**More than meets the eye: Videography and production of desire in semiocapitalism**

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**Abstract**

In light of the recent proliferation of interest in videographic methods in marketing and consumer research, we wish to make a call for thinking critically about the medium. In this essay, we challenge traditional means of semiotic analysis and consider contexts outside aesthetic symbolism that take into account wider agencements of videographic inquiry. We sensitize thinking about videographic production to include a broad scope of influence beyond production and spectatorship. By positing a mode of desiring relationalities in ‘semiocapitalist’ markets, and through the illustrative example of pop-music videos, we show how videography not only produces symbols, but also has the tendency to discipline the viewer into particular subjective positions. We hope to add to the conceptual toolkit of aspiring video scholars and encourage them to be increasingly critical and reflexive about their potential impact.

**Keywords:** videography, criticality, Deleuze and Guattari, desire, a-signifying semiotics, semiocapitalism

**Introduction**

The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition: content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions—these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied: always new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning. (Barthes, 1975, p. 41-42)

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe the events that happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world, which looks to us like a bad film. (Deleuze, 1989a, p. 171)

In preparing for the upcoming JMM special issue *Screening Marketing*, we wish to highlight some critical concerns about videographic research in marketing and consumer research. In particular, we examine the politics of videographic inquiry and consumption, employing contemporary popular music videos as examples of video-based production that reveal several interesting tendencies. Drawing primarily from Félix Guattari’s (1995, 2009, 2011, 2014) work on the politics of immanence and desire, this foray will serve to uncover what the video medium can tell us about the broader issue of the *production of desire* in capitalist markets (also Deleuze, 1989a; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013). We begin by observing that the cultural logics of commodity capitalism are thoroughly inhabited by consumers themselves, and thus constitute the very conditions of *subjectivity* itself through machine-like production of capitalist ways of life manifesting on a global scale. In this context, Guattari’s work heralded the study of *semiocapitalism*. This concept describes a technologically mediated and unrestrained global capitalism of desiring flows, which should no longer be seen as a producer of semiotic symbols that can be interpreted by human agents, but should rather be understood as operating on the level of unconscious signs (e.g. Genosko, 2011, 2012; Lazzarato, 2014). In turn, commercial technological platforms that facilitate online social interactions have been increasingly adapted to transform “a range of hitherto ‘pristine’ life processes into the basis for the abstraction of intangible assets” (Arvidsson, 2016, p. 20). Following these critical approaches, we put forth a view that challenges how semiotic analysis has been conventionally applied in consumer research and the subsequent implications for videographic inquiry.

For Guattari, the question today is not of semiotic content, but rather *a-signifying semiotics*. This perspective looks outside the symbolic analysis of signs and their referents by focusing on how power relations and market discipline are implicitly constructed in the entirety of technological environments that channel desires and create consumer subjectivities (e.g., Bueno, 2017; Genosko, 2008). In this view, our subjectivities emerge via affective encounters in society on a precognitive level, a process which enacts a profoundly subversive potential. A-signifying semiotics reveals the world as an agencement[[1]](#footnote-1) of technologies that exert their influence through the form of their *medium* irrespective of their symbolic forms of communicating (also Genosko, 2009; Lazzarato, 2014). For example, the highly-automated global stock exchange produces symbols such as stock charts, news headlines and economic indicators, but in this view, it is rather its interminable and autonomous functioning that conditions our subjectivities into unconscious moods where global commerce, money and exchange are there not to serve us, but rather, for us to serve (see Genosko, 2008; Lazzarato, 2014). Video, as a technological medium, potentializes similar productive forces of semiocapitalism.

By viewing cultural production as something more embedded than its apparent symbolic representation (also Askegaard & Linnett, 2011), we hope to highlight how any system of semiotics is itself contained within a greater system of technological tendencies that condition the possibilities of semiotic expression, highlighting the role of the *means* of semiotics itself (see McLuhan, 1964). In so doing, this essay approaches semiocapitalism and capitalist desire from an admittedly speculative perspective that finds a diagnostic without an obvious affirmation and employs a certain amount of negativity as its form of writing. Through an exploration of video examples, we suggest that the contemporary cultural tendencies of pop music and its manifestation in video technologies now constitute viewers without the possibility, even the belief in a possibility, to actualize the emancipatory affectivity that has often been linked to pop music in the 20th century (Aufderheide, 1986; Frith, Goodwin & Grossberg, 2005; Thornton, 1995). Following Guattari, we see that these relations of desire now consist increasingly of signs of capitalized subjectivities and cultural expressions of eerily haunting voids. All of these bear witness to a dismembering of affective intensities that suggests we should not hold our breath in anticipation of much else ever happening.

