users to tailor versions of themselves to specific audiences. Even if users do not intend to generate specific forms of capital via this self-tailoring, these performances are in some way curated as they occur in front of an audience. These two aspects of platforms are critical in the development of a globalizing *homo curatorius*, both online and offline.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine how the drive for data extraction in the platform economy generates a disordered information space, which constantly strives toward expansion. Data valorizes communication for the sake of communication, giving rise to what Jodi Dean (2010) refers to as communicative capitalism, in which, from a data extraction standpoint, the more communication, the better. While platforms have been key business models for data extraction, and thus a key source of information

disorder, they are also claiming the exact opposite role, that is, the role of ordering information, as a means to generate capital. They thus become sites of curated communications (e.g., Netflix, Mubi, Apple News) or sites which provide users with the infrastructure to curate communications and generate value from this curation (e.g., Airbnb, Udemy, Preply, Tik-Tok, YouTube). Platform capitalism is more than a business model; it is a socio-technical apparatus which shapes, enables, and coordinates practices, ideologies, and lifestyles. In the final two sections, I examine platformized curation in relation to labor and consumption, emphasizing the aspirational angle of both, in the context of the gig and self-aestheticization economy. This helps to contextualize the productive and consumptive dynamics of platform cultures in the following part of the book.

3.2 Data, Reflexivity, and Communication Unbound

In her writings on the political economy of the internet, Jodi Dean introduces the concept of communicative capitalism to refer to a new stage in capitalist development in which exploitation is increasingly reliant on communication (2009, 2013, 2021). In the industrial phase, the subject of exploitation was primarily manual, industrial labor, while exploitation in communicative capitalism focuses on the communicative abilities of the users (2009). Communication can be defined as “the social production of meaning that constitutes a relation” (Mosco, 2009: 9), as value at this stage of capitalism is extracted in part from the ability of human beings to socialize and produce meaning. Of course, this does not mean that manual labor has vanished or is secondary; on the contrary, increased labor exploitation in mines, ports, and factories, particularly in the Global South, is required for digital infrastructures to exist in the first place, not to mention the exhausting and dehumanizing “micro-labor” of labeling and annotating data so that data becomes useful (Jones, 2022: 4).⁴ With generalized competition, the exploitation of communication is a new frontier and a source of profitability, which is required for global capital to continue growing. For Dean and others (Virno, 2004), this exploitation specifically targets human sociality, which is the ability of individuals to relate, communicate, and create meaning.

The growing socialization of labor has been a well-discussed trope in neo-Marxist theory at least since the Autonomist school’s immaterial labor thesis at the end of the 1990s, which argues that immaterial labor, that is, labor which produces information, affect, and knowledge, is a key driver of value production in contemporary capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2004; Virno, 2004; Lazzarato, 1996). Apart from (or in addition to) being “immaterial”, Marxist theory also describes post-Fordist labor as cognitive and affective, given the importance of IT, design, and services in contemporary capital valorization (Vercellone, 2014). I understand these concepts—immaterial, cognitive, information, affective, and communicative—as descriptive modalities emphasizing different aspects of contemporary capital valorization

while essentially speaking about a post-industrial model of production that capitalizes on sign value. When referring to data extraction, the term communicative capitalism, which posits communication instead of, say, immateriality, affect, or cognition, as one of the key grounds for capital valorization, is more fitting. For data harvesting, for example, it is not so much the content of communication that is valorized (specific “information” or “knowledge”) but the activity of communication itself. Or, for datafication, the content of actions such as liking, messaging, posting, commenting, reacting, or engaging is only relevant to the extent that these actions feed the algorithm or act as numerical indicators of clicks and other statistical figures that can be used to generate future value. This is similar to the argument advanced by McKenzie and Munster with their concept “platform seeing”, which refers to how algorithms operationalize the millions of images uploaded and circulated daily online as data for improving the algorithm’s vision (2019: 5; see also Parikka, 2023). For image datasets, for instance, the image is relevant to the extent that it aids the algorithm’s ability to “see” and recognize other similar images (2019). In this regard, even the simple act of sharing images on Facebook can be a source of value and thus a productive activity for capital (as manual labor is). Via metadata annotating and labeling, the uploaded images can be used to train the Facebook algorithm to see better or be sold as data to other platforms and advertisers as part of image ensembles.

At a time when capital searches for new forms of profitability with the decline of the manufacturing sector, with the exploitation of data the platform business model raises productivity levels (Srnicsek, 2017). Apart from being used in improving advertising, for Nick Srnicsek, data can

educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms; [...] enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; [...] allow for the optimization of flexibility of productive process; [...] make possible the transformation of low-margin goods into high-margin services; and data analysis is itself generative of data, in a vicious cycle.

(2017: 56)

Data then becomes a raw material that has to be manufactured and the activity of users is the natural source of this material (Sadowski, 2019; Powell, 2019). If the source of data is activity, that is, what a person does—which can range from chatting to browsing and from friending or unfriending to posting—then we can think of data, as Alison Powell puts it, as “traces” instead of simply numbers; traces encompassing “relationships, locations, attention, or engagements” that make up one’s life activity (2019: 121). In this regard, datafication is dependent on how effectively users are persuaded to give away their traces: where they went, who they communicate with, and what pages they search. The platform categorizes, analyzes, interprets, and uses these traces to produce better data. In this sense, the platform interface shapes, or curates, the circulations of internet culture, including discussing, posting,

commenting, and messaging; circulations which are mobilized to produce as much data as possible (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). These circulations, or traffic in internet jargon, are dependent on user time and attention and thus a platform must entice users to engage with or simply spend time there (Celis Bueno, 2017). Platforms can use various methods to entice users, such as keeping access free (or partially free) or designing an architecture which encourages dialogue, connectivity, exchange, and “market encounters” (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010: 1416). Insofar as user participation becomes a source of profit, the more users participate, the more profitable a platform becomes (Celis Bueno, 2017: 117). The widely publicized saga of Twitter’s \$44 billion sale to Elon Musk demonstrates that controlling communicative exchange and participation can have enormous value for capital.

The rise of online communication to a social mandate is also an ideological pillar which legitimizes the supposed dialogic nature of neoliberal capitalism (Dean, 2009). This refers to the idea that the “internet is inherently democratic” because online connectivity encourages the free exchange of information and ideas allowing potentially anyone to communicate whatever they want. As Andrejevic points out, in the early Web 2.0 years, the internet was positively received by democratic publics and critical scholars alike as “a scarcity-fighting machine”; a means of providing public access to information by bypassing state monopolies or private media corporations and their vested interests (2013: 28). Social media was empowering, participatory, decentralized, collaborative, activist, and potentially democratic in their ability to coordinate petitions, hashtag activism, and protests against government or corporate mistreatment (e.g., Ellison and Hardey, 2014). This idea was popular in media studies at least until 2015, when scandals involving fake news, Cambridge Analytica and later the Capitol riots erupted—events demonstrating that the ultimate goal of corporate platforms is profit; participation and connectivity are (managed) by-products of the profit imperative.

The mandate to communicate, according to Dean, is an ideological construct that perpetuates the fantasy of neoliberal capitalism, as the regulatory concept of free communication shapes liberal modes of governance (2009). Dean cites the Iraq war, in which, despite “terabytes” of anti-war protest and counter-information, George Bush proceeded with the invasion (2009: 20). Prior to the invasion, Bush acknowledged protestors’ right to “express their opinions”, that is, he acknowledged the protestors’ concerns as valid, but he still bombed Iraq (Dean, 2009: 20). The anti-war message “morphed into so much circulating content”, which became part of the never-ending circulation of culture in communicative capitalism’s shifting and constantly renewable “disintegrated spectacles” (Dean, 2009: 20–24), as the anti-war message intertwined, for instance, with cute animal videos, images from natural disasters, and sex advice. However, the concept of unrestricted communication as a means of extracting data and legitimizing capitalism has its own set of limitations. Comparing, for example, the Bush administration’s reaction of “understanding yet disagreeing” to the Russian government’s banning

and even criminalizing content that challenges its war narrative in Ukraine, demonstrates that the concept of unbound communication is contingent on geopolitical limitations (and it is only conditionally applicable in liberal capitalist societies as well⁵). It is important to remember that the market logic of communicative capitalism, which would ideally vouch for a communication free of interruptions or political constraints, is in practice cut short due to social or larger geopolitical antagonisms.

As a globalizing yet translocal paradigm, communicative capitalism has an anthropological slant, with one of its pillars, according to Dean, being the social production of reflexivity, or the ability to judge, question, and evaluate one's own beliefs and practices in the absence of a grand narrative. Reflexivity theorists from the 1990s, such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, saw this ability as potentially democratic and empowering because Western modernity could now look inward and question its own doctrines and assumptions (Beck, 2013). Giddens famously defined Western societies as "post-traditional" where individuals see self-creation as a reflexive project, a project that can be modified, reversed, and changed by individual decisions and lifestyle choices that are independent of the authority of tradition (1994: 56). Others, most notably Zygmunt Bauman, argued that these "liquid lives" of reflexive modern individuals are precarious and uncertain, as individuals are expected to choose their own trajectories in the face of structural risks and with minimal state protection (2013: 1). On a personal level, reflexivity is the constant desire for a "better" self, which makes life "a succession of new beginnings" (Bauman, 2013: 2); common verbal injunctions for such beginnings include "do not miss this opportunity!", "think outside the box!", and "it is worth trying!". However, beginnings can only happen after endings, which are frequently the source of confusion, anxiety, and disorientation (2013: 2). As we will see later, the market mandate to curate (liquid) lives, whether through food choices, information consumption, clothing styles, or self-guidance, opens up a matrix of possibilities for a better self, instilling a constant fear of missing out (FOMO) or missing a potentially better future. In any case, as a generalized anthropological paradigm in advanced capitalism, reflexivity is a by-product of the rise of consumption and do-it-yourself (DIY) self-making, rather than an emancipatory endeavor from below.

Digital platforms are encouraging reflexivity because they mediate users' reflexive capacities, that is, they allow anyone who wishes to participate in the questioning of statements made by corporations, politicians, religious figures, or other users to do so through posts, comments, and reviews. The reflexivity loop in post-traditional societies—the reflection on reflection on reflection—is not limited to lifestyle choices such as the music people listen to, the clothes they wear, or the bars they frequent, but also spreads, according to Dean, in more fundamental social institutions such as the "languages we use and sciences we have" or "values that lead us one direction rather than another" (2013: 11).⁶ That is, communicative capitalism, with its

incentive to communicate, accelerates reflexivity—refuting, questioning, and re-evaluating statements, lifestyles, news, narratives, and interpretations.

The nuances and degrees of reflexivity vary according to the geographical and political contexts. For example, the compulsion for reflexivity in terms of lifestyle choices, opinions, and styles is much higher for the middle class in big cities like Shanghai and New York, and much less obvious in, say, a village in Yakutia. The anthropological type of communicative capitalism can then be shaped not only by political, social, and economic contexts, but also by the urban/rural divide, with reflexivity being easier to adapt in networks of greater complexity (more on this in Chapter 4). In matters pertaining to Russian politics and wars, VKontakte, the largest Russian social network, allows for less reflexivity than Facebook. Consumptive reflexivity is virtually non-existent on Mount Athos in Greece, a peninsula run by the Orthodox Church, where monks do not even get to choose the color of their clothes. We could go on and on with examples, but we must acknowledge the grounded limitations of platform-based socialities. For Dean and others (Andrejevic, 2013; 2019; Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2021), a key function of the technoliberal imaginary of platforms is capture: not only do platform owners capture the reflexivity loop as data, but reflexivity also becomes an ideological pillar of neoliberalism, the “*endless loop of reflexivity becomes the very form of capture and absorption*” (2013: 13). The reflexivity loop is thus a material-ideological effect of communicative capitalism, as it is based on the profit imperative, which “pushes firms to maximize profits”, rather than being a natural process of social development (Sadowski, 2020b: 9). For instance, while the enlightened act of self-doubt is supposedly fostering a more democratic public sphere in liberal societies, à la Habermas, in communicative capitalism antagonistic actors end up frequently leveraging irrational or out-right conspiratorial discourses (take for instance, Pizzagate and QAnon theories in post-2015 United States). This is because the drive to extract data results in an outpouring of communications that emotionalizes public debate and paralyzes rational decision-making by creating a chaotic environment for individuals to navigate, what Andrejevich calls “infoglut” (2013: 38).

The curation apparatus, as we shall see, promises a way out, it “comes to the rescue”, to refer again to Rosenbaum; however, as its scope expands and its entrepreneurial mandate grows, it fragments the social space into blocks of micro-expertise, at best creating new hierarchies of class and status and, at worst, deteriorating knowledge and critical thought even more dramatically.

3.3 Platform Capitalism as a Productive Model

One of the primary functions of platforms is to extract data and in effect to release an outpouring of communications; this realm of unbound communications creates a new and complex anthropological terrain for users to navigate—at work, in romantic relationships, friendships, performances of personhood, and so on. Platforms provide users with the technical means

to navigate this terrain in all these different roles—as workers, partners, friends, and, more broadly, citizen-users. Platforms also provide the technical means for curation strategies to potentially anyone with a computer and an internet connection for accumulating, to a lesser or greater extent, symbolic or economic capital. In other words, they are more than just a means for their owners to generate capital; they broaden the terrain of neoliberal subjectification for the general population by encouraging everyone to exercise and capitalize on their curatorial-entrepreneurial abilities. In this context, I employ the neologism “platform capitalism”: an accumulation and capitalization model that hails everyone with some access to basic digital infrastructure to develop and invest in, either as producers or consumers, a plethora of curated selves for the promise of future symbolic and economic capital.

In the literature, the term is used similarly (though with less emphasis on its effects on cultural circulation): platform capitalism refers to a platform-specific capitalization and accumulation model based on the extraction of big data for commercial purposes and new types of market encounters between consumers and producers (Langley and Leyshon 2017: 13; Çalıřkan and Callon, 2010: 14). Similar to a bazaar or a stock exchange, platforms serve as intermediaries where producers and consumers meet and encounter each other (Çalıřkan and Callon, 2010). One of the innovations of the platform economy is that these encounters would regularly trade on previously dormant assets or noncommodified areas of life. Airbnb, for example, provides the technical means to mediate the economization of a previously non-economized or less economized object, that is, short-term accommodation, by bringing together two-sided markets, the sellers—owners of houses etc.—and customers—usually tourists. Educational platforms, such as Coursera or Udemy, connect instructors who create and sell online on-demand courses with people who want to engage in distance learning. These platforms, as meeting places for producers and consumers, marketize new objects or activities, and in turn encourage micro-curating practices from the former, such as house owners or instructors.

However, far from being a neutral space of encounter, the platforms are designed to capitalize on the *platform-specific value* offered and generated through these interactions. What is, however, this platform-specific value, according to business literature? In their widely read manual for prospective platform entrepreneurs, titled *Platform Revolution*, Geoffrey Parker, Marshall Alstyne, and Sangeet Choudary (2017: Ch. 6) suggest that platforms have to provide something valuable to users so that they spend time, attention, and trade on them. The most valuable services, according to the authors, include consumer access to the contents created on a platform (e.g., videos on YouTube), producer access to a community of potential buyers of services (e.g., clients on Uber), producer and consumer access to the tools that facilitate interaction (e.g., video editing tools in Tik-Tok), and producer and consumer access to the curation mechanisms which improve

their interactions (e.g., recommendation algorithms in Spotify or Netflix that match the consumers' taste with the producers' content) (Parker, van Alstyne, and Choudary, 2017: Ch. 6). Insofar as these services manage to amass a base of interacting users, they turn the platforms to "sources of excess value" (Parker, van Alstyne, and Choudary, 2017: Ch. 6). This is the excess value the platform creates since these interactions would not exist without the platform (Parker, van Alstyne and Choudary, 2017: Ch. 6). If many users find the platform valuable and engage regularly with it, the platform's benefits will also grow. This ideally then would become a self-generating cycle as platforms are subject to what in business literature is called positive network effects, which occur when "users derive utility from others joining the network" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4278). For instance, the higher the search volume on Google the more accurate the search engine will become as the algorithm will improve, or the larger the number of Instagram followers for a user the better, as this user will expand their networks. Positive network effects occur when the users of a platform have an active interest in other users joining the platform as this increase will improve their platform activity (negative network effects, in contrast, occur when the larger the number of users of a product, the worst the product experience becomes, for example, excessive tourism in an area). In turn, the platform can monetize these effects or leverage them to appeal to advertisers or investors. This is the value that arises from user activity and has to be strategically cultivated by the business model of the platform.

As a business model, the platform has a single mission: to make sure that users "participate regularly and often" and eventually "stick around on their own accord" (Choudary, 2015: 43). A platform should continuously increase its traffic and interactions so that users feel compelled to return to it, so that the platform becomes a habit, or to use more clinical terms, it becomes a dependency and addiction. Yet this would require eliciting new user behaviors that "had never existed in the past", that is, behaviors consistent with adapting a new habit; as such, the platform, should not only "invest in behavior design" but, as if in a sort of disciplinary-pedagogical mission, to "constantly reward desirable actions and discourage undesirable ones" (Choudary, 2015: 43). Here, the business literature acknowledges that the most important mission of the platform is to intervene in the behavioral matrix of users so that it creates the conditions for exploiting their time and attention.

This does not mean that all platform interactions are determined by platform design, but, in the capitalist relations of production, the platforms are first and foremost profit-making enterprises which direct user activity accordingly. Speaking of a sharing economy and collaborative production—rather than behavioral design, addiction, precarity, the gig economy and new forms of exploitation and accumulation—obscures from a critical political economic perspective the role of platforms as a fundamentally new actor in the determination of digital interaction. In this regard, the notion

of platform capitalism, which I employ here is a “techno-pessimist term”, which challenges the positivism characterizing the vocabulary of business (and often media) studies, that is, the idea of the internet as inherently collaborative (Langley and Leyshon 2017). An internet taken over by platforms is nothing of the sort; it is in the vital interest of the platforms to suppress noncommodified forms of collaboration from which they cannot profit.

By promising exclusiveness and experience, among other things, curation is an apparatus spearheading the increasing commodification of internet practices. For instance, as mentioned above, one of the main functions of platforms is to commodify previously non-commodified areas of life by incorporating more social activities into monetary relations. Commodification has particular social and class effects, as monetary exchange becomes a prerequisite for accessing specific services, goods, and relations. In the cultural industries sector, for example, the rise of platforms has coincided with a shift from the gift economy of peer-to-peer to the curated economy of monetary exchange, in tandem with the legal and techno-economic interventions which support this shift, such as the formulation of online copyright laws alongside relatively low subscription models. To use an example, consider the transition from peer-to-peer sharing, such as torrent sites (labeled as “piracy” because they circumvent copyright laws), to subscription-based streaming platforms like Netflix, Mubi, or Spotify. This transition from peer-to-peer to platformized cultural production is facilitated by the commodification and investment in curation services which serve as value adders. Mubi, a sectoral platform relying on infrastructure platforms (e.g., email services for log in, Instagram and Facebook visibility), hosts files in the cloud rather than the user’s hard drive and organizes films in an arthouse and festival atmosphere, where handpicked curation by micro-experts overlaps with a new production/distribution model (“What is Mubi”, Mubi itself asks, “A streaming service? A curator? A publisher? A distributor? A cinema lover? Yes”).⁷ This is a very different experience than peer-to-peer torrent sites, where chaos is constantly piling up, usually resulting in many files that the user must categorize on their own. Another example is the shift away from gift economy hospitality services like Couchsurfing and Hospitality Club and toward platforms like Airbnb. In the early days of Couchsurfing, hospitality was not mediated by monetary exchange, and the rewards for the host were mostly symbolic or intangible, such as cultural exchange, new friendships, positive reviews, and so on. The notion of hospitality is totally commodified on Airbnb, with hosts competing for economic capital and curating their advertised spaces accordingly. In this sense, the term platform capitalism indicates a form of enclosure of the commons and the practice of curation is key in this enclosure.

Sectoral (or content) platforms condition what Nieborg and Poell call the “contingent” character of cultural commodities, including music and news (2018: 4274). Contingency here has to do with the fact that cultural commodities are contingent *on* digital platforms, and especially on GAFAM, that is,

they depend on them for their production, circulation, and monetization, and that they are contingent as malleable, modular, and feedback-driven objects open to “revision and recirculation” (2018: 4276). In this latter sense, contingent commodities inhabit a logic of continuous updating and modification by users caught in the stream of communications, feedback, and data (e.g., cropping, screenshotting, recording, replacing, cutting/pasting and so on). This is similar to the culture of what Manovich called in the early internet days “remixability and modularity” (2005), yet with the rise of platforms as the dominant socio-technical assemblages this culture is channeled to feed the commodity relation. In turn, platforms take it upon themselves to curate contingent commodities, like music and news, via specific services so as generate new forms of power and profit.

In music streaming services, for instance, curated content provides platforms with additional “gatekeeping powers” (Bonini and Gandini, 2019). Robert Pray (2020) goes further to argue that the power of a music streaming platform like Spotify, which has to stitch together different markets—such as the music, advertising, and financial markets—in order to survive and expand, lies principally in its own curated playlists. Pray calls this “curatorial power”, that is, “the capacity to advance one’s interests, and affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content” (2020: 2). For musicians, being included in Spotify playlists means fame and revenue to the point that “record labels have become increasingly dependent on landing on Spotify-curated playlists”; for advertisers, playlists offer the opportunity for native advertising, while for investors playlists represent the promise that eventually Spotify will become profitable by producing its own music and avoid paying costly copyright fees to record labels (2020: 3). By “unbundling albums and reassembling them into playlists” (2020: 3), Spotify re-replaces a fragment of the cultural commodity—the song—into a new ordered constellation that promises to advance new regimes of profit. For users, the curated playlist is an added value that distinguishes Spotify from a music torrent site and can persuade them to pay for the service. Apple News+, Apple’s subscription-based news service, is more than just a news aggregator; it is a curated enterprise that reframes news piece as personalized content (Bandy and Diakopoulos, 2020). As Apple puts it, “experienced Apple News editors curate the day’s top stories from trusted sources, and advanced algorithms help you discover stories you’ll find interesting” (Apple News, 2023). Through this service, Apple can position itself as a powerful intermediary between the news sites and the public and reap whatever benefits accompany this role.

In platform capitalism, platforms deploy curation in two ways: on the one hand, they strive to establish themselves as experts, particularly through algorithmic recommendation systems that curate user connectivity and the provision of curated services, such as, the playlist or curated news (van Dijck, 2013; Langley and Leyshon, 2017: 5). On the other hand, they are sites that allow for massive amounts of curatorial/entrepreneurial labor from ordinary

users while also attracting consumers who want to curate themselves. The remainder of this chapter focuses on these latter two points.

3.4 The Gig Economy and Aspirational Labor

In the following two sections, I explore the material-ideological assemblage of platform work and platform consumption and discuss the ways they shape entrepreneurial subjectivities and aspirational class membership. As stated, digital platforms are typically mediators of multisided markets which connect workers and consumers in site-specific encounters. In these encounters, the curatorial imperative extends from the micro-entrepreneurial establishment and maintenance of services (e.g., drivers, instructors, guides, hosts, bloggers, and so on) to informed and aspirational consumption (e.g., acquiring self-vision, finding your “real” self, eating healthily, or familiarizing yourself with art). It is now common to say that some of the platforms that typically stage these encounters own no infrastructure (Srincek, 2017) calls them “lean platforms”, (e.g., Uber owns no taxis, Airbnb owes no hotels) but capitalize on this platform capacity to bring supply and demand together; it is in these encounters between supply and demand that new productive and consumptive identities are formed.

In terms of production, which is the focus of this section, platform strategies contribute to the emergence of a new labor paradigm, the so-called gig economy, which refers to platform-dependent casual, piecemeal, and flexible forms of work that are typically underpaid and lack security guarantees (Woodcock and Graham, 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). The term “gig” in the music industry refers to music performances and a pay-by-task system, as well as temporary, irregular, and casual forms of work (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). The notion of “the gig economy” highlights a pattern in which more and more people around the world, who only need to have internet access and computer hardware, are independently contracted to carry out specific tasks or irregular work through the mediation of platforms. The gig economy is an umbrella term for various types of work contracts with minimal (if any) security guarantees. In its capacity as an intermediary rather than an employer, the platform bears no (or very little) responsibility for the worker’s security and usually does not pay for the equipment or operating costs needed to carry out the work.

Before looking at how platforms subjectivize workers as self-curators (Table 3.1), let us briefly discuss the variations in platform work. Woodcock and Graham (2020: 6) distinguish two types of such platform work: “geographically tethered work” and “cloudwork”. The workers in the first category exist in a specific geographical location, such as the courier who delivers food or supermarket items, the Uber driver, the Airbnb guide and the host, or the care worker, mover, or a technician in a services marketplace platform.⁸ This work is organized through platforms, but it takes place in a physical space, so the worker is “tethered” to a location. In contrast, cloudwork

Table 3.1 The curatorial imperative in platform work

<i>Platform work</i>	<i>Platforms</i>	<i>Curatorial imperative</i>	<i>Curatorial skills</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
Microwork (Cloudwork)	Mechanical Turk, Clickwork, Microworkers	Very low	Linguistic	Contractors, Reviewing system (stars/ comments)
Geographically bound low-skilled (e.g., transport)	Deliveroo, Uber	Low	Affective and technical	Reviewing system (stars/ comments)
Freelancing (Cloudwork)	Upwork, Preply	Average	Affective, organizational, and technical	Reviewing system (stars/ comments)
Geographically bound medium-skilled (e.g., hospitality, tourism, guiding)	Airbnb	High	Affective, organizational, and aesthetic, linguistic	Reviewing system (stars/ comments)
Content creation	Instagram, Facebook, Tik-Tok	Very high	Affective, organizational, technical, aesthetic, and linguistic	Fan communities

Note: The curatorial skills refer to the following abilities: affective—communicative, responsiveness, politeness; organizational—setting up a business, price-setting, subcontracting; technical—driving, fixing, IT skills; aesthetic—photo-shooting, design; linguistic—effective storytelling.

occurs remotely and without requiring physical presence. Cloudwork involves two types of work depending on the skills required: online freelancing (high-skilled) and microwork (low-skilled). Online freelancing refers to activities that require more advanced skills, such as web development, translation, and proofreading, for instance on sites like Upwork or in online course platforms like Udemy. This work is usually better paid and mostly involves a global middle-class workforce with educational capital, often IT skills, and emotional and communicative abilities to navigate customer and market needs. Unlike online freelancing, the second type of cloudwork—microwork or micro-tasking—is the lowest paid and least skilled platform work, including repetitive tasks such as labeling and annotating data, participating in surveys, or following and reposting material from social media accounts. This is typical of the services provided by platforms such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, Clickwork, or Microwork, which are typically marketed as crowdsourcing marketplaces and where employers crowdsource tedious micro-tasks to a global workforce. This work can be shady or borderline unethical; on the site Microwork, for example, they reach out to employers willing to pay for fake likes, reposts, comments, and traffic (“whether you need traffic for your website, comments or a fresh post for your blog, bookmarks or likes for a video you want to be popular...” [Microworkers, nd]). Much of this work entails socially paralyzing tasks, such as clicking and annotating data, that rely on basic human intelligence that feeds AI and machine learning to make algorithms smarter. While workers performing these tasks may theoretically reside anywhere in the world, the majority live in low-income countries of the Global South, as the extremely low payment is not enough to survive in higher-income countries. Phil Jones (2022: 13) mentions how such microwork is outsourced in refugee camps around the world, so that refugees can live in subsistence conditions, resulting in the creation of a racialized “refugee industrial complex” knitted to the demand of technological-economic progress, for example, the improvement of AI and machine learning.

