

An Interview with Michael Betancourt

by Sean Scanlan

Michael Betancourt is a critical theorist, film theorist, art and film historian, and animator. His principal published works focus on the technologies of visual music, new media art and theory, and formalist study of motion pictures.

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Abstract: Sean Scanlan, *NANO*'s editor, interviews artist, curator, art historian and critical theorist Michael Betancourt to discuss the nature of agnotology, a term that means the “creation of uncertainty and ambivalent ‘fact’; it is a competitive tool incompatible with the idealized ‘free market’ of capitalism.” Betancourt is skeptical of Big Data and the ways that the consumers who unknowingly “produce” data for business interpretation are increasingly becoming transformed into a “token of exchange (valorized) by the database.”

Keywords: agnotology, crisis, capitalism, competition, play, digital capitalism

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Introduction: Michael Betancourt is a theorist, historian, and artist concerned with digital technology and capitalist ideology. His theory of Digital Capitalism is the first materialist analysis of the convergence of globalized financialization, digital technology, and autonomous production. His essays have been translated into Chinese, French, Greek, Italian, Persian, Portuguese, and Spanish, and published in journals such as *CTheory*, *Semiotica*, and *Leonardo*. He was interviewed about his theories on RT network's Keiser Report. For more information, or to locate recent publications, please visit the archive at michaelbetancourt.com.

Over the past few months, Betancourt and Sean Scanlan, *NANO*'s editor, developed one question into this interview through email exchanges.

Sean Scanlan: Thank you for taking the time to talk with *NANO*. To begin, I wonder if you could explain some of your ideas about agnotology and the digital realm. In your book *Agnotology & Crisis in Digital Capitalism* (2013) you raise the argument that there is a very important relationship between hand labor and digital labor, a relationship grounded in the “illusion of production-without-consumption enabled by digital technology and automation” (4). For readers unaware of this potent term, can you briefly unpack agnotology and how this illusion works?

Michael Betancourt: Explaining agnotology requires a few foundational concepts. The most important of these is the “aura of the digital,” which is a description of how the social uses for digital technology create a rupture with our concerns about the physical world, replacing them with an illusion of infinite resources, infinite production, and no costs. This illusion has a wide range of impacts throughout our society and my analysis is concerned with identifying the superstructural basis for those impacts, in effect making them become critically visible so they can be criticized.

The issue with digital production is not really about hand labor or digital labor, it's about how digital production generates an illusion of separation between effects and means—the disconnection between what you do with a computer system, such as download a file from an Internet server, and the resources and physical supports required to make that download possible. This idea appears as the belief that the digital ends “scarcity,” that it eliminates costs and makes everything equally available to everyone. While we as a society consciously know these things cannot be true, at the same time, the behaviors that the “aura of the digital” describes all proceed as if they were true: it is not simply an issue of consumption; it is also (perhaps even more so) a description of expectations for how economic and social policy should be formulated.

The element of labor in all this is only the smallest part of what's happening with digital capitalism: this general rejection of anything built in the physical world, including all the laws, regulations, protections, and social conventions that make society function. Anything that

impedes the expansion of digitally implemented capitalist protocols is conceived as either quaint or an irrelevant vestige that impedes economic “innovation and growth.” This conception is a fundamental element of how these transformations are justified by the defenders of this new economy, an issue that periodically receives acknowledgement in the news; journalist Paul Carr’s discussion from 2012 is typical:

The pro-Disruption argument goes like this: In a digitally connected age, there’s absolutely no need for public carriage laws (or hotel laws, or food safety laws, or... or...) because the market will quickly move to drive out bad actors.

Carr’s summary is to the point; the idea that digital technology negates the need for established protections ignores the harm that happens while waiting for these market-based “corrections.” It is a demonstration of how the aura of the digital eliminates physical impacts from consideration, but his description captures the nature of digital capitalism’s refusal of established social restraints: existing laws are simply an impediment to the expansion of digital technology. Belief in the transcendent aspects of this implementation means there is a blindness to the historical lessons and battles fought to gain the protections that are now simply being ignored. The superficial objectivity of the computer systems that are supposed to somehow replace established protections are simply machinic function—the uniform imposition of whatever ideology informs the design; machines are never impartial, they reify the beliefs they are built to enact. The rhetoric around Bitcoin, the sharing economy, social networks, digital distribution of media, etc. all reflect this process and the (usually implicit) demand that laws be replaced by unregulated, entirely new digital systems where the market will police itself without the need for oversight.