Motivated by our belief that there is an urgent need for explicitly critical work on the politics of videographic inquiry, we highlight various novel concepts that can be employed to reassess video production and interpretation in consumer videography. What we wish to alert videographers to, is that criticality can no longer be contained only within the video (its expression of symbols, contexts, and participants), but has to also be increasingly recognized in the realm of producing video data and the distribution and dissemination of videographic work. In producing videos, we partake in and recreate spectacles of consumption, but what does this work of spectacle-making express? In these contexts, it is not only the symbolism of the video itself that speaks, but also the whole context of its techno-cultural embeddedness, which allows only certain types of interactions with it (Genosko, 2008, 2012; Langlois, 2011).

While it should be said that video dissemination platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo have arguably helped videographers tremendously in a practical sense, it would nevertheless be a mistake to view these modes of video distribution and expression as devoid of forces that enact market discipline. Thus, we discuss a potential ‘dark side’ to what has been called the ‘democratization’ of cultural production in the wake of the proliferation of new media (Fiske, 1987), and how global semiocapitalist forces of production both fuel and are constituted by consumer desiring. Further, by revealing new dimensions in its underlying and intersecting power relations, we also wish to reconsider how the subjectivities of videographers and audiences are produced. Videographic work should thus not be seen as a transparent reproduction of reality, but a powerful production of convincing illusions that is itself affectively embedded in the production of culture. We attempt to offer conceptual openings that can be used as a starting point when attempting to critically assess videographic inquiry on this level of a-signifying semiotics:

* What forces pertain to the videographic agencement beyond its immediate symbolism?
* How and for what purposes are we producing spectacles of consumption in video?
* What kind of subjectivities are produced in videographic practice in semiocapitalism?

**Extending the scope semiotics in consumer research**

As avid video enthusiasts ourselves, we have noted a pressing issue in the burgeoning practice of videographic research today: the dearth of a vocabulary with which to discuss the content of videos, and an even greater deficiency of the means by which to discuss the cultural effects of video itself as a medium. In our field, we still have a very limited volume of work exploring how video enables a potential wealth of nonlinguistic encounters – a movement to be seen as agentic in affective rather than representational ways (Hietanen, 2012; Hietanen and Rokka, *in press*). While such approaches to various forms of non-representational theorizing have recently experienced a tremendous proliferation in our field (e.g., Hill, Canniford & Mol, 2014), we feel that the political stakes have not been particularly well fleshed out, in particular regarding how we come to understand the productive forces of videography (see Hietanen, Rokka & Schouten, 2014; Toraldo, Islam & Mangia, 2016).

It was recognized early on that videographic inquiry in consumer research also faces a central problem of having often been seen as a low-tier academic pursuit of creating ‘entertaining esoterica’ (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). It seems to us that we in the videographic community need to do more to engage with theoretical issues and attempt to move beyond the descriptive and documentary types of approaches that remain common in ACR video tracks. Yet, the politics of such new potentiality of thought has, to date, been largely overlooked in our field. Let us then move on by paraphrasing Douglas Brownlie in a particularly forthright moment: ‘We should understand by now we are not making wedding videos, and where is the critical edge?’

Paralleling the proliferation of postmodern cultural sensibilities (Elliott, 1999; Firat and Schutz, 1997), consumer culture has long been approached as a circulation of images and signs that form a system of consumption (Cherrier & Murray, 2004). The traditional method with which to analyse cultural signs, semiotics, has been adopted by consumer researchers as well (e.g., Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Mick, 1986), and it has been argued that the practice offers notable potential for videographic inquiry (Belk, 2011). For the purposes of the present essay we will leave the full unpacking of this tradition to others (see Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel & Brannen, 2004), but in general consumer semiotics draws from De Saussure’s linguistic construction of symbols and their referents; i.e. how consumption is mediated via cultural symbols in a complex interplay of signifiers and the signified. Departing from this, the alternative Peircean semiotics opens up the strictly linguistic pairings of semiology and further focuses on the abstract relations between signs of corresponding projections and their interpretants (Kockelman, 2006; Mick et al., 2004). Semiotic analysis has thus been employed in developing cultural understandings of meaning emanating from symbols in consumption (e.g. movies, packaging and advertising) and their interpretive deconstruction (Lawes, 2002).

Its virtues notwithstanding, the understanding enabled by semiotic analysis typically focuses on the level of *content* as the constituent of the message; symbols seen to create conceivable links to external realities or particular ideas. Thus, the idea of how the medium *itself* has agentic powers has received relatively little attention, as the level of analysis inherently deals with the decoding and interpretation performed by individuals considered to have considerable autonomy and interpretative capabilities (also Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013). We thus typically tend to search for symbolic clues within the videos, but rarely consider in what ways consumer culture is produced by being all but ubiquitously embedded in the video medium. As videographers, we often stick to producing representations of consumption as spectacles of sight and sound, and as we do so, we also render an implicit image of our subjectivities as an outcome.

