This text was a talk given at La Bellone House of Performing Arts, Brussels (BE) as part of a.pass seminar on the subject of ‘conspiracy’ with Juan Dominguez and Victoria Perez Royo on 14-15 April 2016. It explores the idea of daring as an ethical and political action, departing from three different works of fiction. Through thinking the protagonists conditions and contexts, it considers dare as a mode of collective action and its implications for issues such as antiwork imaginaries, subjectification, fear and affect.

DARES AS ETHICAL OPERATIONS

In the context of performance practices, the dispositive of the dare can offer a way for manipulating the circumstances that pre-format habituated modes of gathering around a performative event. Juan Dominguez’s Clean Room, which offered the occasion to develop the present text, is a powerful experimentation in this direction, as his research aims to “transform the commitment of the spectators” (Dominguez na) to their condition without transforming them in participants in the creation of an experience which is actually already coded insofar as its meaning. Instead, the performance settings allow for a creation of a reciprocity of attention that makes the attendees into “necessary accomplices” (Dominguez 2016).

The most quotidian form in which we encounter the kind of conspiracies that interest the choreographer in everyday experience might indeed be under the guise of dares, as in truth or dare games children play with each other. Dares are a form of collective cultural actions that are seldom looked at in their own right, but they could offer a generative site from which to develop a certain possibility of thinking of cultural practices that foster counter–conducts.

In his discussion of governmentality, Michel Foucault introduced the notion of “counter-conduct” as a positive conception of the resistant subject that is not focused on opposing power, but instead insists on producing itself differently. While governmental rationality always holds as its target the conduct of others, counter-conducts are described by Foucault as a “struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (Foucault 2007: 201). Emphasizing its ethical-aesthetic character, Foucault further describes counter-conduct as “the art of not being governed quite so much,” of “not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (Foucault 1997: 44-45).

Here, I want to give a more specific traction to the concept, contextualizing the significance of daring as a mode of caring for the counter-conduct of others. As such, daring could be considered a useful ‘sensitizing concept’ from which to consider contemporary cultural production. I’m borrowing the notion of ‘sensitizing concept’ from sociologist Herbert Blumer (1954), who developed the idea to differentiate between definitive concepts, or those notions that in
social theory provide “definitive prescriptions of what to see,” to those “merely suggest[ing] directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954:7). Unlike definitive concepts then, sensitizing ones produce as well as describe the human relations and actions of which they speak. These are concepts that make a distinct social reality appear for a researcher, and yet implicate the researcher in the very cultural possibilities they either open up or preclude. This was for Blumer the special contribution to theory that he saw as the most appropriate task of social sciences, which could then reclaim this condition as a specificity rather than as a flow in relation to other exact sciences. I believe daring, alongside site concepts such as conspiring, can point to a direction along which to look for considering a key problematic of contemporary cultural production, which has to do with how to shift the parameters of engagement and encounter with its audiences in such ways so as not to simply replicate the modalities of interactivity and participation constantly elicited by social media and marketing strategies in the form of free labour.

ANTIWORK IMAGINARIES

Pasolini first film, Accattone, shot in Rome in 1961, opens with a famous, beautifully staged dare. Accattone is a Roman slang term which can be roughly translated as ‘scumbag’, referring to people who never do well, who are lazy, and who rarely hold down a job and find themselves pleading for money, and is also the nickname of the main character, a young man from one of the poorest neighborhoods in Rome. In the opening scene, Pasolini’s protagonist (played by Franco Citti) is having lunch with some friends, all boys
from the *borgata*. It’s a beautiful summer day and the young man are all hanging outside joking and chatting, as none of them has a regular job to attend to. While some of them argue that a common acquaintance has recently died because he went swimming right after lunch, Accattone believes this motivation to be a false superstition, and thus he is challenged to prove his conviction by jumping in the nearby river with his full stomach. The young man not only does that, but he renders his bath in the river a spectacular occurrence for the entire neighborhood, who comes out to witness the dare, by performing an angel dive from a high bridge in the vicinities. The scene ends with a triumphant Accattone winning some highly desirable cash from his mates.