Getting paid for one’s labor is perhaps the most dramatic of the challenges posed by these new digital marketplaces. The shift to automation and digitally autonomous forms of value generation often act to eliminate (paid) labor, transforming formerly non-productive actions into new forms of value that depend on unpaid labor leveraged by pervasive monitoring and other variants of surveillance. The physical labor and resources required to maintain these digital systems, as well as the costs that physical labor inherently has are either minimized or eliminated from consideration. Because labor is the foundation of historical capitalism and its systems of value production, exchange, and preservation, and this historical system is currently dominant, the impacts that digital capitalism has on labor are at one and the same time fundamental challenges to the entire structure of all societies.

Consider how the so-called “sharing economy” operates: a few software companies introduce digital systems to facilitate some type of transaction. These middlemen connect customers with other providers while taking a large share of the transaction fees. But these software companies do not employ the providers—they are simply a medium, making the transaction possible. So the costs associated with whatever service is being provided—whether it’s a hotel room, taxi ride, or anything else—primarily fall on the provider. These are physical costs that are not the concern of the middleman software company, but they are costs for the people who actually do the work. The sharing economy is thus a parasitic exploitation where the physical costs

associated with the business are not a part of the business model at all—nor does the business itself directly address them. This elision is typical of how the aura of the digital hides these concerns with physical resources and costs: CheapHotels, Uber, Airbnb, all of these companies reveal the same underlying process where the physical costs, legal restrictions, and social impacts all disappear from consideration.

The agnotological element is implicit in this entire process: it is what makes these disappearances from consideration seem not only normal but appropriate. Agnotology is a general term for this type of artificially produced ignorance—it is the inability to recognize that the sharing economy or social networking or any of the various big data companies—makes factual statements become controversial, and invites counter arguments about basic information statements. With critiques of sharing economy, for example, companies such as Uber or Lyft, the answer is simply that the company allows people to make use of what they already own to turn a profit from their possessions, a claim that makes these companies sound like they are some type of global rummage sale when they are not. In the case of Uber and Lyft, these are taxi companies where all the costs of the taxi fall on the driver (who is the owner-operator of the car) and the majority of the profits (if not all of them) go to the software company who does not bear the expenses associated with the actual work. And all done without concern for the legality of the business. Only when the local and state attorney’s offices became involved did these companies begin to talk about the legal status of what they were doing. The difficulty of even raising the issue that the drivers are being treated poorly and exploited by this business is the most demonstrative aspect of agnotology. The ready availability of counter arguments to any objection (such as the pro-disruption argument Carr describes) is agnotology in action, making the discussion of what is occurring almost impossible as it becomes difficult to even determine what the facts themselves are.

SS: You began writing about these topics in 1998, on the verge of the first digital revolution. Can you outline some of the momentous changes to how digital capitalism works since then? Could one grasp these changes as being based on newer technologies primarily, or do we need to account for policy changes, administration changes, and even world events such as Twitter revolutions and Snowden’s digital cache?

MB: What I find interesting about digital capitalism is how consistent it is once you recognize the structural logic that produces it. If you go and read either Al Gore or Newt Gingrich’s speeches about computer technology from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, for example, what you will see is this claim that digital technology will enable a new era of wealth production, one unconstrained by physical limitations, scarce resources, or geographic distance—in short, the aura of the digital. This is the same ideology we see in the initial roll-out of Apple’s iPad as a “magical” appliance that should be interposed between you and the world you encounter: this conception is a popular expression of the same positivist view of technology coupled with a transcendent narrative where the physical world simply ceases to matter. This ideological transformation is one that the technology itself reflects: the ways the computers store information and simulate earlier machineries all function to make the aura of the digital happen. The effect of this aura shows how digital systems reify capitalist priorities, reflected in the protocols for *how* our society

has deployed the technology, these priorities then constrain the next generation of innovations and production. However, the relationship between its sources and development become mutually reinforcing and consistent over time—the physical and the immaterial—that is what makes them superstructural effects of and within capitalism.