There is a third category of platform workers not included in Woodcock and Graham’s classification, which is likely the most relevant to the curatorial apparatus, namely content producers (Vallas and Schor, 2020), or what we can call platform curators. These workers typically perform contractless, aspirational labor, giving away their time for free in the hope of achieving future success and recognition. While content workers are not conventionally contracted workers, their work is profitable from the perspective of the platform, because by spending time and deploying communicative skills they facilitate traffic, network effects, and connectivity. The main goal of platform curators is to launch themselves as personal brands and micro-experts on a specific topic and establish a consistent revenue stream. As a result, they would ideally become self-sufficient workers who can maintain themselves by working on their own terms, adopting “the maxim ‘DWYL’ (Do What You Love)”, where “pleasure, autonomy, and income seemingly coexist” (Duffy, 2016: 442). This is why, in contrast to other microworkers,

content producers may gradually invest in their means of production, such as cameras, microphones, or stage design for bloggers, education for life coaches and instructors, traveling, dining, buying followers and likes for aspiring or actual influencers, and so on. These are fundamentally aspirational workers who strive to become “independent workers” and eventually earn a stable income, for example, through advertising, mentoring sessions, seminars, and product promotions. In this case, the content producers should aesthetically curate a version of themselves, which can be ideally monetized at some later stage. This aspirational labor, as Duffy suggests, is “a highly gendered, forward-looking, and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity” and represents a new and ideologically charged paradigm of labor in the era of platforms (2022).⁹ Aspirational labor, can also progressively turn into what Wang calls in reference to exploitive forms of online sex work “desperational labor” as anxieties, insecurities, and life uncertainties gradually stack up (2021).

All these different workers rely on platforms as a socio-technical and accumulation model to perform their labor, and as shown in Table 3.1, they must curate themselves in various ways and to various degrees. Curatorial imperatives are vital for content producers, for example, as they must possess organizational, aesthetic, affective, linguistic, and often technical abilities. An Airbnb cooking instructor, as we will see in Chapter 5, requires advanced linguistic skills to develop forms of storytelling that convey authenticity and originality, affective skills to create a friendly and hospitable cooking environment, and organizational skills to set up pricing and timetabling. A life coach needs aesthetic skills to design an inspirational persona for their fans and organizational skills to monetize this persona, whereas a Deliveroo courier would need some basic affective (politeness, friendliness) and technical skills (signing up and using the platform/app) to get positive customer reviews. At the other end of the spectrum, cloud microworkers would only need to have some basic linguistic abilities in order to complete micro-tasks and have their employers approve of them. In this classification, the general rule is that the more aspirational the labor, the more inventively an entity should be curated. In other words, the curatorial imperative grows stronger when there are opportunities for upward mobility, whereas in contrast to when an individual is aware that no upward mobile career can come out of their labor (such as couriers and microworkers). Of course, aspirational work is heavily ideological as the promises of work independence and flexibility are often not met, amidst labor hardships and aborted visions (Gregory and Sadowski, 2021).

Platforms must also establish what Langley and Leyshon (2017: 20) refer to as “ostensibly stabilizing reputation economies” in order to coordinate network effects and engender audience trust, and these economies must be supported by quality control and evaluation mechanisms in order to appear legitimate. The five-star and occasionally written review system, where the customer and the worker exchange evaluations, is the most dominant

evaluation mechanism ranging from driving and hospitality to educational and microwork platforms. These evaluations reflect the reputation of each component and are especially essential for workers because poor ratings and reviews may mean less income and, in the case of repeated poor ratings and reviews, possible ostracism from the platform, which can lead to unemployment. These are the tools for disciplining platform workers; the customers are, in a sense, their bosses, and thus the worker should self-perform in a way that is consistent with the customer desire in the “consumer-centric environment” (Barile, 2023: 7). Platform work has a biopolitical component because its coding architecture is designed to require workers to develop specific types of skills and human capital that correspond to this environment (Gregory and Sadowski, 2021). This includes not only the review system, but also the overall performance of employees. Gregory and Sadowski (2021) examine the labor conditions of Deliveroo couriers, arguing that platform work frequently commands bodily and psychological conjunctions under the platform mandates of flexibility (being ready for work), vitality (being fit for work), and legibility (being machine readable). The platform workers here develop what they call “perverse virtues”, which correspond to the numerical metric systems’ disciplining of labor and the rewards of the “biopolitical platform” (2020: 10).

Content producers on social media platforms are not usually subject to an evaluation system in the form of stars and reviews, but their performance is measured by metrics and publicly reviewed by audience responses. In the first instance, the performance metrics of a business account on Instagram would include statistics such as engagements per follower, follower growth, and referral traffic over time—the higher these indicators, the more likely a content producer is to monetize their activity. The metric system disciplines the activity of content producers because they should be optimizing their posts and stories to achieve better results, they may need to post, for instance, in the ideal posting time, which is the time of the day that their posts will receive the most likes. For example, during critical stages of the war in Ukraine (such as the start of the invasion in late February 2022 or Putin’s announcement to mobilize reserves in late September 2022), several Russian Instagram micro-celebrities would avoid posting inspirational content; as the audience’s attention was drawn to much more urgent news, this would have a negative impact on their overall metric performance or could lead to negative audience reactions. Responses are likely the most important factor for content producers to capitalize on, and they entail what Dumont refers to as “relational labor”, which is involved in the “creation and management” of ongoing relationships with the audience, mainly in social media (2017: 122). In this regard, this type of work is disciplined similarly to other platform work in the sense that the (aspiring) micro-influencer must tailor their behavior and responses to optimize metrics and to the whims of their audience.

3.5 Curated Consumption and the Aspirational Class

At the other end of the platform, there is the consumer, who either directly purchases a service, or simply spends their time on the platform's content. In the former case, consumption is a straightforward act of monetary exchange; in the latter, to return to the communicative capitalism thesis, the consumer may be scrolling through Facebook or watching YouTube videos and is exposed to advertising. From an economic standpoint, any platform user is a consumer as they generate value for content producers, including bloggers, influencers, and others, by expending resources, namely, time, attention, and communication skills. For the platform economy, everyone who uses the internet is a potential customer whose resources can be exploited.

Consumer engagement with various activities online and offline is frequently the result of psychological manipulation, such as clickbaiting or algorithmically recommending content which would engage the consumer with the platform for as long as possible. Yet the consumptive engagement with certain practices is also formative for one's identity. In the context of a consumer society, expenditure of money, time, and resources are inextricably linked with who one is and what one does. This consumer identity is not independent of the actual conditions surrounding it, rather, individuals act as consumers against the backdrop of social representations, discourses, and values that shape "consumer subjectification" in specific ways (Schmitt et al., 2022: 76). In an economy of abundance of choice and difference, where everyone is supposed to "choose" what they want to be, the engagement with specific goods and services over others shapes social perceptions about identities (Skeggs, 2013). Crucially then, consumption not only reflects the consumer's class background (e.g., "they eat in an expensive restaurant because they are rich"), but it also creates perceptions of class as through that consumers assume social positions and navigate values ("they eat in an expensive restaurant because they value quality"). Curated consumption, or consumption that is based on the guiding authority of experts, is a way to claim a consumer (and larger social) identity which is culturally refined. This refined identity can be shared, exchanged, and communicated, thereby constructing more uplifting perceptions of classed personhoods.

Before moving on, let us consider the broader relationship between consumption and identity through an aspect of curated consumption: the case of "ethical consumption", which supposedly represents a distinct form of self-fashioning from the mainstream, if not a form of resistance to dominant values (Adams and Raisborough, 2010). By purchasing "ethical" brands and boycotting "unethical" ones, the ethical consumer can incorporate moral values into their purchasing decisions, such as veganism, environmentalism, anti-discrimination, and other tropes pertaining to some idea of justice. By consuming justly, the ethical consumer can tell themselves and others morally uplifting stories about their shopping habits given that there is a social space that affirms the significance of these stories (in certain social contexts a space

for moral consumption is limited or may not even exist). These stories would make a claim to what Bourdieu famously theorized as “distinction”, that is, the privilege to be distinct in some way from the masses, which is a marker of social class (1987). As ethical consumption is embedded in commodity relations and new markets, it is also a target of market-based ideological encoding. For Sobande, this can entail “woke-washing”, or the appropriation of social movement ideals by corporations, which occurs when companies adopt “social justice rhetoric and representations in pursuit of profit”, capitalizing on different sorts of demands for justice (2019: 2724). This technique of value extraction can commodify social struggles, making their causes a sign of moral superiority in society’s competing perceptions of class belonging (Kanai and Gill, 2020: 2). The same is true for the greenwashing, queerbaiting, and pinkwashing campaigns of corporations, whereas the very same corporations may otherwise rely on cheap labor, lobbying, and exploitative relations of production. The ethical consumer legitimizes new consumptive identities by placing value on the ethical, and thus on the “right” over the “wrong” consumption practices. In this regard, apart from potentially activist, ethical consumption is also an ideologically ridden practice, insofar as it allows the consumer to hypothetically assert a morally superior self against other, inferior “functional” consumers. Thus, consumption ideology are the “ideas and ideals related to consumerism that are manifested in consumers’ social representations and expressed in their communicative actions in the marketplace”, where this ideology is expressive of broader perceptions of class, status, and identity (Schmitt, Brakus and Biraglia: 2022: 2). Whether it challenges capitalism or not, ethical consumption is capable of shaping these perceptions.

Overall, these perceptions are shaped in the process of cultural exchange, where consumer taste and preferences are negotiated in various hierarchies of prestige and where culture is deployed as an economic resource that creates understandings of class (Skeggs, 2013). For Beverly Skeggs, class is not just an objective category but is expressed in symbolic struggles; the middle class, as a desirable ideological apparatus for hailing working class and subaltern populations into the system of consumption, has therefore “no frontiers other than those continually produced and transformed through struggle, and these cannot be defined abstractly” (2013: 5). This is an important insight in terms of ethically or generally curated consumption because the symbolic frontiers of class-making are constantly reshaped and rearticulated. For example, as we will see in later chapters, in curated consumption there is a strong emphasis on the authentic, the genuine, and the meaningful. To be authentic, therefore, in what you choose to buy is a trope for both performing middle-class values and for mediating contemporary understandings middle-classness (see Chapter 5).

There is also a valorization of the “genuine”, which is opposed to both pretension and restraint and which is seen as a real moral value, rather

than simply as fun; hence the middle-class interest in the authentic object and the authenticity of the other.

(Skeggs, 2013: 23)

Speaking about such contemporary perceptions of middle-classness, Currid-Halkett classifies this new consumer ideology as that of an “aspirational class”, an elite yet widespread grouping of mostly middle- and upper middle-class urban dwellers who value informed over conspicuous consumption (2018: 18). Aspirational consumption, like aspirational labor, is a way to inscribe oneself in social relations through ideological fantasies of class belonging. The aspirational class views consumption as a future investment for becoming an improved person and moving up the social ladder. It crafts itself primarily through symbolic and cultural capital rather than income, as it is the *where* of money spent that counts instead of the money itself.

The aspirational class is motivated by self-confident values and is actively choosing a way of life through an excessive process of information gathering and forming opinions and values, some of which involve money but many of which rest on cultural capital instead.

(Currid-Halkett, 2018: 19)

Curation provides the aspirational class advanced opportunities for storytelling, which is a typical means for negotiating forms of symbolic capital. Storytelling is a trope attached to the originator of the story and it “appeals to humans’ demand for a meaning in life as stories engage emotions, stimulate fantasies, and thoughts” (Mei, Hågsen and Kristiansen, 2020: 94); the more unique the stories, the more captivating the originator of the story appears. To use our initial example, a curated sock that is local and authentic offers a story to tell the self and others, and thus shapes (perceptions of) identity. As we will see in Chapter 5, an Airbnb cooking session with an Italian grandmother provides a story that is authentic and shareable, it is not “random” cooking, but rather a recipe based on the experience of a historical community. The luxury fashion brands in Chapter 4 tell quirky and offbeat stories, and the life coaches in Chapter 6 encourage their clients and trainees to curate their identities based on their “true” selves. Curation, in this sense, is a cultural and economic rationality that occupies a structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams’ term (1977), in contemporary capitalism by expanding the imaginary of self-aestheticization and the ideal of the self as a work of art (Featherstone, 2021; Skeggs, 2013). In the post-2010s of digital abundance, socks with personalities function as what Lury refers to as “prothesis”, marking an inscription of the self that operationalizes one’s personality in the marketplace of identities (Lury, 2013).

The aspirational class is reflexive insofar as it is expected to think through various consumption practices vis-a-vis opportunities for self-making, or to consume as a means of self-personalization. To “drink almond milk instead

of regular milk”, for example, means to engage in consumption that has internalized a certain social awareness of animal rights and assumed eco-friendly knowledge, which in turn becomes a marker of social status (Currid-Halkett, 2018: 22). In this regard, aspirational consumers are the ideal candidate group for buying into the curatorial narrative, as this narrative provides a story about one’s self-image, what the business studies scholars Pine and Gilmore refer to as “purchasing on the basis of conforming to *self-image*” (2007: 65). Self-image here becomes a craft and quest for the aspirational consumer, who understands that the more uniquely difference is managed, the more possibilities for social distinction. Curated consumption, in other words, serves as the foundation for a new consumer ideology in the disorienting context of communicative capitalism.

3.6 Conclusions

The new categories which curation inhabits can be endless as micro-expertise covers more and more areas of social life, from skinfluencers (skincare influencers) to petfluencers (pet influencers) to wine and low-calorie cooking experts. This chapter discussed how curation, as a new apparatus of intermediation, emerges in the shift from communicative capitalism, where information and communication are simply valorized as acts of data, to platform capitalism, a socio-technical model that encourages new market encounters and the organization of communication under narratives and metadata. This model amplifies the social imperative to curate and be curated by making use of platform architectures, tools, audiences, and affordances. Thus, while viral animal videos circulate in a disorderly and exponential fashion on the internet, for The Dodo, the example with which we opened this chapter, they are vehicles of channeling specific emotions, such as empathy, fun, and positivity—the narrative of an entrepreneurial initiative. Curated entities, such as that of The Dodo, aim at commodifying shapeless and disorderly communications under such specific narratives. The internet is a machine enabling an incessant production of connectivity and communications, regardless of the content of these communications (Dean, 2009; Andrejevic, 2019), and platformized curating strives to capitalize on these communications by organizing them.

Platforms, as any technology in modern capitalist societies, are “an expression of the economic objectives that direct them into action”—they inhabit the logic of profit and surplus value rather than being a natural outcome of historical development, (Zuboff, 2019: 22; Sadowski, 2020b). In the domain of work, digital platforms shape the aspiring imaginary of flexibility and independence by renting their technical capabilities to aspiring celebrities and ordinary users. If we were to give a spatial analogy, we could think of fairs or festivals renting their spaces to different sellers where the exhibitors pay a rent to borrow the place for a certain period of time. As such, a remote language teacher in Preply, for instance, has to rent the platform space by

paying a commission to the platform for the class they conduct in return for visibility, easier customer reach, scheduling, and trusted transactions. Inside the platform, the teacher becomes a self-entrepreneur who uses the curatorial imperative to appeal to their customers, including the writing of an attractive description and making an introduction video of themselves. Or, for instance, in Airbnb Experiences, the organizers of tours, seminars, or classes pay a commission to the platform per customer booking. This new platform-based entrepreneurialism increasingly compels a middle-class precariat to perceive themselves “as a form of capital to be invested, and of their income as the return on such investment” (Bandinelli, 2019: 5; see also, Bandinelli, 2020). As new landlords extracting wealth from “renting” labor in a neo-feudal regime, platforms intensify the formation of self-entrepreneurial subjectivities in conditions of gig labor (Wansbrough and Dean, 2021; Sadowski, 2020a). In the domain of consumption, if information capitalism brings chaos, curation promises order, packaging information together in narratives and forms of storytelling. In this sense, curated consumption arises when the content of communication for data extraction purposes becomes largely irrelevant, and when the communicative form largely detaches itself from the imperative of the content. Curation promises to emotionalize and rehumanize communicative exchanges at a time when these exchanges are defined by the logics of inhumanity, automation, and computerization.

Platform capitalism denotes not simply a transition from one period to another but the overlapping of adjacent techniques of capital accumulation, involving the model of data extraction that brings communicational chaos and the model of curation called upon to restore order. In the next part of this book, I discuss in more detail curating in platform capitalism focusing on the particularities of three cases of curated worlds, namely high fashion, cooking, and life-coaching.

Notes

- 1 www.facebook.com/watch/?v=817592485885026
- 2 The distinction between these platform types is fluid, and there is a constant dynamic driving them toward integration. For example, infrastructural platforms seek ways to broaden their scope through sectoral connections, whereas sectoral platforms often rely on infrastructural platforms for several operations, including online visibility.
- 3 Van Dijck *et al.* further say that this ecosystem, “looks egalitarian yet is hierarchical; it is almost entirely corporate, but it appears to serve public value; it seems neutral and agnostic, but its architecture carries a particular set of ideological values; its effects appear local, while its scope and impact are global; it appears to replace ‘top-down’ ‘big government’ with ‘bottom-up’ ‘customer empowerment’, yet it is doing so by means of a highly centralized structure which remains opaque to its users” (2018: 12). Nick Srnicek (2017) makes another useful categorization of five different platform types, including advertising platforms (Facebook,

Google), cloud platforms (Amazon Web Services), industrial platforms (GE), product platforms (Spotify), and lean platforms (Uber and Airbnb). Yet, while insightful, this categorization leaves less space for conceptualizing the practice of curator-users and is less useful for the research at hand.

- 4 In the last ten years or so the digital economy, which is the main driver of communicative capitalism, is not only developing fast but it is diffused to all other sectors as digital platforms are at the top of world economy (Sadowski, 2020a). Indeed, in 2022, according to World Bank, digital economy, amounting to 15.5% of the world's GDP, is growing two and a half times faster than the world's GDP in the last 15 years (World Bank, 2022). This economy depends on the extraction of earth materials and the manufacturing sector mostly residing in Global South, upon which the exploitation of communication and sociality is grounded.
- 5 This for instance has been argued in relation to the privileging of specific narratives around COVID-19 and outlawing others in liberal capitalist democracies, for example, see Miconi, Pezzano and Risi (2023).
- 6 This is close to what the reflexivity theorists called "institutional reflexivity" (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994).
- 7 Mubi.com, accessed November 13, 2022.
- 8 For instance, on the Russian platform YouDo.com, the clients place an ad requesting some service and the workers bid for the job.
- 9 This is typical of labor in contemporary creative industries in general, such as romance fiction writers (Lois and Gregson, 2019).

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Part 2

Cultures of Platform Capitalism



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4 Cool Is in the Air

Atmospheres of Banal Luxury in Digital Warhol Economies

4.1 The Banal Luxury Complex

In 2019, the British art and fashion magazine *HERO* staged an interview between the superstar curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and the “artist, model, and musician” Eliza Douglas (Douglas quoted in *HERO*, 2019).¹ The editorial text describes Douglas as a “modern muse”, who is additionally the “partner, collaborator, and star” of the prolific artist Anne Imhof, winner of—among other prizes—the prestigious Golden Lion for representing Germany at the Venice Biennale in 2017. The interview deals with Douglas’ “burgeoning portfolio of work, her collaborations with Imhof and modeling for Balenciaga”, that is, Douglas’ sprawling career crossovers in just a few years, ranging from high art to high fashion and everything in between. Douglas is a recognizable figure to global art world trotters for her distinguished androgynous, offbeat, and clumsily elegant physique, which she showcases as a performer in Imhof’s dark and loosely choreographed compositions, commenting on youth cultures and nihilistic consumerism. Douglas’ all-round, cross-disciplinary subcultural capital conveys a sophisticated coolness, reminiscent of that of Edie Sedgwick in the Andy Warhol milieu in New York (Thornton, 1996). Apart from modeling for the high-end luxury brand Balenciaga, Douglas has also collaborated with the offbeat luxury fashion brand Vetements, which brings Eastern European and “gopnik” styles to the global catwalk.² Douglas’ persona has been promoted in the fashion world by the founder of Vetements and, at the time of writing, the artistic director of Balenciaga, the Georgian-born and Belgium-educated Demna Gvasalia, labeled as “wunderkind” and “fashion’s biggest trickster” (Conlon, 2018; Serio, 2022). Demna, who was in the *Time* magazine’s top-100 most influential people in 2022, popularized Douglas’ physique among high-fashion milieus, from the Vetements’ idiosyncratic fashion statements to the classy Balenciaga haute couture. For Demna, Marcel Duchamp is one of the main reference points (“I have discovered Duchamp by discovering myself in a way as designer, because it explains to me how I work”, Gvasalia quoted in Hargrove, 2019). The anti-fashion ethos of Demna mirrors Duchamp’s anti-art, transforming everyday items

into notoriously expensive luxury fashion via a transgressive, controversial, and cool aesthetic that we can call “banal luxury”.³

Douglas is just one of countless transnational actors, aspiring or accomplished, in the neoliberal cultural industries, who wander around diverse creative fields and inhabit the incessant blurring of disciplines, professional identities, and the borders between high and low. This chapter looks at the productive aspect of this crisscrossing and, in particular, the eclectic interweaving between classic avant-garde strategies and commercial fashion design in banal luxury; banal luxury “artifies” fashion via the legacy of conceptual art and is thus key for disseminating the curatorial apparatus in both highbrow milieus (e.g., traditional fashion consumers) as well as ordinary internet users (e.g., via platform sharing). The references to Obrist, Douglas, Imhoff, and Demna are cursors to a metropolitan, transnational, and conceptual high-end culture, which transports the mass aesthetic to high-end cultural production—a gesture reminiscent of milieus around Duchamp and Warhol. This scene inhabits physical spaces, that is biennials, openings, and fashion shows as well as online platform connectivities, including posts, stories, tags, check-ins, memes, and other relational practices (van Dijck, 2013). Similar to how the historical avant-garde, like Dadaism and Surrealism, became part of the mainstream via curators-mediators in the 1960s and the 1970s, banal luxury, as an anti-fashion gesture, needs to be curated in order to attain legibility and value.

The banal luxury complex inhabits interdisciplinary creative scenes varying from art and fashion to music and dining. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett argues that a similar interdisciplinary interweaving was the strongest economic asset of post-1990s New York, which she calls the “Warhol Economy” (2020). Owing its legacy to Andy Warhol, the visionary who mingled the avant-garde, the countercultural, and the mainstream around event socializations in his studio the Factory, the Warhol Economy harvests continuous cool atmospheres across networks of creativity. Currid-Halkett’s concept is celebratory, similar to that of early creative economy enthusiasts like Richard Florida, overlooking issues around artistic exploitation, precarity, and ideology (Zukin, 2020; de Peuter, 2014), yet useful as a descriptive tool for the purpose of this chapter. Insofar as banal luxury is stylistically the reverse of exceptional luxury, it shapes countercultural and symbolically rich atmospheres that are nevertheless economically productive. To illustrate this with an example, let us look at the productivity of banal luxury in a promotional event that the fashion brand Burberry staged in September 2020 as a homage to Imhof. This event, according to one of its reviews, curated a “cosmopolitan” and “international” selection of “stars”, including Douglas who performed some of her tracks “*exclusively for #Burberry* ahead of the Spring/Summer 2021 show” (Bruno, 2021). These songs adopted a Sonic Youth-like, “dirty” distortion guitar and looped, coarse vocals with Douglas simulating a later-generation Kim Gordon.⁴ Burberry celebrated “the artist’s freedom of expression” (Bruno, 2021), linking the concept of freedom to

a musical underground style as part of the brand's identity. Here, capital produces a simulation of the underground that crisscrosses contemporary art, grunge aesthetics, stylized photography, and sophisticated fashion so that creative networks coalesce and flow across the brand. The performance curates Burberry as a daring, edgy, and cool brand in the overarching context of "cool capitalism" (McGuigan, 2015).⁵

As the pop icon Kim Kardashian says in her capacity as brand ambassador for Balenciaga, "When I wear clothes designed by Demna, I feel cool. I feel no matter what I wear, it's going to be all right, because he designed it and he's the coolest" (quoted in Friedman, 2021). The concept of "cool" in marketing literature is usually associated with mass consumerism (e.g., Levi's jeans), rather than with the exclusivity and sophistication of high-end fashion. Yet, I will argue that the aesthetic posture of coolness is precisely what runs through banal luxury networks in platform economies. Via "cool", the signifier "luxury fashion" undergoes a subcultural artification that expands milieus of audiences and buyers. Coolness involves recurring traits that have dominated the post-war youth subcultures to varying degrees, such as narcissism, ironic detachment, and hedonism (Pountain and Robins, 2000; McGuigan, 2015: 4).⁶ Cool is a "permanent state of private rebellion", a defiant state of not showing too much emotion, not becoming too clingy, not pressuring, not demanding but keeping loose, independent, decent, and distant (Pountain and Robins, 2000: 19). In banal luxury, these mannerisms are packaged in an atmosphere of sophistication, that is an overall cultivation, an informed outlook and the ability to make conceptual associations.⁷

In this chapter, I explore the figures of Demna and the Vetements-Balenciaga complex as they are a remarkable link between the historiographies of anti-art, the avant-garde, and the curatorial, on the one hand, and the commercial world of fashion and high-end creative industries on the other. I therefore focus on selected exemplary expressions of banal luxury without exhaustively analyzing Vetements' and Balenciaga's history or Demna's career. This chapter aims to bridge contemporary artworld and high-end culture before delving into less exclusive platform practices, like cooking, coaching, and flirting. In the first section, I discuss the idea of Warhol Economies as networks that rely on the appropriation of subcultural, underground, and countercultural trends forming dialogues within middle- or higher-class milieus. If the concept of the Warhol Economy "is the sociality of the Factory enacted on the scale of New York City" (de Peuter, 2014: 31), then I will here expand the concept, arguing that, instead of merely New York, it encompasses trans-local creative milieus that sprawl in diverse sites, online and offline, interweaving art, music, business, fashion, entrepreneurialism, and market-based transactions. Later, I look at the persona of Demna, who crafts a populist, controversial, and sophisticated genius in the tradition of Andy Warhol and embraces "ugly" fashion aesthetics. Next, I look at the use of the selfie in the Vetements Instagram accounts and the poor chic in apparel designs, such as the Okhrana Uniform and the Paris Sneakers of Vetements and Balenciaga



Figure 4.1 The intersections between banal luxury and contemporary art: Vetements on the way to Giardini, Venice Biennale 2022.

Panos Kompatsiaris.

respectively. I argue that banal luxury offers a unique case of the curating economy as it updates the traditional avant-garde gestures of Duchamp and Warhol in the age of platforms, borrowing from the latter's language of connectivity (see Figure 4.1).

4.2 Warhol Economies and Cool Atmospheres

The readymade and its experimental, anti-art, and anti-commercial ethos found its commodified apotheosis in the activities of Andy Warhol and the milieus around him in post-1960s New York. Warhol's "business art" overtly emphasized that when it comes to creating art, what primarily matters is the creation of the context (Currid-Hackett, 2020: Ch. 1). These contexts spanned creative disciplines joining different practitioners under a seemingly loose atmosphere of narcissistic transgression, which was the backdrop of experiencing objects, performances, and other activities in the Factory sociability. With Warhol and the milieus around him, art decisively abandoned

handcraft in favor of an extended socio-economic practice, which is a business enterprise where the boundaries between making art and making money are blurred.⁸ The artist here is pushed to assume the role of a creative entrepreneur insofar as innovative ideas are a prerequisite for artistic success. With the widespread institutionalization and dissemination of conceptual art strategies since the 1990s, as we saw in Chapter 2, this paradigm has become canonical in creative fields globally; the mandate to be in the right place and to know the right people across networks and flows of art, money, and parties shapes the role model of creative subjects (Lorey, 2014; McRobbie, 2018). With the catalyzing influence of social media, this mandate spreads as a desirable life model pretty much everywhere, not just for those in the art world (Mould, 2020).