I start from Pasolini’s film because his treatment of the dare in the movie speaks to my own preoccupation with this subject, which has to do with the possibility for cultural practices to participate in the creation of a postwork imaginary (Weeks 2011). In *Accattone*, the dare emerges from a resistance to labour that is common to all the youth gathered for lunch. They are not only excluded from the legitimate job market, but they see work as a humiliation and embarrassment rather than as a source of affirmation. This attitude is made clear later in the movie, when the same posse loudly and cruelly mocks a boy who ‘capitulated’ and got himself a job. Thus, daring becomes something to do rather than work. It becomes a social game, but one where the boys call on each other to prove themselves outside the framework of having a career or money. The game of social mobility excludes them anyway; they ‘know’ they cannot win that specific bet against the system, and that hard work is not a way out of poverty. As these youth hang out, then, their sociability generates an excess that surrounds their togetherness without purpose. And in turn, the excess generates a practice that is different from work, but still is a way of intervening in the world. Departing from Pasolini’s scene, we can say that daring is a collective practice in the sense that it produces a shared “collective hesitation” (Stengers 2014) around a known unknowns that needs to be probed, tested or brought into existence. Daring is moreover a practice as it demands a form of discipline from participants, it implicates the honing in of skills (in the case of *Accattone*, medical knowledge about digestive processes and diving skills, for instance). The skills that are put into play during a dare also offer an interesting counterpoint to the process of de-skilling that is often associated with the jobs reserved to poor, uneducated people, a pool of ‘bullshit jobs,’ to borrow a term from David Graeber (2013), that is increasingly growing as management and technological techniques all concur to strip all kinds of processes from any embodied know-how.

To further support the hypothesis that dares might have something to contribute to a post- or anti-work imaginary, it is significant to note how this type of group playing has been associated not only with the cultures of plebeian and lumpenproletarian populations, but is also a frequent trope within aristocratic lives, another social group that was, for opposite reasons, excluded from work activities. A well-known example of this found in literature
is the classic adventure novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*, by French author Jules Verne (1873). In relation to this, it might be legitimate to speculate around the role that dares held in the socialization of early proto-scientific knowledge as it begun to circulate and be shared in the context of amateur societies and clubs during the 17th and 18th centuries (cf. Roche 1998; Clark 2001). In both the highest and lowest strata of society then, the dare emerges as a cultural practice that partially substitutes work as the occasion to become integrated into a community, to prove oneself and to generate a shared knowledge of what is possible to do or know, but is not yet in the repertoire of a given social milieu. To say with Gilles Deleuze, dares can be seen as a way to approach the realm of the virtual, understood not as “something that lacks reality, but something that enters into a process of actualization by following the plane that gives it its own reality” (Deleuze 1997: 5).

Simultaneously however, daring opposes work, as it is predicated upon an excess that lies outside the cycle of production and consumption, outside accumulating capital on one hand (for the aristocrats) or getting a wage on the other (for the poor). Daring offers a social frame for collectively put aside the logic of strict economic calculus and practice abundance instead. Kathi Weeks encourages to think of this kind of experiences in terms of ‘getting a life,’ (Weeks 2011: 231), noting how this common expression does not predetermine what it might mean to get ‘a’ life: it simply gestures, in a non-prescriptive way, towards more meaningful practices and challenges than those allowed within the work regime, of which daring can be one.

**TECHNIQUES OF ADVENTURE**

Before jumping from the bridge for his incredibly high dive, Accattone murmurs: “Let’s give the masses what they want.” He is very conscious of the spectacular and performative quality of his gesture; the need to execute a perfectly timed and choreographed dive is key for ensuring that his deed becomes memorable. This attention to aesthetics is another aspect of daring that is worth of consideration, because, in a prescient way, daring also opposes work as it tents to create, and give significant to, its style of execution. As part of the narrative repertoire of many traditional cultures, they represent one of the ways in which, out of plain, limited contexts, people have – over and over again – conjured up the possibility of an elsewhere, a generative capacity that places dares within the ‘magic circle’ of play, liminal rituals and performances (Schechner and Schuman 1976). The link between dare and performance was first highlighted in JL Austin’s seminal work *How to do things with words* (1962), as he included ‘challenging’ among his list of performative speech acts. He described it as an illocutory force, together with incite, demand, assert, accuse and oppose. In Martin Heidegger too, we find a reference to challenging, as in *The Question Concerning Technology*, the philosopher explained that which pertains to modern *techne* as something that ‘challenges forth’ (Heidegger 1977: 15), that is, that is able to transform nature into a source of energy.
Building on the references above, now I would like to attempt a definition of the dare as a performative technique for transforming the everyday into a resource to reciprocally generate permissions for having adventures. Since this is admittedly a dense definition, I will attempt to unpack it.

