

**An In-formed matter of race: transduction, intuition and desire  
Simondon's theory of individuation  
in relation to FC labor, and to Ahmed's queer phenomenology of race**

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Still of a video of me while working at the Fulfilment Center at the port of Rotterdam, taken by a colleague. February 2022.

“One could say that in a civilization that divides humans into two groups (those who give orders and those who carry them out), the principle of individuation, in line with the technological example, is necessarily attributed either to the form or the matter but never to both together.”

-Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*.

What initiated the intellectual inquire of this text was a simple question: What would happen if we theorize the labor that occurs at the fulfilment centre through Simondon’s theory of individuation and through Sarah Ahmeds’ phenomenology of race? Okay, probably this question right now does not sounds that simple, and extra information is needed for the reader.

The first thing that we need to clarify is: *what* is a fulfilment center, and *the* kind of fulfilment center I am taking about. This fulfilment center (FC) in particular is located at the port of Rotterdam, part of the skyrocketing-growing Dutch online-supermarket industry.<sup>1</sup> It distributes groceries to mostly middle-class costumers. Spatially, its architecture is that of a massive industrial warehouse, with almost no windows looking to the outside. What goes on inside the FC is what some theorists of work have called *economic gamification* or the *gamification of labor*. The entire labor process is set up as a fast speed game. Color music, speed: walking with industrial boots, loud music, and the workers locked to a scanner, that is, the workers’ body permanently surveilled and walking speed controlled. Gamification is only one of the latest techniques of advanced capitalism, to lure the workers into self-exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Now, about the FC workers. It is a personal story. I used to be one of those workers. I worked at this particular FC during three years, two of those years were under covid-19 lockdowns. As you might guess I am not Dutch. I am a Mexican immigrant. The reasons that brought me to the FC are nothing more than structural racism and the kind of jobs that pay rents for global south immigrants in highly industrialized countries like the Netherlands. Most of the FC workers are racialized immigrants from the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Global South. And yes, leadership positions are mostly occupied by highly educated Dutch and other white people. Ever since I got this at stupid job, it has become my personal intellectual obsession of the past years to theorize what goes on inside the fulfilment center, to theorize my labor there and my own racialized bodily exposure to the latest gamified techniques of exploitation used by semi-automated capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> According to statistic the online supermarket industry in The Netherlands has been one of the fastest growing the past 8 years. See: <https://www.rsm.nl/news/detail/14684-online-supermarket-picnic-fastest-growing-company-in-the-netherlands/>

<sup>2</sup> Rey, P. (2014). Gamification and Post-Fordist capitalism, in: Walz, S. P., & Deterding, S. (2014). *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

Now what about the second part of the question regarding using Simondon's and Ahmed's work to theorize this experience. There seems to be something about borrowing Simondon's semi-thermodynamic lexicon, particularly in relation to labor to map the FC. Simultaneously I find interesting to conjunct a Simondonian reading of the FC with Sara Ahmed's work on phenomenology of race. The question of race is easily invisibilized by theorists of contemporary labor, which is understandable since most of these theorists are Western and white, therefore do not have the embodied experience of race and labor, as people like me have. Simondon, Deleuze as well as many others Western theorists of work, talk about 'the worker' as some abstract entity. But who is this worker, what genre or non-genre is? is it a white worker or is it an illegal racialized immigrant worker? In the case of the fulfillment center 'the man who works' is racialized and almost in all cases comes from a postcolonial or currently occupied context. On the other hand, I also recognize a concerning lack of engagement of decolonial theorists and critical race theorists with speculative readings of race in relation to contemporary capitalist forms of labor. In this sense the work of Sarah Ahmed provide us with 'queer' tools to understand differently labor and race through a parallel lens of the philosophy of technology, from a phenomenological perspective.

In 'Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others' Ahmed's proposes an understanding of of the 'matter of race':

“The “matter” of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one “can do,” or even where one can go, which can be redescribed in terms of what is and is not within reach. If we begin to consider what is affective about the “unreachable,” we might even begin the task of making “race” a rather queer matter.”<sup>3</sup>

Ahmed defines the category of the 'racializing' not as an historic category but a phenomenological one, that is, how we experience and perceive reality. Through this lens she theorizes the actualizing of racialized categories through the notions of space, orientation and desire.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I will provide an analysis of FC labor through Simondon's theory of individuation regarding the *form-energy-matter* construction of the individual, particularly focussing on Simondon's concept of transduction & information and Ahmed's theorization of space, orientation and desire, in relation to racial capitalism. Ahmed's speculative approach to phenomenology and to the racial matter, allows me to create a framework in which I can work in parallel with Simondonian energetic concepts regarding the formation of subjectivities. As well as to approach theory from a speculative yet embodied perspective. After all, this was an experience my body experienced and was exposed to.

