

Mood as Political Hermeneutic

Paranoia is the mood du jour for the here and now. The news is fake. Trump is a puppet for Russia. The economy is on the verge of collapse. Everything is toxic—toxic waste, toxic culture, toxic institutions. “Is it paranoia if the world really is toxic?” Paranoia splits the world in two: one idealized and rife with utopian possibility, the other toxic and deadly.

Moods like paranoia transcend single experiences or events. They dispose us to the world and politics—warping perception, filtering everyday life—and direct us toward some objects and away from others. This is why one philosopher says that we don’t have moods, but rather, they have us.¹

But who or what has them?

Paranoia has you; it uses you. Paranoia is the affect par excellence of instrumentalism, of the rationalizing sciences of logistics, infrastructure, and supply chain management. What could happen, the logistics wizards ask, what could conceivably happen to this container full of flat packed IKEA furniture as it journeys from factory to port, as it is hoisted onto a gigantic ship and traverses the ocean, as it is hoisted onto a truck and heads to the warehouse? Only piracy, raids, industrial actions, fraud and bribery, theft, vandalism, occupation. Their paranoia is what keeps the cargo safe.

In ancient Greek, *para* (irregular) and *noos* (mind) together form “distracted.” The Left is preoccupied with pointing out all that distracts—the culture industry, media spectacle, consumerism, identity politics. The question, however, isn’t what distracts but how distraction—how paranoia—can be put to use. If mood has us, how do we use mood to move and transport new socialities, to build a supply chain and distributed network of political feeling that exceeds the toxic infrastructures of global capitalism?

One reason paranoia has such valence is that the current moment feels like *déjà vu*—or at least that’s how some of us sometimes talk about

it. What will be Trump's Reichstag fire? Are the authoritarian regimes installed or supported by the United States on behalf of neoliberal capital finally coming full circle? We should be wary of the impulse to indulge this sense of *déjà vu*, warns Paolo Virno. If *déjà vu* is the experience of an actual past, then all presents are potential *déjà vus*, thus prescribing the future and foreclosing its possibilities. *Déjà vu*, he says, is a "mnestic pathology" that attaches us to a pseudopast, rigidly bookending the here and now.²

Another fatally seductive paranoid response is the naïve epiphany. This distorts our sense of where the present moment fits in history. "One reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm," wrote Walter Benjamin shortly before his death. He went on to deride those who stood in amazement, unable to believe that "the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible." This amazement, he wrote, "is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."³

How, then, do we trust what we know? How do we trust memory? *Can* we trust memory? Capital and the state would certainly answer yes, because memory means the collection of copious data. This functions as memory because it is meaningful and valuable for modeling and predicting consumer behavior and state economies, for policing and counterterrorism, and for advancing robotics, AI, and biotechnology. For us, memory is the precondition for a subaltern history, be it in archives, national mythologies, oral and visual recollections, collective trauma, or (paradoxically) collective amnesia. Memory qua subaltern history, necessarily incomplete, is pitted against the positivist reliability of memory qua data.

Let's reject the language of trust, with all its connotations of reliable truth and financial investment. What if instead of trusting in memory we allow mood to be a political hermeneutic or an affective map (to borrow from Jonathan Flatley) that guides us to multiple pasts and futures? And even as mood is inevitably shaped by capitalism, the state, and other powerful entities, it is also indeterminate and excessive. Mood informs the sensuousness and emotional texture of life, and in that sense it draws us to the aesthetic dimension.

This aesthetic dimension is of course a feature of late capitalism, and yet, it is not, we must assume, fully subsumed by it. Some affects have been flattened, but other, emotions, sensations, currents of feeling without name, have been elaborated, transmitted, put to use. The organization of affect and mood by the transmission of signs, images, Wi-Fi signals, infrastructural modifications, and even the availability of food takes the form of an interface with productive processes that spread across the entire domain of the *socius*. Who would believe, now, that elevator music was once the *avant-garde*?⁴

And yet, our sensibilities, our feelings as yet uncolonized or those seeking liberation, appear as a resource, both as historical residuum and as emergent constellation of a set of relations, kinds of feelings that index another affective array, a moody arrangement or a “not yet,” as José Esteban Muñoz might have said. Utopian sensations are not, of course, the only ones we feel in the smelter of violence that overcodes our path, our communions. Receiving affective stimulation, converting it into affective transmission, creating a mood, is both a response to market forces and current conditions and a strategy of liberation.