Dares are a technique, but an open-ended technique. In fact, what is interesting in the dare is that it derives its capacity to generate meaningful action not so much from this or that specific technique, but from the consequences a gesture or act entail in relation to one’s biography and milieu. Back in 1911, Georg Simmel theorized this mode of actions as ‘adventure’ (1965). Simmel noted that in the arc of existence, there are events, or concatenations of events, that carry a different intensity, sensory and symbolic, which sets them apart from everyday experiences. Among the attributes of this category of experiences however, Simmel gives more important to the form, the structure of the adventure, rather than the content. Indeed, a banal occurrence for someone can be a life altering moment for someone else. While the distinction between form and content has since been criticized as problematic as a methodological and theoretical tool of analysis, what matters here is that in the adventure, the final outcome is not what counts. The worth of the experience is intrinsic to its unfolding, or, in other words, adventures mold their own structures and meanings and become the occasions for experiencing freedom in a situated manner. Departing from this argument, other theorists have recently looked at the experience as a promising name for what an antiwork imaginary might look like (Campagna 2012). Moving beyond this argument, I propose that the significance of the dare as a dispositive for formatting contemporary cultural practices lies it its potential for addressing the challenges of a post-disciplinary and postindustrial society.

Simmel’s focus on the adventure stemmed from his longstanding research interest in the kinds of social practices created by populations impacted for the first time by the rapid urban revolution of the industrial modernity. Adventures could still be legitimately imagined as deterritorializing experiences unfolding individually and spontaneously. The present landscape however is characterized by the different texture of marketing saturated global metropolis, the imaginary constantly stimulated through the mash of offers created by the experience economy which represents the most advanced manifestation of the society of the spectacle already theorized by Guy Debord in the 1960s (Debord 1994). This new landscape is pre-arranged in such way that the emergence of intensity and meaning is already social and formatted, so as to be more easily intercepted by capital flows. Thus, in a context in which we are constantly engaging in situations whit a pre-designed meaning, the opportunity of adventure is no longer available as an elsewhere to be encountered accidentally. It needs to be generated through social practices of counter-conduct. Especially in a moment when situations that produce meaningful and memorable ambiences by borrowing only some (usually controlled and preselected) aspects of daring mechanisms abound: adventures are being sold as a vacation genre (Vester 1987), Californian
corporations are sending employees to play immersive treasure hunts games (McGonigal 2003), and NGOs are promoting silly ‘challenges’ designed to go viral on social media (Rossolatos 2015), to name just a few examples that come to mind.

Thus exploring daring as a kind of autonomous, reciprocal technique for producing adventures might offer us a socio-aesthetic protocol, among the array of cultural forms through which individuals become subjectivized, for reorganizing our experiences in the world, and it might allow us to do so in ways that carry both material and symbolic consequences. Dares traditionally have to do with either confronting that which is shameful or that which is defiant of power structures, including as we have seen in the case of Accattone, the power of received knowledge and common sense. They constitute a portable minimal element of the carnivalesque, if you like, able to turn the world upside down. The heroic and the foolish are both their turf. They proceed by pushing the limits of what is possible for us to undertake in both directions – and in so doing dares describe an expansive movement. To put it differently, they allow us to explore the contours of what makes us vulnerable or afraid, and by the same token, to explore the quality of the relations that mold the contexts in which we are active.

DARING AS QUEERING CARE

In the 1999 movie Fight Club, based on a 1996 novel by Chuck Palahniuk, one of the main characters, Tyler (played by Brad Pit), issues a dare to the posse of lost and demotivated men who gather in his clandestine ‘fight club’ in search of a different approach to life. To shake them up from their timid acceptance of social conventions, and to connected them with a different perception of social reality:
Tyler: This week, each one of you has a homework assignment. You’re gonna go out, you’re gonna start a fight with a total stranger... [there’s a pause as he drools blood]

Tyler: You’re gonna start a fight and you’re gonna lose. [we see a montage of Fight Club members trying to pick a fight]

Narrator: [voice over] Now this is not as easy as it sounds. Most people, normal people, do just about anything to avoid a fight.

This scene highlights another significant characteristic of the dare, the fact that it is different from the bet. Its risk is different. A bet is a gesture of speculation, you can lose, however, you can also bet without suffering any consequence. Many people would bet money as a way of not betting their lives. A bet is designed for having one winner and a loser. In Pasolini this aspect was also partially present, as Accattone’s challenge was simultaneously a dare (jumping from the high bridge) and a bet (that he would not die as a consequence of having eaten before the swim).