This is not to say that there is no theoretical precedence for an alternative perspective. Marshall McLuhan (1964) provided a highly influential account of semiotics that goes beyond content. His understanding of media as a form of technology and the idea that “all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed” (p. 90) gives us an accelerating world in which the form of any particular medium affords us a particular horizon of thought, irrespective of its content. For McLuhan, language is a form of media that enables human preoccupation beyond a realm of “objects of attention” (p. 79), rendering new worlds of possibilities altogether. But language is just one technology that intermingles with hundreds of others in the world in which we find ourselves. Video – a technology, music – a technology, all are media and all carry their own realms of possibilities and limitations for engagement and interaction.

Foreshadowed by how McLuhan’s forms of media overcode their respective representational message, capitalism’s *functioning* tendencies are everywhere, even if its particular *form* is elusive. This is contemporary post-industrial semiocapitalism, which denotes a ubiquitous intensity that does not operate following logics of clear symbols and representations, but is rather a technologically pervasive desiring intensity (Genosko, 2009, 2012). “It is not the net but its shadow” (Genosko, 2011, p. 117), where labour is decreasingly distinguishable from what one generally is, knows and does (immaterial labour by ‘knowledge workers’), as “all of the social enters production” (Genosko, 2011, p. 121). Through the global mediation of desiring forces by instantaneous online connections, semiocapitalism moves human desiring and the desiring tendency of capital in capitalist markets into close alignment (also Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). Our entire frame of reference is coded in these relations on the level of constant unconscious intensities, which are not analytically identifiable and decodable by semiotics (also Berardi, 2015). For Guattari, we thus need a sensitivity to *a-signifying semiotics*, a theorizing of affective flows that is no longer preoccupied with how meanings in messages connect to referents, but focuses on the broader context of how subjectivities are produced in an interplay of power exerted through technologies and communications (also Genosko, 2008, 2011; Lazzarato, 2014). This view does not dismiss precognitive signals as a low-level entity on the hierarchy of semiotics (with no clear symbolic meaning), but sees the whole semiotic system as an agencement of affective intensities that moulds subjectivity on an unconscious level (Genosko, 2009, 2012). Drawing from post-Freudian psychoanalysis, subjectivity assumes no coherence or stability, but is rather a desiring tendency more appropriately captured within the concept of *subjectivation*, a view of subjectivity as a primordial desiring thrust, always incomplete, but desperately engaged in a continuous search for a cohesive identity (also Deleuze & Guattari, 2013; Guattari & Rolnik, 2008).

Consumer research literature has grown to be increasingly receptive to the construal of identity as something which is always fleeting and not in full cognitive control (Early, 2014; Kozinets, Patterson & Ashman, 2017; Thompson et al., 2013), but in subjectivation there remains a powerful *unconscious desire* to achieve an identity that is exactly that. These desiring tendencies are often fully channelled, regimented, and disciplined by a race for elusive meanings in commodity markets (also Böhm & Batta, 2010) that nevertheless seems to fail to produce ‘happiness’, even for the affluent (see Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett, 2006). Given the impossibility of a stable subjectivity, Guattari’s a-signifying semiotics focus on how both human and nonhuman elements in a socio-technological system construct particular modes of subjectivation through regimes of power and discipline, making technologies, including video, sites to which desire as a productive force can momentarily attach itself (also Kozinets et al., 2017).

This desire of subjectivation is unrelenting, constituting potentialities of a *machinic unconscious*, affected and affective in the socio-technological settings (Guattari, 2014, 2011), in which they are “manufactured, modelled, received, and consumed” (Guattari & Rolnik, 2008, p. 35) in semiocapitalism. While people in capitalism grasp for subjectivities and meaning, they are increasingly fragmented in machinic flows of data “that reduces all singular content to an abstract value or axiom” (Bueno, 2017, p. 742). What Guattari challenges is the idea that we are ‘outside’ our relations and able to observe and reflect upon them. Rather, he directs us to think about how we are fully constituted by our relations through the desires of our machinic unconscious in a flux of shifting intensities, not an internal language “within individuals indexed on static mythic figures or even mathemes” (Genosko, 2008, p. 13). The medium, whether it is credit cards, city gentrification or videographic production, allows us only certain tendencies of subjectivation and these desiring relations are not written in language or given to us simply as symbols of their content. Instead, the medium itself, in the ways we are unknowingly made to interact with it, provides the frame of possibilities of our unconscious desires.