In her celebratory account of urban coolness, Currid-Halkett defines the cultural economy of New York as the Warhol Economy (2020), where an informal web of parties, art openings, punk musicians, fashion designers, hip bars, jazz clubs, restaurants, cool spaces, music venues, and underground art compose the city's "perpetual creativity" (2020: Ch. 1). As we saw with the Burberry partnership, this cross-sectoral, informal sociality suggests that "fashion, art, film, music, and design did not reside in separate spheres", but are in the process of movement and exchange (2020: Ch. 1). Avant-garde artists mingle with eclectic fashion designers and underground musicians in urban clusters of chic bars, fusion restaurants, boutique coffee shops, and organic markets. This perpetual creativity should then be thought of in terms of networks and processes, rather than objects and persons. Similar to Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory (2010), in the Warhol Economy, art objects, subjects, performances, and events are actants within a network mediating its longevity in varying capacities, intensities, and degrees.⁹

In this sense, and since a network is always more than the sum of its parts, the Warhol Economy gives rise to an intangible context which defines the emotive hint of a space, an atmosphere. The concept of the atmosphere, traditionally associated with the meteorological field, owes most of its relevance in contemporary theory to the seminal work of the philosopher Gernot Böhme (2013, 2016). The atmosphere, for Böhme, encompasses the intangible surroundings, barely perceptible and often neglected, framing one's presence and action: an atmosphere is the "moods which are 'in the air'" providing the "emotional tinge of a space" (2013: 1). Different emotional tinges construct different affects and dispositions when navigating a space. The atmosphere surrounding a hospital's waiting room, for instance, crafts an emotional tinge that usually communicates sadness or psychological distress, while the atmosphere in a comedy show enables laughter. Atmospheres have certain characters, and the character of each informs "the way in which it communicates a feeling to us as participating subjects" (2013: 2); if it rains or it is windy, the atmosphere is often gloomy, if it is sunny and the smells are nice the atmosphere is pleasant. Atmospheres thus qualify affects and emotional responses: if one laughs in an environment of psychological distress

that would be perceived as inappropriate while if one laughs in a comedy show it would not. There can be something theatrical about an atmosphere, as if objects, subjects, and activities occur on a stage. An atmosphere is neither material nor immaterial, neither perceptible nor imperceptible; as its etymological origin suggests, it is a sphere of *vapor* (atmos [ατμός] in Greek), a state of in-betweenness, among, and within. Atmospheres often refer to the tacit level, being “there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining” (Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen, 2015; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013: 36), neither objective nor subjective, they are “what is in between, what mediates the two sides” (Böhme, 2016: 13). The atmosphere of the Warhol Economy conveys a cool ambience, that is, it is an imperceptible surrounding within which subjects, objects, and events are shaped by, and themselves perform, a condition of desirability; a space—physical or virtual—that appeals through ironic detachment, narcissism, and some (minor and managed) deviation from the norm, a “symbolic rebellion” (Puntain and Robins, 2000:15).

Symbolic rebellions are registered as such insofar as transgressive, underground, radical, or subcultural trends manage to, one way or another, intervene in the dominant lexicon of a creative field (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018; McGuigan, 2015; Currid-Halkett, 2020). Such rebellions typically happen on behalf of middle- or high-class milieus, a process which has been notably termed as “radical chic” (Wolfe, 1970). The managed accommodation of aesthetically, politically, or socially radical postures is a way to insert managed dissent or friction into the network’s atmosphere. In terms of contemporary creative industries, such radical postures, for example, may refer to previously frowned upon or ignored art practices, such as the Duchampian readymade, subcultural musical styles such as punk, online communities such as gamers, or political actors such as revolutionaries (Kompatsiaris, 2017; Ciotti, 2020). As the managed accommodation of transgression makes a network look cool, we can argue, like Jim McGuigan, that cool capitalism is the “incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself” yet add that it is not simply disaffection with capitalism but the deviation from any authority that mediates coolness (McGuigan, 2015: 1). Deviation, though, whether more or less politically and aesthetically radical, has to be *curated*, that is, packaged in narratives that would satisfy specific creative stakeholders, audiences, and milieus.

Let us give an example of how a high-end art milieu curated its atmosphere through the ordinary practice of simply describing artworks. The 9th Athens Biennale (titled *Eclipse*) that took place in 2021 included in its program a film installation by the British artist and film director Steve McQueen titled *End Credits*. This installation was devoted to the Afroamerican baritone singer, athlete, and committed communist Paul Robeson, highlighting his persecution by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as a result of his political activities. While Robeson was a revolutionary and a hardline communist, a fact that resulted in the FBI taking his passport for years and in effect destroying his life and career, in the biennial webpage he was portrayed

as a “social activist [...] blacklisted [...] due to his struggle against racism”.¹⁰ This is, however, a customization of Robeson’s life that suits the biennial’s largely anti-communist stakeholders.¹¹ This case shows a way to curate an element within a cool atmosphere, that is, to publicly edit out, select, and eventually distort the biographical details of someone like Paul Robeson so that the visitors, funders, and stakeholders see what they feel better seeing. Robeson appeared as a simple activist instead of a communist party member with strong ties to the Soviet Union (who even wrote paeans to Stalin). The curators of *Eclipse*, as key actors in the transnational Warhol Economy networks of Athens, curated a state of “controlled transgression” (“black but not communist”) performing and shaping the predispositions of its audiences and stakeholders.

Let us consider another example of a curated atmosphere and its desiring affects. The Russian premiere of the film *France* (2021), directed by the French arthouse director Bruno Dumont, took place in September 2021 in the newly rebuilt cinema *Khudozhestvenny*, located in heart of Moscow in Arbat Square. The rebuilding of *Khudozhestvenny* (literally “artistic”) was celebrated in the national and international press, as, first opened in 1909, one of the oldest cinemas in the world. Its lavish renovation attracted the interest of the city’s contemporary cultural scene and was reported in global news. Bruno Dumont, winner of two Palm D’Or awards in Cannes and known for films that portray working-class life, is an arthouse director popular with cinephiles, left-wing cineastes, and the creative class. Since its opening, *Khudozhestvenny* has built a partnership with the haute-couture brand Gucci, whose logos and advertisements were displayed in different parts of its premises. During the premiere, a Gucci fashion exhibition was on display in the main foyer of the cinema, right next to the entrance to Dumont’s film. The premiere was attended by people with symbolic, cultural, and often economic capital in the Russian context. This assemblage qualified an atmosphere blending Dumont’s arthouse credentials and Gucci’s luxury fashion taste in a lavishly restored 1909 cinema combined with the presence of international middle-class crowds. Dumont’s symbolic capital as an arthouse director and thus as someone who creates art “independently”, Gucci’s highbrow elegance, the history of the building, including the likes of Sergey Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, and the refined visitors gathered in an atmosphere of sophisticated coolness: “something important is going on here”. This “something important is going on here” is a key atmospheric condition of the Warhol Economy.

The concept of the Warhol Economy is useful as we can extrapolate the analytical perspective in relation to banal luxury that (a) grapples with the productive side of creative networks, (b) emphasizes the synergies between creative spheres for maintaining network flows, and (c) highlights how semiotic difference needs to be curated so as to appear “cool” and partake a value regime in capitalism economy. To extend and de-fetishize the New York-ness of the concept, we can then speak of global Warhol economies, which, apart

from being territorially contained, are online, mobile, and transnational. Such cultural economies involve the coming together of international flows of coolness, ranging from an Asian restaurant in Berlin and an art biennial in Guangzhou to the digitally native musical style Vaporwave, and Instagram accounts on socialist architecture. These flows are interweaving physical connectivities locally composed of art openings, parties, concept stores, fashion shows, underground concerts, and so on, and virtual ones in social media and platforms facilitating distant interaction. Both online and offline converge in flows and particular moments that spill over into broader society; for curating coolness in the Athens Biennale, for instance, Paul Robeson had to appear as a “black activist” instead of “communist” or “Stalinist” in the descriptive texts of the actual exhibition and the online spaces that the biennial navigates or exhibition reviews and the public discourse about Robeson in Athens Biennale.¹² Warhol Economies then capitalize on semiotic differences for generating cool atmospheres across the interweaving between the physical and digital. One such economy is the field of banal luxury.

4.3 “It Is Ugly, That’s Why We Like It”, or Privileged Populism in High Fashion

In the next sections, I look at atmosphere of banal luxury, in particular those around Demna, Vetements, and Balenciaga. In this section, I focus on Demna’s privileged populism and continue with selfies and the poor chic in the performances of these brands. In all cases, a feeling of “banal” is acted upon luxury; banal refers not only to an object or gesture of bad taste but also to the ordinary, the tedious, and the uninspiring, which when purposefully performed upon luxury atmospheres appears as a subversive gesture. I also understand the banal as a notion that comes into effect within the contexts articulated, so in luxury fashion banal implies the common and the everyday as opposed to the elegance, privilege, and uniqueness that luxury offers access to. The atmospheres of banal luxury I look at bridge a continuum between physical spaces, such as fashion events, and online spaces, such as interviews, clips, posts, and reels. Here and in the next sections, I follow selective moments of the banal luxury complex, including Instagram accounts (@vetements_official and @balenciaga @demnagram), interviews, fashion items, and public interactions. The interview format, for example, which we saw with Douglas, creates a stage where one can appear as radical, controversial, prophetic, and so on in the context of what Gernot Böhme calls “performance society” (2017: 17). Yet, to go back to Bourdieu, performances are subject to the rules of the field and the positions one is speaking from rather than free-floating exercises (1997). I regard the material, for instance, that I use from Demna’s interviews in this section as a linguistic performance specific to the luxury fashion field and the subfield that Demna navigates instead of a free-floating exercise in self-making; in luxury fashion, as in any other field, there is a struggle among the field’s players for defining dominant concepts,

discourses, and values (Bourdieu, 2020; Bartlett, Cole, and Rocamora, 2018). Demna is part of “the post-Soviet fashion” scene (Bugajska, 2020; Simpson, 2021), which is a subfield of luxury fashion credited for queering the masculine body (Roberts, 2019), and whose other representatives include fashion designers Gosha Rubchinskiy and Lotta Volkova. Post-Soviet fashion channeled an excessive fashion style of “ugly” streetwear aesthetics and a conceptual remodeling of digital culture to global fashion, which Demna inherits and performs in the luxury fashion world.

Demna is the co-founder of the luxury clothing brand Vetements, and he was its head designer from 2014 to 2019.¹³ In 2019, he left the brand to focus on his role as creative director of the prestigious Paris-based haute-couture brand, Balenciaga, which hired him in 2015. During these four years, Demna held a position in both brands—for Demna Vetements and Balenciaga are “two different, independent stories that happen to share one common factor, which is me” (Demna quoted in SSENSE, 2016). Vetements launched a symbolic revolt against the established fashion system by unashamedly embracing cheap popular culture, something risky for a brand positioning itself as luxury. Vetements collaborated with low-end companies, such as DHL, IKEA, Reebok, and even Crocs, and occasionally chose equally banal venues for their shows, including a McDonald’s restaurant and a cheap Chinese restaurant in Paris. These synergies were controversial insofar as they challenged the exclusiveness of the luxury fashion system, yet they made the brand look confidently cool in its undertakings. The scandalousness of these collaborations gained extensive media coverage from major media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and *Vogue*, among many others. As the scandalous provocation is a classic avant-garde tactic for drawing public attention, the charismatic figure of Demna proved key in attracting media publicity.

While luxury fashion designers have likewise embraced avant-garde tactics, including banality and ugliness before, Vetements under the direction of Demna (and after 2019 of his brother, Guram Gvasalia), pushed this idea to its limits. Tellingly, when asked about one of Vetements items, Demna stated in 2016 at the height of Vetements success that “it’s ugly, that’s why we like it” (Demna quoted in Wolf, 2016). This avowal reverses a commonsense truism of the fashion system, that is, that fashion is about beauty, through an unapologetic celebration of its exact opposite. As Duchamp vocally disassociates art from the burden of handcraft or beauty by exhibiting a prefabricated and banal bicycle wheel, the love of ugliness here has a similar effect vis-à-vis luxury fashion: it strips it from its *raison d’être*. The timing for Demna was more ideal than Duchamp, however, as Demna’s endorsement of unorthodox aesthetics resonated with the body positivity movement that entered fashion and culture at large at least after the 2010s while Duchamp’s practices were only institutionalized in the art system in the 1960s and 1970s (partly via the symbolic and economic capital associated with Warhol), that is, more than 50 years after their initial appearance.

However, this celebration of fashion's opposite cannot be "radical" enough as it takes place within a certain industrial field that is regulated by rules regarding what can be done, what can be said, and how. Since the main rule is to make profit, radicality should be one way, or another administered (Bourdieu, 1996). If one's position in the field gradually becomes more established, radicality will be tailored to fit the field's established codes (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975). For instance, in a later interview when already the creative director of the much more prestigious haute-couture label Balenciaga, Demna updates the idea of "liking ugliness" vis-à-vis the original spirit of Balenciaga's greatness. Eventually, via Balenciaga, "ugly" models showcase elegance and (unconventional) beauty:

Demna: I cast real people. They have such personalities and some of them are quite the characters. They choose what they want to wear. And it's also very Balenciaga. He used to have what people would call "ugly models".

Leon Talley: Yes, but they were elegant.

Demna: They were super elegant, and he made them elegant with his clothes. People transformed when they put those dresses on. It makes sense to look for unconventional beauty at Balenciaga.
(Talley and Iman, 2021)

Here, the radical gesture of "liking ugliness" does not entail a subversion of the fashion system's codes as it still plays within the key luxury signifiers of "beauty" and "elegance". Rather, it is more of a tactical inclusion and therefore expansion of the system's reach. This is another classic avant-garde move: the "anti-art" of Duchamp and others did not entail a rejection of art as a system; anti-art was rejecting a specific type of art (e.g., academic art) while still navigating references, display techniques, and audiences specific to the art canon. It was thus mostly a gesture of expanding the scope of the field and eventually including in the field forms, styles, media, and audiences that would (supposedly) democratize the field's loftiness. The subsequent recognition of these avant-garde gestures by the official artworld and the rest of the society as genius has also to do with the prevalence of capitalism as the socio-economic system at the time; capitalism economizes difference to create new desires and markets of which the avant-garde and later conceptual art were part. While Demna draws parallels between his practice and that of an artist (he says, "I don't want to compare it [my work] to an artist working on an artwork—but it's the same", Demna quoted in Amed, 2016), this supposed democratization of fashion is explicitly modeled as business from scratch. Contrary to the anti-art practices of the 1920s that were attended by a closed circle of devotees, in today's capitalism there is an expanded cultural market for likewise formal experiments (as also proven by Balenciaga's enormous visibility under Demna).

In banal luxury, the rhetoric toward the democratization of fashion (via celebrating ugliness or unconventional beauty) often flirts with a larger populist rhetoric, which praises the ordinary and subaltern versus the elite. Populism is a discursive construction that “interpellates citizens as members of ‘the people’, considered as an underdog, and opposed along a vertical down/up axis to ‘the elite’, conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful and privileged group” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2020: 316). In populist discourse, there is an often-rhetorical celebration of the masses that are superior than the elites. Demna appropriates elements from the underdog classes in the expensive clothes he designs, as we shall see later, but also employs similar tactics, applauding the subaltern classes for being real and authentic in contrast to the self-righteous elites:

A lot of people who don’t have money and who don’t have the possibility to buy designer clothes—they *have much more understanding of style than the elite.*

(Zahm, 2022, emphasis added)

And

When you have too much money, you lose that sense of style because you don’t have to be creative anymore. You can buy your identity by buying the brand, by buying a watch, a diamond, whatever. And when you don’t have [money], when you have to be creative with a roll of toilet paper, that’s when you really can make something new.

(Zahm, 2022, emphasis added)

The people here have presumably grown superior taste over the elites who have become complacently conformist as a result of their material abundance. The strategic use of underdog identities in order to reinforce one’s authority as expert resembles what De Benjamin De Cleen and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado call “populism of the privileged” (2023). Given that it comes from the creative director of one of the most expensive fashion brands in the world and maybe the most visible fashion superstar at the time, this rhetorical style reverses the commonsense hierarchy of taste and at the same time continues addressing the elites (the 1%, the people who can afford, say a Balenciaga dog bowl for \$900, see Pauly, 2022). That is, the luxury fashion designer credits the dressing capacities of the masses and discredits that of the elites yet at the same time attempts to appeal exclusively to the privileged latter. This assumed “friction” in the system, or “crisis” in De Cleen and Casado’s terms (2023), does several things at once: it enables system reflexivity and therefore expansion, as the high fashion participants are encouraged to question their lifestyles and choices, as well as announcing Demna as a culturally omnivorous expert who navigates with remarkable ease both high-end and low-end clothing styles (Savage, 2006). This crossover throughout

genres is persistent in several of Demna's creative expressions; for instance, his curated playlist for Apple Music "Hello, My Name is Demna" resembles a Greatest Hits album of global pop/rock, with songs of Kayne West, Marilyn Manson, Garbage, Muse, and Rammstein spiced up with more internationally obscure Russian and Georgian music related to Demna's growing up.

The perception of Demna as a culturally omnivorous expert is boosted by Demna's own autobiographical details, including his upbringing in Soviet Georgia and his experience of communism:

Up until 1991, Georgia was part of the ex-Soviet Union, so I had a *Soviet childhood. I was brought up with Stalinist, Leninist, and, Communist ideas and deprived of any kind of real information.*

(Demna quoted in SSENSE, 2016, emphasis added)

In a statement that can be easily accommodated in the milieus of creative industries, similarly to the Athens Biennale, the "Soviet childhood" and communist ideas here are blamed for depriving Demna of true information. Yet, at the same time, these conditions shaped his vision as a designer; for instance, the embracing of military aesthetics and police uniforms in his design practices are justified by his experience of war and life in the Soviet Union. Or, for instance, the "scandalous" late 2022 mud runaway designed by the artist Santiago Sierra at Balenciaga's show in Paris Fashion Week, who Demna recruited because he is an artist "against capitalism", was a metaphor "for digging for truth and being down to earth" (Demna quoted in Spiegler, 2022). A harsh childhood and the distinct upbringing endow the designer with a rare, penetrating vision, which binds him with a responsibility to be authentic to his experience:

I feel like my challenge and responsibility as a designer today is to question what beauty is. Why do we follow the rules from 50 years ago? I didn't grow up in Versailles. I am a refugee. I needed to look for beauty in everything. Cristóbal [Balenciaga] did that when everybody was doing fitted silhouettes and he did what they called a "potato bag." The most minimal thing. He was the father of minimalism in some ways. I read an article in an issue of French Vogue from the 1960s, and they ridiculed it and said it was ugly, and I suddenly felt so good, because I realized that when you want to do something like this, you always have to suffer not being understood right away. I went through that, too, and it gave me hope.

(Demna quoted in Talley and Iman, 2021, emphasis added)

Demna's creative practice is here a calling that somehow appears consistent with Cristóbal Balenciaga's original vision. By partaking in the authority of Cristóbal Balenciaga, Demna occupies the figure of the misfit who eventually made it to the top, a genius who, despite misfortunes and suffering, went from rags to riches.

Demna's persona is also performed via Balenciaga's Instagram account (14.3 million followers) and the Instagram account @demnagram, an account controlled by the fashion enthusiast Saba Bakhia, a "Demna supporter", and in turn "supported by Balenciaga" (that is by Demna himself). Balenciaga and Bakhia are platform curators, insofar as they organize the representations of the brand and of Demna in Instagram (insofar as Demna is *the* public face of Balenciaga). The Balenciaga account has the unorthodox strategy of updating all its content in each new collection (instead of preserving previous posts in its timeline) so as to highlight each new collection for a certain period of time. In its permanent stories section, it promotes activist causes, such as the women's movement in Iran or the Ukrainian war efforts, while this activism extends to incidents, among others, such as Balenciaga leaving Twitter as soon as Elon Musk became the owner of the platform, Demna dropping his long-term collaborator and buddy Ye (Kayne West) after the latter made a racist statement against Jewish people and Demna calling for the US citizens to vote for Biden in the American elections of 2020. The @demnagram account performs a different side of Demna: apart from photos related to his design, it regularly features inspirational quotes attributed to Demna. For instance, in the description of a post on Balenciaga sneakers there is Demna saying, "do not listen to anyone telling you what to do and how to do it. The only thing, you should listen to is your heart, it will always bring you to right places in life" (Demna quoted in demnagram, 2022a) or "I don't like that luxury is always intended to communicate that you're rich [...] I'd rather wear a bag that doesn't make me look like the rare bourgeois bitch who can afford it" (Demna quoted in demnagram, 2022b). These inspirational quotes register the luxury designer as a guru or life coach (about which we will see in more detail in Chapter 6), crafting a persona that spreads over pretty much anything that is associated with neoliberal creativity today. In the next section, I turn to another instance of banal luxury, which is the Vetements Instagram account and in particular the use of selfies.

4.4 Highbrow Selfies in Vetements Instagram

Vetements, similar to Balenciaga, except even more defiantly as a result of its explicit orientation toward youth cultures, stages Instagram atmospheres that are cool, revolting, and transgressive. The brand excessively deploys internet meme aesthetics and, as per Demna's spirit, reverses common perceptions of beauty and elegance in luxury fashion (Skjulstad, 2020; 2021). The Instagram activity of Vetements taps into platform connectivity, inviting "audiences to participative action, tweaking, DIY practices, controversy and debate as part of the brand's persuasive techniques for agenda setting, thus situating itself in the center of discursive activity" (Skjulstad, 2020: 188). For instance, prior to launching an online "secret project" in July 2021, Vetements published a post in their @vetements_uncensored calling their followers to "Join Now

or Fuck Off”. This not only transgresses the customer-oriented paradigm, in which customers are treated with respect, but it turns to its complete opposite by telling them to “fuck off”. Via such daily managed controversies, the fashion design collective taps into internet cultures and meme logics, with hilarity and transgression being encoded in their digital mediations (also often into their garments and apparel).

Here, I focus on one of the (many) illustrations where Vetements uses internet culture in a transgressive way vis-à-vis the rules of the luxury fashion: the use of the selfie for depicting the models wearing its clothes in its Instagram account. These selfies are registered as a symbolic revolt to the canon of the luxury fashion, and together with other “flawed” posts, involving blurry, shaken, flashy, pixelized, bedroom, overtly sexualized and randomly cut photos, curate a stream of boundary-defying coolness. It is a coolness, which similarly to the Demna persona above, renders the ordinary and the banal as parts of luxury milieus. These posts enable a knee-jerk visual curiosity, which, especially in Instagram cultures, is central for grabbing the audience’s attention.

Phones offer a simple and cheap way to create self-portraits that can be easily uploaded, shared, and reacted to. As the selfie aims to present an improved version of the self (whatever improved means for anyone), phones can make these versions of the self-public and thus open to social interaction. Selfie as a cultural form indicates an engagement with one’s self, face, and body. The selfie is also a vehicle of self-reliance and individualization, as, for instance, instead of asking someone, professional or not, to photograph you, you can now do it yourself. For the critical theorist Henry Giroux, the selfie expresses the “narrow orbits of self-obsession and individual posturing” that dominate contemporary capitalist cultures and has a further economic aspect as it boosts adjacent economic industries, especially the cosmetic, Botox, fitness, and plastic surgery industries (2015: 4). On the other hand, the selfie format has been also credited to be a vehicle for progressive causes, offering for instance visibility to activist causes, such as the struggles of war refugees (Nikunen, 2019) and the female self-empowerment against patriarchal canons (Murray, 2015).

In the hierarchy of aesthetic value, the selfie stands for a mass and generally banal form that is usually at odds with the exclusiveness of high fashion. Traditionally, the representation of fashion involves a professional photographer taking pictures of the model. This representation is mediated by a (usually) male expert whose gaze supposedly provides access to the (usually) female model’s beauty and clothing elegance. Luxury fashion photoshoots can be part of the promotion of high fashion, and especially if taken by a celebrity photographer, they can offer additional high-end publicity. By having the model looking at the camera lens, fashion photography shapes a voyeuristic triangle between the photographer, the model, and the viewer, in which the fashion photographer and the model are involved in a “game of seduction”, of which the final (and only) receiver is the viewer.

Using the selfie format as the visual representation of a luxury brand thus collapses these aspects of traditional fashion photography. First, there is no expert mediating aesthetic value, as now the models become the arbiters of photographic quality themselves. There is no voyeuristic game of seduction as the model's gaze looks back into the mirror and thus the audience exclusively consumes the model's own seductive play with themselves. The model, instead of the professional photographer, has the power to mediate the ways that their "beauty" will appear to the public. The fashion selfie plays within the discourse of empowerment as now it is the model that initiates the hedonistic game and therefore the model is not merely an object to be consumed by the photographer's and audience's gaze but an active subject creating their own imagery. Of course, in the fashion world this empowerment is deceptive as it is again the creative director curating the fashion brand who decides which selfies are allowed to be publicly shown.

In short, the use of selfies is an anti-fashion statement that questions fashion's reliance on quality, elegance, and beauty, registering a symbolic revolt against conventional fashion iconography. To go back to the production of reflexivity in communicative capitalism, the use of selfies invites audiences to question, reflect upon, and momentarily transgress the rules of fashion as a social system as instead of demonizing them as banal and low-class. Vetements welcomes their lowliness into this system and thus violates its archetypal values. This insertion of an utterly banal practice into luxury fashion milieus is again resonant of Duchamp's appropriation of the mass and the unworthy in readymade art, yet as we saw with ugliness and will see with poverty in the next section, it is exclusively oriented toward corporate profit. Negativity is curated in a way that the risk of a backlash is contained and the whole enterprise continues to add value to the brand.

In the Vetements selfies (Figure 4.2), the models render their own, supposedly unmediated and unfiltered, eroticism available to viewers; the selfies are unpolished, with no make-up or effects, as if they would be quickly sent to a friend. Most of the time these models are not luxury fashion professionals but aspiring ones typically with (only) thousands of Instagram followers. Their feeds may contain posed photos but also posts from their everyday life, most often overtly emphasizing their sexuality and cool lifestyles. This is another curatorial-marketing strategy as by tagging "ordinary persons", Vetements links with "the people" instead of the elites (although again it is only the elites who can afford its clothes). The Vetements selfies communicate a loosely transgressive atmosphere by means of banal and populist tropes. In the bottom right picture, for instance, the female model has a dick sticker on her phone case, claiming a sex-positive hedonistic empowerment. In internet culture, the "unsolicited dick pick" constitutes a threat and the figure of the "dick" usually stands for male aggressiveness and harassment. The positive identification with a dick then rejects the figure of the woman-victim in favor of a woman who celebrates sexuality in her own terms, and it does so as an everyday casual affair instead of as a grand political statement.

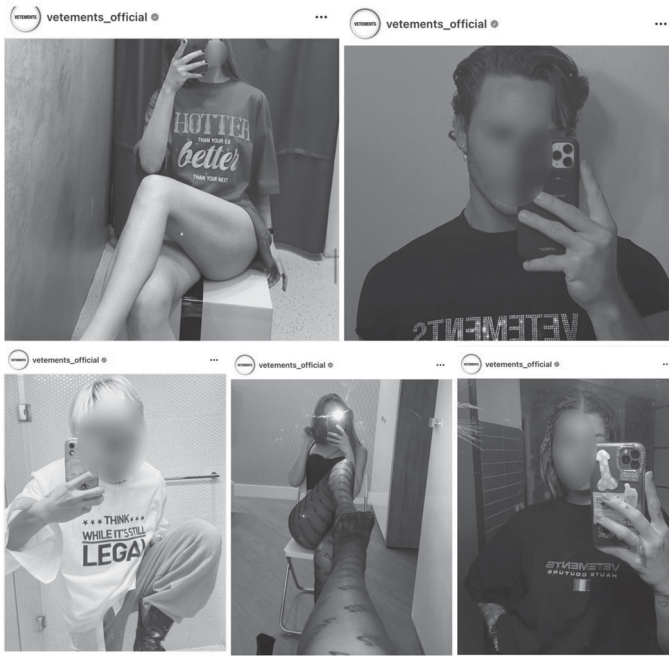


Figure 4.2 Vetements fashion selfies.

The model in the bottom left picture wears a t-shirt writing “Think While it is Still Legal”, an internet conspiracy-type of slogan, and the model in the top left picture wears a t-shirt writing “Hotter than your Ex, better than your Next”, a tacky phrase found in internet memes. While these banal meme phrases can be printed cheaply on any plain t-shirt, these Vetements t-shirts have prices starting from \$450. All models in Figure 4.2 are focused on their phone screens, that is on their own self-image, in an overtly narcissistic-compulsive way.