Hollywood has long been aware of the utility of mood as a political hermeneutic. *It's a Wonderful Life*, Frank Capra tells us, as he asks us to compare the family-run munificence of small-town whiteness with the anonymous Pottersville saloon, a space of urban ethnic anomie. More recently, a film like Dreamworks' *Trolls* plays out a hermeneutic of mood in its efforts to tell an exodus narrative. It hardly seems coincidental that Dreamworks should release the film only four days before the US presidential elections. But unlike the Internet troll who got elected, the animated Dreamworks trolls are not villains—quite the opposite.

A full reading of the film would have to take into account the ways it engages with the exodus narrative, Masada, settler colonialism, the history of slavery, and other touchstones of revolution and emancipation. The important thing about it, for the purpose of understanding mood as a political hermeneutic, is the way it places the pursuit of happiness at the center of its narrative. The trolls are the embodiment of happiness. Constantly looking on the bright side, they sing and dance themselves out of danger and pessimism. Every half hour, there is a chime and someone announces that it is hug time.

Pursuing the trolls, and the happiness they bear inside them, is the mission of the other population in the film, the hideously ugly creatures called Bergens who—until the epic escape that launches the film's narrative—imprison the trolls in a tree at the center of Bergentown. The jewel-colored trolls hang from the tree like decorations, to be consumed once a year in a ritual feast the Bergens call Trollstice. This decorated tree is a constant reminder of the happiness that the Bergens are missing.

In Bergentown, like Pottersville, depression abounds. We see a Bergen lying in his own grave, troweling earth onto his own body. Another walks past, a book in hand, tearing all the pages out. Another goes round all the flowerbeds with clippers, chopping off every flower's head. The first verse of “Clint Eastwood,” by the Gorillaz, drones on the soundtrack.

At the film's climax, when the trolls seem surely destined for the cooking pot, one of the main characters, an irrepressibly chirpy creature called Princess Poppy, finally loses the source of her happiness, which is her capacity for hope. As her hope leaches away, so does her bright

pink coloring. She becomes a gray husk, and all the other trolls, standing around her watching aghast, start to turn into gray husks themselves.

It is at this moment that the trolls at last become political subjects. The atomistic bonds of the collective will, channeled through the voice of Justin Timberlake singing the Cyndi Lauper hit “True Colors,” are more powerful than depression. A chime goes off, announcing hug time, and the trolls draw near to each other, gradually regaining their colors and their political will.

After the 2016 presidential election, many of us felt like trolls in the cooking pot, gray and colorless. And we felt useless, used up, unable to maintain the collective energy that the Bergens of capitalist democracy want to extract for themselves. We took to the streets, we took to Twitter, but when we were home by ourselves we were gray little husks. Our happiness, the happiness of others, mattered not at all in the United States of Bergentown, its borders policed by fantasies of big, beautiful walls.

The Bergens, signifying capitalist incorporation, hate and desire the trolls at the same time. Lefties need to remind ourselves of this: we, like the trolls, have something precious in our bonds of political affection, that the ethos of care and partying that the trolls embody is *our* ethos too. If there is one thing the trolls are not, it’s paranoid. This almost leads to their downfall, as they are unable to recognize a traitor in their midst. But on the bright side, they don’t seem at all interested in the Internet.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
2. Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*.
3. Benjamin, “Theses on Philosophy of History,” 257.
4. Lanza, *Elevator Music*.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “Theses on Philosophy of History.” In *Illuminations*, 253–64. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Flatley, Jonathan. 2008. *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Lanza, Joseph. 2004. *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Virno, Paolo. 2015. *Déjà Vu and the End of History*. New York: Verso Books.