SS: You make sharp use of Benjamin, Barthes, and Eco (among others), especially the way you update and then leverage their ideas of authenticity, quotation, and mixing. I'd like to ask you a bit about your motivations for theory—for using theory to do scholarly work that has real implications. You state in your postscript that critical theories, especially postmodern theory, must engage not just intellectually, but also culturally and in the actual world; for, as you write, the desire is to avoid being culturally irrelevant, the “resulting critique is not simply an intellectual invention, but an attempt to develop the logical implications of those technologies—related against their actual uses in the political economy” (119). I like this idea, and I was hoping that you could expand on it.

MB: Developing any new piece of theory is hard. The general framework that theory represents doesn't just appear *sui generis*, out of a vacuum. It has a relationship to earlier theory, expanding, challenging, or altering it to develop new relationships that earlier work doesn't or can't produce. There are very real demands made on such writing (most especially to get it published), that it demonstrate these connections explicitly in the course of its explanation-development. So, while much of the actual theory itself may be novel, its presentation can never focus primarily on these new developments—the argument must instead present itself through relationships: making novel ideation seem less so. It is a rhetorical technique in writing theory where the novel masquerades as the familiar.

I regard my own work as having an empirical bias in its construction, and this requirement keeps my work focused on observables: things that once identified by theory become easily recognizable. This connection makes the applications for my theory work in many ways self-explanatory, giving the analysis an expansive quality exceeding what actually appears in the text. Grounding theory in specific details and observable features of both historical texts and contemporary social developments links its descriptive character to our shared social constructs. I think this linkage is essential for theory to offer critical models that can impact human agency—for a theory to offer the possibility for changes to society, the audience needs to understand not just the theory's claims but how it models our world. Every theory offers not only a description of the present or immediate past, but suggests expectations for future developments, even though these will often be implicit. These undeveloped predictions a theory offers in expansion are much more important than the observations it provides—this is where the quality of its modeling becomes important and the linkages between theory and application matter. Theory shouldn't be only a game of “what-if” disconnected from its ramifications on policy and human activity because it *will* have impacts. My work simply begins with that recognition.

The models that people use to construct their understanding of the world around us matter: they determine which options we recognize and which ones we ignore; they establish parameters

and limit our horizons of expectation accordingly. Such constraints are present in any theory we use to understand our world, the connections are always already there, an inherent feature of human thought. The concern for my work is whether what I'm doing opens up spaces for consideration and analysis or simply repeats what we already know, closing off further development. The issue is one of dogmatism and risk: too strong an embrace of established models can lead to their unquestioned acceptance; too many structural challenges and the theory risks becoming a new dogma. The challenge is to produce something that is radically new, but modifies existing theory in such a way that change becomes possible because the radical aspects are not immediately apparent. These dynamics are what make writing theory difficult. It's the difference between creation of your own work and the application of someone else's ideas. One of the more direct ways to keep the focus on opening new areas for consideration is to insist on a connection between theory and the social.

Human society is active. Theory provides a way to model its complexity in useful ways, but we need to remember that society as an aggregate responds to these models. It incorporates the new ideas posed by theory, but also has a certain degree of churn in which older concepts resurface in new configurations, changing the apparent structure of those earlier forms (without necessarily changing their meaning). Theory needs to adapt as a result of this dynamic: it works precisely because these transformations are what make cultures coherent, as they are continuously re-incorporating newer configurations and developments. Our critical models need to adapt to what's happening; links to earlier theory are increasingly necessary to analyze how the present differs from the past. The world that Benjamin was attempting to describe, much like Marx, no longer exists. To assume that their theories are necessarily an accurate description of the present is a logical fallacy; my own work is an attempt to address the changes brought about by these theories being assimilated and incorporated. Their now-historical critiques cannot be entirely accurate given how social structures have changed in response to their work, which means their theoretical accounts of the world will necessarily produce conclusions that do not match empirical observations of what is happening in contemporary society. This situation is true for any theory: the creation of new models is thus an on-going problem.

SS: It seems like your ideas on the housing bubble in chapter 4, "The Scarcity of Capital," exemplify, perfectly, the immaterial, digital capitalism that you unfold in the opening of your book. I wonder if a similar process is at work at corporations like Twitter, which now manipulates feeds based on monetized algorithms—à la Facebook. Can you explore this trend, and possibly comment on the newest facebookish spin-off called Ello, which is an ad-free social media platform?