The audience reactions in these posts are also indicative of a cool sex-positive atmosphere as they are more than often include many “heart” and “fire” emojis in the row, implying that the model looks hot rather than that the garment is beautiful. “Does the shirt come with the guy?” asks, for instance, a user in the comments of the top-right picture. Again, here the “guy” is more important than the garment (which is obviously and purposefully banal), and as typical for the Warhol Economy, it is the surroundings that matter often more than the objects themselves. In this selfie banality, the models then “look like us” yet the actual price of the garments erects a class barrier between “them” (those who can afford Vetements clothes) and “us” (who cannot). In many places on earth, for instance, a simple pair of

Vetements' tights cost several times more than the average monthly salary. In this sense, while the selfie trope aims to build intimacy with the audience, this is a pseudo-intimacy, or a "cold intimacy", to use the term of Illouz in another context (2013), as the intimate relationality that the brand cultivates stumbles over the unequal distribution of resources in society.

The Instagram selfie is part of Vetements' performance of banality that spans from their social media accounts to actual apparel creations. The idea here, reminiscent again of Duchamp, is to turn ordinariness into a cult object, to render its boringness and repeatability into a desirable fetish. Luxury fashion is, of course, first and foremost an extremely profitable business, and therefore this gesture, contrary to the one by Duchamp, is dictated by the profit motive. The gesture has to arouse the feeling of desirability in networks of industry professionals, rich buyers, and the luxury fashion public alike, convincing them that it is worth spending time, money, and attention on the brand.

4.5 Poor Chic, the Security Uniform, and the Damaged Sneakers

The first widely popularized banality of Vetements was their collaboration with DHL, in which, similarly to the examples above, they marketed a common yellow and red DHL t-shirt as luxury fashion in 2016. This DHL t-shirt cost around \$200 at its release in stores, and now its price is rising on reseller platforms as it became a collector's item (creating artificial scarcity is very important for Vetements' strategy and vision). In October 2021, Vetements pushed banality further by launching a new hoodie called "Okhrana" in collaboration with the online concept store SVMoscow (which after the invasion of Ukraine was renamed to "S77"). The hoodie was a simple all-black hoodie with the yellow logo *Okhrana* (охрана) printed on it, which is "Security" in Russian. The term is loaded with references to the Russian security and police apparatus, known for their brutal methods. For instance, *okhrana* was the name of the notorious tsarist secret police that used falsification and torture against political opponents, especially leftists and Jews. Apart from the signification with the tsarist police, the word *okhrana* in contemporary Russia is printed in the uniforms of security personnel that guard public buildings (it is this uniform that Vetements copied). These security personnel are paid little and come from working class backgrounds. Furthermore, the word *okhrana* bears references to state discourse, whether as the provision of security or as prohibition and unfreedom, and at least in popular parlance, it is the radical other of contemporary fashion, which supposedly celebrates the values of freedom, individuality, and expressiveness. In the context of growing authoritarianism and censorship, *okhrana* comes to signify the more repressive and lumpenproletariat elements of Russian society that would unquestionably embody the conservative values of the state discourse (without of course meaning that all security personnel individually share these values).

The appropriation of the figure of lumpenproletariat by Vetements is an example of “poor chic”, which more broadly refers to “an array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish—and often expensive—‘fun’ of poverty, or of traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses” (Halnon, 2002: 501). Instead of appropriating the exotic other, as in more traditional accounts of cultural appropriation, poverty chic is a form of appropriation that colonizes the class other (Ryndya, 2023). This has been a constant motive of Demna and post-Soviet fashion design in general (Gosha Rubchinskiy is a case in point). As in the process of cultural appropriation, the class other does not have the power and cultural capital to self-represent in high-culture milieus and the luxury fashion designer speaks exclusively on its behalf. This conceptual gesture of aestheticizing the lumpenproletariat and elevating a typical security uniform to an expensive fashion item (its price is more than \$1,000), parodies high fashion and injects friction into the system.

Vetements, Balenciaga, and Demna repeat the motive of “safety” in many collections; for Demna, as seen above, this is justified through references to his past. For instance, in the SS20 Vetements collection, presented in a McDonald’s restaurant, Demna showed a number of militaristic costumes, such as the puffer jacket and pants that almost precisely copied the German police uniform in a more oversized silhouette. Yet when it comes to banal representations of power, Vetements is omnivorous as it also welcomes its exact opposite, that is anarchism and revolt. As such, there is the “Destroyed Anarchy sweater”, which is actually a ripped black sweater with the symbol of anarchy printed on the front and priced at €1,480.¹⁴ Anarchism and the ripped sweater are signs of anti-power, that is anti-systemic signs, as such signs can range from the anti-capitalist Santiago Sierra to conspiracy theory slogans. In this endless semiotic play, even the “okhrana” and police personnel represent anti-systemic figures as from the point of view of liberal mainstream society they are the lumpenproletarian “others” with poor taste and little volition of their own (see Figure 4.3).

This romanticization of poorness is equally spectacularizing in the “Paris Sneakers” launched by Balenciaga in May 2022 under Demna’s creative direction. Balenciaga sneakers are a trademark of the brand—they even figure in Douglas’ paintings, as we saw. In Obrist’s question of why to paint sneakers, Douglas responds that they are “Balenciaga, there is a lot of hype around them” and they are “the kind of thing where people line up around the block hours before they are first released in the stores” (Douglas quoted in HERO, 2019). The Balenciaga sneakers in Douglas’ paintings become a fetish, telling a story about cultural obsession that should be read along the lines of their context, concept, and creator.

In this sense the “destroyed sneakers” is a deconstructive reference to the larger trademark of “Balenciaga sneakers”. The Paris Sneakers essentially look like a shattered, ripped, torn, muddy, and dirty item. One would associate these damaged shoes with people in a state of despair, such as refugees



Figure 4.3 Vetements Okhrana uniform.

or economically disadvantaged people. And still, the more destroyed the sneakers the more economic value they have as they verge toward the conceptual artwork instead of a common footwear item: “while Balenciaga will sell 100 pairs of the limited edition extra-destroyed sneakers featured in the campaign for \$1,850 each, the actual Paris sneakers—slightly distressed but still very much intact—start at \$495” (Kennedy, 2022). The sneakers were launched amidst some of the biggest refugee movements in Europe and the world, including Syrian and Ukrainian, and somewhat expectedly caused frustrated headlines, debates, and Twitter polemics. Yet this very frustration around the Paris Sneakers has “generated almost \$5 million in media impact value (MIV), a measure of conversation on social media, in just 48 hours”, that is, it created “a self-sustaining conversation on social media” that kept on promoting the brand (Kennedy, 2022). Here, again, the scandalous avant-garde tactic is a means to generate publicity and virality for the brand.

The social media frustration against Balenciaga skyrocketed in November 2022 for another transgressive campaign, which involved little children photographed in bondage teddy bears, that eventually brought a serious crisis to the company and even made Demna apologize publicly. With this

stunt going too far, it is hard to predict at least at the time of writing in which direction future Demna and Balenciaga-Vetements transgressions will head and whether the shocking avant-garde techniques will continue.

4.6 Conclusions

This chapter presents a snapshot of the (digitally) mediated atmospheres of banal luxury through provocative posts, interviews, online interactions, and controversies. As an “indeterminate, spatially diffused quality of feeling” (Böhme, 2016: 18), an atmosphere impacts the ways that objects and subjects are perceived, thus being a terrain upon which value is performed and negotiated. Banal luxury capitalizes on the repurposing of beauty and elegance in the context of internet Warhol economies using populism, provocation, memes, irony, DIY, street language, sex-positiveness, and the underground. In the atmospheres we saw, internet platforms are not merely a means to showcase, network, and perform clothing collections but provide the raw material of connectivity and participation. This in turn becomes embedded in the clothes, style, and stunts of banal luxury.

Banal luxury is a subfield of the wider creative network of luxury fashion and thus postures of narcissism, ironic detachment, hedonism, interdisciplinarity, open-mindedness, social awareness, and the celebration of body and individuality are key in its social interactions. Banal luxury is a context within which subjects, objects, and events are shaped by and themselves are encouraged to perform a condition of desirability conditioned by the coordinates of the subfield. For instance, Demna’s framing of “ugliness” as potential elegance in the context of Balenciaga reterritorializes deviation within the dominant values of the field. These public interactions facilitate atmospheres, yet these atmospheres are neither fully intentional nor fully accidental, they rather emerge as aesthetic postures within the field’s structured and structuring predispositions. For instance, Douglas’ interview at the beginning of this chapter, is not an intentional act to shape her own “brand” around, say, Demna or Balenciaga, but a semi-structured and semi-spontaneous performance of a social actor within a larger creative network, of which Douglas, Demna, and Balenciaga are part. Douglas did not strategically “play a role” but inhabited an aesthetic posture of coolness that is suitable and potentially capitalizable within these milieus.

The omnivorous creative vision of Demna is reminiscent of the legitimized freelance professional curators in the post-1990s and capacity to navigate “posthumanism over pizza”. In the context of this creative vision, objects, concepts, and activities are interpreted and valorized as being instances of their creators’ visions. Thus, Demna declares that “everything I do has a reason” (Demna, quoted in Tashjian, 2021), and the audiences, critics, consumers, and users should be convinced that there is a certain rationality behind each trick, that there is a larger creative plan, that Demna knows what he is doing, that there is a curatorial vision behind seemingly disjointed

stunts, and that he is “the coolest”, to repeat the opinion of Kim Kardashian’s about Demna. In the next chapter, we move from this high-end creative vision to the construction of purpose in food practices in the time of platforms, that is in less exclusive and seemingly more horizontalized areas of life.

Notes

- 1 This and the rest of the quotes from the exchange between Obrist and Douglas come from *HERO* (2019).
- 2 A “gopnik” is a derogatory term used to refer to person from a lower-class background mainly in Russia, Eastern Europe, and ex-Soviet Republics, particularly one who is perceived as lacking in education or refinement; it is the approximate equivalent of the English “chav.”
- 3 It can be regarded as a subfield of luxury fashion distinct from its more traditional manifestations, in say Prada, Hermes, or Luis Vuitton, brands which coalesce around the signifier of “elegance” (this will be discussed later on in more detail).
- 4 The YouTube user Bobby B made the following comment on the page of the performance: “What a joke—rich kids posing as artists, posing as musicians doing big corporations collabs in the disguise of “fashion”. Artists need to transcend this capitalistic shit, we don’t need another rehash of the rock star.” www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkAXumBqwcc
- 5 To put this in Marxist terms, this staging of an underground spectacle as part of the brand’s DNA exemplifies a transition from formal subsumption to real subsumption in the field of culture, where in the former, the capital takes command of processes originating outside or prior to it, such as in the commodification of subcultural styles (e.g., graffiti), while in the latter, capital organizes the production process internally so that subculture materializes after its own image.
- 6 Narcissism refers to an “exaggerated admiration for oneself, particularly for personal appearance”, ironic detachment to a “stratagem for concealing one’s feelings by suggesting their opposite” and hedonism to something more than the pleasant, tending toward “the worldly, adventurous and even orgiastic” (Pountain and Robins, 2000: 154).
- 7 Coolness developed from being both an attitude and style related first to black and then youth subcultures in the Anglo-American world and became gradually a global signifier to commodity culture, design, and advertising (as in the marketing practice of coolhunting). Coolness is not a quality fixed in entities, but a fluid condition related to the people’s judgments about these entities and, indeed, a condition primarily pertaining to the development of capitalism and commodity culture. It also differs from milieus to milieus as well as from time to time—what was cool yesterday may be kitsch now and what is kitsch now may be cool in the future. While Dick Pountain and David Robins speak about the “cool” as part of a personality type or attitude, I would like here, following Jim McGuigan, to see coolness as a fundamental aspect of commodity culture that in turn shapes social interaction around which identities, relations and desiring investments are performed (2015).
- 8 We should stress here that this is a process related to the development of capitalism and its techno-social relations rather than generated by a single individual; apart from Andy Warhol as a flesh and blood person, when I speak about “Warhol”,

- I highlight a process that involves the gurufication of a creative persona via the promotion of an enormous symbolic economy around them that far exceeds the flesh and blood individual.
- 9 Richard Florida, the guru of creative industries policy who endorses Currid-Hackett's book, argues that perpetual creativity means economic value, and the hipper a city appears the more creativity and thus capital it will attract (2004).
 - 10 The description can be found here: www.onassis.org/whats-on/end-credits-steve-mcqueen
 - 11 The film was shown in the Onassis Foundation, a partner institution of Athens Biennial. This foundation, recently involved in gentrification policies in downtown Athens, is devoted to the memory of the shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis and mainly funds its activities thanks to oil and fossil fuel extraction and transportation.
 - 12 The struggle for maintaining a frictionless space of coolness can then lead to the prescription of what we may call, following Foucault (1977), "cool regimes of truth", as a cool curated atmosphere can advertently or inadvertently prescribe its own version of historical events built after its own image.
 - 13 Vetements was founded in 2014 as a design collective from designers who had previously worked in prestigious brands, including Maison Margiela, Balenciaga, Céline, and Louis Vuitton.
 - 14 This information can be found at the following address: <https://sv77.com/eu/men/vetements/destroyed-anarchy-sweater/215615-product/>

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5 The Babushka–Nonna Experience

Curated Authenticities and the Aspirational Gastronomical Imaginary

5.1 Biennials and Babushkas

In November 2021, I enrolled for a private tour of the main venue of the 6th Ural Industrial Biennale (UB6) taking place in the center of Yekaterinburg in the Ural region of Russia. The venue of this tour was Salute Cinema, a constructivist architectural monument whose avant-garde history conversed with popular culture as the cinema entered the Guinness Book of Records for the longest showing of a single film in history. This film was the James Cameron blockbuster *Titanic* (1997), which Salute showed for eight years due to its unprecedented demand, with visitors often watching it several times. The co-existence of Soviet avant-garde architectural legacies and Hollywood’s sensationalism was, no doubt, a perfect narrative entry point to the biennial and was the first thing mentioned by my exhibition guide, Gleb. However, Gleb was not an ordinary guide he was a “mediator”: “Do you know the difference between a guide and a mediator?”,¹ he asked, to which I replied, “No, I do not.” He explained the difference between these two figures as the following:

You know the *babushkas* (grandmothers) which are traditionally working as attendants in Soviet-style museums, right? When you ask these babushkas a question they would usually reply in a rigid and pedantic manner. The museum guides, too, navigate the same rigid paradigm, which is very different to what we do here. The museum guide belongs to the world of babushkas, as they *explain* what the work is about, in contrast to the mediator for whom there is no correct or wrong interpretation of the work. The mediators discuss interpretations together with the viewer.²

Indeed, during the tour, Gleb asked for my opinion on several occasions: “What do you think Russia should do with its Soviet monuments?”, he asked in relation to Clemens von Wedemeyer’s work *Open Objects*. “What do you think about performing ritual dances to opera music?”, he asked in relation to Clément Cogitore’s film where a group of mostly black dancers re-enact the Enlightenment opera piece *Les Indes Galantes* in a style owing to the black

riots in California in the 1990s. For Gleb and the UB6, mediation is a process open to the viewer's feedback, quite the opposite of the babushka model where the rigid explanation of what "the artist wants to say" prevails. In its paralyzing stiffness, the babushka model was too close-minded, too conservative, too sclerotic to adapt to the viewer's feedback.

The same day, however, I encountered a babushka, whose uncompromising stiffness was mobilized as a key asset in the experience economy instead of discarded as old school. This was a local Airbnb Experience titled *PELMENI WITH BABUSHKA* (capitalized in the original), where pelmeni refers to a traditional Russian ravioli-like dish. According to this Experience, the visitor pays 5,000 rubles (around €60 at the time) for a 2.5-hour training session led by a babushka on how to cook hand-made, authentic pelmeni, which they would eat with local beverages. While it was implied that the babushka was the organizer's grandmother, her picture was absent from the advertisement so that it could be potentially any babushka: a *generic* babushka, as the floating signifier "babushka" was mobilized to uplift the practice of cooking. The concepts surrounding this signifier, including rigidity and inflexibility, were here mobilized positively, denoting authenticity and dedication.

No doubt, for the biennial world of mediators, it would probably be cringeworthy—rather than cool—to mobilize the babushka as a prop for gaining status; yet for the world of experience tourism the babushka was the perfect prop. I wrote a message to Katya, the organizer of this Experience, to clarify the presence of this totemic figure—the babushka—in the event and book an Experience. Katya got back to me with bad news: unfortunately, the babushka could not cook with us because of the COVID-19 escalation in Yekaterinburg at the time of visiting but she and her friend could guide the cooking experience of pelmeni instead. However, the babushka's absence made the Experience look uninteresting as an ethnographic event and, in an ironic reversal of the terms, turned the Experience too generic, almost unauthentic: "Why", one could ask, "learn how to cook pelmeni from a young Airbnb entrepreneur and her friend?" The babushka was the figure gluing the unique character of the Experience together, as it offered a story to narrate that could be shared with oneself and others; she was the curatorial linchpin around which the food Experience revolved.

Both these instances—the biennial and the Airbnb Experience—are part of the same urban plateau of the creative economy, referring, however, to different types of creativity that correspond to different worlds of production and consumption. If the biennial is part of the highbrow, conceptual milieu, as seen in the previous chapter, then the Airbnb Experience actors are lifestyle entrepreneurs conceiving themselves or their immediate surroundings "as a form of capital to be invested, and of their income as the return on such investment" (Bandinelli, 2020: 5). Katya mobilized a generically authentic babushka as a form of symbolic capital whose investment could yield financial capital by tapping into the experiencescapes of contemporary tourism (Mossberg, 2008; Mei, Hågsen and Kristiansen, 2020). Contrary to

highbrow actors aiming for the niche, luxury, and sophisticated worlds—intellectually, artistically, or economically—the target in Airbnb is mass society and curation is customer-oriented.

In this chapter, I look at curatorial practices on platform and wider cultural economies as they move from the exclusive to the less exclusive and from atmospheres of highbrow coolness to experiences with locality and authenticity. This, of course, does not mean that food does not have a luxury side similar to fashion; luxury gastronomic experiences are conceptual, deconstructive, and photogenic, as we shall discuss in more detail in Section 5.5, inhabiting canons and norms of prestige. These include world-famous restaurants, like Noma in Copenhagen, prestigious prizes, like Michelin stars, celebrity chefs, like Salt Bae and preferred gastronomical patterns, like ethical food. Underneath and beyond these canons and norms, there are millions of curated gastronomic practices with a less elite address and varying degrees of curation unfurling in hyped urban neighborhoods or in everyday social media accounts. Despite the differences, we can argue that these food practices share some common features in the age of platform cultural economies: (a) food is performed as a form of distinction instead of simply a biological need, (b) there is an emphasis on locality and authenticity, and (c) there is a tendency to artify food, for instance via stylized dish photos uploaded in platforms, expert language in menus, food and restaurant descriptions, and an emphasis on dish design.

I start this chapter by delving into the business literature on the experience economy as it is a key site for understanding Airbnb Experiences and the wider entrepreneurialization of food from the perspective of capital (e.g., Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 2011; 2013; Lewis and Bridger, 2011). The idea of staging experiences recalls Böhme's concept of atmospheres that we discussed in the previous chapter. While these obviously depart from different disciplinary traditions, the critical exploration of the experience economy offers a better understanding of Böhme's concept, as it helps contextualize the purposeful enactment of atmospheres in entrepreneurial enterprises. In the next section, I focus more specifically on food and discuss the ideals of new upper- and middle-class gastronomical imaginary, which, according to the theorist Margot Finn, revolves around cosmopolitanism, purity, sophistication, and thinness (2019). I argue that the food-experience economy capitalizes on these ideals, which take global visibility through media platforms. These ideals are embodied in celebrity chefs, culinary contests, and diet plans, among others, where the practice of eating, drinking, or cooking is recontextualized so that it acquires meaning. In the last sections, I look at two case studies of authentic and post-authentic food economies—a virtual cooking class with an Italian grandmother, a *nonna*, and the reframing of tradition in the gourmet scene in the city of Thessaloniki, Greece. In both cases, platforms allow for performing the dish as a work of art via photos and elaborate descriptions which promise unique and memorable food experiences.

5.2 Experiences and Authenticity in Business Literature

Katya's mobilization of the babushka as a means to curate an Airbnb Experience is evocative of a business literature that, at least since the late 1990s, has emphatically dealt with the concept of "experience" and its commodification. This literature suggests that economizing experiences is the business answer to the new hyper-informational world that renders consumption homogenous and unexciting (e.g., Lewis and Bridger, 2011; Pine and Gilmore, 2011). The idea of experience as a separate economic unit was popularized in 1999 [2011] with the book *The Experience Economy* by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, whose influence has been significant in marketing, tourism, and management studies. Pine and Gilmore suggest that businesses need to think of themselves as theatrical settings that can provide experiences to the emerging new customer of the information age, who is increasingly willing to pay for narratives, memories, and unique moments. The atmosphere around consumption, to repeat Böhme's critical thesis, marks its potential for economic exchange. Pine and Gilmore offer the example of coffee beans; when harvested they cost 1–2 cents per cup, when sold as a good in a store they cost up to 25 cents per cup, when sold in a fast food chain they cost up to 50 cents per cup, and when offered in a café in Saint Marco's Square in Venice the same quantity of coffee can reach up to 15 dollars. This dramatic price difference between a fast-food chain and a café in Saint Marco, the authors argue, occurs because in the latter the consumer has a memorable story to tell; while the actual drinking experience of the two is almost the same, the atmosphere around "Saint Marco" curates a unique moment that increases the experience's *value*.³

Pine and Gilmore, however, go a step further arguing that the economization of experiences is key for maintaining a global regime of capital accumulation and growth,⁴ stressing in the updated edition of the book in 2011 that "*goods and services are no longer enough* to foster economic growth, create new jobs, and maintain economic prosperity" (2011: ix); even more dramatically, they later claim that the focus on goods and services "leads down the road of economic austerity" as experiences hold "the key to promoting economic prosperity" (2013: 20). Companies should be staging themselves "as in a theatrical play" (Pine; Gilmore, 2011: 3), as the consumers should sense, remember, and communicate the products. In a saturated world of sameness and information overload, the capacity to frame a product around memorable stories is a professional skill for winning the hearts and wallets of the consumers. Or, as in the example with which we started this chapter, the consumer does not pay for cooking pelmeni but pays for cooking pelmeni with *babushka*, which promises the feeling of "cooking authentically".⁵ As we shall see later, with the purposeful selection of rare and local ingredients in restaurant curation, the feeling of "cooking authentically" codifies a sense of sophistication and prestige that subsequently negotiates forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1987).

The argument in Pine and Gilmore's book has been employed in diverse business settings, from retail shops to theme parks, giving rise to a new field of marketing, customer experience marketing, where the focus of potential monetization regards the experiential relation the consumer builds with economic offerings. In this broader employment of Pine and Gilbert's idea, the consumer should generally feel pleasant when they consume, as "ugly feelings" may prevent them from spending money and time (Ngai, 2007). At the heart of this business imperative then is the experiencification of consumer time, which is time mediated by capital. For instance, Sanat Rao (2021), a Chief Business Officer writing for *Forbes*, exalts the persisting potential of the experience economy ("The Future Is Experience"), arguing that the currency of the new consumer is time: in a hectic metropolitan context, consumers have to calculate whether time spent in economic activities is worth it and assess future transactions accordingly.⁶ This drive of capital to compartmentalize time into commodifiable moments has the effect of shrinking free time, that is, the time not policed by commodity relations. For instance, a curated two-and-a-half-hour tour that specializes "in the most Instagram-worthy sights around Athens downtown"⁷ occurs at the expanse of the time that could have been spent discovering the city by simply roaming around; if the latter's time is up to a degree free from the commodity relation, the former subsumes time into it. There is yet a further demand from this experiencified time, as the time spent in an Experience should ideally connect to the *future* as potential investment, in the sense that spending experiencified time should yield cultural or symbolic capital (e.g., raising one's status, expertise, social circle, networks) so that the future looks more uplifting. The Experience guarantees that posting these Instagram-worthy highlights from Athens would gather more positive reactions than posting "ordinary" ones. Or, in the case of the babushka, the Experience implies the possibility of unique stories, memories, tags, and pictures that can magnify one's cultural or symbolic capital among social media followers and friends. As the virtual and the physical interweave, experiencified time—which is ideally all time under the regime of capitalist consumption—is heavily marked by the question of aspirational investment, in other words, experiencified time colonizes the future; rather than time simply spent on present gratification, it is time spent as a future venture mediated by the commodity relation.

The drive to experiencify time corresponds to the internal dynamics of capital accumulation and growth for continuously bestowing value upon previously non-commodified areas of social and biological life in order to avoid social crises, delegitimization, or collapse. Given the physical constraints that the environment sets for unlimited growth (e.g., Harvey, 2007), capital needs to intensify consumer desire by colonizing the emotional, communicative, linguistic, biological, and cognitive capacities of human beings as evermore spheres are subsumed to the value relation and the sociality of capital (Virno, 2004; Harvie and De Angelis, 2009). In this regard, the experiencification of time interweaves into the fabric of social reality as it attempts to colonize

free time and the feelings, thoughts, and lifepaths connected to it. In a disorienting world of the constant outpouring of information, the curation of experiences in the form of memorable moments taps into the broader demand “for meaning in life” in the form of stories that captivate (Mei, Hågsen, and Kristiansen, 2020: 94). The stories around “I cooked pelmeni with babushka” are richer, more unique, and more unusual than the stories around “I cooked pelmeni”. The storytelling involving a babushka tells us that I have spent my time in a memorable way as I participated in something local and authentic. This is not to say that the babushka, or the nonna who we discuss later, are themselves driving this process; on the contrary, they are productive vessels in an expanded labor regime that capitalizes on their properties. Both the physical persons and their properties are used to perform platform work for a globalizing gastronomical imaginary that regards originality, locality, and authenticity as signs of superiority (see also next section).

To win the soul of such new consumers, as the marketing literature argues, businesses then need to move “from abundance to authenticity” (Lewis and Bridger, 2011: 6), that is “learn to understand, manage, and excel at rendering authenticity” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 3) and offer *real* services that would satisfy a new consumer’s “quest for authenticity” (Lewis and Bridger, 2011: 6). In their later *Authenticity: What the Consumers Really Want*, a book aiming to “help executives, managers, and workers see the world differently and thereby figure out what to do about it” (2007: xii), Pine and Gilbert posit authenticity as the main resource for a flourishing experience economy. As in the previous book, the authors are here categorical from the start: “Now more than ever, the authentic is what consumers really want, [...and] organizations today must learn to understand, manage, and excel at rendering authenticity” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: xii). Their reasoning of why authenticity is vital for business is indicative of how this new managerial ethos perceives the social tensions of the disorienting information landscape: tensions are simply a further opportunity for capitalization. In the world of internet, avatars, and virtuality, reality becomes “a scarce resource”, for Pine and Gilmore (2007: 18), and thus experiences of living irreplaceable moments are in high demand. The more fakeness traverses every aspect of social life, from political lies and corporate deceit to broken educational institutions, and futile non-profit organizations, the more consumers are under the suspicion that they live in a Matrix-like world. For Pine and Gilmore, the rise of lifestyle politics, as in New Age, spiritualism, mindfulness, and wellness programs, is a further indication that the search for meaning is in high demand (2007: 28). Like all prudent capitalists, however, Pine and Gilmore do not seek political solutions to this frustrating condition (for instance, in enhanced civic participation) but suggest capitalizing on social dissatisfaction for generating further profit. If people feel “faked” by everyone around them and the demand for authenticity is high, why do businesses not jump into this grim bandwagon and sell “reality”? Pine and Gilmore, however, in a Baudrillardian twist, argue that when it

comes to developing authentic products, the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity does not matter; what matters instead is “the customer perception of authenticity” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 3). In this sense, as we shall see later with the examples of cooking and restaurants, authenticity is a matter of the customer’s perception, and thus it can be adjusted to customer demand, which usually derives from an already formulated middle-class habitus.