Given these characteristics, Guattari’s project makes the box of assumed sensibility of symbolic content porous, and can be seen as part of emergent thought that seeks for the ‘ruin of representation’ (Olkowski, 1999). In a similar vein, we believe it is time to fully recognize how video is by no means “an innocent practice” (Hietanen et al., 2014, p. 2020), but rather is rife with unseen power dynamics and implied politics (also Toraldo et al., 2016; Whiting, Symon, Roby & Chamakiotis, 2016) in its own right. Importantly, none of this is contained in the symbolic arrays and sequences in the video itself, but is rather engrained in the a-signifying semiotics that reverberate throughout the entire scope of what constitutes its production-consumption. One could construe the videographic approach to consumer research as constituting a gaze directed at a society of consumption spectacles, this gaze rendering in itself yet another spectacle in turn; that of cinematographic spectatorship.

With this section, we have expressed a wish to direct videographers of marketing and consumer research to considering that video fieldwork, contexts of spectatorship, and video dissemination on digital platforms are subject to a production of a-signifying semiotics that constitute all participants of the practice. We will now delve into a more specific example of an instance of cultural expression and how its technological circulation suggests certain capitalist tendencies of its affective medium. This example, employing the pop music video, will also provide an outline of how large-scale cultural shifts where videographic production, dissemination and viewership play a central role, affectively produce subjectivation in far-reaching ways.

**Pop music videos and the simulation of lost futures**

Over the last decades, there has been a wealth of highly influential work that paints contemporary consumer society as profoundly engaged in simulation; the construction of spectacles that are not related to any idea of ‘real’ life but nevertheless produce powerful images of living that serve to replace the mundanity of existence (e.g., Baudrillard, 2007; Cubitt, 1993). In videographic production simulation comes into play directly, as we are not ever simply recoding life, but rather actively participating in a process of producing audio-visual spectacles that ‘simulate the living’ through consumption (also Hietanen, Schouten & Vaniala, 2013; Mengis, Nicolini & Gorli, 2016). These spectacles, in turn, through their a-signifying capacities invariably and constantly signal *how* to desire consumption and its spectating (also Žižek, 2006). Few examples provide a more explicit illustration than pop music videos which are almost invariably engaged in a projection of phantasmal identities and events that are nonetheless a reflection of the wider context that enable them as viable, and increasingly commercially motivated, expressions.

The history of the pop music video goes back several decades and much has been written about its culturally transformative impact (e.g., Aufderheide, 1986; Frith et al., 2005). They marked a cultural shift that enabled a linkage between sound and image in a way that would not only transform the recording industry, but arguably also the manner in which artistic forms of expression and commercial interests circulated in society. Today, the idea that a work of pop music consists of both an audio track and a video has been normalized into expectation, and analysis of the semiotics of pop music is, as a result, almost inseparable from its visual representation in the form of the music video.

But what is the affective tendency of the video form of pop music today? It may be useful to start by considering that virtually all popular music scenes during the past century had an emancipatory contour; from blues to jazz to rock’n’roll to punk to rave to Detroit techno and rave culture more generally (see Gilbert, 2015; Thornton, 1995). A great variety of musical scenes emerged in parallel with social movements and emancipatory ideals. It did not matter so much that the content of any particular song did not make these claims explicit, rather the promise was ‘in the air’ in the form of an affective reverberation. While a tendency to simply repeat what came previously was recognized in early work on billboard-topping pop songs (Goodwin, 1988), their potentials of social change and liberating capacities have generally received far more interest (Dolfsma, 2004; Hawkins, 1996; Nooshin, 2005).

Marketing and consumer research has noted the simultaneous existence of and subsequent breakdown of tensions in both countercultural music production and mainstream music (Bradshaw & Holbrook, 2007; Hietanen & Rokka, 2015), albeit acknowledging these being less pronounced in certain contexts (Eckhardt & Bradshaw, 2014). Nevertheless, these relations remain laden with cultural tensions, where it would seem that the very engine of marketization readily draws from aesthetics of authenticity that become promotable, demonstrating almost frictionless commodification of themselves, precisely because they readily display an aversion to capitalist production (also Bradshaw, McDonagh & Marshall, 2006; Hietanen, Rokka, Roman & Smirnova, 2015). Here, we encounter a sort of perpetual motion of rehashing of resistance to the old, spawning new authenticities to satisfy what may seem a neophilic tendency of ‘the masses’ (also Holt, 2002). As capitalist production, pop music’s ‘form’ is of repetitious simplicity and its effect is ‘conformity’. Pop music projects an appearance of innovation, the semblance of newness, while at the same time being constitutive to the most obvious axiom of capitalism’s productive tendencies (Buchanan, 2000). The tension between commodified expression and resistance, serving as the engine of this process, constitutes a cultural negotiation that shows no signs of ever being resolved. In turn, this cyclicality renders ample opportunity for extracting the marketable surplus of ‘togetherness’ created by consumers in their social relations (Arvidsson, 2005).