MB: All of those internet-based systems that were collectively known as "web 2.0"—of which social media is the most commercially vibrant example—depend on pervasive monitoring of their users. This continuous, omnipresent surveillance is only possible with a combination of high speed computers, low cost data storage, and various kinds of nearly unseen government sponsorship, such as those built-in to the US tax codes to encourage the kinds of physical investments this monitoring requires. All of this surveillance serves a dual purpose, both a commercially-oriented valorization of social activities, and an intrusive (yet secretive) predictive

modeling of future choices by individuals that big data enables for its users: corporate marketing and governments. The databases thus generated make no distinctions in their use, and so it's difficult to distinguish between the form of tracking-modeling of behavior by one group and another since they use the same tools in much the same way—the differences are more about intent and purpose than the data itself; the use of data is evidence for these intentions. The distinctions among companies such as Facebook, Google, or Twitter are really only a matter of scale and degree. They are all employing basically the same technology for similar ends.

A social network such as Ello, if I'm reading their claims and manifesto correctly, is an attempt to rebuild the model of social media without the pervasive monitoring. There is a certain amount of irony in that if you click the buttons attached to their manifesto, it invites you to give them your social media identifiers by sharing your agreement or disagreement on a much wider range of platforms than is typical. However, the way Ello is doing this construction is much like early Facebook or Google's Gmail service when they began—via exclusivity. If you aren't "the right sort" you aren't allowed to join, which in this case means being part of the social networks that this organization wants to integrate. The elitist aspect of this construction should be obvious. Their lack of openness suggests that there are very specific interests at work in the construction of this open and free system, but those interests are not immediately apparent from looking at the site. The things to ask about any project such as this one are: who is this network focused on attracting, and who is paying its bills?

SS: I especially like how you bring older cultural and socioeconomic theories to bear on current crises, thereby making them new. And you are also adept at using certain observations as the catalyst for pushing new theories to account for them...much like one of my favorite current sociologists Zygmunt Bauman who says in *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers* (2008) that globalization's speed and intensity creates a situation that compels critics to always play catch-up, to always be on the lookout for new tools: "we desperately need a new framework, one that can accommodate and organize our experience in a fashion that allows us to perceive [globalization's] logic and read its message" (2). Along these lines, what do you think the next trend in late capitalist theories will be? What is the next digital emergency on the horizon and how should we deal with it? Does your current research or creative work address the future in the way I'm describing?

MB: I have never been a fan of this phrase "late capitalism." It sounds like capitalism is dying and will soon be over—when quite the opposite has happened. The structural challenges to capitalism posed by digital automation and technologies don't appear to be a sign of its end so much as a fundamental shift towards a more primitive, brutal form of accumulation and assault on the social organization of human society. The problems posed by attempts to critique and engage this capitalism are hidden by these digital technologies and the ideology that informs them. What makes digital capitalism difficult to address is not a mercurial nature (it is constant and self-consistent), but its valorization process: obvious, direct criticism is absorbed and adopted as part of this expansion. These procedures develop in ways outside the scope of historical critiques in part because those critiques (even when they acknowledged this tendency to colonize the social) were concerned with the assumption of an external critical position. There

is no exterior. This realization does not eliminate or invalidate the potential for critical understandings; neither does it invalidate critiques as being complicit with their subject—both of these beliefs are nihilist sophistry, apologia for not engaging. They are visible impediments to the development of theoretical models such as those in my work.

My theories begin as something primarily descriptive—designed to be specific and familiar, but also addressing general problems posed by digital technology; they are a critique of those developments associated with the widespread implementation of digital technology to reify capitalist production. The difficulty that digital capitalism presents when it encounters the social originates with how the physical consistently disappears from consciousness when engaging these devices—it is a reified transcendence, one that obstructs critical engagement directly; everything I have written as a theorist is concerned with futurity, with the creation of “analytic tools” that produce a critical understanding of these dynamics. It is not an issue of describing minor or isolated phenomena. The challenge is to shift our critical focal points from these immanent developments to the forces that enable their progression, shifting the object of analysis from observations of epiphenomena to the unseen processes that produce those surface features.

But the short answer to your question is yes.

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