These authentic-seekers, for the marketing researchers Ian Seymour Yeoman and Una McMahon-Beattie, aspire to an “alternative to the perceived ‘homogenisation’ of contemporary culture, food, and leisure experiences” (2019: 116), as they simply want to be different. The experiences they desire should have “clear links to a place, time, or culture”, that is experiences that are “produced in a traditional way, that are unique, and that have a genuine story behind them” (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2019: 115). Yet the quest for authenticity cannot be seen as categorically separated from other consumer micro-trends in the experience economy, including what Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie call the “fluid identity” or the “everyday exceptional” (2019: 116). For example, the quest for authentic food may be just one quest out of several for a consumer who perceives their identity as “fluid”, that is one who buys both low-end and occasionally high-end and makes hybrid consumer choices. Or it may be part of a consumer behavior defined as “everyday exceptional”, that is of consumer behaviour that is characterized by constantly pursuing occasions to break the everyday routine (2019: 116). In other words, the quest for authenticity is a non-linear, distributed practice across urban and middle-class milieus rather than an identity strictly corresponding to a particular group of consumers (similarly to the aspirational class as I argue below).

The consumption of authenticity can grant a romantic sense to reality, and assembles, in this sense, a “romantic view of consumption”, reminiscent of the first travel and hospitality encounters of Northern Europeans in the 19th century involving orientalizing exotic places (Makkar and Yap, 2022: 3464; see also Buck-Morss, 1987). Romanticism, as a cultural and artistic movement, emerged as a reaction to industrial modernity and historically assumed various political forms, either regressive or progressive. The experience economy mobilizes a romanticism devoid of political narratives apart from the single incitement to consume. To go back to the babushka example, she acts as a promise of authenticity, a communicable sign that can provide the self and others a moment of alleged transgression from supposedly inauthentic, industrialized food practices. This transgression from the norm guarantees an individual encounter with romanticism packaged as a commodity that can turn into a badge of authenticity shared visually or orally with acquaintances, friends, and followers. Devoid of a political vision, such as that of movements challenging dominant eating practices, including the slow food movement or even dumpster diving, romanticism is here exclusively a business imperative. Authentic consumers expect to be

enchanted by consumption and give themselves over “to something greater than the self”, thereby becoming part of an encounter that transgresses the profit motive or, even better, “becoming part of the enchanted object or lifestyle” (Makkar and Yap, 2022: 3462). Food authenticity, as we will see in the next section, is part of a diffused gastronomic imaginary which gives rise to questions of identity, class, and selfhood.

5.3 Aspirational Food and the Gastronomical Imaginary

As we discussed in Chapter 3, the aspirational consumer is the ideal consumer group for engaging with curated content and thus for engaging with aspirational food practices. In this section, I specifically look at the aspirational consumer and their gastronomical imaginary in the context of what Margot Finn calls in *Discriminating Taste* the “food revolution” of the past decades (2019: 6). For Finn, the food revolution is assigning social status to food according to four central ideals: “sophistication, thinness, purity, and cosmopolitanism” (2019: 20). In platformized cultural production, the food revolution appears as an expert discourse, communicated by authorized social agents, including critics, celebrities, influencers, star chefs, and pundits, who regulate not only what “good taste” is but also what kind of food and dietary arrangements correspond to ideal, beautiful, and ethical bodies. In this way, the practices of eating, drinking, or cooking are recontextualized as carriers of distinction-based meaning. The popular figure of the foodie is evocative in this regard, as it refers to “somebody who thinks about food not just as biological sustenance, but also as a key part of their identity, and a kind of lifestyle” (Johnston and Baumann, 2014: 2), that is, to someone whose diet is suggestive of their overall “self”. Expert gastronomical discourse transforms the thinking and practicing around certain foods and drinks by defining what is more and what is less appropriate to do with them. For instance, “[b]eing interested in wine”, in the context of wineries, wine tasters, and wine seminars, classes, and schools, “became a sign of refinement instead of addiction, impoverishment, or the dangerous—if sometimes alluring—sensuality and lack of self-control associated with wine-drinking immigrants” (Finn, 2019: 4; see also Inglis and Almila, 2019; Inglis, 2022). To know about wine and especially wine in its global dimension is a sign of sophistication and cosmopolitanism rather than addictive or potentially problematic behavior. In the age of mass communication and platforms, this expert gastronomical discourse becomes an everyday—rather than an exceptional—encounter. Yet it is often the elites that legitimize it rather than everyday people. Celebrities, for instance, are key in the proliferation of certain food patterns and they can both embody and propagate the proper food ideals. Finn mentions how in American popular culture of recent years, a president-celebrity like Barack Obama was the epitome of the foodie in particular via “his affinity for gourmet or upscale foods [...] his body size and its relationship to his eating habits and health [...] his

knowledge of natural foods [...and] his appreciation for diverse regional and ethnic cuisines" (2019: 20). Both a president with refined taste as well as a "man of the people", Obama personified ethical values, healthy choices, and sophisticated style in his gastronomical persona. This persona encountered audiences with middle-class habitus or aspirations for a lifestyle of "critical eating", that is, the experience of eating as a "form of collective belonging and meaning making" (Mihalache, 2016: 318) rather than merely a response to body instincts and being hungry.

While Finn focuses on the emergence of this discourse in the United States, in particular in reference to class anxieties of the 1980s, the values of the food revolution are performed by (aspiring) middle-class consumers all over the world (see for instance, Chaudhuri, 2019). Avocado, granola, quinoa, kale, brewed coffee, and craft beer are just few of the "universal" symbols of this gastronomical imaginary, adapted in varying intensities and degrees in local cuisines. Similar to the aspirational class, the new food consumers are mainly "college-educated, affluent, and liberal" crowds (Currid-Hackett, 2018:13), who value informed or even oppositional consumption (see Section 3.5); they come from "the professional middle class, or even more narrowly, the left-leaning part of it sometimes referred to as the liberal elite" (Finn, 2019: 21). However, these new consumers can also be conservative or apolitical, who simply engage in feel-good and purpose-driven consumption (Pine; Gilmore, 2007).

As these new food consumers overwhelmingly reside in urban settings, the "rural" becomes a romantic component that bestows distinction to food. This is an aspect that the experience economy both exploits and performs. To go back to the previous section, Pine and Gilmore target the urban and aspirational dwellers who desire "active, authentic, and participatory experiences" in "more authentic, indigenous, or organic venues" (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 4), for whom distinction and aspiration are interwoven in acts of self-perception. Yet, as the quest for distinctive food experiences becomes a prevalent consumer and business ideal, at least in big metropolitan centers, Currid-Hackett's idea of an aspirational class may be delimiting as it fences off a specific group of elite consumers from the rest. Similar to what was argued in the previous section about "authenticity seekers", we can argue that aspirational consumption occupies a wider structure of feeling in neoliberal societies, to borrow again Raymond Williams' term (1977), that is, an emerging sensibility that colonizes working- and middle-class desire. The spreading of this sensibility, extending from apps with Curated News⁸ and Experiences of drinking with locals, is a result of the expansion of the institutions of the market in more spheres of life and the ideology of interlocking consumption with personal fulfillment or success. Speaking about the gastronomical imaginary, Finn summarizes the contours of this structure of feeling as follows:

Gourmet foods are supposed to taste better, at least to people with well-trained palates, often because they contain more expensive ingredients.

Thinness is both more attractive and healthier than fatness, and it is assumed that anyone can achieve it through the right combination of diet and exercise. Natural diets are supposed to be both healthier and morally superior, although at the turn of the last century reformers were more concerned with indigestion and sexual urges than with cancer and the environment. Appreciating international and ethnic foods is supposed to be a sign of education, worldliness, and a forward-thinking appreciation of diverse cultures.

(2019: 51)

We can also speak about this gastronomical imaginary as a regime of truth in the Foucauldian sense, an expert discursive formation permeating eating and cooking values and extending across several income levels. For instance, Noma, a Michelin-starred restaurant which has won the world's best restaurant award for several years, and the babushka are obviously addressing customers from different income levels; yet they both inhabit the same gastronomical imaginary in which authenticity, health, and cosmopolitanism are status-bearing symbols and food does not merely cover a functional need. While Noma will certainly not make authenticity its flagship value the same way that cooking with babushka does, the fantasy of authenticity is still a key reason for the buzz around the restaurant. Noma is repeatedly credited for the "creation of the new Nordic cuisine", which is a rediscovery of local foodways in terms of ethical eating and sustainability.⁹ Thus, authenticity in elite dining becomes subject to visionary and creative gestures as agential acts of rediscovering locality, returning to one's roots, reinterpreting traditional dishes, and so on. For instance, the star Russian chef Vladimir Mukhin and owner of elite dining restaurants in Moscow is credited with "bringing back his homeland's colorful cuisine" (Kelly, Evstatieva, and Myers, 2018)¹⁰ while the chefs Virgilio Martínez and Pía León from Central in Lima (the second best restaurant in the world in 2022 and first in 2023) are credited for their "ode to Peru in all forms" as their "dishes celebrate the unique landscapes, history, and traditions of their homeland by using an abundance of locally-sourced produce".¹¹ In this regard, the commodification of the ideals of the new gastronomical imaginary navigates different class backgrounds and social spheres: if babushkas and nonnas, as we shall see in the next section, are expected to pass the culinary traditions untouched from generation to generation, it is mostly male celebrity chefs who move these same culinary traditions forward.

Platforms and digital media offer a new visibility to this imaginary in at least three ways: they are means for validating and diffusing gastronomical expertise as food actors become influencers and celebrities whose opinion matters; they are sites where new visual and textual aesthetics around restaurants and dishes proliferate, such as in stylized dish photos and elaborate menu descriptions; and they give access to DIY production formats for aspiring chefs to perform their dishes, such as in YouTube and TikTok videos,

Instagram reels, and Airbnb Experiences, as they can now try their luck in the global food economy. In this sense, platforms compress time and space to such a degree that encounters with gastronomic others can simply happen by scrolling one's feed or by clicking on a "how-to-cook" video. With space and time being compressed in an exploding whirlwind of new images and narratives about everyone and everything, expert place-bound knowledge becomes a token of value. Against the superficiality of images and narratives about everyone and everything, the place-bound knowledge delivers authenticity, either as unbroken tradition or as reinterpretation of this tradition, promising to uplift the cosmopolitan and sophisticated profile of foodies.

5.4 "Handmade Pasta with Italian Grandma"

The COVID-19 lockdowns brought a severe crisis to global tourism, and as a result the hospitality and foodservice sectors had to find ways to cope with this unsettling condition. If the babushka was unable to organize her authentic cooking Experience with pelmeni because of the pandemic, then another grandmother, an Italian one this time, proved more tech-savvy and led a cooking class via digital platforms. With the online interactions becoming the "new normal" in many professional activities after COVID-19 (Barile; Kompatsiaris, 2020), Airbnb introduced in April 2020 the Online Experiences (OE) in order to substitute the dramatically decreasing demand for physical Experiences. The Airbnb OE has received praise for inaugurating a whole new economic sector in the field of tourism and hospitality, dubbed "virtual tourism", which would presumably play a future role in tourist economies (Cenni; Vásquez, 2021). Learning how to cook the authentic way from the comfort of one's home was now just a few clicks away.

The host of the Experience "Handmade Pasta with Italian Grandma" was the granddaughter, based in a town near Rome, called Palombara Sabina. From this small town, grandmother and granddaughter could virtually reach every corner of the world via Airbnb and Zoom. I opted for taking her OE cooking class in Airbnb titled "Handmade Pasta with Grandma" just before the Christmas of 2021. The demand for cooking authentic Italian pasta with the Italian nonna was extremely high: leading up to the Christmas day, one could hardly find a free slot, even 10 days in advance. The slot I managed to find was late in the evening, at 11 p.m. (GMT+3) local time, which made me the only participant out of the ten aspiring cooks outside of US time zones. The Experience offered slots for cooking classes virtually during the whole day (apart from a nearly four-hour break from 4.30 to 8.30 a.m.), with often more than one slot being held at the same time—which would make it impossible for the same grandmother to work the whole schedule. The classes were held in English and Japanese but not in Italian, indicating that the Experience was unambiguously selling Italian tradition to the rest of the world.

As with her Ural counterpart, the figure of the "Italian grandma" was the anchoring point of the OE. Nonna embodied a grassroots expert who

cultivated her cooking skills outside of the market and mass tourism (only to be appropriated by them at a later stage), inhabiting a romantic space of food-making seemingly unspoiled by the profit motive. The grandmother was frozen in time, rigid and uncompromising, and as such she inhabited History, a past time now absent and disremembered. In this sense, she had a larger cultural if not historical role to play, passing a cooking heritage from generation to generation. The advertisement at the time I took this class described nonna:

She lived her childhood during the second world war, her mum taught her how to feed children with just 2 ingredients: eggs and flour. Whenever I sat in her kitchen growing up, she'd make pasta while sharing memories of that time. I soon realized my generation was missing something important: not just the handmade pasta technique but an entire tradition passed down through the ages. I decided to share this gem with the rest of the world.¹²

The economic value of this Experience trades on the asset of a tradition dwelled by the Italian nonna and channeled by her granddaughter. The grandma's minimalist cooking—not out of choice but out of necessity—is a rarity from a past time, which, similar, for example, to the moon rock that we saw in Chapter 2, is framed as a document of human civilization reaching the status of heritage. Here, however, a platform entrepreneur is assigning this status to grandma's cooking, rather than to an institution like a museum; the Experience is then marketed as a historical vessel that passes this heritage down to current generations. Sharing an “entire tradition” suggests an altruistic gesture beyond economic calculations, it is actually not about selling but about giving. Thus, similarly with artists who “affirm the irreducibility of the work of art to the status of a simple article of merchandise” while at the same time also affirm “the singularity of the intellectual and artistic condition” (Bourdieu, 1985: 3), the experience-maker casts the Experience as both irreducible to economic calculations and unique, that is to say, commodifiable. The commodity relation is obscured as travelers or experience enthusiasts can now become the proud new heirs of an authentic practice, the romantic knowledge-holders passing this authentic knowledge over to others. In other words, the Experience's exchange value is not just cooking but the experiencing of a recipe with a moving story that animates a lost yesteryear, a romantic story that enlivens values of community, slowness, and honesty—values alien to today's hyper-industrialized world.

The grandma is then the “true” host of this story: “I learned how to make pasta since I was really young by my grandma, Nonna Nerina [...] *she is the true host* and the true protagonist of this story”.¹³ Yet, despite being the true host, Nonna Nerina cannot be entrepreneurial enough to curate an Airbnb Experience on her own and run this in different time zones (not least because she could not speak in any language other than Italian and whenever she had

to say anything the host would translate). It was the host's granddaughter who curated this Experience, including the organizational and aesthetic parts, through the use of the Airbnb's digital platform. And while the granddaughter after hundreds if not thousands of cooking classes would, of course, have the skills to run the experience on her own or with the help of a friend without exhausting an old grandmother (that is, similarly to Katya, without the grandma), the removal of the grandma would signal the death, or at least the fundamental downgrading, of the Experience. If the grandma is removed from the story, the experience loses its soul, it stops being a passing down of tradition and becomes an ordinary cooking class. For that reason, to address consumer demand the grandma multiplies as if cloned. Since it is virtually impossible for the same grandma to work 24/7 for several weeks in the row, the host employed other nonnas from the village, detaching the symbol from an actual person to a multiplicity of generic nonnas:

Over three years, we've hosted more than 5,000 travelers in our kitchen. And soon other grandmas in our small village decided to be part of this crazy project! Nonna Angela, Nonna Gio, Nonna Lalla, Nonna Marghe, Nonna Renzia are waiting for you, amore!¹⁴

The "Italian grandma" is here implicated in a higher level of abstraction as a disembodied, all-purpose symbol, a relic whose material properties (an old-looking, Italian woman with the capacity to cook) are put to work in the global economy of signs. Digital platforms turn the sign-value of this relic into a global commodity that can be accessed from anywhere in the world. As with the generic babushka, the Italian nonna expresses an interchangeable yet scarce materiality, for example, it is hard to find access to Italian grandmother-looking persons and put them to work if you are not based in Italy or have some Italian roots. To go back to the material-discourse nexus, discussed in Chapter 2, the physical/material, for example, "Italian grandmother", similarly to the materiality of the moon rock, affords a particular ground for narratives and curatorial anchoring points. These anchoring points are vital for the process of commodifying a service, in our case cooking, and raising the value of the experience amidst global competition.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of the disciplinary mechanisms of the platform economy is the review system. After completing the cooking Experience, the customer is led to review and rate the expertise, authenticity, and innovativeness of its host, such as the "thoughtful personalization" and "super storytelling".¹⁵ Some of the questions the customers are invited to respond to are the following:

How would you describe your host?
 They seemed like an expert
 They had some basic knowledge
 They didn't have much knowledge

What made them seem like an expert?

Choose all that apply

They had a very deep understanding of their topic

They shared personal stories that conveyed their passion

They had a rare level of insight or perspective

They had world-class background or qualifications

How would you describe the experience?

It felt special and unique

I could've found the same thing somewhere else

I could've easily done this myself

What made it feel unique?

Choose all that apply

I wouldn't have been able to do this on my own

I felt like I could actively participate

I felt immersed in a special culture or community

It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience¹⁶

The Airbnb questionnaire emphasizes expertise, storytelling, and uniqueness, which, as we saw in Chapter 2, are key for art curating while concepts such as “immersion” and “participation” have been correlative with the contemporary art world at least since the 1990s. The employment of art-like concepts in review questionnaires disciplines the host to further artify their work to satisfy customer demand; the host has to take care of aesthetic considerations for proving their expertise. This expertise is certified by “personal stories that conveyed their passion”, a “very deep understanding of their topic”, and a “rare level of insight or perspective”—qualities that the figure of the “Italian grandma” abundantly embodies. In Airbnb, and generally in the platform economy, such promises of expertise, storytelling, and uniqueness are carried via a knowledgeable vessel—the host, the restaurant, the chef, the grandma, or any other service provider—who is expected to have a deeper insight of the subject matter and has a willingness to share it. Echoing the curating economy's motto discussed in Chapter 2, the Airbnb guidelines, for instance, encourage the hosts to “Earn money leading people on activities you love”.¹⁷ In countless other expertise Experiences, storytelling and uniqueness are interwoven with authenticity, as the “Italian grandma” is just one of a myriad of other authentic tokens in platform economies that can be put to work. In the Experience section in Paris, we can “Learn to bake traditional croissants”, “Learn to make French lemon pie”, or “Learn to make macarons with a chef”—food practices that rely on a deeper insight into Frenchness. The international star Marie Kondo, the Japanese guru of decluttering, brands her minimalist KONMARI method for tidying up homes via the token of Japaneseness.¹⁸ Similar to Marie Kondo, the Italian grandma does not merely cook pasta but is a conduit of the past and a transporter

of history.¹⁹ While in such instances the notion of “tradition” takes a more linear direction presumably moving unspoiled from the past to the present, in upscale food practices, as we shall see in the next section, tradition is recontextualized, reimagined, and reinterpreted.

5.5 Anarchist Foodies

If Finn argues that the ideals of gastronomical imagery capture the eating habits of the aspirational consumers and liberal elites in the United States, then what happens to other parts of the world and especially in peripheries? Bengali cuisine in India (Das Chaudhuri, 2019: 2) or the Siberian cuisine in Russia (Ermolaev, Ruban and Yashalova, 2021) are cases in point, but in this section, I look at another Mediterranean region: the city of Thessaloniki in Northern Greece (which happens to be my hometown), where there has been a notable boom in the gourmet food scene in the past ten years or so. This boom reached the point when in December 2021 the city has been designated by UNESCO as “Creative City for Gastronomy”,²⁰ a label giving it access to the larger UNESCO’s “Creative Cities Network”, a network with activities as diverse as literature, media arts, film, and craft. The mayor of Thessaloniki underlined the news that gastronomy “is a significant comparative advantage of Thessaloniki [...] and upgrades the travel experience”.²¹ The gastronomical revolution of the new dining scene in the city has been discussed informally among acquaintances, friends, and family members, from different political views and economic backgrounds but also in the press and on guided tours.²² A recent *Guardian* article titled “A unique culinary repertoire: What makes food and drink in Thessaloniki so special?” praises the city for its fusion cuisine and gastronomical heritage, including the sweet pastry-like *bougatsa*, and even the cold instant coffee *frappe* (which is incidentally and ironically an anti-foodie beverage [Johnston and Baumann, 2014: 1]).

The city’s fine dining scene emerged in the 2010s, and a part of it evolved from the collectivist and neo-anarchist political lineage of the 1990s and 2000s, particularly revolving around unlicensed university canteens run by anarchists and squats, including the now defunct *Mavri Gata* (Black Cat) and *Yfanet*, a massive squatted old factory, not far from the city center. *Yfanet*, in particular, was a critical site for developing a politicized creative practice in the city (and a constant target of the state threatening it with closure and confiscation of the squatted area), guided from Situationist’s principles of derive and détournement but also by a strict anti-commodity ethos, at least in their initial years.²³ This milieu has been involved in the city’s restaurants at least from the mid-2000s onwards, either as restaurant owners, cooks, waiters or all of the above. *Yfanet* and *Mavri Gata* held regular collective kitchens, which offered the organizers the cooking and organizational skills that could be later used for setting up their own businesses.

The ways that the emerging local gourmet scene in the city relates to neo-anarchism are multi-layered and would require separate ethnographic and historical research to discuss them in depth; for the purposes of this section,

let us assume that these connections indicate the involvement of the underground into the city's creative economy (similar to what was discussed in Chapter 4 with the Warhol Economies). Thessaloniki's dining scene follows the new gastronomical movement in the age of platforms toward food "gallerification", in the sense that there is an increased emphasis on food narratives and on the visual and storytelling atmospheres around food. As such, it is largely characterized by the reinvention and commoditization of food traditions, which involves routine descriptions in menus about each ingredient's (usually rural) places of origin; the use of expert narratives to frame dishes, which involves a specialized food vocabulary and ingredients widely unknown, invoking a sense of rarity related to highbrow, upper-middle class rather than working class imaginary; the presentation of dishes as if they were works of art, where form, style, and even matching colors are significant; and the mobilization of an identity related to the handmade, the artisanal and the crafted, which contribute to the food's overall artification. This gastronomical trend in Thessaloniki is part of a tendency in Greece, over the last ten years or so, that the anthropologist Nafsika Papacharalampous terms as the "New Greek Cuisine" (2019). Papacharalampous looks at the "rise of the Greek rural" mostly in upscale Athenian restaurants where "neglected traditional foods and humble ingredients appeared reinvented" (2019: 13). In her ethnographic account of Athenian upscale restaurants, Papacharalampous summarizes this as follows:

Restaurant menus now included foods from the villages, such as black-eyed beans or wild greens; offal, such as beef tongue, oxtail or beef cheeks; foraged foods such as saltwort or sea urchins; traditional dishes such as spinach and rice stew (*σπανακόρυζο*), oven baked chickpeas (*ρεβυθάδα*), braised meat with greens and avgolemono sauce (*φρिकाσέ αυγολέμονο*) or *pastitsio* (*παστίτσιο*) [...]. Even *trahanas*, an ingredient made of fermented milk and wheat, something "never worthy of being served at a dinner party," as Nagia, an older Athenian told me, was now featured at upscale restaurants.

(2019: 13)

This "gastro-cosmopolitanism", as Runa Das Chaudhuri names this tendency, reclaims "heritage in a cosmopolitan mode", packaging the presumably authentic in middle-class artified aesthetics and a neo-ethnic identity (2019: 2). Yiannis Mylonas argues that from a policy perspective this gastro-nomic tendency is part of a "creativity cult" in Greece promoted by neo-liberal actors for defining notions of success in the public space (2020: 102). The peripheral dimension of Greece is also important because as soon as restaurants and cooks attempt to elevate the local and the authentic to the status of high cuisine they have to "look up" to international aesthetics. That way, the local *taverna* indicates a naval gazing and inward-looking cultural moment that should be repurposed so as to showcase the food revolution's ideals of cosmopolitanism and sophistication.

Let us look at the media atmospheres around a restaurant from the Thessaloniki scene that is indicative of all the above, THRiA a self-described restaurant of “Gourmet flavors *inspired* by the Mediterranean and Greece cuisine” (italics added).²⁴ The word “inspired” in the self-description implies a move away from the grandmother’s “close-minded” authenticity to claim a post-authenticity that relies on the creative interpretations of a new popular agent—the chef. For the context of a less touristy developed European town like Thessaloniki, with no significant links to financial capital and thus to really elite dining, THRiA is a representative upscale restaurant²⁵ and a typical site of the gastronomical imaginary in a peripheral scene with a strong food identity. We can notice the ideals of purity, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and thinness that THRiA inhabits in this scene in an expert review about the Thessaloniki food scene published in LiFO, a popular Greek lifestyle free press, and shared on THRiA’s Facebook account:²⁶

THRiA from the beginning had something different to say. Something more gastronomical, more creative, more gourmet [...] If, say, Michelin came to town for awards, they would definitely stop by here to try a crispy puff pastry with black sesame, mint feta, and nettle foam. The decor, the open kitchen work like a television—behind the glass you get carried away watching a hyper-spectacle of young, stylish persons working via a balletic coordination the choreography of the latest kitchen techniques, civilized and clean cut, without screaming, without beating themselves up, a feeling that makes you think that “New York and the Thessaloniki Waterfront are the same”. European and cinematic.

(Psihouli, 2018)

Here the local/authentic undergoes an uplifting by signifiers like “New York”, “Europe”, “Michelin”, and “cinematic” pointing to a creative high-end cosmopolitanism; the expert ingredient language of crispy puff pastry with black sesame, mint feta, and nettle foam points toward deep gastronomical knowledge and sophistication. The cooks appear as young-and-stylish-ballerinas and therefore their slim and trained bodies invoke “thinness”, which is another central ideal in Finn’s classification. As Mylonas puts it, “the restaurant appears as an experiencescape in which the cooks—besides preparing delicious, creative, and chic dishes—also perform elegant and sanitized choreographic spectacles of craftsmanship and civility” (2020: 104). The expert review designates the restaurant as a civilized spectacle, a forward-looking enterprise which aesthetically moves the city forward toward Western civilization, a sort of “total work of art”, to use Matthew Wilson Smith’s understanding of Wagner’s famous *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the age of cyberspace (2007).

Key to spreading this artfulness in the age of platforms are posts in the social media accounts of restaurants and chefs, especially involving

photographs and descriptions of dishes. I argue that this coupling between photographic representations and the descriptions of dishes in social media is essential for establishing the idea that the dish is ultimately an artwork, that is not only conventionally tasty, but a rarity crafted by the chef's inspiration that is almost too opaque to be understood by the masses. The visual representations come typically from a vertical position recalling the two-dimensionality of the canvas while the descriptions perform the curatorial role of skillfully interpreting otherwise obscure works of art (see Figure 5.1).

THRiA, as thousands if not million other restaurants around the world, share in their social media accounts visual representations portraying dishes as inspiring artworks. There is an emphasis on the geometry of the space and the plate's design, the shape of the ingredients, the color tones and the expressiveness of the chef that is represented in the "impulsive" strokes of sauces and dips on top of the dish, as if in an abstract expressionist painting. The mobile phone offers a dispersed accessibility for photographing dishes and social media platforms make the distribution of these images simple, not only for the restaurants themselves but also for restaurant goers. The "Instagrammable dish", if we are to call it that, is a recognizable style to the point that AI apps and services are built to mimic it.²⁷

The descriptions are equally artfied, drawing on curatorial language that brings wider social and cultural associations to food (though they can also be possibly produced in artificial intelligence (AI) via ChatGPT and other language processing platforms). Let us look at THRiA's descriptions on its Facebook page:



Figure 5.1 Images from THRiA'S Facebook account.