While it would be mistaken to make a romantic argument for times of yore or to view music consumption historically as marked by clear breaks (Buchanan, 2000), it would seem that certain accelerating tendencies are taking place in the now instantly global markets of online-mediated music (Hietanen & Rokka, 2015; Jansson, 2002). Now circulated in its video form, pop music seems to be increasingly detached from any emancipatory desiring, and instead resembles a repetitive tendency that points only to its own machinic production (see Fisher, 2014a; Gilbert, 2015). It now seems to coincide with how ‘late capitalist’ subjectivities have increasingly abandoned their optimism about future (Jameson, 1991; Lazzarato, 2014; Noys, 2016). This has been posited as marking a grand cultural shift in thought within capitalism itself, together with its corollary technological advances that used to promise us more optimistic futures to inhabit but now have increasingly failed to deliver. Instead, in semiocapitalist production, it would seem we are increasingly uncertain and insecure about our future (also Cova, Maclaran and Bradshaw, 2013; Fisher, 2014b; Podoshen, 2014), where the “dominant feelings today are probably anxiety or depression […] a constant low-level distress” (Culp, 2016, pp. 48-49). The failed promise of futures to believe in has also brought about curious by-products, such as utopian science fiction almost invariably seeming ‘out of date’, or in context of electronic music, “it is only in the same sense that jungle and techno are out of date – not because they have been superseded by new futurisms, but because the future as such has succumbed into retrospection” (Fisher, 2014b, p. 344). These tendencies are currently thriving in large-scale markets of nostalgic and retro consumption (see Brown, 2001, 2013), unfathomable from the perspective of modernist optimisms dating back only a few more decades.

In the instantaneity of global capitalist production, popular music and its circulation in video form now increasingly follows the pattern of being continuously repurposed to the re-mashing and re-cycling of its own past orders to provide a fleeting sense of nostalgia; Goodwin’s (1988) diagnosis of the reproductive quality of pop music has arguably reached an intensified and expanded stage. We are simultaneously completely subsumed in its productive logics, but are without any real stake in its accumulative desiring. Naturally, what is described here is hardly limited to the contexts of pop music videos alone, and to understand what these tendencies reflect, we turn to examine the broader context of cultural production.

**The capitalist refrain and the end of creative potential**

Several seminal works attempt to link cultural production to the future of capitalism in a way that seems to arrive at an incessant cyclicality of repetitious desiring – endless signs of production of production (Baudrillard, 2007; Deleuze and Guattari, 2013; Guattari, 2014). These dystopian views are also often coupled with greater processes of increasing stratification of wealth and ecological and humanitarian crises in a world suffocating under the pressure of increasingly frantic processes of commodification. For Guattari, these tendencies and their cultural production bring about *capitalist refrain*, in which semiocapitalism, in its evermore penetrating experimentations of commodification, perpetually seeks to homogenize the possibility of affective experience to its lowest common denominator (let us all watch sitcoms that even laugh in our place, that are equally (not) funny to everyone, let us all experience an authentic holiday that is carefully commodified and regimented to produce an expected experience). Here the desiring production of subjectivation increasingly coincides with the machinic repetition of the orders of capitalism itself – a digitally mediated spectacle of “enforced happiness and enjoyment” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 80). It would seem we have a keen desiring tendency to connect and go along with all this, as it is increasingly argued that conventional leftist criticisms seem to forget that in all this injustice and alienating tendencies there is a subversive libidinal enjoyment lurking (Deleuzre & Guattari, 2013; Fisher, 2014b; Lyotard, 2004; Tomšič, 2015). These desiring investments are now encapsulated in subjectivation that increasingly has come to produce the *desire of capital itself*.

This radical claim argues that there is an abundance of potential desire in the affective tendencies of capitalism itself, and even its injustices and repressive orders can be unconsciously ‘enjoyed’ as subjectivity is seduced in a mad dash of consumption and social competition (Baudrillard, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 2009; Lyotard, 2004), where there is “an anxious anticipation, not that there may not be enough, but that there is too much, and too much for everyone” (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 30). Following Deleuze and Guattari (2013), desiring is relentless and always in tension, attaching itself to more desiring potential and desiring its own annihilation for “desire desires death too” (p. 19). This desiring readily attaches itself to pain (see Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), but also cruelty, submissiveness, drug addiction and the like in the pursuit “negating the ego itself” in the intense potential of pleasure in apathy (also Deleuze, 1989b, p. 29). In semiocapitalism, this kind of psychoanalytic enjoyment takes the form of something akin to the masochistic pleasure of a commodified Stockholm syndrome, where one sides with the hostage-taker in every act of consumption that the incessant desiring of the machinic unconsciousness prompts. It has been successfully incorporated by consumer subjectivities to the point where no conceivable alternative to Western consumerism can be readily imagined (Genosko, 2012; Shiermer, 2011; Stavrakakis, 2007), but that does not mean that consumption is not enjoyed even when its alienating and unjust ramifications are increasingly understood by consumers themselves (Lyotard, 2004; Žižek, 2002).

