Private Passions at work in the Silicon Valley

I haven't been to the Googleplex. I haven't visited Infinite Loop, Cupertino, where Apple currently has its headquarters. Nor have I been to the largest *burölandschaft* in the world that is home to Facebook. But I am going to write a story about the interiors of these companies. It won't be about the pop-art colours, the wall finishes, the free perks, or what is being served in the cafeterias. I won't deconstruct the names given to the meeting rooms (90's alternative rock albums), or comment on the hipster-geek paraphernalia. I'm going to write instead about the way that management processes work on the interior of the employee, on their subjectivity.

I write it from a distance – spatial – (from London) – and temporal – from my experience of Silicon Valley in the late nineties, when I consulted on streaming multimedia content over the internet. Apple had QuickTime, and fruity-coloured machines. Sean Parker was at Napster, peer-to-peer music sharing, or piracy as EMI called it. Enron were a big presence at events like this – the Houston energy giant was into bandwidth trading (along with its energy network). It was a time of web evangelists, management gurus and 'killer apps'. And then the bubble burst – a stock market crash, 9/11, and the Enron scandal hit. I couldn't even get a job as a web-designer.

I write this *as if* looking in, from a window mediated by Google, one of the companies I take as an exemplar of this management process. Because it makes no difference, you understand, the not-being-present, we are in it just as much as the Googlers.

*****

The Silicon Valley Management style is everywhere. It doesn't even need to be located in an office, it is so pervasive that it escapes the workplace and is becoming the pre-requisite ideology for all working life. This management style creates new subjectivities, it is based on the premises that there is an intrinsic satisfaction from working hard, and that all individuals aspire to realise a greater purpose and self-actualise. The management

works on the underlying beliefs, motivations and values of the employee, contrasted with earlier ideologies of control and discipline that assume that an employee is inherently lazy and will avoid hard work where possible.

These mechanisms multiply across national boundaries, they are replicated in the arts, theatre, design, architecture, and in education. We all have to innovate, be entrepreneurial in our precarious jobs and living situations, and above all, we must be passionate about what we do. We have been convinced to let go of ideas of a structured salary, job security, pensions, union support, because we are promised that worthwhile work will sustain us on a deeper level.

If you haven't been to Silicon Valley, I'm sure you can easily picture the non-architecture of the repurposed industrial lots, the interiors now furnished with ping pong or 'foosball' tables, free healthy cafes, breakout spaces, and acres of white-boards. You can imagine what it's like to ride the primary-coloured bicycles across the repeatable landscapes of Mountain View, Menlo Park and Palo Alto. Thanks to Google Maps we all know the way to San Jose. While much has been written about the aesthetic features of the Silicon Valley office, its relationship to the production of a specific type of employee is less explored. Why are Googlers and programmers at Facebook and other start-up workers so damn enthusiastic?

They must be a different species from those of us who write critiques about them. You won't find me high-fiving some awesome new app to control the temperature of an office-space through a proportional representation voting algorithm. Maybe you'd do it – IRONICALLY. Well, good luck with that, because in this context irony, cynicism and even European academic critique are no insulation from the process, nor do they produce any measurable effect. Google and Facebook are only extreme examples of a management of subjectivity that is increasingly pervasive throughout the new economy, of which arts, humanities and education are a constitutive part.

*****

If you look only at the way that working practices are choreographed through design to optimise 'serendipitous' encounters (each worker in Google should be within a two min walk from one another; the queue at the cafeteria should be three to five minutes), or on the functionalism of obvious perks (free transport from desirable living locations to the

out-of-city campus; free meals; doctors' surgeries), you'd miss the operationality of these elements and their relation to the management practices.

The obvious features are typically seen in two ways: either as the most active or dominant form of management, as if all any company needs to do to transform employees into productive, innovative beings full of enthusiasm can be achieved through a design strategy, without implementing fundamental organisational change; or they are seen as extras that any employee believes they can cynically benefit from, without becoming too attached.

The perks give an illusion of distance – the in-joke aesthetics of Gen Y cultural references trivialise the transactional, as though all that is being handed over is some superficial part of the personality – nothing more than tastes and past-times. As such it becomes easy to understate their part in the transformation of subjectivity. On the one hand, they are sensible and extremely functional – taking the stress out of the day by providing all the basic needs, transport, health, food, and technical support – so that the employee can concentrate on more important things. At the same time they are relatively benign – an employee might imagine that these perks would be easy to give up if they really thought that their integrity was being compromised – it's only a lunch ticket, after all – nothing to stake your identity on.