In Fight Club, by comparison, the difficulty of the challenge lies in facing the realization that in a dare, one cannot lose. To dare to do something, to accept the invitation, is already a victory, no matter the consequences. The achievement is in having invented a possibility into existence - dares seek out the limits of a situation until the illusion of the reality as a necessary arrangement shatters.

To dare someone can be regarded in this respect as a queer form of care. To push someone out of their comfort zone, to come up with a challenge that is meaningful, not too easy and not too hard, but positioned just at the right level of liminality so as to support a leap. Complementary to the kind of unconditional, limitless love that is more often celebrated in the arts, daring testifies to another kind of love we equally seek to establish in social relations, and that too often, in our neoliberal societies, is confused with the supposed virtues of competition.

While the images from Accattone and Fight Club might, at a first glance, suggest this to be the real of a specifically masculine modality of social performance, this is not the case. A dare is, for example, inscribed in the opening scene of the quadrilogy of novels by Elena Ferrante, an anonymous Italian author whose literary work dedicated to the lives of two Neapolitan friends, Lenù and Lila, has received great international attention since its publication in 2011. The first book of the series, My Brilliant Friend, begins when the two protagonists are little girls, showing how friendships often begin with embracing a reciprocal challenge, as Lila, the brilliant friend of the title, lures or Lenù, “up the dark stairs that led, step after step, flight after flight, to the door of Don Achille’s apartment”. He is a notorious criminal associated with the local camorra, an irascible man the children in the neighbourhood see as an ogre. Lila and Lenù “climbed slowly towards the greatest of our terrors of that time, we went to expose ourselves to fear and interrogate it.” As Lila, the stronger and braver of the two, dares Lenù to follow her up the stairs, she pauses and finally reaches back to hold her friend’s hand – simultaneously giving her courage and asking for support. This situation of their childhood
dare thus ties them for life, as they discover that courage is not an individualized quality, but as a social capacity to face dangers, real or imaginary, through acts of solidarity. Soon after, for each of the girls, the presence of the other constitutes a vivid spur to become more “I soon had to admit that what I did by myself couldn’t excite me, only what Lila touched became important.” – confesses Lenù to herself.

Positive psychology treads on a similar ground when it speaks about the phenomenon of social facilitation. According to researches conducted both among groups of people, but also in other social animals such as ants or monkeys, the mere presence of others can stimulate a better performance and enhance the individual capacity to act in noncompetitive situations (Aiello and Douthitt, 2001). While the philosophical and political meaning of these findings is still a subject of debate within psychology, as results vary significantly in relation to the kind of attention and the kinds of tasks being observed, the very existence of the phenomenon of social facilitation posits the question of the kind of conditions under which the social can become a plane of expansion of the self. The group of theorist Colectivo Situaciones declined this question onto the political ground when, in their militant research about and with Argentinian social movements, they asked:

How to dare ourselves to suspend the corpus of knowledges available to us on the social and the political, the certainties referring to “the middle classes,” “the excluded,” and “the politicians”? (Colectivo Situaciones 2012: 83)

Reflecting on the collective practices of the movements, CS coined the concept of ‘social protagonism,’ which they understand as

an ethical operation. This means a passage – a laborious one – toward the reappropriation of these conditions of departure such that these original circumstances no longer operate as a determination, but rather as conditions to be assumed that permits us a passage to the act. This sovereignty over the situation itself implies as well a certain capacity to cut out a space-time. This cutout is, in turn, the condition – and product – of the emergence of sense (it is this operation that we call situation). (Colectivo Situaciones 2012: 31)

The specific creativity of the social protagonism that Colectivo Situaciones talk about lies in the possibility of tying our expressive modalities with the cosmopolitan frameworks, powers and relations that shape them, in such a way so that we can transform such frameworks. By finding new ways of daring each other, we can come to witnesses our deeds so that they can then become epic – that is, so that the story of our individual deeds can acquire a meaning that is bigger than our individual biographies. Perhaps the knowledges, procedures and strategies developed within the realm of performing arts can help carry out such ethical task, to develop not examples to follow, but diagrams to put to use, creating a shared culture of references about how to make the experience of social protagonism
available in our existential and relational repertoires, as a way out from the confines of the ubiquitous spectacle traversing our social milieu, which, as Rousseau said before Debord, is making us all alone, together.¹

Bibliography


¹ “People think they come together in the spectacle, and it is here that they are isolated.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to d’Alembert on the Theatre*.
*Fight Club.* 1999. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox, USA.


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