Indeed, even the engagement with attempts to commodify the resistance to the system itself, as in the case of ‘ethical’ brands, can be observed to be readily enjoyable as a form of mischievous make-believe (Walz, Hingston & Andéhn, 2014; also Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016). As Deleuze and Guattari (2013) note, capitalism is a process of desire and proliferation, or “production for production’s sake […] The capitalist machine does not run the risk of becoming mad, it is mad from one end to the other and from the beginning, and this is the source of its rationality” (p. 423). These logics are embodied in subjectivities of consumption whose machinic unconsciousness produces desiring engulfed in relentlessly producing signs of consumption, personal branding and individualistic achievement (see Scott et al., 2017). To interject and ask ‘how does videography, including my own works, play into, or oppose this greater tendency?’ may help facilitate more critical, and in our opinion more subversive, works to emerge within our field.

Going back to the example of a pop-music, consider what one may observe through a semiotic analysis of a video in the hip-hop genre (for an illustrative example, see ‘THat Part’[[2]](#footnote-2)). One may identify a veritable smorgasbord of semiotic categories commonly seen as cultural symptoms of (take your pick): the almost indefinite glorification of masculine hubris, brazen demonstrations of purchasing power, femininity relegated to something akin to machines of male pleasure (but only if they look sexually arousing to the male gaze) that is one, of only a few, in a set array of positions of qualified independence available. All these interpretations common to semiotic analysis would constitute critiques on the level of the semiotic symbols in the video alone. In a manner of speaking, they would stay largely ‘within’ the video itself.

What thinking about a-signifying semiotics can potentially add to this is a way to diagnose why such portrayals of lifestyles are appealing as a semiotic whole – even in the face of their obvious superficiality – and what kinds of subjectivations that engaging with this medium produces. The repetitive cyclicality and affective emptiness of these videos lie in stark distinction to some of the intensities of its predecessor scenes. This emancipatory potential now seems eerily absent. The pop music video seems not only to have lost its longing for new imaginations, but has also moved to a point where even its attempts to ironize itself have lost all possibilities of signification beyond its own machinic emergence as a commodity. Even when a hip-hop artist (such as in the example above) makes an ironic spectacle of the music industry, the irony no longer points to any alternatives, but is subsumed by its own cyclical circulation of pop music production with the appropriate video aesthetics. In its formulaic, constantly inward-backwards referencing to its ironic distance it relentlessly approaches the capitalist refrain. That is a point at which the constant quest for difference becomes predicable and loses its ability to affectively evoke new ways of thinking; the mindless staring into the TV-screen as another iteration of the sitcom formulae is displayed provides a striking example of what millions experience every day. Approaching the capitalist refrain, we encounter a situation in which one can no longer even imagine, or meaningfully discuss alternative or new ways of thinking, as its irony has been inverted to retrospective banality that no longer even recognizes the possibility of meaningful engagement. Instead, the possibilities of desiring production (on platforms such as YouTube) is mostly to participate in flows of largely unconnected ‘comments’ or to click on the next suggested video of similar type according to algorithmic statistics that now machinically channel ‘taste’ (also Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). This is your subjectivity now. Click on the next video. Repeat.

These affective tendencies are interwoven in technologies that guide possible interaction with the medium. In a Guattarian sense the subject was ‘never there’, but the desire for producing a subject was always productive, now having formed all-encompassing connections to a desiring productive logic in a capitalist sense. This leaves us with a simulacrum of cultural meaning in the form of audio-visual music expression, a retrospective longing in consuming diversities of sameness. “Machinic enslavement and a-signifying semiotics work together” (Genosko, 2009, p. 123; also Bueno, 2017) in this simulation of video-mediated musical experience as repetition of the same set of possibilities, and thus only interpreting its semiotic content cannot reveal it as a cultural tendency that produces movement for subjectivities constitutive of capitalist unconscious desire. Endless and relentless production of production. No intensities, no future, the end of genres.

To what end do we identify these tendencies as informing consumer research videographies? Let us start by asking: how and for what purposes are we producing spectacles of consumption in the form of video? We might start by imagining videographic inquiry based on a critical engagement with the capitalist refrain we have described above. We hope that videography can, in a way that necessitates new ways of thinking about the medium, critically engage with the a-signifying semiotics of its production, dissemination and viewing of its own constitutive spectacles. Next, we will provide a contrast between what we perceive as a tendency towards a lowest common denominator of videographic inquiry itself, and a proposed, albeit tentative, alternative that we feel could open up possibilities for new ‘images of thought’ on video.