They are instead integral to a philosophy that the company should provide a total immersive environment in which the well-being (physical and emotional) of the employee is secured, leaving them free to self-actualise through work. These ideas are hard-written into corporate philosophies of tech-companies. Bill Hewlett of Hewlett Packard describes the HP Way as *'the policies and actions that flow from the belief that men and women want to do a good job, a creative job, and that if they are provided the proper environment they will do so.'*

Google's head of People Operations (POps), Lazlo Bock, emphasises that the conditions that satisfy good management are not the obvious perks that Google is famous for; rather it is the generation of beliefs, emotions and values amongst its employees. His job is to manifest a company mission that employees can feel passionate about. The aesthetic becomes, in part, a physical realisation of the company culture. The dissemination, understanding and internalisation of a strong company culture is crucial to this management style. Apple, Google and Facebook all have very distinct cultures:

Google is open, participatory and its design language is fun and colourful; Facebook prefers to decorate it's space minimally allowing its employees to 'hack it'; Apple is secretive and proprietary, it calls its engineers designers and its tech-support 'geniuses'.

Yes, the aesthetics *communicate* innovation, energy, this is no boring corporate place to work, but this is not semiotics, but rather the construction of an active environment in which identity is manipulable. The aesthetics and perks *do* something to the employee; they don't just look enthusiastic, they *really feel it*.

******

This Californian style of management was developed by high-tech companies in the 1940s and 50s, early start-ups that positioned themselves in direct contrast to the rest of corporate America by challenging traditional models of top-down authoritarian management.

They were companies like Hewlett Packard, who originated 'management by wandering around', and Varian Associates, who encouraged their employees to buy into the company through the offer of stock options and a share in profits. While coupling the goals of the individual with the goals of the company through a financial mechanism was not unique to the companies on the West Coast, the high-tech companies along Route 128 in were also producing strong company cultures. But the coupling of ideologies to the realisation of an individual's fundamental desires was particularly successful in Silicon Valley.

It was termed the Silicon Valley Management style (SVM) and borrowed from Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchies of Needs*, a five-stage model of what drives human motivation. At the lowest level of the hierarchy are the essential physiological needs for the survival of the human body. Next comes safety from natural elements, war, violence and instability. Once these basic needs are met, Maslow proposes, humans seek love, belonging and social acceptance, relationships including family and friends. Then comes esteem, respect, self-confidence, competence and self-reliance. Finally, at the top of the hierarchy is self-actualisation; the realisation of the individual's full potential.

Maslow believed that an individual must not only meet the needs lower down on the hierarchy but to master them in order to reach the ones at the top. Maslow's concept of personal fulfilment was influential in business theory at MIT's Sloan School of Management, as well as the counter-culture.

One interpretation of management in the 1960s was Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X described a tendency of management to view the employee as an individual who avoids work where possible, who sees it as a period of time deducted from their life, and so needs to be coerced, disciplined and incentivised to work by close monitoring and control. Through Theory Y, McGregor promoted a different idea: that in fact, individuals wanted their work to be fulfilling and sought opportunities to demonstrate their creativity through it, seeing it as a part of their lives as much as their leisure and family time.

In the 1980s another business management professor, William Ouchi, proposed Theory Z, drawing on his observations of Japanese 'miracle' companies. Employees, he said, want to identify with the company and that their happiness, wellbeing and fulfilment would extend from work into the private realm of their lives and families. He proposed that the creation of a strong company culture with participation from employees in organisational decisions was central to developing loyalty, responsibility and autonomy from within the workers.

The Silicon Valley Style develops McGregor's Theory Y and Ouchi's Theory Z into a company philosophy that is more than profit goals or corporate social responsibility, and goes further than the development of a sense of unity and family in the Japanese model. It is the generation and materialisation of company missions that extend beyond actualisation of the self to realise positive change in wider society. Where once the employees' sense of motivation could be tied directly to the financial performance of the company through the performance of stock, the creation of a company mission ensures that even the most banal work of programming is contributing towards some greater purpose. Part of the work of management is to make these missions tangible through the development of real projects; for example the voicemail-to-twitter application Google launched during the Arab Spring.

It is not discipline that the Silicon Valley company exerts on the individual directly by management, but a process of alignment of the inner desires of employees themselves with the company objective. It is not difficult to produce such rhetoric, given the wide acceptance of the idea that solutions to global problems will be found in technological advancement.