The grouper is juicy and fresh with the coolness of a buttery Tangerine sauce, steamed greens in grouper and lime broth—with parsnips in 3 different textures. An emotional tasting tour on the path of creative Thessaloniki cuisine!!!²⁸

Kotsi (pork shank) as you have never imagined it!!! We were patient enough to cook it for 48 hours at low temperature to caramelize it, and it was finally worth it!!! We made the velvetiest potato cream like the master chefs in the good French restaurants. Polenta gnocchi with a little espresso is the touch that will take off the unexpected taste event. A tasty journey from tradition to postmodern Gastronomy!!!²⁹

TALIATA, the Italian version of the steak loved by the people of Thessaloniki. A challenge to offer the ultimate steak experience to the gourmands of a city that lives and breathes good food. THRiA's tagliata [...] Aged Port / fried potato nest / prosciutto chips / parsley spirit for cooling / beef skirt !!!³⁰

The portrayals of the dishes are symbolically rich and appeal to the senses (e.g., “velvetiest, textures”), experiential (e.g., “the ultimate steak experience”), merging locality (e.g., “kotsi”, “creative Thessaloniki cuisine”, “a city that lives and breathes good food”) with more acknowledged gourmet centers (e.g., “French restaurants”, “Italian Taliata”). In this journey “from tradition to postmodern Gastronomy”, the menus enact a site of refinement and sophistication as they promise to uplift the eaters via the profound knowledgeability of the chef. As the 2022 film *The Menu* directed by Mark Mylod wittily shows, the new chef's persona dwells in inspiration, creativity, and guru-like spiritualism by deploying expert menus and descriptions.³¹ As Finn puts it about the ethics and aesthetics of expert menus:

Similarly, the presence of essences, foams, or fancy terms such as *soubise* and *escabèche* on a menu are not only signs of gourmet cooking but also go hand in hand with the use of ingredients typically supposed to be healthier, more sustainable, and novel or exotic. The gestalt you can invoke with a single word, such as “artisanal” or “kale,” often feels like a coherent aesthetics and ethics of eating.

(2019: 19)

The “gestalt” Finn is speaking about, whether via words or images, assembles a food atmosphere that invokes aesthetics and ethics alike around various performances of the self. This is neither to deny the magnificent sensations and pleasures of eating nor to downgrade the genuine subjective investments people may have to alternative foodways. It is more to underline that the distributed gastronomical imaginary retains an ideological angle that in the age of platforms gets intertwined, either strategically or unwittingly, in everyday routines such as particular ways of photographing, sharing, commenting on, and reacting to vis-à-vis manifold foodscapes. These routines negotiate

forms, longings, and aspirations of belonging and thus of identity-building. The prevalent concept of a “romantic dinner” in dating, for instance, a theme we shall also discuss in Chapter 6, suggests an upgraded eating experience that breaks away from the routine. In Thessaloniki, a romantic dinner in THRIA would for most people fulfill this role by granting a temporary belonging in an elite group of connoisseurs in contrast to a dinner in a kebab place that is typically regarded as banal. The more food is curated in diverse pathways, the more it seizes modes of socialization filling us with anxieties of identity, class, and selfhood.

5.6 Conclusions

This chapter argued that gastronomical curating is driven by the readjustment of capital to the condition of information oversaturation through recourse to expertise and artification, so that food consumption becomes meaningful and unique. As many smaller businesses are becoming increasingly artified in their design, architectural, decorative, and labor practices, especially in big metropolitan centers, the span of gastronomical curating ranges from the boutiqueization of bakeries, restaurants, and cafés, usually in minimalist, “clean” style, to the post-2010 boom in new global liquor scenes, such as crafted beer, cocktail, and wine bar milieus, and the spread of fine dining, expressed in curated menus, auteur chefs, or Michelin stars. The development of gastronomic curating encounters consumers with concepts and figures previously unexplored by capital. As locality, authenticity, and the generic babushkas and nonnas—concepts and figures previously excluded from the accumulation process or restricted to the domestic sphere—become a means to win the hearts of new consumers and thus produce capital, they need to be staged or literally put to work as a customer-desirable image of themselves. This staging further blurs the lines between reality and representation and is evocative of the disintegrated spectacles of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2013; Wark, 2014).

The substitution of manual labor with machinery in farming especially after the 1950s and the development of transnational supply chains makes food global and ubiquitous (Pratt, 2007: 286); in this context, the authentic and the local assume a new currency in the form of traditional recipes, methods of cooking, the capacity to categorize ingredients, or the insights into the qualities of materials corresponding to different geographies, types of soil, and weather conditions. In the global food market, locality and authenticity are the last frontier of identity; they are bound to expert knowledge as the keepers of this knowledge are entitled to mobilize their expertise for curating experiences. As we have seen, the authentic does not necessarily link to a single consumption practice; it is a currency mobilized to address different class backgrounds by adding a romantic appeal to consumption that is supposedly against mass culture. This romantic yearning for the past is captured in another popular idea among urban milieus, that is of “a return

to nature”, or as Michael Pollan advises in his foodie bible *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* of avoiding “anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food” (2013: 17). The economization of similar ideas and ideals entails the extraction of value from consumers’ emotional, communicative, and affective capacities, intensifying the regime of capital accumulation down to everyday meaning-making and subjectivity. This mass mobilization of food as a sign of status is part of a new “consumer ideology” that promises the consumer a distinction from the masses on the grounds of a presumed encounter with a mythical past that has been lost to modernity (Schmitt, Brakus, and Biraglia, 2022). Or, as Sherry Turkle keenly puts it, “I believe that in our culture of simulation, the notion of authenticity is for us what sex was for the Victorians—threat and obsession, taboo and fascination” (2011: 4).

The curatorial imperative of the authentic babushka and nonna permeates popular culture representations in varying intensities and degrees spreading to everyday as well as luxury settings. As such, curating operates both at the mass level, in which ordinary users are interpellated by entrepreneurial platform-based opportunities, and at the celebrity level, where individuals or brands strategically position themselves in the marketplace. In both cases, the abovementioned aspects of curatorial production are key: the conceptual selection and arrangement of signs, the framing of commodities through storytelling techniques, and the production of oneself as niche expert are all mobilized so that food consumption is converted into a sharable experience. In the next chapter, we will follow the thread of curatorial production in another notable figure of authenticity and inspiration in platform capitalism: the life coach.

Notes

- 1 This shift from guides to mediators has a gendered aspect too. Quoting Christina Morini, Elena Trubina argues that the employment of such mediators exemplifies the tendency in late capitalism “to prioritize extracting value from relational and emotional elements, which are more likely to be part of women’s experiential baggage” (Morini, 2007: 40, quoted in Trubina, 2020: 120).
- 2 The mediator is anonymized and this is not a direct quote but a paraphrasing of his words.
- 3 This is an idea that by now “dominates the philosophy of tourism” (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2019: 1) and has been thought through extensively for diverse sectors, including farm tourism (Mei; Hagensen; Kristiansen, 2020) and food tourism (Kim, Park, and Xu, 2020).
- 4 For the authors, the known economic units were up until then, the commodities, that is raw materials extracted, grown, or killed (in the case of animals); the goods, that is items assembled from raw materials; and the services, the intangible acts that satisfy a consumer without the necessary mediation of goods. For them, the experience sector has been mistakenly lumped together with the “uneventful activities” of the service sector (2011: 3), including activities as uninspiring as “dry

cleaning, auto repair, wholesale distribution, and telephone access” (2011: 3), for which the consumer pays to satisfy a practical need. As the significance of the service sector in the post–World War II world increases, especially in the West, this new economic unit, the experience, is posited as a means to save capitalism from crises.

5 As Per Darmer and Jon Sundbo put it:

It is not the shoes, but the fact that these shoes are fashionable and show who you are, which is the experience. This is an experience you cannot get from just any pair of shoes. It is the design, the marketing, the usage and symbolic value of the shoes that makes them an experience. The shoes acquire a story or a theme and it is the story or the theme, rather than the product, which the consumers buy and cherish in the experience economy.

(2008:1)

- 6 Yet, as each “economic offering”, to use the language of Pine and Gilmore (2011: 8), navigates different expectations about the *uses* of consumer time, there can be no overarching formula of success. In a setting like a fine dining restaurant, for instance, where time is not simply procedural but expected to be gratifying to the senses—taste, sight, and smell—time should be pleasing and memorable. In the digital banking and retail sphere, for instance, the customer experience would consider usability and easy navigation of one’s services, the fewer clicks and the less time to make purchases and other bureaucratic tasks, the better.
- 7 www.airbnb.co.uk/experiences/289574
- 8 <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/curated-news/id1592149063>
- 9 This comes from the website The World’s 50 Best Restaurants that voted Noma no 1 in 2021: www.theworlds50best.com/the-list/1-10/Noma.html
- 10 www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/03/16/594310548/the-russian-chef-who-is-bringing-back-his-homelands-colorful-classic-cuisine
- 11 www.theworlds50best.com/the-list/1-10/central.html
- 12 This advertisement has been changed on the official Airbnb page of the Experience, but it is still persevered electronically here: https://allevents.in/mobile/amp-event.php?event_id=10000308121247947
- 13 *Pasta with the Grandmas*: www.airbnb.gy/experiences/1610894
- 14 *Pasta with the Grandmas*: www.airbnb.gy/experiences/1610894
- 15 I copied-pasted this and the questions below from the Airbnb Experience review page for which no direct link can be provided.
- 16 These are taken from the Airbnb questionnaire after completing the Experience.
- 17 www.airbnb.com/host/experiences
- 18 Platforms are key in spreading Marie Kondo’s brand, as apart from her own “static” website, her oeuvre spreads in Instagram (4 million followers), Facebook (1.4 followers) and Netflix (with the popular show “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo”) while through Amazon her books are deliverable practically anywhere in the world.
- 19 YouTube: www.youtube.com/channel/UC6X7ywSNmDPGHwzkjbbEboQ Instagram: [pastawithgrandma](https://www.instagram.com/pastawithgrandma/), Facebook: [handmade pasta with grandma](https://www.facebook.com/handmade.pasta.with.grandma/)
- 20 <https://news.gtp.gr/2021/11/10/thessaloniki-joins-unesco-creative-cities-network-for-gastronomy/#:~:text=Thessaloniki%20is%20the%20only%20Greek,work%20in%20the%20food%20industry.>

- 21 Ibid.
- 22 <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/11/10/unesco-thessaloniki-gastronomy/>
- 23 Indicatively, from around the early 2000s onwards, there have been instances where bands were turned down from the space for having previously played in bars; or in some of the squat's parties there was a decision to ban any monetary transaction in the space and was thus often impossible to buy any drinks (so that people had to buy them from nearby stores). In this sense, the space had to remain, as much as possible, "pure" from monetary exchange.
- 24 THRIA opened its doors in 2015 and closed in late 2022.
- 25 The prices were around €15–20 per dish.
- 26 www.facebook.com/THRIArestaurant/posts/1273547392777116/
- 27 For instance, Lunchbox is an AI-powered app that gives to restaurant owners the opportunity to turn dishes into photographable artworks in a matter of few seconds without the need of the professional photographer.
- 28 www.facebook.com/THRIArestaurant/photos/1898706816927834
- 29 www.facebook.com/THRIArestaurant/photos/1793461097452407
- 30 www.facebook.com/THRIArestaurant/photos/1779909678807549
- 31 The chef in the film is praised: "The way he weaves in historical allegories, [...] it is a concept. [...] That is what makes his food so exciting. He is not just a chef. He is a storyteller".

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6 “A Person without Vision Will Perish”

Curating Mindsets, Micro-Celebrities, and Intimacies in Life Coaching

6.1 You Know *How Much* I Love Paris!

Opening an early 2022 episode of the Life Coach School Podcast, titled *When You Just Can't*, the “Master Coach”, host, and founder of the School, Brooke Castillo, admitted that today: “I just can’t, [...] I want to crawl back into the covers, I don’t want to do it, I don’t want to show up, I don’t want to deliver, I just literally can’t do it” (Castillo, 2022b). Days when you “just can’t” can affect anyone—Castillo assures us that “I have those days too and I want you to know that it’s okay”—yet not everyone has the right approach to face them. Castillo tells the listeners that she is experienced in handling incapacitating days—“I am doing that quite well”, she admits—and thus she sets out to offer a “mental way of approaching” these days. Here, the coaching advice and expertise are closely tied to first-hand experience. From a similar position of experience comes the advice of the so-called Breakup Coach Dorothy A.B. Johnson, who in a previous episode of the same podcast, titled *Thriving After Break Up*, explains to Castillo that she decided to pursue the “breakup” specialization after a traumatic “break up with my significant other of 7 years” (Castillo, 2022a). During this painful time, Johnson tried everything to ease her pain, even spending “about a year googling how to get over your ex”, and yet she “was still feeling super angry” with him. The pain was healed after attending a life coach school, where she “immediately realized” that she wanted to be a break-up coach, with the knowledge she acquired “in two break-ups” being key for advising others. And yet in another episode, Tonya Leigh, a Self-image Coach, tells Castillo that her self-image was always a serious problem, as “for so many years I was spending energy and time trying to fix myself” and the unfortunate result was to “perpetuate the story that I was broken” (Castillo, 2021). After years of failed attempts, she suddenly realized who she wanted to be when she travelled to “Paris for the very first time” (“You know *how much* I love Paris!” she exclaims to Castillo), and it was in this mythical land of romance and charm that the troubled Leigh finally “got the glimpse of the woman” she wanted to be: “everything”, she confesses, came together, “from how I dress, to my mindset, to just how I *curate* myself” (Castillo, 2022c). And there, in the eternal City of Love,

Leigh finally came up with a discovery, whose sharp insight accompanied her professional career ever since: “we as women get to create ourselves”. As a self-image coach, Leigh coaches how to create a female self-image that brings more status and money, simply by “elevating” three fundamental pillars of female identity—“mindset, style, and surroundings” (Castillo, 2022c).

The rise of life coaching into a multi-billion-dollar industry and mass phenomenon, as a potential profession and therapy technique, follows the decades-long impetus of “psychologizing” social, political, and economic problems, a rationality first appearing in Western societies and then spreading and adapting throughout the globe (Nehring et al., 2020: 4). Psychologization means simply to “make something psychological”, a discursive maneuver which involves the reduction of “moral, political, or social categories” to a “question of psychology” (Nehring et al., 2020: 4). While traditionally the question of psychology was encountered by a certified expert, such as an academically trained psychologist, a psychoanalyst, or a psychiatrist, life coaches rely on a version of therapeutic credibility that is very loosely regulated, if not occurring in a legislative vacuum (Aboujaoude, 2020: 3). The rise of platforms deepens the deregulation of the industry as it offers unparalleled promotional, educational, and networking opportunities to aspiring and professional life coaches; coaches can embody their inspirational personas in a variety of formats, including in videos, podcasts, seminars, photos, and personal accounts. In this expanded terrain of struggle for institutional recognition, the capitalization of a previous feeling, most preferably referring to unease and suffering (and their overcoming), such as difficulty in getting out of bed, a painful break-up, or troubled self-image are key in proving the credentials of expertise.

In this chapter, I look at the online manifestations of life coaching as a professional practice and general inspirational diffusion pervading platform societies. I am interested in how the coaches *curate themselves* in social media accounts, seminars, and other performances of the self as well as on the social constructions they advocate when they *curate others*. The coach needs to live a stimulating life that inspires and thus guides by example and, as such, there is a constitutive link between self-curation and curating others: to guide others one needs to first showcase a convincingly inspiring life story. Inspiration, of course, as a tool for raising publicity, is not just specific to life coaches but is employed by various actors, including politicians, celebrities, and everyday users. As internet fame appears to have become “increasingly accessible and practiced by or bestowed upon ordinary people from all walks of life” (Abidin, 2018: xiv), everyone with a social media account is interpellated as a potentially inspirational actor. It is in the practice of a life coach that the inspirational ethos finds its full purpose, as the successful management of inspiration and the generation of what we can call “inspirational capital” can be significant gateways for self-gurufication.

In the scholarly literature, the figure of the life coach rests on the terrain of the “therapeutic” (Nehring et al., 2020: 6), an umbrella term that consists

of the modern disciplines purporting to “saving the self” (Illouz, 2008: 41), and histories ranging from Freud and self-help to psychoanalysis and popular psychology. The spread of psychology in particular consolidated the idea that “emotions were entities which should be managed and manipulated, that they needed to be expertly managed for healthy and authentic selfhood to be achieved” (Illouz, 2017: 15), which is a key discursive construction in therapeutic cultures. Accordingly, as Illouz argues elsewhere (2013: 45), any obstacle impeding the realization of a healthy and authentic selfhood and of reaching our full potential became a potential pathology to be confronted. Thus, from the 1960s onward, with the growth of the so-called humanistic psychology and figures like Abraham Maslow, the idea “that health and self-realization is the same” and that people who had “unrealized lives where in the need of care and therapy” entered the lexicon of psychological discourse in the United States (Illouz, 2013: 45). For Maslow, for instance, the highest principle in the pursuit of emotional well-being is self-actualization and the unearthing of the inner potential of the self. The non-actualized and unfulfilled selves—the selves which are not reaching their full potential—are, according to this view, problematic if not outright sick. This concept enlarges the psychological pathologies in need of treatment; any obstacle to self-realization is a problem that drags us down the path of misery. A more recent instantiation of this discourse in the domain of psychology is positive psychology with figures like Martin Seligman who extend Maslow’s thought for eliminating any negativity that holds the soul hostage (Illouz, 2020). Coaching is a branch of the therapeutic; with its premises in the world of sports, it suggests that the self can reach its full potential in career, family, relationships, body, and all spheres pertaining to life with the proper and continuous training.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the “self” as the main element of analysis and introspection in therapeutic cultures. The self in these cultures is a site where competing discourses, interpretations, and solutions are pronounced in psychological expertise (Rose, 1999). This preoccupation with the self in liberal modern societies has been viewed in the critical theory of the last decades via an “epistemology of suspicion” (Illouz, 2008: 4), in the sense that it manufactures governable and docile subjects in the context of capitalist governmentality (Rose, 1999). For some, it is unimaginable to even consider neoliberalism independently of the development of psy-expertise and therapeutic cultures (Foster, 2016). In the following section, I look at the micro-celebrity strategies of life coaches across their multi-platformed interactions. Micro-celebrity regards “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good” (Senft, 2013: 346), as personal accounts, professional profiles, courses, groups, and other platform affordances can turn the coach into a micro-celebrity who gathers fans, audiences, and publicity around them. As I describe, I took courses for becoming a life coach myself in order to become familiar with the modes of self-presentation in the platform economy and with the recurring talking points in the coaching imperative. In the last two sections, I look at how

these talking points construct reality by proposing ways to curate the souls of audiences and fans. In Section 6.4, I focus particularly on the idea that the self is a project revolving around signifiers of “discipline”, “mindset”, “confidence” and “resilience” and in Section 6.5, I look at curated intimacy and sexuality in men’s coaching. The rhetorical constructions of the latter suggest a form of “intimate entrepreneurship” (O Neil, 2018: 14), whereby romantic and intimate relations are subjects to be learned, managed, and conquered for upholding hegemonic masculinities. This chapter overall argues that the curatorial apparatus of life coaching not only reflects a form of neoliberal ideological indoctrination, but that this indoctrination is a material effect of platform capitalism that opens up the potential for acquiring inspirational capital and micro-celebritization to anyone.

6.2 The “Self” and Liberal Governance

The individual and its spiritual corollary, the “self”, are a key site of struggle, legitimacy, reflection, and value in capitalist modernity, and the fundamental unit upon which an assemblage of legal, economic, and political strategies unfurl, ranging from the right to property, vote, and self-expression to consumerism and lifestyle politics. Yet the self is a construction that does not exist prior to its articulation and discursive foundation in modes of socialization and social contexts generally (Skeggs, 2013). If someone is forced to spend their whole life in an empty, white-walled room, this person would develop a very different self than most people. In conditions of social interaction, the articulation of the self is contingent on variables including class, ethnicity, gender, bodily ability, and educational background, among others; as these variables are enacted in these conditions, they define what the boundaries of the permissible, the expected, and the possible are for individuals and social groups. The claiming of the self, then, involves the implicit or explicit negotiation, transgression, or submission to these boundaries, and enacts an (always re-shapable) subject position that provides particular vantage points from where someone views their place in society. Furthermore, the self, as Skeggs argues, is part of a system of social exchange “in which classed personhood is produced through different *technologies*” (2013: 5, emphasis added). Skeggs uses the concept of technology in the Foucauldian sense, which implies a form of power that aims to mark and produce individuals in ways that are compatible with the broader political and economic reproduction of society (Behrent, 2013: 82). In political contexts, where the “self” assumes prominence, such technologies are socially diffused, crossing over state and market rationalities, including government policies, such as introducing audits in workplaces to make the work environment more competitive, or media representations, such as the promotion of particular notions of success. For instance, to avoid being perceived as unsuccessful, a person may strive to accommodate to prevalent norms about success, including in work, family, and love relationships, and would thus shape their selves according to

this striving. Norms are then shaped by technologies of power and are themselves subject to change and diversification. A social technology exercises soft power, that is to say power via which a population is questioned by diverse and often competing expert authorities (the food expert, the psychology expert, the fashion expert, and so on). In the context of the therapeutic, while these authorities suggest the proper ways of conducting and managing the conflicting and always negotiable borders between the normal and pathological (“it is normal” to have negative emotions, asserts Castillo [2022e]), they intensify a preoccupation with the problems around the self, instead of, say, social inequality and power relations, and thus authorize governable subjects in neoliberalism.

The oeuvre of the sociologist Nikolas Rose and the so-called governmentality school is worth mentioning here. Since the 1980s, Rose’s prolific work has grappled with “these little engineers of the human soul, and their mundane knowledges” (Miller and Rose, 2013: 5), which Rose calls the “psy-disciplines”, namely psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and psychotherapy (Rose, 1999). The psy-disciplines pivot around “heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority, and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise” and are generative, in the sense that they make it possible for human beings to “conceive of themselves, speak about themselves, judge themselves, and conduct themselves in new ways” (Rose, 1991: vii). These disciplines are a key technology for regulating the self and shaping “governable subjects” in advanced liberal societies (Rose, 1999: 40). The term *technology*, then, refers to applications of power that are less based on overt violence and more on the “subtle manipulation of human behavior”, in which “bodies are prodded in certain directions, molded according to particular norms, and forced to act in coordination with one another” (Behrent, 2013: 84). Neoliberal media culture, in particular, suggests a psychologized ontology with the individual or the business as its fundamental units, organizing an entrepreneurial regime of truth (Foucault, 1977), that is to say, a systematic viewpoint that proposes a taken-for-granted market rationality across every aspect of social reality (Wilson, 2017: 52). In this culture, there are prominent ideological injections shaping governable subjects, such as to be autonomous and creative, as we already with McRobbie’s idea of the “creativity *dispositif*” (2018: 11), or to be empowered and assertive, as with Rosalind Gill’s and Shani Orgad’s idea of a “confidence cult” (2022: 4), which we discuss later in this chapter.

Life coaching is a present-day instantiation of the psy-disciplines, an up-to-date “little engineer of the human soul”, with its expertise being distributed and assigned in a rather disorganized and voluntaristic manner. An institutional certification, for example, a university degree, is one of the possible modalities of legitimization for becoming a life coach, and probably not the main one. Instead, coaching legitimacy mostly relies on the coach’s own “charismatic authority”, as Hendriks (2017: 59) puts it (more on this concept in the next section). This deregulated and seemingly anti-institutional

ethos of life coaching is a carryover of the legacy of self-help, which is in many ways its more direct disciplinary heir on matters pertaining to the self. The genre of self-help emerged in 19th century England as a byproduct of liberal-bourgeois political thought, emphasizing individual excellence and the quest each person should undertake against the paralyzing arduousness of the state. The state and its institutional authorities are a priori suspicious for imposing conformity; in order for an individual to morally and economically succeed they should look inside and improve themselves. This is evident, for instance, in the writings of the founder of self-help literature, Simon Smiles, who publicized the values of individual morality to the working classes. While Smiles' politics were responding to different developments of his time, including the failed workers revolutions of 1840s, self-help popularized an ethic that emphasized "the virtues of hard work and improvement, [...] a cult of respectability which placed harsh pressures upon the poor, and [...] the rejection of state action to improve social conditions" (Morris, 1981: 91). Thus, in *Self-Help*, written in 1859, Smiles proclaims that, "even the best institutions can give a man no active aid" and that "the utmost they can do is, to leave him *free* to develop himself and improve his individual condition" (1889: 21). Individual self-improvement is however not merely a personal enterprise but partakes in nobler political implications, as "helping and stimulating men to elevate and improve themselves" is "the highest patriotism and philanthropy" (1889: 23).¹ This idea involves a self-civilizing quest, a courageous fight against the barbaric instincts that reside in each one of us (more in Section 6.4). The regulation of these instincts through introspection, discipline, and self-control can eventually advance societies toward loftier states (in this sense, those with unregulated instincts can be held responsible for dragging societies back). Expected to self-excel, the working class in the self-help imperative is molded after the image of the bourgeoisie through an endless quest for self-improvement to which it is most probably destined to fail as class and social relations are not in its favor.

Thus, the therapeutic—including self-help, coaching, and psy-expertise—corresponds to liberal forms of governance; yet to what extent these forms of governance correspond exclusively to liberal power and its application (often in a colonial manner)² is the subject of ongoing debate (Nehring et al., 2020: 8). The reach of the therapeutic is abundant in non-Western regimes of governance, including China (Hendriks, 2017; Yang, 2020), Russia (Salmenniemi and Voronaand, 2014), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Fanti, 2020), and India (Bhatia, 2018), among others. The mushrooming of platforms greatly contributes to the accelerating diffusion of therapeutics to diverse parts of the world. As in the previous cases we saw, this diffusion is not linear but marked by processes of adaptation, as practices, discourses, and forms are localized to different political, social, and economic contexts. There is also the question of language, access, and wider cultural settings. It is not enough to speak about globalization in reference to the spread, and in some cases tremendous success, of English-speaking coaches (such as, say,

a globally recognized coaching persona like Tony Robbins). Language-wise there are booming national coaching scenes that act independently of the authority of English-speaking coaches making reference to other regimes of knowledge; we can think of how the Russian coaching industry has been impacted by occultism, Eastern spirituality, and the theosophy guru Helena Blavatsky or the Chinese psy-scene by Confucianism (Yang, 2020). More than an English-language driven dissemination, there is a non-linear process of the continuous adaptation and rearrangement of psychological imaginary as platforms help in making this imaginary recognizable and part of the everyday life in vastly different cultural and political settings. Similar to how psychologization became widely diffused in the United States thanks to another techno-social apparatus, that is the “paperback revolution” in the late 1930s (Illouz, 2013: 43), the architecture of social media, whether in Chinese, American, or Arabic public spheres, encourages an individualist confessional style, whose “excelling” can bestow authority on particular individuals to be able to improve the lives of others (Abidin, 2018; Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017). The authority of these individuals, whether influencers, micro-influencers, internet celebrities, or micro-celebrities (Sections 3.4 and 6.3), can rely on a certain display of success and thriving so as to inspire their followers and audiences.

Accumulating inspirational capital, which can be used as a means to provide coaching advice, encodes “universal” signifiers of capitalist culture, such as “success”, “growth”, and “confidence” in national, local, niche, and micro contexts. There are some nearly transnationally appealing props for encoding these signifiers, such as helping cute animals or posing with (your) kids, which trigger collective sympathy, but more often the accumulation of inspiration is audience dependent. For instance, the indicators of thriving and success among some Russian-speaking aspiring coaches I have followed, rely on what their audiences would consider as exceptional such as “having a nice family” or “moving to Paris”, which may not be the case in other national contexts. These situations provide curatorial anchoring points that can evidence some kind of success to their followers, and around which an inspiring profile can be sustained via daily updates, photos, posts, reels, and stories.

In this race for inspiration, irrespective of the geographical framework, modern therapists have to be modeled as charismatic and compelling personas. To gain credibility, at least among the lower classes and mass consumers, the common coaching narratives of leadership, excellence, and growth need pointers to paragons of overcoming obstacles in life. Potentially, the more desperate one was before the transformation, the more convincing they can be. To go back to the introduction, the break-up coach recounted a devastating break-up with a boyfriend who she loved; it was the laborious overcoming of this ordeal that made her wiser, as she understood how to deal with break-ups. Or, in a podcast titled “Delay Discounting”, Castillo explains a theory according to which people need to wait for the right circumstances until they reach a professional decision rather than just accepting what they

find along the way. Castillo describes how she had the audacity and patience to refuse to side with “instant gratification” by not taking whatever was available right in front of her; she patiently waited for better things to come (Castillo, 2022d). In a sort of virtuous circle, the validity of this theory can be proven by Castillo’s own success in professional life (which refers to the self-generated cycle of abundance that we will see in Section 6.5 with men’s dating coaching). In the following section, we will discuss in more detail the constitution of inspirational personas in the context of media platforms.