**(Re)Production of a capitalist semiotic**

The understanding of the capitalist refrain provides us with a template for identifying a problem with videos of consumption acting only as ‘reproducing the signs of production’ and thus simply adding to a-signifying semiocapitalist tendencies. To instead find any new potentials of thought requires ardent dedication to the questioning of how power relations are created and maintained (or rather re-created) in not only human interactions, but also an increasing matrix of non-human interactions of technological platforms (Langlois, 2011). We call critical attention to the desiring tendencies of producing spectacles of consumption that are released to reverberate in online spaces such as YouTube, Vimeo or whatever will (shortly) come to replace them.

In this young field, it has been often claimed that video somehow approaches a more immediate and authentic connection to consumption. Indeed, consumer culture is “bright and noisy” (Kozinets & Belk, 2006, p. 335) and so on. But what are the politics of producing these expressions in video form? More importantly perhaps, in the sense of guiding the field as an area of inquiry, what are the means by which videographic inquiry is evaluated? Not to forget, how is videographic inquiry *itself* symptomatic of and intertwined with the spectacles of consumption it expresses? It would thus seem to us that when we wish to talk about our own consumption videographies, we also need to produce a sensitivity regarding how much distance we have from the threat of capitalist refrain. We also must not limit that estimate of difference to the superficial critique of symbols such as the brief critique of the hip-hop video we used as an example. We feel a need to engage more explicitly with the politics of the very *form* of research we are engaging in, including the plethora of technologies and discourses that come to mediate it. If consumption is a productive spectacle of desiring that effectively reproduces its own cyclicality in semiocapitalism, then what is our craft of videographic inquiry capable of doing that does not simply constitute a second order spectacle moulded in the same machinic tendencies as the consumption it chronicles? The trap is becoming an academic orthodoxy by uncritically seeing how we constitute spectacles and where we disseminate them, thus morphing into repetitive orders; yet another form of machinic production that happily coincides with the production of a fixed set of semiocapitalist subjectivation.

What seems to be a key issue here is that we should recognize that consumer subjectivities are embedded in the same influence of the a-signifying semiotics as we ourselves are, once we engage in rendering them into a spectacle of spectacle. And importantly, we do not in any way intend to imply that we as consumers are unsophisticated or ignorant. On the contrary, we are all increasingly the brave new subjectivities a semiocapitalist world order produces in how: “individuals are the result of mass production. The individual is serialized, registered and modeled” (Guattari & Rolnik, 2011, p. 43), where the affective gains of consumption point towards cynicism and endless banality. Indeed, “one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital [...] we prefer to burst under the quantitative excesses that you judge to be the most stupid. And don’t wait for our spontaneity to rise up in revolt either” (Lyotard, 2004, pp. 113-114). We are the machines of semiocapitalism.

Observing that the affective vector of video-based contemporary music is laden with overcoded intensities of capitalist refrain and with its machinic repetition inscribed and interacted with, reveals the subjectivity of the *user* (and indeed his/her labour as a ‘co-creator’). Which “is appropriated by and objectified in machines, to which living labour remains in relation of subordination” (Genosko, 2012, p. 123). A tendency which is produced, of course, every passing day in the mediated virtual interplay of the interaction that legitimizes and allows its desiring in the disciplinary ways that are expected from competent citizens-as-consumers. While there is no conceivable emancipation from a-signifying semiotics, what we would like to encourage, is ‘violent’ reflection on both the a-signifying semiotics one may find oneself subject to in the act of videographic inquiry and the worlds of consumption we produce. As Culp (2016) advocates in his analysis of the dark side of desiring, the possibility of imagining life in ways that starts to upset our contemporary social orders of this world “requires cultivating a hatred for it” (p. 8), as it would seem today that a joyous reading of the potentials of affirmation in Deleuze and Guattari no longer appears feasible in semiocapitalism.

**New orthodoxies and their alternatives**

The present work is a call to pose new questions, to explore the means of production, proliferation and presentation of videographic work and to decisively expand the scope of semiotic analysis. What we have attempted is to encourage aspiring scholars of videography to think critically of the entire agencement of cultural production they are an inherent part of. Yes, we produce symbols on the flickering screen, but always by the means of digitally mediated audio-visual formats, as well as with the cultural, institutional and economic circumstances within which we engage in videography in the first place. It may well be important to imagine the extent to which we are employed to reproduce the a-signifying semiotics of consumption itself, especially if our films remain on the level of the descriptive gaze and disseminated through commercial platforms that can signify a lack of any alternatives. This produces spectacles of consumption that clearly fall within the greater logic of semiocapitalism, where the mode of subjectivation is arguably directed towards and increasingly replaced by the desire of capital as subjectivity itself. In semiocapitalist cultural tendencies, if we portray capitalism without struggle we implicitly portray nothing but an account of ourselves as well-adjusted, obedient, capitalized subjectivities (also Dunne, Harney, Parker & Tinker, 2008). This will be the case for videographic inquiry as well if the medium is put to use to convey fetishizing spectacles.