The creation of a good company mission has elements of a narrative, especially a good myth of origin, and it is enacted through the passionate identification with often hyperbolic and global mission statements. In the case of Facebook, a small handbook was placed on every new employees desk when the number of users hit the billion mark. *'Facebook was not originally created to be a company'* reads the cover; the inside page continues *'It was built to accomplish a mission – to make the world more open and connected.'*

Hewlett Packard's *Eleven Rules of the Garage* became an internet sensation after Wired Magazine falsely reported that they originated in 1941 in the wooden Palo Alto Garage where Bill Hewlett and David Packard founded their start-up. In fact they were formulated in 1999 by then CEO Carly Fiorina (Sloan Management School graduate) after instructing an advertising agency to produce a manifesto from Bill Hewlett's biography *The HP Way*. Fiorina loved the concept, but rewrote the rules to suit the new culture of Hewlett Packard, and had a replica of the fabled Palo Alto garage constructed on the lot of HP headquarters for an extensive advertising campaign. Her first rule is *'Believe you can change the world.'* The tenth is *'Believe that together we can do anything.'*

Company missions describe behavioural rules, often expressed in vague terms such as *'be creative, take initiative, take risks'* or *'push at the system'* and *'do what's right.'* Google's motto of *'Don't be Evil'* is reported to have been thought up by a Google engineer, but is now replaced by the non-specific imperative to *'do the right thing'.*

*****

In the SVM the primary objective of the company culture is the eliciting and management of moods, behaviours and attitudes from employees. The term 'emotional labour' was first used by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, and is seen as any work that incorporates the management of a worker's states of being (their emotions, beliefs) in

order to affect the states of being of another (usually their customers). Emotional labour includes the work of flight attendants, call-centre workers, waiting staff, nurses, social workers – typically sectors endorsing *service with a smile*.

There is a critical point that can be taken from Hochshild's work that has implications for the employee of the information economy. She identifies a difference between surface acting and deep acting in the performance of emotional work. Surface acting is the manipulation of outward effects; looking as though one enjoyed the work, or cared about a customer; presenting a demeanour appropriate to the context of the job. It assumes that the private self, which goes home at the end of the shift, is held in reserve. In deep acting the employee undertakes to really feel the emotions required for the performance of her job. Hochschild's crucial observation is that in deep acting, the private realm of the employee is put to work (and in return, the subjectivity created for work enters all areas of life, including the personal and the sexual). In deep acting, there is a blurring between self and corporation. There is no backstage in such a configuration. The values and beliefs of the company become incorporated into the employee's total subjectivity.

*****

Perhaps you believe that it's only the most naïve individuals who would subscribe to these narratives, and whose sense of self is so weak that it can be overcome by such an ideology. Perhaps you believe that there is some special quality that you possess that allows you exemption; that you could shout the mottos enthusiastically, but privately believe something else; that you could accept all the perks, knowingly. But it is precisely in the ambivalence of the employee that the management of subjectivity becomes most effective.

Ambivalence, in the later writings of Sigmund Freud, is an emotion to be guarded against rather than a mechanism of defense itself. The result of such feelings in the employee is either to suppress recognition of the negative aspects of working for the company and embrace its culture, or to employ cynicism and a distancing from that culture. In both cases the subject creates their individualism around the company culture, either in their choosing to embrace it, or reject it, with the belief that they can resist being

affected by it (as they benefit from the perks). Both these methods are seen by Yiannis Gabriel as *'disabling a critical viewpoint'* from where resistance could be made. Cynicism or knowingness is no effective insulator between the self and the corporation.

Such is the strength of the belief in an untouchable core at the centre of the self. We accept the intrusive surveillance of smart phones and social media because of the convenience that they give us, while the same devices collect intimate details about our lives. Despite the obvious asymmetry of the transaction, and our constant worry over the implications of such deep surveillance, we remain connected. Perhaps we feel that at some point we can log off, unjoin Facebook, switch to a Nokia *if* it got too bad. Or do we believe that these algorithms can never really know us, that somewhere inside us, there is a true and infinitely unknowable self that cannot be accessed and quantified?

I think it's worse than that. In our cynicism we become the ideal producers, through our self-distinguishing from what we perceive as the mass market, our sardonic opinions on twitter, individualistic wit on Facebook, and Instagrammed ironic take on the world around us. We'd do better to just 'like' and retweet memes than originate subversive content. As Judith Butler points out, the effectiveness of subversion quickly transforms into cliché, which in turn neutralises its subversive power, particularly since subversion itself carries market value.