6.3 Digital Gurus, Micro-Celebrities, and the Claim to Charisma

The legitimacy of the coaching guru, as argued already, is more improvisatory if compared to the legitimacy of more institutionally sanctioned knowledge experts, such as university-trained psychologists; degrees are not enough and the actual life experience of the self-help or coaching guru should often bear witness to “charismatic authority” (Hendriks, 2017: 9). For Hendriks, charismatic authority is defined

not by reference to the personality traits or innate characteristics of the authority figure, but by reference *to the nature of the social relationship* between the authority figure, on the one hand, and the followers and students, on the other.

(2017: 4, emphasis added)

In the context of this relationship, the guru can make a “claim to charismatic authority” (2017: 92), enacting an inspiring and credible persona hoping that the followers will be convinced by this claim and trust the guru to help solve their problems. If charismatic authority relies on the relationship between an authority figure and their followers, then digital platforms mediate the qualities of this relational dynamic: an aspiring guru can propagate a claim to charisma across dispersed sites, for instance, by hosting a YouTube show, maintaining an account in Instagram, sharing short clips in Tik Tok, making a Facebook group, a personal or fan page, organizing courses in Coursera and Udemy, creating podcasts for Spotify and Apple Podcasts, and adding links to all the above in their website. The coach can employ the design and connectivity affordances of platforms, facilitating the aesthetic and technical features that would accompany their curated persona.

But how do platforms mediate this relationship and the claim of charisma that a coach needs to make? Contrary to the pre-modern guru, who had to communicate their charisma in physical proximity to their followers by speaking at a gathering, the contemporary coach can potentially have a global reach thanks to the internet. Media technologies are prosthetic extensions that transform the relationship between the authority figure and their followers (Lury, 2013). Older technology, like the megaphone, could only amplify a guru’s voice within a limited range. Later, printing technologies

could overcome the proximity barrier by making this voice a transmittable object, which by means of reproduction and duplication can be transported in diverse geographical locations.³ Inventions like the audio recording, radio, television, and video shrank time and space even more. Social media platforms provide the coach with a simplified interface for setting up a personal brand as well as, importantly, an audience that can stick around on its own accord, to go back to Chapter 3. Yet platforms, as sociotechnical apparatuses, do more than that. By making their affordances readily available, they confront any cultural producer with the curatorial imperative as the latter becomes an everyday and relatively effortless encounter. By seizing this encounter, the coach should organize a business model in the context of a potentially global marketplace of supply and demand; in contrast to gurus of the past, modern life coaches can own multiple virtual spaces through which they can reach audiences, and manage the production, distribution, and returns of their coaching business as well as its overall aesthetics and design. It is not simply the guru's voice that is amplified by the platforms; the mere availability of platforms means that potential gurus can turn into little artists and little entrepreneurs at the same time.

In the more gatekept traditional media, a coaching guru would for instance get a ten-minute television slot in a morning show or a one-page interview in the popular press, that is, the guru's performance would be subject to the *editorial* processes of the medium. On a platform, the guru possesses "unlimited airtime"—potentially infinite temporal and spatial bandwidth for writing, speaking, and generally curating their persona. This is a shift from representational to presentational media, as David Marshall calls this transition, bringing about the possibility of articulating a "widening dimension of the public self" (Marshall, 2010: 40), a self that is distributed throughout the digital information landscape and scrutinized by audiences and followers. In reference to the celebrity culture that Marshall writes about, the representational regime of traditional media bent heavily toward the editorial function of the medium and its managers, as "culture and politics have relied upon a media filtering system to organize and hierarchize what is valuable, significant, and important" (2010: 45). Conversely, in presentational media, this filtering is not the responsibility of an external editor but largely becomes a task that the (aspiring) celebrities need to address themselves or with the assistance of independently contracted social media managers. Coaching gurus curate their online identities via personal or partly outsourced (depending on the budget) curatorial labor coalescing aesthetic considerations around design, visuals, layouts, logos, texts, photography and audio, and organizational concerns around pricing, subcontracting, networking, hiring, collaborating, and micro-managing relations with followers. In other words, platforms confront coaches (and cultural producers in general) with the apparatus of curation as the editorial function is now theirs to manage.

The platformization of the coaching persona then gives access to technological affordances for potentially elevating a coach to a micro-celebrity

(or even more alluringly a proper celebrity). The term micro-celebrity refers not simply to a recognizable person within a niche online milieu, say about climbing, perfumes, or wines, but to an online practice that involves constructing audiences as fans by curating a carefully crafted personage (Marwick, 2015).⁴ It is defined less by the number of followers but by a set of techniques that correspond to laboring skills: “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, uses strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regards their audience as fans” (Marwick, 2015: 337). The prehistory of online micro-celebrity, dates back to the models of the erotic web cam industry, who are one of the earliest examples of online self-presentation via these techniques and laboring skills (Abidin, 2018; Jones, 2020; Senft, 2008). For Theresa Senft (2008), who popularized the term micro-celebrity in reference to the camgirls of the late 1990s, the micro-celebrity refers to “a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to ‘amp up’ their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online” (2008: 25).⁵ The camgirls were also the “beta testers” of all the subsequently established labor practices that were employed to achieve internet fame, including the “building of self as a brand, and engagement in a specific form of emotional labor” (2008: 8). Micro-celebrity labor differs from that of the traditional celebrity most notably in the ways it connects with fans by practicing intimacy, authenticity, accountability, and especially continuous relatability (Lewis, 2020; Raun, 2018).⁶ The labor of relating regards the creation and management of ongoing relationships with fans, even if these relationships may not always be pleasant to the platform curator; for instance, in the ethnographic research of Dumont a male micro-celebrity in professional rock-climbing has to communicate with followers in a way that he appears inspirational and engaged, while he does not particularly like or even feels uncomfortable with these followers (Dumont, 2017). More than that, relational labor is a key for deterring legitimacy crises or potential canceling (Ng, 2023),⁷ as micro-celebrities constantly have to appear as authentic, open, transparent, and accountable to their audiences. While the traditional celebrity would maintain distance and unreachability from fans, the micro-celebrity must be confessional, reciprocal, and engaged, that is “curate a persona that feels continuously authentic, interactive, and celebrity-like regardless of the size or state of one’s audience” (Abidin, 2018: 12). Navigating platform affordances, then, as a micro-celebrity (or often as an ordinary user) entails the cultivation of communicative skills that can be put to work for instilling trust to the followers (Lewis and Christin, 2022; Lewis, 2020; Raun, 2018).

The platformized life coach follows these micro-celebrity techniques to various extents in order to be elevated to the level of an expert, trustworthy, and guru-like figure in matters pertaining to spiritual guidance. I followed several coaches in their platform-based incarnations, listening to podcasts, tracking their social media accounts, subscribing to groups and mailing lists,

and taking two coaching courses so that I become a certified coach myself. The virtual communities, forums, discussion groups, and seminars that these life coaches maintain help garnering additional publicity and magnifying their reputational scope. For instance, the self-described “social entrepreneur and active thinker” Kain Ramsay (Ramsay, 2022), whose course I attended, maintains a discussion group on Facebook titled “The Principles Into Practice” with nearly 70,000 members at the time of writing. The purpose of the group is to bring together “like-minded individuals from all around the world who are studying, or who have studied, Kain Ramsay or Achology associated on-demand training courses” and one of its stated goals is to give “details about NEW Kain Ramsay training products” (The “Principles Into Practice” Discussion Group, nd). Ramsey is thus the spiritually leading persona around whom the activity of the group revolves. For example, the group’s feed consists of inspirational quotes from his work, links to his writings and courses, lives streams with Ramsey offering advice, interviews with Ramsey taken by other Achology members, and other people’s testimonies about how useful Ramsey’s coaching was. There are also regular links to the website of Achology (of which Ramsey is the founder and director) and to Ramsay’s own webpage. These websites serve as both permanent information hubs for Ramsay’s past and future work and commercial spaces selling courses, books, merch, and other material. In this sense, the platform is both an amplifier of the guru’s voice and a scaffolding that facilitates transactions by directing to personal websites that sell the coach’s services. Apart from the aesthetic, Ramsey, or most probably his media managers, take care of the organizational part by coordinating the group, setting community guidelines, and administering the micro-debates and often disputes that occur between members. Groups, pages, and forums are sites for micro-curatorial labor within the larger space of the social media platform.

Likewise, the “professional speakers, trainers, and coaches” Joel and Natalie Rivera, from the “Transformation Academy”, whose online course I also attended, maintain virtual communities that revolve around them. They maintain a networking page of around 56,000 followers and 58,000 likes on Facebook where they constantly post videos and quotes of themselves or praise their courses. This page claims the relatively popular mandate of personal and professional freedom within the coaching industry, as it aims to “empower INDIEpreneurs”, or what they call “self-employed freedom junkies”, to “create purpose-driven business” (Transformation Academy, nd). Joel and Natalie Rivera demonstrate seniority and expertise in recruiting new industry talents as they regularly invite emerging coaches in their online videos and seminars, who specialize in various types of problem solving. Their self-representations in this group involve, similar to Ramsay’s, numerous stylized photos of themselves that communicate greatness and determined vision. These pictures show the coaches as unwavering visionaries and entrepreneurs, similar to what we saw in Chapter 4 with @demnagram, accompanied by motivational quotes from their work. Motivational pictures

are an additional medium for coach self-curating as the fans encounter Enlightened mentors whose overarching words of wisdom give solutions to everyday problems.

The most important arenas of legitimacy for the micro-celebrity coach are however their courses, seminars, and lectures which eventually manifest their capacity to transfer knowledge and advice. These arenas are not merely important for the symbolic capital they can offer to the coaches, as posting photos and reels for instance mostly does, but they are additionally an important source of income (sold in platforms either as on-demand sessions or live streams or a variation of both). Apart from revenue, the courses are also a guarantee that their community will reproduce itself and develop as new members join it. I enrolled in two life coaching on-demand courses in Udemy, the first titled “Life Coaching Certificate Course (Beginner to Intermediate)”, led by Ramsay, and the second titled “Transformation Life Coach Certification (Accredited)” led by the Joeel and Natalie Rivera. I completed both courses and for both I received a certificate via email, the former accredited by “Achology” and the latter by the “Transformation Academy”, which are both self-styled online academies founded by the instructors of the courses. Generally, online coaching courses would typically lead to some sort of certificate that is accredited by a school. The terms “certificate”, “accreditation”, and “school” are critical for luring clients as they make these courses look credible assuring a qualification that can be used as a proof of expertise among followers and fans. It is, for instance, not rare to see a younger, aspiring coach adding to their Instagram profile the titles of the courses they have completed appearing as accredited coaches by a school. Thus, for freelance coaches like Ramsey or Joeel and Natalie Rivera the establishment of a school (Achology and the Transformation Academy respectively), whatever a school in this case means, functions as a façade of credibility, as the students can think that their course is certified by a school, that is by an institution rather than just a person. Yet, if there were no online platforms these schools would simply not exist, at least in their current form, as they would not be able to physically attract students from all over the world. The numbers sound astronomical: indicatively, at the time of writing, Ramsay offers 32 different pre-recorded coaching courses in Udemy and has been a teacher to 615,835 students with 152,635 reviews, while Joeel and Natalie Rivera offer 96 courses and had 569,001 students with 184,720 reviews.⁸

These and other schools in the English-speaking coaching field and beyond include online and offline courses that greatly vary in price, quality, duration, pricing models, and learning outcomes.⁹ Tellingly, the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (IPEC) charges almost \$12,000 for two years of attendance, the course offered by Brookes Castillo and the Life Coach School ranges between \$1,800 and \$3,000, while the on-demand Udemy courses cost around \$150 (most coaching courses after the COVID-19 pandemic adapted an online format). In turn, the International

Coaching Federation (ICF) is probably the most recognizable institutional body that certifies quality in the coaching industry, accrediting coaches and courses offered by other schools or educators. In their website they thus boast being the gold standard of the industry: “Anyone can call themselves a coach. But ICF-credentialed coaches are professionals who have met stringent education and experience requirements and have demonstrated a thorough understanding of the coaching competencies that set the standard in the profession” (International Coaching Federation, 2023). Other coaching organizations can then apply for having their courses approved by ICF and use the “accredited by ICF” label as a badge of prestige (Ackerman, 2021).¹⁰ In turn, the coaching entrepreneurs, who for whatever reason are not collaborating or are competing with ICF, are profiting by the coaching industry’s deregulation. “At The Life Coach School”, Castillo and her team emphatically say, “we did not and will not apply for Certification through the International Coaching Federation (ICF)” (The Life Coach School, nd: 24–25). This field in-the-making then reflects the “rhizomatic dispersion” of expertise and authority in neoliberalism (Kaščák and Pupala, 2011: 148), according to which a semi-institutional actor can make a claim to authority and challenge the legitimacy of other actors. In coaching, there is no governmental body that holds undisputed authority over the field, it is the entrepreneurial enterprise and the market that decides which knowledge agendas are valid. In the context of these multi-platform interactions of schools and learning programs, expertise becomes effervescent as it can be seized by individual coaches or their schools via performative claiming. Such performative claiming provides to coaches like Castillo, Ramsay, and Joel and Natalie Rivera the chance to prove their credentials via reviews, rankings, clips, interviews, and other platform material potentially leading to micro-celebritization. In the next two sections, we move from the coach’s curation in the platform economy to the strategies for self-curating that this multi-billion-dollar industry endorses and promotes. In Section 6.4, I focus on what I regard as the staple frames of self-curating, including discipline, mindset, confidence, and resilience, and in Section 6.5, I look at how these frames take shape in the heterosexual male coaching discourse around the areas of sex and intimacy.

6.4 Curating Lives of Discipline, Confidence, and Resilience

The purpose of describing the strategies of self-curating is to turn attention to the cultures, values, and meaning the curatorial imperative endorses. Similar to what was argued before, the next two sections argue that the curatorial imperative expands cultures of self-absorption, fulfillment, and inspiration. The main principle that coaching cultures endorse is that life and the self should be perceived and effectively curated as projects. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the self in this endeavor should be both the project’s supervisor and the entity to be supervised. While this distinction is not usually made explicit

by coaches themselves, let us, for the sake of analysis, call the “uncurated self” an entity with a damaging propensity toward disorganization, indulgence, conformity, and laziness, and the “curator self” as the potentially rational, organized, and prudent supervisor of this entity. It is a project then that has a particular aim to transform the uncurated self into an improved version of the self.

Like other projects, life, as if it were an artwork or an art exhibition, should be guided by a larger vision that inspires and permeates decisions on career, love, food, clothing, education, friendships, among other areas. This vision can of course be partially modified through time as circumstances themselves change and it thus becomes a process of constant revision and transformation. As each person has distinct experiences and situations, this vision has to be unique to each, it cannot just derive from generic advice as in the self-help industry.¹¹ Discovering this vision involves research, that is, working with the self and searching deep inside this self. “You need to work with yourself” is a common injunction in vernacular parlance, advice columns, and other locus of psy-expertise of neoliberal governmentality, framing the self as a wild animal that should be reflected upon, controlled, disciplined, modified, advanced, pardoned, indulged, tamed, and generally trained to achieve particular results. Understanding, acting upon, and eventually mastering the impulses of this beast is a project that “we”, the rational and mindful beings inhabiting us, should curate.

In economic phraseology, the idea of the “project” refers to a time-specific work arrangement that captivates the aspirational horizon of neoliberal societies; projects are flexible, they welcome individual creativity and initiatives, they can be completed at one’s own pace, and escape the standard working routine (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). As a common laboring practice of both artists and entrepreneurs, projects are unstable and precarious, but they are also a means of socialization in the marketplace allowing the imagining of a better future and upward mobility. Projects can never be completed as one should move from one project to the next or do more than one at the same time. Through them one may meet new people, present their work to new audiences, or develop collaborations that could lead to other projects and professional development. Following the idea that life is a project, with an undiscovered “self” lying at the core, turns life (including the past, the present, and the future; memories, emotions, and desires) into a sort of construction site, on which productive and value creating processes unfold. Similar to a construction site where workers unearth minerals, the unearthing of the true self involves different forms of labor aiming to discover the spiritual gems buried inside of us leading our souls to the path of self-fulfillment and happiness. This work with the self can “never be understood as assured or complete” but is always “a work in progress, requiring continual introspection and labor” (Organ; Gill, 2022: 10)—constant revision and the mobilization of novel resources as circumstances themselves change. Self-labor is here a central unit of exploitation; this is the “work you

have to do with yourself”, demanding research, coordination and often the recruitment of psy-experts, mindfulness specialists, trainers, yoga teachers, care workers, and counselors as well as input from technology, including from medical equipment, self-tracking devices, personality tests, exercises, and so on. This construction site is a work in progress where capital gets accumulated and valorized by activating forms of labor, infrastructure, and technical equipment around it.

“A person without vision will perish”, states Ramsay at the beginning of his course, as “when we don’t have a compelling vision for our lives, we can end up going round and round the same old circles” (Ramsay, nd). Similar to artists who need to have strong vision statements for their projects or the curators whose curatorial statements need to reflect the exhibitions they organize, a person’s life project needs to have a vision, that is to come up with a story that would interpret their past life and inform their future goals and objectives. “Self-concept comes first”, Ramsay argues, it has to be determined at the beginning of the coaching process; it is about “how we see ourselves, how we define ourselves, how do we define ourselves to be”, and it thus regulates all the smaller aims and goals we set in our lives (Ramsay, nd). Yet self-discovery is not an easy task, it needs thoughtful contemplation as the possibility of misrepresenting our real selves and authentic desires lurks beneath. And if we fall for this misrepresentation, the consequences can be grave: if our self-concept does not line up to who we are at the core, “we are operating in an incongruent way”, says Ramsay, which means that everything we do eventually will head to the wrong direction (Ramsay, nd). There is thus an essence, a significance, a meaning at the heart of us that we need to determine, and which exists independently of external influences. “Very few of us know how to determine our own significance outside of external factors such as career, wealth, company, and status”, writes Ramsay in his book with the evocative title *Responsibility Rebellion*, and we are thus “all vulnerable to falling into this pit of defeatism and purposelessness” (Ramsay, 2020: 102). Unless we unearth this essence, we will drift aimlessly like leaves in the wind that swirl around, themselves dragged by external forces and circumstances. The path toward self-discovery and happiness is synonymous with growth, development, and purpose to avoid “going round and round the same old circles” (Ramsay, nd).

The personal challenge, however, becomes even more severe once we get a glimpse of our internal gems; once we discover our true self, the labor not only needs to continue but to become more intense and uncompromising. This is because, as mentioned above, the uncurated self in life-coaching cultures is messy and unruly, almost like the barbarian in orientalist narratives who needs curbing to follow the proper direction and be lifted to a higher state of self-awareness. The curatorial imperative embarks on a self-colonizing and self-civilizing quest since the highest stage of self-awareness implies curtailing our uncurated savage instincts. Maintaining unfaltering progress to our vision is possible, for Ramsay, only “when we start developing this

level of self-awareness” as ultimately “self-control is the ultimate expression of maturity in life” (Ramsay, nd). Speaking in a podcast of Castillo, the “self-discipline coach” Monika Levi shares a similar opinion: “the most successful people are not the most intelligent or talented. They’re the most disciplined people” (Castillo, 2023). Therefore, “every action you take is a vote toward the person you want to become, the identity you want to build. And so it’s all about the compounding of the little choices we make every day” (Castillo, 2023). If our curator self does not pay attention to these “little choices”, the uncurated self can easily fall prey to malicious forces, which will make us act in whatever erratic way they desire. As Ramsay confirms in his book, “When you allow your emotional and mental well-being to be controlled or manipulated by your unmonitored thoughts, external circumstances, or forces, you become immediately disempowered and out of control” (2020: 91). There is then an ever-present danger that these wicked agents, unmonitored thoughts, and external forces, will take advantage of our vulnerable selves and rail them across evil lines.

This fight with evil is constant and should inform all of our “little choices”. Even when we indulge in some unmeditated pleasure this should be subject to the same self-observation and self-discipline apparatus; for instance, we should be allowed to treat ourselves with sweets or holidays only after we make some sacrifice that brings us closer to our vision (i.e., like trained dogs, we have to deserve the reward). For Castillo’s radical self-Stakhanovism, observation and self-discipline should be constant so that we eventually disavow all indulgent, unproductive moments:

When we indulge in food and we indulge in eating Oreos, when we know that that’s not what we ultimately want to do with our lives, it’s very similar to indulging in emotions that we know aren’t going to serve us.
(2015)

Even the common feeling of confusion should be prohibited as ultimately it serves no purpose, no vision, it only drags us back to inaction:

“I’m confused,” is very indulgent. It’s a way of not taking action. It’s a way of confusion, indulging in the emotion of confusion. I do like to talk about it as an emotion that serves no purpose. It doesn’t help you. All it does is stall you out.

(Castillo, 2015)

Thus, when this everyday feeling arises, we must strive to overcome it, since it distorts the straightforward grasp of our desires. Radical self-discipline should lead to an improved self, that is, to a self that is capable of achieving goals and aims that correspond to *what we want to be*. For Levi, self-discipline means to do something unwanted, it sacrifices present-day joy and convenience for achieving our ideal future self, “it is doing something that you don’t

want to do, literally in the moment, for your future self” (Castillo, 2023). The apparatus of self-discipline in coaching cultures is then similar to religious asceticism, serving a transcendental narrative of the real self that has to be unearthed and sustained so as to reach a fulfilling spiritual deification.

More than that, self-discipline should rely on developing a specific mindset that would be able to enforce it. For all the coaches I have studied, the very concept of “mindset” and idea that we should develop a specific “mindset” were extremely important to the point that they provided the overarching goal of their training; for Joel and Natalie Rivera, for instance, “all success is attributable to mindset” and the right mindset, according to them, is called the “growth mindset” that allows for adaptability, change, and improvement over time (Joel and Natalie Rivera, nd). This is contradicted by the “fixed mindset” which implies stagnation and inaction, or, in other accounts, with the “victim mindset”. Ramsey regards the victim mindset catastrophic as, “for powerful people, the victim mindset is nothing more than an unnecessary chain holding them back from living exciting and rewarding lives” and this victim mindset is “detrimental to your growth and self-mastery” and not productive; it is a fetter that prevents us from growing (2020: 48).

The right mindsets should be accompanied by specific traits. In contrast to the tendency for self-destructiveness found in the fixed or victim mindsets, some of the staple attributes of the right mindset are confidence, empowerment, and resilience for achieving one’s vision. Confidence refers to the ability to believe in yourself, which is ultimately the indicator of success; as Joel and Natalie Rivera put it, “whether or not a person will succeed depends on the level of confidence” rather than, say, inherited financial status, educational background, or social capital (Joel and Natalie Rivera, nd). The confidence imperative is widely distributed not only in the life-coach discourse but is key in the neoliberal apparatus at large in which market competition is impressed upon all dimensions of social life (Wilson, 2017). The prevailing “confidence cult(ure)” is an integral part of the therapeutic narrative that imposes an “obligated freedom”, as Organ and Gill argue, “in which not achieving the required change is framed as moral and psychological failure” (2022: 6). In other words, it is impossible to be “free” unless you do all this labor of unearthing and orient the “work with yourself” toward self-transformation. The confidence imperative, however, especially when targeting female audiences, does not set a transcendental “perfection” as its standard but admits (and comes to terms with) the messiness of life, its weaknesses, and negativities. Confidence is thus accompanied by a “vulnerability turn” (2022: 6), according to which people should love themselves, embrace their past mistakes, and turn harmful psychological traits into assets. Castillo, for instance, in her podcast episode *Embrace Your Negative Parts* tells us: “Think of all the things in your past that you wish you hadn’t done, and take a deep breath and say, ‘Oh, I’m human. This is part of my human experience’ [... .] And human beings do things that cause problems for other people, and human beings do things that ‘hurt’ other people. And

it's okay. It's okay. You're okay" (Castillo, 2022e). Be willing to embrace your weaknesses, then, even the ones that can lead to harming oneself or others comes from a position of acceptance rather than pathology. In this sense, the vulnerability turn inhabits the same neoliberal version of individual empowerment as it addresses traumas as opportunities for self-improvement (instead of, say, searching for their social causes and collectively struggling to confront these causes).¹²

This is also the departure point of positive psychology, according to which traumas should not be simply encountered so that we understand and reflect on them, but they should be molded into feelings of happiness. Martin Seligman in his bestseller *Authentic Happiness* (2002), for instance, believes that through constantly maintaining an optimist outlook we can eventually uphold a protective shield that would guard our well-beings from external negativity. This corresponds to the trait of resilience that requires a constant attitude of optimism, flexibility, and adaptability, as damaging events, like losses and traumas, should be used to make us stronger. Resilience is a property of the strong and powerful, who abide by Nietzsche's dictum "what doesn't kill me make me stronger", a widespread citation in meme cultures that transposes the coaching vision of constant internal struggle against adversity into everyday parlance. Resilient people need to stay positive, as positivity "constitutes a 'buffer' against adversity, giving the feeling of being someone competent, who cannot be 'crushed' by the world", as Illouz puts it, like reactive and elastic materials that will be enduring whatever attempts to crush them (2020: 84). Discourses on resilience "call on people to be adaptable and positive, 'bounce back' from adversity, and embrace a mindset in which negative experiences must be reframed in upbeat terms" (Organ and Gill, 2022: 17), that is to absorb, convert, and repurpose negative occurrences into shields for the future well-being.

Assessing whether coaching discourses may (or may not) work for individuals or social groups is not the point here; the point is instead to place the curatorial imperative within the cultures it harvests and, given its immense popularity, the "truths" it gives rise to in the broader social space. The key truths of the coaching narrative prey on common interpellations of neoliberal ideology and specifically on what Julie Wilson calls a "self-enclosed individualism" (2018: 6). As AnaLouise Keating (2012) puts it:

Self-enclosed individualism relies on a dichotomous framework that positions the individual in opposition to all other human and nonhuman beings. ("It's me against the world.") In this binary-oppositional structure, each individual is entirely separate from the external world. Self and society are mutually exclusive; to survive and thrive, each person must focus almost entirely on herself, evaluating all actions in egocentric terms: "What's in it for me?" "How can I succeed?" "How will this event, this situation, affect me?" "What can you do for me?" "What can I take from you?"

(quoted in Wilson 2017: 4)

In the coaching narrative then, “negative” events that antagonize power relations, such as strikes, boycotts, or protests, should be not evaluated from the standpoint of a possible social improvement but from whether they serve or not our individual happiness and self-fulfillment. References on class are stunningly absent from this discourse, or better they are present insofar as coaches want to highlight that class and social position eventually do not matter. In this sense, the curatorial imperative contributes to further canonizing atomization as the fundamental unit of social reality in which personal interest and the maximization of one’s pleasure should always come first instead of, say, sacrificing oneself for a larger cause. In the next section, I explore how this atomized narrative plays out in the training of heterosexual men on how to form relations with women, a sphere that is particularly apt for reproducing narratives of success and self-realization.

6.5 Curating Masculinities in Sexuality and Intimacy Coaching

Similar narratives are then palpable in the men’s coaching, and more particularly, in the courses, guidelines, seminars, and prescriptions focusing on dating and romantic relations, which attempt to outline the proper ways of curating men’s sexuality and intimacy. This section explores men’s coaching as part of the curatorial tropes that received widespread popularity in platform society.