For those who wish to critically engage the cultural tendencies of semiocapitalism, the entirety of video production and its a-signifying medium should be taken into consideration. If, as we have seen, videographic inquiry is increasingly able to participate in implicit and explicit forms of presenting academic work as dictated by the form of academic journal publishing and conference presentations, we run the risk of the subversive potential of the video medium being eroded. Was it ever subversive in the first place, or only potential that so far never quite made it? To return to the premise posed in the beginning of this text, the question: ‘what kind of subjectivities are produced in the cultural context of videographic practices?’, should not be a forgotten just because answering it is not a statement, but a praxis that can only emerge *through* the affective potentials of future videographic work (see Rokka and Hietanen, *in press*). At present, we have simply presented in a new theoretical context that 1) provides an alternative, wider framing by encouraging the consideration of a-signifying semiotics, and 2) emphatically states that the production of consumption spectacles is always close to a valorisation of consumption and reproducing its cultural code.

One way to start following this logic is an expressive rather than representational notion of video-based inquiry (Hietanen et al., 2014), where videographic practice in all its stages should be seen not as reproduction of reality, but rather as a form of cultural production itself. Here it is important to understand that all we express on video is necessarily a fiction, but also that video as a machine of affective production produces great ‘powers of the false’ (Deleuze, 1989a), which means that its fictions can be deeply moving and convincing. Transitioning from a representational frame of mind entails understanding that all expression is the work of affecting our image of thought, as powerful affective encounters can alter how we see both histories and the potential futures (also Olkowski, 1999). If we as videographers are to have any stake in critical substance, one way to look at it would be “the degeneration of social relations [...] the hatching parasites of hyper-capitalist growth, and mental pollution caused by media infantilization and passivity-inducing post-political cynicism” (Genosko, 2009, p. 74). Videographers can produce intensities that interrogate and inspire in resonant ways, but this entails understanding the machinery we are inherently partaking in and engaging it with a force that is so radical that it finds ways to subvert being simply reappropriated to the axiom of capitalist desiring.

Let us then, in our own ways, intensify the proliferation of the videographic craft, but in so doing, let us also lift our gazes from the mesmerizing screens and lenses to find a generative critical distance with our topics, our theorizing, our production, and our delivery. And while increasing visibility on various online platforms and the publication of videographic work in respected academic journals are certainly signs of how the field is developing, let us always stay on the move and produce expressions that refuse to be locked and stored away in media platforms that uncritically reproduce certain social orders. Let us not extend the adherence to orthodoxy and group-think that seems to characterize many prestigious academic outlets in our field. Further, let us be equally watchful for inertia when it comes to critically assess the greater political, cultural and technological context of what we are expressively portraying in our videographic work, or we too will increasingly become “accessories – conscious limbs – of machines” (Genosko, 2011, p. 122).

Like video art that escaped the galleries (see Cubitt, 1993), consumer research on videography should trickle through boundaries and between media. As a medium, video is a digital mutagen, an agencement which is never finished or complete and should not be content or contained simply in carbonite or etched as bullet points on academic CVs. This is how video could potentially flow between representational orders and, in its own escape ‘within’ academia, finally become art. And not become art symbolically, but actively by the way its medium can comment on more stable and incumbent academic practices and the politics in which we implicitly partake (see Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014). While publishing will help us gain much needed and welcome recognition, the political goal of the medium, if understood as a critical project, should do more than this, and aim to be something that subjectivises “revolutionary consciousness” (Bogue, 2003, p. 169). In the Deleuzoguattarian register, what we have is a raw machinic desiring, and thus to think and to act are both part of this affective tendency. To imagine a critical video practice needs this kind of “action-thought” (Deleuze, 1989a, p. 163) to reverberate through all subjectivations in both videographic production and spectatorship (also Rokka & Hietanen, *in press*). Also, as Guattari and Rolnik (2008) note, any change can today only be actualized in molecular forms guided by desiring intensities of grass-roots societal change. There is no foreseeable difference that can be hierarchically offered within the system of semiocapitalism that only continues to promote the kinds of difference that it can immediately incorporate into its own rules of capitalist accumulation. The idea we hope can reverberate further, in terms of exploring the politics of videographic inquiry, is to acknowledge that there is not only a spectacle in front of the camera, but that the spectacle is ‘behind, inside and all around’ (also Hietanen & Rokka, *in press*). No part of it is innocent, but all are full of potential for subjectivation and, if treated as such, may just help us move towards being able to generate more reflexive and powerfully critical scholarly contributions in the future.

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1. We have chosen to use ‘agencement’ to stay closer to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s original concept and to highlight the agentic relationality and the intertwined nature of all forces in such emergent events, rather than ‘assemblage’, which connotes a more technical notion designating an arrangement of objects (see Phillips, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ScHoolboy Q – THat Part ft. Kanye West (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQ\_DHRI-Xp0) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)