The question of queerness, which it will not be developed in depth in the short length of this paper, has to be understood as an ontological tool to think labor-race spatially, cybernetic ally and affectively. At the same time there is an implicit argument in this text for *queering* theory of race and labor that allow us to think differently and perhaps much more affectively the technical experience of the desiring individualization-racialization processes of capitalism we are currently subjected to.

## **Gamification, capitalism & its technical objects**

As I mentioned earlier, FC labor is fundamentally characterized by one of the latest trends of advanced capitalism: economic gamification. Situating the FC, in the history of labor and its spaces, the FC is a modern-day factory. The online-supermarket industry lies at the heart of contemporary semi-automated

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<sup>3</sup> 3 Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

capitalism. As many theorists of work have mapped out, a key element of the way capitalism is executed today is the use of affects and emotions to get the job done. Labels like ‘emotional capitalism’ ‘affective capitalism’ are everywhere (Deleuze, Mouffe, Galloway, Fisher, Byung-Chul Han, among others). Central to these theories of contemporary labor is the school of thought brought by Foucault about labor and productive power. According to Foucault, in the disciplinary societies, factories were a mechanism through which the production of subjectivities to the needs of capitalism, were formed. Later on, with the emergence of the internet and cybernetic technologies, the fordist model described by Foucault gave rise to a post-fordist economic model, with the corporation at its center and not the factory anymore. In his classic text *Postscript for the Societies of Control*, Deleuze theorized precisely this transition mediated by technology from Foucault’s discipline societies to what he called the *societies of control*:

“in a society of control, the corporation has replaced the factory, and the corporation is a spirit, a gas. Of course the factory was already familiar with the systems of bonuses, but the corporation works more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions”.<sup>5</sup>

Deleuze readings of capitalism, we could say are much more organic and fluid than Foucault’s, and proper of the fluid configurations of life and work brought by cybernetic technologies. In a similar organic fashion, Simondon’s highly detailed analysis of the technological operation behind the fabrication of a brick, seeks to prove that energy is key to the process of individual creation. The energy of the worker, argues Simondon, applied during the labor process is thus key to Simondon’s understanding of the way matter becomes form, “a really existing individual”. Through the technological example of the labor that goes on for the brick construction, Simondon seeks to demonstrate a missing link in the relation between matter and form, how form comes into being. According to Simondon “the formation of a natural or technical individual never ends up in the application of *a* form to *a* matter”, and that an element that is left out by the hylomorphic schema are “the energetic conditions of form-taking”.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the brick fabrication Simondon places “the real dynamism of the operation”<sup>7</sup> in the workers’s labor, his or her energy:

“In order for the matter to be able to be modulated in its becoming, it must—like the clay at the moment when the worker packs it into the mold—have a deformable reality, i.e. a reality that does not have a definite form but all forms indefinitely and dynamically, since this reality, while it possesses inertia and consistency, is a depository of force (at least for an instant) and is identical point by point with this force; in order for the clay to fill the mold, it is not enough for it to have plasticity: it must transmit the pressure that the worker impresses on it, and each point of its mass must be a center of forces; the clay is pushed into the mold that it fills; it propagates the energy of the worker within its mass. While the mold is being filled, a potential energy becomes actualized”.<sup>8</sup>

Following this example, it is interesting to ask how could we apply Simondon’s theory of individuation and energy to the semi-automated-semi-cybernetic labor that goes on inside the fulfilment center? Also because FC workers labor don’t produce a physical object. Simondon writes:

“the brick carries with it the imprint of a moment of the man’s existence, it solidifies this activity exerted upon homogeneous, passive matter waiting to be worked; it emerges from this singularity”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, G. *postscript on the societies of control*, 4

<sup>6</sup> Simondon, G. (1958). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. trans. Cecile Malaspina, John Rogove (Minnesota, Univocal & University of Minnesota Press, 2017): foreword, xix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

If we adapt the first part of this sentence “the brick carries with it the imprint of a moment of the man’s existence”, within the conditions of FC labor then we could say that *the cybernetic-simulacra technical object created at the FC carries with it the imprint of a moment of its workers’ existence*. But what is the passive matter waiting to be worked that emerges from this singularity? I will argue that the answer is: the affects of the racialized postcolonial worker. The product of the gamified labor of the FC is the acceleration of the forces of racialized immigrant workers. Its resulted technical object is a device which carries within itself not only the affects of its racialized worker, but a device for the perpetuation of racism and whiteness. Simondon writes:

In order to produce a form, one must construct a *certain defined* mold, prepared in a *certain* fashion with a *certain* type of matter.<sup>10</sup>

Actualizing Simondon’s theory of labor to read FC labor through the lens of Ahmeds’ critical race theory, particularly queer phenomenology of race, we could say the following: In order to produce a ~~form~~ FC’s technical object, ~~one~~ the racialized postcolonial worker must construct a *certain defined* mold, prepared in a ~~certain~~ *gamified and accelerated* fashion with a ~~certain~~ *affective-racialized* type of matter. This matter is the worker’s racialized body in itself. And what is the *certain defined mold* that the racialized worker constructs through the FC labor? Its own surveilled gamified self-exploitation.

### **Metastability, Transduction & information**

For Simondon, the processes of individuation take place “in a field of primordial metastability”.<sup>11</sup> In turn, Deleuze’s lexicon for his readings of capitalism also argues that advanced capitalism is executed through *states of metastability*: “the corporation works more deeply to impose a *modulation* of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions”.<sup>12</sup> For Simondon Modulation is the transformation of energy into structure (demodulation is the transformation of structure into signal / energy). Metastability is a condition of individuation, and of life. The living being is a device of individuation, not only a product of individuation.

Unlike that of the physical individual, the whole activity of the living being is not concentrated at its limit; in the living being there is a more complete regime of *internal resonance* that requires ongoing communication and that maintains a metastability, which is a condition of life.<sup>13</sup>

Simondon’s argument of an unfinished transductive process in shaping an equally incomplete individual reminds what Foucault calls *processes of subjection*. According to Foucault, processes of subjection are the techniques used by power structures aiming to ‘train’ the human body, are executed. Such processes in turn, allow for the emergence of specific modes of human identity or ‘docile’ subjections, that are compatible to the needs of authorities.<sup>14</sup> The factory, such as the school and the hospital, function as tools of the system to conduct this power-production of individuals. In this understanding of power produces, we can also understand gamification as a form of soft power. As Patella-Rey writes: “Gamification is a form of soft power – it only works if it can entice individuals to genuinely want what the gamifiers want. Power, in this instance, should not be understood as a constraint; instead, power effected through gamification is better

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Simondon, G. (1958). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. trans. Cecile Malaspina, John Rogove (Minnesota, Univocal & University of Minnesota Press, 2017): foreword, xxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the Societies of Control. October, 59, p 4.

<sup>13</sup> Simondon, G. (1958). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. trans. Cecile Malaspina, John Rogove (Minnesota, Univocal & University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 5

<sup>14</sup> 5 Foucault, (1977) p. 136. quoted in Vega de Santiago, D. (2018). The Gamified Society and its Aesthetic Emancipation [Master Dissertation], Leiden University repository

understood taking the form of a disciplinary strategy”<sup>15</sup>. If we follow this Foucaultian understanding of power as ‘power produces’, and that the resulted individuals of this production are subjectivities constantly in formation, or in Simondon words’ “*in the midst of undergoing the process of individuating*”,<sup>16</sup> then we can argue that FC functions as a metastable container-system that produces individuals in the Simondonian sense, always undergoing processes of individuating. According to Simondon transduction is defined as following:

Transduction we mean a physical, biological, mental, or social operation through which an activity propagates incrementally within a domain by basing this propagation on a structuration of the domain operated from one region to another.<sup>17</sup>

For Simondon transduction is the process through which individuation happens. Simondon argues that transduction is an individualizing movement of knowledge and of being.<sup>18</sup> In this sense transduction is an operation of form-taking, through which individuation takes place, which runs parallel to “the energetic discharge of the metastable system that is revealed as being more than unity and more than identity”.<sup>19</sup> Within Simondon’s quest for solving the problem of form and matter, by focussing in metastable energetic systems, he argues that the notion of form must be replaced by the notion of information.

transduction, in strict solidarity with the discharge of the supersaturated potential energy of a metastable system, will appear as a form-taking and, on this basis, in the conjoined, twofold topological and noetic sense, as “in-formation.”<sup>20</sup>

The energetic discharge of the metastable system is both the labor that is executed at the FC in conjunction with the process of subjection in which the individual worker, through gamification techniques, becomes docile to the needs of capitalism. The form of the ‘brick’ so to say, the product shaped at the FC is abstract. This is all the more reason why Simondon’s idea of “form must be replaced with that of information”, is accurate to describe this type of labor. The in-formation that is produced in the FC does not only refer to the extreme surveillance the workers body is subjected to during the labor process. Information also resides in the product of its labor, which is not only the consumer project but the gamified racialized worker produced to the hegemonic needs of racial capitalism, it is also a product of this production.