The areas of sexuality and intimacy, similar to other areas, as we saw, are dramatically impacted by the curatorial imperatives of self-presentation, authenticity, and personal vision that digital technologies have brought about. In this section, I especially look at how sexuality and intimacy are instrumentalized in heterosexual men’s coaching cultures for dramatizing male identities of empowerment among shifting socio-economic realities and conceptions of gender. Sexuality refers to the ways that (gendered) people perform (or not) sexual desires around other (gendered) people and bodies; intimacy in turn refers to the warm and tender feelings or gestures, not necessarily sexual, that people experience around particular individuals. While these affects often overlap, when it comes to male coaching in particular, sexuality becomes primarily the subject of so-called dating coaches while intimacy that of so-called relationship coaches. In men’s coaching and wider popular culture discourse, sexuality and intimacy are considered to be core parts of one’s identity. By understanding and enabling one’s sexuality, for instance, one can have more possibilities to find the ideal partner and achieve happiness (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). Or, by mastering intimacy, one has more chances to succeed in other significant areas of life, such as professional growth, personal development, and family, or to elevate emotional states linked to personal well-being, including feeling protected and cared for. Sexuality and intimacy (maybe along with career) are, in the coaching narrative, *the* most important areas of one’s identity, to which one should invest time and resources. To go back to the premise of the last section, then,

discovering and eventually effectively performing one's sexuality is part and parcel of unearthing a real self in coaching cultures.

I have followed coaches addressing heterosexual men who specialize in both sexuality and intimacy across social networks in order to familiarize myself with the tropes of the male coaching romantic discourse.¹³ As a systematic analysis of male coaches is not the aim of this section, I include some selective examples of dating and relationship coaches which I regard paradigmatic of the curatorial strategies and micro-techniques employed for mentoring their audiences. Indicatively, I discuss Corey Wayne, who is a popular sexuality and intimacy coaching celebrity with 500,000 subscribers on YouTube and 100,000 followers on Instagram as well as the writer of bestseller books, such as *How to be a 3% Man*. I also include insights and material from other male coaches who perform diverse masculinities: from more fragile, including Reese Stockhausen in a website called "Practical Intimacy",¹⁴ to hardcore and uncompromising alpha, who can be fully misogynistic (an infamous example being Andrew Tate). Despite the differences in style and nuance, all male coaches address a neoliberal hegemonic masculinity that should be dominant, assertive, and entrepreneurial as opposed to uncured masculinities of disorientation and servility. In this context, sexuality and intimacy are areas that should be curated toward a winner-takes-it-all vision of successful manhood, a vision that can be adapted to different constructions of male types from the adventurous and risk-taking "player" to the responsible "family person".

Dating platforms and apps, according to Chris Haywood's account on masculinities and online dating, "impel us to reveal ourselves (or particular edited aspects of us)" and more explicitly to valorize the self, making it "more explicit and accessible" (2020: 6). They thus create new anxieties not only for discovering one's sexuality but also performing one's unique sexual identity, desires, and romantic aspirations. In a non-binary gender landscape, the notion of masculinity is constantly being made in different contexts of interaction that mark the self in different ways. Coaches addressing heterosexual men commonly resort to the idea that there is an impending "crisis of masculinity", according to which men have become weak, disoriented, and incapable of fulfilling their traditional roles. They attribute this "crisis" to the feminist undoing of traditional gender roles, the disappearance of the muscled breadwinner in light of the deindustrialization of the West, and expressions of multiple genders and sexualities that do not conform to traditional binary notions.

By operationalizing flirting, dating, and relationships with women, men's coaching inhabits a place both in the so-called manosphere, an online movement that avows men's rights in opposition to feminism (Ging, 2019), and the so-called seduction industry, which is itself a fragment of the manosphere, and aims to train men to seduce, and generally managing relations with, women (O' Neil, 2018). The manosphere community claims sexist mythologies, such as the Red Pill philosophy, taken from the film

Matrix, that supposedly aims to liberate men from a feminism-dominated society as well as the fundamental distinction between alpha and beta males (among some other types), with the former conforming to independent, assertive, and autonomous men who can handle any situation for their own benefit and the latter to docile men who have lost their maleness as a result of feminism and social degradation. The manosphere is also a place of more underdog, self-described beta masculinities, such as the incels, or involuntary celibates (O'Malley, Thomas and Holt, 2022), who constitute a resentful online movement holding women as well as the alphas equally responsible for their poor dating life and subordinate status and codifying them in derogatory slang such as the Staceys and the Chads, respectively (Menzie, 2022). The seduction community inhabits overlapping codes and vocabularies with the manosphere, such as “friendzoning”, that is when a woman wants to remain friends instead of having a sexual relationship, and the “Mr. Nice Guy”, which refers to the passive beta males whose desires are colonized by dominant society. Male coaching in essence trains the “Mr. Nice Guys”, the “losers”, the “people pleasers”,¹⁵ and the “betas” of this world to escape the friendzone and gradually become the real masters and leaders of their desires.¹⁶ In this sense, male coaching represents an uplifting, assertive, positive, and generally curated practice against the uncurated masculinities that are confused in a chaotic social environment; a curated masculinity promises a step toward men’s well-being and happiness. The ideal mindset here is not simply one aiming toward growth, as we discussed in the previous section, but a mindset that corresponds to a curated version of dominant masculinity.

The repudiation of weakness in favor of dominance and assertiveness is a common trajectory in all the male coaches I followed, including the seemingly more fragile ones: “Finally feel like a MAN. With an unshakable confidence and trust in who you are and what you want” (Jodi and Reece, 2019), “Most women crave alpha males who display strength, confidence, and power” (Valizadeh: Ch. 1), “A true Alpha Male, a man who goes for what he wants and has positive expectations that he will achieve his goals, will choose his purpose and his passion over a woman if faced with the choice” (Wayne, 2013: 2), “I am advocating that you develop a strategy for adaptation—like a blueprint for transforming from a beta male to an alpha male” (Blake, 2021: Introduction). Thus, while not all men’s coaches inhabit the manosphere in the same way, they all curate a hegemonic masculinity that is vigilant, forceful, self-controlled, resilient, and adaptive. In light of resilience and adaptability, discussed in the previous section, hegemonic masculinity cannot primarily be defined in its traditional opposition to homosexuality, as some scholars have argued in the past (Anderson, 2009), but refers to a varied process of accommodating values within a given social order, including the strategic adaption of elements from less hegemonic or beta masculinities for establishing strategic dominance—for instance, by being strategically pro-gay so as to adapt to social norms and remain influential within particular milieus (Ging, 2019). Men’s coaching then hinges upon

this explicitly managerial framework to curate hegemonic masculinities to new social environments of rising feminism and technological affordances that demand new forms of political correctness and accelerate dating competition: be an alpha “without the toxic masculinity bullshit”, as Damien Blake, the author of the *Modern Alpha Male Mindset Strategies*, puts it (2021: Introduction).

Furthermore, apart from helping to build one’s career or family, which are the eternal standards of success in capitalist modernity, male coaching promises that by properly curating sexuality and intimacy a man can further have more and better fun. From a miserable nerd, the man can transform into a muscled and desirable entrepreneur, such as Jeff Bezos who often acts as a regulatory example. While, as stated in the previous section, indulgence is framed in life coaching cultures as less productive, in male coaching the concept of “fun” is recurrently brought up as it not only promises pleasure fixes, which are in turn expressive of a charming, powerful, and dominant lifestyle, but also “trains” men to approach and relate with women (O’Neill, 2018). This training has a productive side as it can eventually help them to conquer the woman of their dreams (who can then be their wife).¹⁷ To fulfil similar demands, dating and flirting coaches have to teach men various tricks. The proper communication style then is broken down into a set of learnable instructions that streamline and rationalize romantic exchange stripping away the contingency or awkward and improvised moments. This is typical of all courses, seminars, bootcamps, and books on men’s dating I came across, which generally purport to teach men “how to approach women [...], what to say, how to say it, and [...] how to respond to her questions and her tests” (Wayne, 2013: 5). The experience of the instructor as a self-proclaimed master on flirting, dating, and relationships here again certifies that there is a “script that works”, which, if followed, will afford clients with an abundance of dating options.

The discursive construction of “abundance”, that is to say the maximization of choice, is here a fundamental pillar and can even constitute the end point of the men’s journey. In general, in order to succeed, a man needs to have *a lot*, not only in terms of money but also in terms of dating; the more the better. The dating apps have drastically inflated the institution (or illusion) of choice, which is a fundamental pillar of liberalism, including, at least in theory, the possibility of sourcing up from an infinite pool of potential partners. As Illouz eloquently puts it,

Choice—sexual, consumer, or emotional—is the chief trope under which the self and the will in liberal polities are organized. To have a modern or late-modern self is to exercise choice and to increase the subjective experience of choice. Choice is the trope of selfhood linking freedom to the economic and emotional realms; it is the main modality of subjectivity in the consumer and sexual realms.

(2021: 27)

If choice, as the main modality of subjectivity, is nominally limitless, then the issue at stake is how to reach a condition of abundance that would allow men to keep as many choices as possible open: “Busy, successful men communicate abundance. They come from a place of abundance. If things don’t work out with one girl, it’s no big deal. There is another bus every 15 minutes”, as the coach Corey Wayne proclaims (2013: 68). Here, the implicit idea is that once a certain saturation point of desirability is achieved, this will trigger a self-generating condition of more desirability and a self-fulfilling cycle of abundance. Knowing that there is choice elsewhere, men can be more relaxed, cool, and chilled when pursuing a woman. In turn, this effortless coolness will make them more desirable for the women they pursue and, as in a self-generating loop, this will create even greater choice when pursuing the next woman. Women are thus perceived as a sort of currency whose accumulation can lead to an abundance of choice and thus freedom from scarcity.

The men’s dating coaching culture inhabits a rationale that treats women as learnable machines with similar features, at least when they have not been “infected” by feminism, which according to the manosphere discourse, is something that decisively alters their behavior. By treating romantic exchange as knowable, the woman becomes a category that displays observable characteristics over time. In the seduction industry, the eventual conquering of this knowledge is paramount for learning how to conquer women in the context of “the game”, a concept that refers to the mastering of seduction play and that was first introduced in the blockbuster book *The Game* by the now “recovered” pick-up artist Neil Strauss (Gilsinan, 2015).¹⁸ Dating coaches hope to curate the archaic “predator” instincts of modern men by teaching them to know and recognize their prey’s reactions and thus adjust their behavior accordingly. Examples thus drawn from evolutionary biology, or the natural world abound and serve to, one way or another, “naturalize” the behavior of men and women. The injunction that alpha men should be “leading their pack” like wolves is one of the most popular ones but one can encounter plenty of them in the coaching discourse. For instance, coach Corey Wayne in a 2022 video titled “Why She Will BE Back After Backing Away” compares women’s behavior with that of cats: “chase a cat and it will run away; leave it alone and eventually it will come back sit in your lap and start purring; like cats, men must let women come to them at their own pace” (Wayne, 2022).¹⁹ Or, as he claims in the section of his book titled *Women Are Like Cats, Men Are Like Dogs*: “Women are like cats. They come and go as they please... and... YOU MUST LET THEM!!! If you don’t, you will destroy their level of safety and comfort with you” (2013: 79). Here, women react in predictable ways, like domestic animals whose reactions are natural and easy to understand following specific instructions while by doing so men exercise their agency and cunningness to reverse the presumably detrimental social developments against them (e.g., feminism).²⁰

The curatorial imperative in men’s coaching brings to the fore an intense preoccupation with manhood that has to be regained and repurposed amidst

disorientation and changing gender roles. The underlying assumption is that the uncurated man is constantly confused and thus not be able to evolve in this new reality. In contrast, the curated man can read gender and generally social relations through a series of “do’s and don’ts”, which, if practiced correctly, can bring success and fulfil the (currently compromised) mission of men to lead and be dominant.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter looked at the manifestations of the curatorial imperative in life coaching both as a productive as well as a consumptive enterprise in which “individuals are expected to construct and self-regulate their own human capital in all spheres of life” (Fenwick, 2001:127); to make the best of their potential, human beings have to grapple with the self as an ongoing project that requires labor. The self is a work in progress subjected to often competing discourses and expertise, and we should continuously cherish and cultivate this project in order to achieve a life worth living. As the self does not exist prior to its discursive articulation in given material contexts, the spread of the curatorial apparatus in everyday media technologies accelerates an existential questioning around what the self is and what it should be. To go back to the premise of the sections above, the skyrocketing of the therapeutic ethos correlates with the unprecedented affordances for value creation that are released via the development of platform capitalism. The figure of the coach, from the perspective of political economy, is a symptom of these affordances which exploit the audience’s attention and the constant displacement of one’s identity in platform-based interactions. When speaking of the Foucauldian technologies of the self, we should take into account that these are an effect of the drive to accumulate and maintain a continuous regime of growth, a drive that shapes social life after its own image.

The chapter further explored how techno-social affordances construct new material conditions for the production of the guru or the spiritual guide. The platform guru needs to make a much more varying and multi-directional claim to charisma, according to the possibilities each platform can offer. Similar to what was referred to in Chapter 3 with The Dodo and other content creators, the coaches make use of these platform techno-social affordances for raising their visibility and reputational capital as well as facilitating transactions and enabling independent forms of self-branding. The platformized production of the life coach organizes “the self as ‘entrepreneur’” (Foster, 2016: 83), both as a commercially curated enterprise and as an inspirational address curating others. The figure of the life coach performs, even more effectively than the previous cases we discussed, a constitutive link between “self-curating” and “curating others” as the efficient curation of a coaching persona in platform cultures is a prerequisite for being fashioned as a charismatic authority that can then curate others.

Notes

- 1 The encoding of self-help as political responsibility was indeed more prevalent in the early self-help cultures that, at least in the United States, were initially emphasizing idealism and self-sacrifice over entrepreneurial personality traits like creativity, domination and masterfulness (Hampel, 2020: 220).
- 2 For instance, the bureaucracy of colonial enterprises in Africa, as Sloan Mahone argues (2007), preferred psychologized explanations over socio-economic ones for analyzing anti-colonial dissent as the psy-apparatus partly developed by studying the cultural other (Nehring et al, 2020: 8).
- 3 Furthermore, according to Walter Ong, “The electronic age is also an age of ‘secondary orality’, the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence” (2013: 3).
- 4 The term “niche internet micro celebrity” (nimcel) has recently entered the lexicon of popular media cultures, for instance (Taylor, 2022). On the other hand, Marwick prefers the term “subcultural micro-celebrity” over “niche micro-celebrity” as the former is able to account for the often subcultural communities that give rise to micro-celebrities (2015).
- 5 For Senft (2008), the figure of the camgirl was empowering, for the camgirls she studied were realizing the feminist slogan “the personal is political” by performing a confessional style. However, while technologies can be empowering for some, for others usually located in the Global South are disempowering. Wang notes that in the Chinese camgirl industry the aspirational labor is combined with desperational labor: camgirls in the Chinese industry “employment status differs from that of the self-employed Western social media content creators, because of its inherent desperation” (Wang, 2021: 622).
- 6 These two differ for Abidin, with the micro-celebrities preceding the “platform revolution” being niche, homemade, and hobby-driven while the internet celebrities are global, multi-platformed, and vocation-driven. Here, I will not be strictly following Abidin’s typology and using the terms interchangeably as these differences are not important for the purpose of this chapter.
- 7 As Hendriks puts it:

Consequently, and despite all its rhetorical strengths, charismatic legitimacy is relatively unstable, since it is vulnerable to de-legitimizing crises. If information surfaces in public that contradicts the guru’s self-presentation as a bearer of charisma, then many of the followers could quickly lose their faith and interest, throwing the guru’s position as guru into crisis.

(2017: 8)

- 8 This information can be found at the following link: www.udemy.com/user/kainramsay/ and www.udemy.com/course/life-coaching-a-complete-guide/#instructor-1
- 9 Here, I use the term “English-speaking” instead of “global” so as not to reproduce the narrative that English equals “global”. In reference to the rise of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), Taskeen Adam writes on the issue:

“...regional” MOOC platforms have emerged since 2015, supporting other countries and languages: e.g. XuetangX (China), MiriadaX (Spain), MéxicoX

(Mexico), France Université Numérique (France), EduOpen (Italy), ThaiMOOC (Thailand), SWAYAM (India), and Edraak (Jordan) [...] These platforms are termed “country-specific” and “regional” while the platforms from the US and UK are termed “global” because they are in English [...] reinforcing the narrative that to be global is to be Western.

(2019: 2)

- 10 “When a profession is relatively new” as the coaching guide supporting ICF’s supreme position in the field tell us, “it is ripe with opportunity”, it “makes for an exciting time for those just breaking into the field, but it also makes for some uncertainty around qualifications [...]. Who is to say what constitutes a “good” professional? Who is qualified, and how is that determined?” (Ackerman, 2021).
- 11 We should thus keep in mind that there are always disciplinary difference between therapeutic practices and fields; as Ramsay, the trainer of the Life Coach certificate course I undertook, categorically stated in the first classes “life coaching is not about advice”, in the sense that it is a tailored, feedback-driven, and thus responsive practice that (at least in theory) avoids off-the-shelf counseling. It rather requires training the self and this training is customized as each one of us is unique (Ramsay, nd).
- 12 As we will see in the next section, and as Organ and Gill also point out, the mandate to embrace vulnerability is more directed toward women as in masculine coaching cultures men mostly have to inhabit assertive, “alpha” personas where there is less room for vulnerabilities.
- 13 The relationship coach Reece, for instance, describes himself via the myth of previous transformation that as we previously saw is a constantly enable to prove certifying expertise:

Hi, I’m Reece. You probably can’t tell by looking at me, but I’ve battled a lot of shit over my 42 years on this planet—suicidal depression, substance abuse, severe social anxiety, emotional trauma, sexual shame, epic Nice Guy syndrome... I have spent a lot of time figuring my stuff out and learning how to transform my pain. And that’s what I help men do—to stop hiding, get real with themselves, and live an authentic life on their own terms.

(Reece and Jodie, nd)

- 14 See the note 13.
- 15 For example, “You’re A Chronic ‘People Pleaser’” (Jodi and Reece, 2019).
- 16 Even though their discourses may differ communities such as “Men Going Their Own Way” (r/MGTOW forum in Reddit), Incels, and Men’s Right Activists are all part of the manosphere.
- 17 The idea that men should have fun is grounded in the popular manosphere belief that marriage has become “such a bad deal for men”. On the one hand, as this thinking goes, the abundance of dating choice can make men happier and on the other the supposedly unfavorable divorce laws in the West will “trap” men in complacency and underdevelopment: “over the decades, the goals of men have shifted from family to fun”, as the notorious male coach Roosh Valizadeh emphatically asserts (2018: Ch. 1). In this entrepreneurial sexism, it is often the mere quantity of women a man has slept with that can be an indicator of a successful

man (O'Neil, 2018), especially if this is combined with "quality", which in the manosphere refers to a grading 10-point scale system—with the women graded as "ten" being the "God's gift to mankind; the definition of perfection": www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=1-10%20Female%20attractiveness%20scale%29%2C

- 18 The "game" for another pick-up artist is "a collection of beliefs, behaviors, strategies, and tactics that make women more attracted to you while increasing your likelihood of experiencing intimacy" (Valizadeh, 2018: Introduction).
- 19 Or, as he even more bluntly puts it in the same video: "Remember when a woman feels felt and understood, the legs [opens up his arms] they open" (Wayne, 2022).
- 20 Rachel O'Neil in her book *Seduction* (2018) situates the pick-up artists and participants of the seduction industry in the context of neoliberalism, as these phenomena are part of a larger process according to which values of individualism extend to increasingly more areas of life. Male coaching further enables the capitalization of man's "experience in dating", as he is now able to easily turn this "transferable skill" into a business that may sell and grow.

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7 Who to Be, How to Appear, and What to Consume

Concluding Thoughts

This book has discussed curating as an imperative of platform capitalism where social media, streaming sites, hospitality and dating apps—to name just a few—pose questions of *who to be*, *how to appear*, and *what to consume* in profound ways. Making oneself part of a narrative is a diffused mandate: What to post, what to wear, what to eat, what friends to have, what music to hear, what films to watch, what places (to want) to visit, what socks to choose, and what opinion to have about serious issues like climate change, military coups, AI, genetics, space colonization, and cryonics, or everyday issues like football, fashion, and diet. And as this book examined, the question of what “narratives to be part of” amidst a world of disorienting information is an encounter shaping the emotional tonality of aspirational class imaginary. The dispersion of this imaginary is not merely a trend that people can simply decide to follow or not, but a totality that interrogates everybody as potential curator, one way or another. By totality, I do not mean that every person at every moment needs to think about how to curate or be curated; since the curatorial-aspirational imaginary is diffused in the most routine spaces of cultural production, everyone using a smartphone, for example, confronts it, irrespective of how they respond to this confrontation. Being in possession and in control of self-narratives is a strategic means of socialization that can assist upward social mobilities in our capacities as workers, friends, romantic partners, children, parents, siblings, or all of the above.

By moving from the artworld to wider media cultures, the logic of curating promises to solve the riddles of disturbing communication overload plaguing the self against, yet instead it generates further disorientation and uncertainty, class anxieties, and deadlocks by telling us that the imperatives of who to be, how to appear, and what to consume are inextricably linked with one’s social identity. Countless choices which are packaged as commodities, ranging from self-help seminars and authentic food experiences to cool fashion and personalized diet apps, tell us that we can become something if we consume them: better looking, more diverse, cooler, smarter, and more self-aware. Engaging with curated consumption promises a better self, which

is expected to grow toward a vision (or multiple visions); not engaging with curated consumption implies a missed opportunity, a prospect that has not been pursued, or a lost trajectory which can remain as a specter haunting the future. Even if you engage, the self can be left permanently unfulfilled as new niche curated choices unendingly unravel over social imagination: Why not download an app that tells you when the best time is to go and pee while watching a film in the theater and thus improve your film experience?¹ The curatorial imperative contends that personal choice inhabits a meaning, a vision, or a concept of the self as choosing becomes a matter of who we are as social beings.

I argue that anxieties, aspirations, emotional tonalities, and subjective investments are taking a mass character with the help of platforms. The idea that choice is meaningful and evocative of one's social identity was previously limited to more exclusive class formations or niche therapeutic cultures that had time and resources to devote to matters pertaining to the self. I departed from the premise that the overarching organizational core of platform capitalism is the profit motive (Sadowski, 2020b), and that according to this motive platforms, which are vast apparatuses of enjoyment and control, attempt to curate connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) and program sociality (Bucher, 2018) according to value-producing ends. The evaluative, ideological, and affective registers of this motive undermine the potential role of platforms as public institutions, or at least generate a tension between the public sphere, which à la Habermas is meant to be a space of rational deliberation, and commodification, and which involves the extraction of value from this public deliberation, spinning it to value-producing ends. Fake news, for instance, on a platform like X (formerly known as Twitter), is not always purposeful misinformation but an in-built effect of the X architecture. The latter is designed to capture the time, attention, and engagement of users and, as such, it renews the user feed continuously. This drives news channels in X to want to report faster than their competitors in order to be seen, followed, and grow; in other words, the platform architecture itself undermines fact-checking, which, in the context of a hyper-competitive environment where even seconds matter, is a time-consuming process.

Thus, on the one hand, platforms are actively pouring out an informational, communicational, and relational overload, which results in a perplexing social landscape fragmented in terms of discourses, lifestyles, fads, news items, and values. On the other hand, they are also major sites for nurturing the curatorial imperative, enabling ordered narratives. Apart from algorithmically curating the interactions between users by building a coding architecture to increase user engagement, as we saw, they often take on the role of content curator (e.g., Apple News) or offer curatorial possibilities to the users, either as potentially monetized (micro-celebrities, influencers, bloggers, and so on) or daily practice (e.g., organizing and displaying one's feed in a social media platform irrespective of the number of followers). Via the latter affordances, platforms blur the distinction between the industrial

and the every-day as they give the opportunity to users to monetize hobbies, or subcultural and niche practices. In this way, countercultural traits are constantly exposed to the possibility of commodification. What could once have counted as a counter-public sphere is exposed to instant capturing as information and data—the raw material for value production. A niche blogger or simply the latest Vice article captures and recycles countercultural tropes as algorithmic spectacles which aim to attract user engagement and time. These algorithmic spectacles, which are suggestive of the overall fragmentation of spectacle in neoliberal capitalism (Wark, 2014), are in turn valuable for the platform itself. In this neo-feudal arrangement, the platform resembles a landlord who lends its space to the users and subsequently collects rent in the form of data, premium subscriptions, and attention, among other things (Sadowski, 2020a; Dean, 2020).

The algorithmic spectacles and other curated content, this book argued, are further evocative of cultures in the anthropological sense of the word. The book navigated the values, emotions, socialities, and, generally, the cultural dimensions of platform curating by following it in a diverse range of sites. I discussed some of the behavioral, stylistic, and larger anthropological traits which platform curating mediates in public spheres, indicatively reflexivity (Chapter 3), coolness (Chapter 4), authenticity (Chapter 5), and inspiration (Chapter 6). To return to Adorno, to whom we referred to at the beginning of the book, it is not that these cultures did not exist before but that these cultures assume a widespread canonization with the advent of digital platforms. Coolness, as we saw, is a posture and stylistic ritual of banal luxury around the Balenciaga–Vetements–Demna complex. Before the emergence of platform connectivity, coolness was a posture principally associated with mass culture, such as jazz music or Levi jeans, and less to high fashion, as the latter would mostly privilege traits such as elegance, exclusivity, and sophistication. The mere availability of platform infrastructures mobilizes luxury brands to relate to forms of popular culture, such as coolness, as they need media engagements, followers, and visibility; luxury fashion pursues high and low cross-promotions to curate brand connectivities before a global audience well versed in memes, films, art, music, and even cultural theory. I explored coolness, authenticity, and inspiration in respect to specific areas, namely fashion, food, and life coaching, however these cultures co-exist and overlap over the whole platform economy. For instance, together with its hyper-conceptual outlook, the banal luxury complex also displays some of the other cultural tropes I discussed, such as authenticity (e.g., a commitment to the values of the brand), reflexivity (e.g., the ethical brand positionings vis-à-vis fast fashion), and inspiration (e.g., Demna posing as visionary guru). Or food authenticity, which in curated gastronomy mobilizes figures like a local grandmother for gaining symbolic capital, can overlap with cultures of coolness (e.g., the counterintuitive selection of rare ingredients), reflexivity (e.g., the awareness that the food industry exploits animals and environment),

and inspiration (e.g., the promotion of figure of the visionary chef). In this sense, the cultures this book discusses can be understood as varyingly present all over the spectrum of platform capitalism.

Finally, the book aimed to contextualize the ascent of curation from the realm of art to a dominant cultural trope by pointing to the wider social logic it inhabits. Distributed curation, as this book argued, is not a market aberration vis-à-vis art curation but an expansion of the latter's logic of value production. Businesses embrace this logic of value production in the realm of economic transactions for boosting market value, while for audiences and users it becomes an imperative pertaining to the question of what stories to tell about oneself to oneself and others. The term "imperative" here signifies a push in a direction, instead of a totalizing and overpowering regime. As with all social injunctions, the curatorial imperative is an effect of hegemonic economic, technological, and social forces. Via this imperative, platform capitalism shapes an anthropological condition across contemporary mediascapes and beyond, a *homo curatorius* whose embodiment of the "story you should be telling on your own" informs desirable horizons of class, status, and belonging. Its logic encompasses diverse spheres ranging from high-brow art and the fashion world to low-brow experience economies and economies of authenticity, from confidence cultures and pick-up artists to algorithmic rationalities. To put these diverse spheres under the umbrella of *homo curatorius* is to underscore how the questions of who to be, how to appear, and what to consume—the imperative to curate and be curated, the logic of guiding one's practices, emotions, and life paths as if these will lead to a higher vision or concept of the self—cut through various spheres of contemporary platform cultures. It is a globalizing yet situated mandate where the artification of social and economic life—creativity, art, and design—meets the rationality of the market actor, rational consumer choice, and the spirit of entrepreneurialism. To curate and to be curated in the context of platform capitalism marks socializing processes of (especially) urban subjectivities surrounded by a seemingly abundant choice. If anything, it deepens the preoccupation with the self as the fundamental unit of analysis, which requires constant examination and reflection amid bewildering social complexity.

Note

- 1 The Runpee app: <https://runpee.com/>

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