## **An In-formed matter of race: transduction, intuition and desire**

How does the ‘racial matter’ affect, actualizes, alter the technical object produced from this cybernetic precarious FC labor?

So far we have provided a thermodynamic reading of FC labor, through a Simondean lens. For the embodied aspect of my reading which is regarding to the bodily experience at the FC, I will like to draw in Ahmed’s proposal of queering the phenomenology of race. Here, the notions of desire and space are key to the processes of form-making of racial constructs. For Ahmed, space is fundamental to the actualizing of racialized categories. In the perceptive-experiential tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Ahmed argues that racial constructs are related with the way we live and perceive space. Ahmed discusses

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<sup>15</sup> Rey, ‘Gamification and Post-Fordist Capitalism’ (2014), referenced in Vega de Santiago, D. (2018). *The Gamified Society and its Aesthetic Emancipation*, [Master Dissertation], Leiden University repository

<sup>16</sup> Simondon, G. (1958). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. trans. Cecile Malaspina, John Rogove (Minnesota, Univocal & University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. xxiii

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



space, and the idea of the *racialization of space*, as a result of the orientation and disorientation of bodies, looking at migrant movements. For Ahmed, racism works as a way of “orientating bodies in specific directions, thereby affecting how they “take up” space. We “become” racialized in how we occupy space, just as space is as it were, already occupied as an effect of racialization”. At the center of Ahmed analysis of how racism operates through orientation (& space) is the notion of *desire*. Ahmed sees desire as a structure that actualizes how racism operates through orientation (& space). Desire confirms that which we, racialized bodies are not (the object of desire), while it pushes us toward that “not,” which appears as an object on the horizon, at the edge of our gaze, always getting closer even when it is not quite here”.<sup>21</sup> Ahmed argues that the orient and its bodies become a ‘supply point’ for what is lacking. The oriental body is the ‘far away’ object of desire the western body seeks to bring closer, that points towards an horizon or a future. However Ahmed reminds us of the political economy present in the structure of desire: “desire involves a political economy in the sense that it is distributed: the desire to possess, and to occupy, constitutes others not only as objects of desire, but also as resources for world making”.<sup>22</sup>

The bodies that ‘inhabit’ the fulfilment center are ‘far away’ bodies, migrant bodies mostly coming from the ‘orient’ (dutch caribbean, the global south, middle east, eastern europe, etc). The white owner of the FC utilizes the ‘fairness’ bodies of the workers as property to perpetuate hegemonic wealth. The oriental racialized workers become a supply point. The racialized bodies that occupy the fulfilment center, occupy it as an effect of racialization, and in turn, the workers body become racialized by how they occupy and ‘take up’ spatially the fulfilment center, that is through the desiring-gamified and cybernetic labor process.

Going back to Simondon’s transduction operation at the heart of the individuation process, Simondon argues that transduction is not only a cognitive operation but also an intuitive one:

“Transduction is a mental procedure, and even much more than a procedure, it is the mind’s way of discovering. Transduction is therefore not merely the reasoning of the mind; it is also intuition.”<sup>23</sup>

This understanding of transductive labor as also an intuitive process, is useful to understand how the FC works at the level of an affective-machinery which perpetuates racial gamified capitalism. If we follow Simondon in that we get rid of the notion of form and instead we use that of in-form-ation, we could then theorize desire and orientation as proposed by Ahmed, as key to the in-form-ation processes of desiring-racial constructs. The fast picking game, and the spatial experience of that kind of exploitation does to actualizes ‘the matter of race’. The cybernetic spatial reality of the fulfilment center is one that contains racialized machines and machines of racialization. The form and matter that shapes its labor, as well as the workers energy, understood as a process of individualization that does not begin nor ends in the individual. The power of affective capitalism resides not only into maintaining the courses of power (the hegemony of whiteness) but also in the fact that the individual produced by the transductive desiring-racializing process the worker is willing to desire, engage and perpetuate its own oppression. Thus, the gamified capitalism that I had described here must be understood desiring-racist at its core.

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21 Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. London: Duke University Press. 114-115

22 Ibid.

23 Simondon, G. (1958). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. trans. Cecile Malaspina, John Rogove (Minnesota, Univocal & University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 14-15.