

Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons

Willem van Weelden

Review – November 1, 2009

Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers in association with the Institute of Network Cultures, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, 2008, ISBN 9789056626631, 240 pages

Twenty years after the introduction of the postmodern 'delirium', the notion launched by Jean Baudrillard in his famous thriller *Fatal Strategies*, the problem of finding a diagnosis of our times and a cultural critique that is not the victim of the many-headed monster of 'hyperreality' is still urgent. Baudrillard introduced the term in order to point out the loss of our ability to describe reality simply yet in all its fullness. Inspired by Marshall McLuhan, he supported his theory by emphasizing that the nature of human relationships is determined by the forms of communication employed. But this very fact opens the way to what is ultimately a self-referential way of thinking which, in the final analysis, only problematicizes one's own choices and orientations. Society as a functioning whole can only be indirectly understood as a self-referential framework ending in the zero degree of its own thought. This methodical problem, this 'aporia', still seems to exert a traditional weight on the shoulders of the writer and researcher Matteo Pasquinelli, whose *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* is a brave attempt at throwing off the historical burden and escaping from this theoretical narcosis and melancholy.

But it would be silly to judge this unusual book solely on whether this escape has succeeded, since Pasquinelli rummages through a lot more. What makes the book special is that it uses the concept of the bestiary (even though only three animals are presented) to provide an ideological critique of the culture industry and of what is currently happening in network culture, such as the media landscape of terrorist warfare and Internet porn. The book moreover attempts to provide an answer to the question as to how this analysis could be used to think about the establishment of a digital commons. To be perfectly clear, Pasquinelli sees the commons as a broad social given, and not just as Creative Commons, an alternative concept for copyright. He starts out from a more general idea of a common as a way of basing issues regarding property or deriving rights not on traditional market thinking but on openness, communalism and shared responsibility – in short, on a new sociality. *Animal Spirits* should therefore be seen primarily as an affirmative political study of the conditions that would contribute to such an endeavour.

In order to give a good description of the arena in which the struggle over the commons is being fought, he opens with an appeal to take as a guiding principle the 'animal spirit' that he sees everywhere in network culture. Borrowing from the theories of John Maynard Keynes, who saw in this animal spirit precisely the unpredictable human driving force of economic cycles, and in line with the recent work of the neo-neo-Marxist Paulo Virno (see the [interview with Virno](http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismension-of-art) [www.onlineopen.org/the-dismension-of-art] in Open nr. 17), Pasquinelli advocates a revision of the theoretical perspective. The dirtiness and brutality and intrinsic conflict of today's network reality should be taken seriously as a precondition and not be theoretically, aesthetically or rhetorically glossed over under the unction of

good intentions, sterile utopias of horizontality and the celebration of the paradigm ‘information wants to be free’. He sets against this credo of the Free Culture movement the hard, material reality that might or might not provide us with access to some culture or other, and points out that the accumulation of information simultaneously nourishes forms of speculation and new communication monopolies. For Pasquinelli, thinking about a common also therefore implies an investigation into the broader material impact and consequences of the deployment of cultural capital.

In his elaboration of this conceptual programme he then deals with three phantasmagoric monsters: the managerial parasite (derived from Michel Serres’s *The Parasite*) of the digital commons, the hydra (a mythical many-headed, dragon-like snake) of the cleansing of the ‘creative cities’, and the double-headed eagle of power and desire that governs the media landscape of war and porn. For him, the parasite stands for the completely parasitical relationships that have taken over the production of knowledge in cognitive capitalism, whereby work, politics and art are inextricably entangled and mutual dependence and exploitation are the rule – a circumstance that seriously blocks the creation of a healthy political opposition or conflict. Conflict is completely watered down in accordance with the micro-politics of relationships of dependence. The culture of ‘dog eats dog’ runs rampant. According to Pasquinelli, there is no room for a naive trust in the inherent goodness of the human species. He sees Web 2.0 as offering no utopian guarantee that the horizontality of knowledge production will turn out for the good, although he does not exclude this as a possibility, as long as we are aware of the animal machinations. A powerful example that he uses to analyse these machinations, one which in his view represents the ultimate basis of the knowledge economy, is the enormous increase in property speculation, which is the material shadow of the ‘creative commons’. After 20 years of ideological misunderstandings and two years of credit crisis, says Pasquinelli, we now have a chance of abolishing the longstanding asymmetry between the squatters movement and Internet activism. The crisis in the financial markets is ensuring both the collapse of the symbolic, immaterial value which manifests itself online and a physical depreciation in the property market, for example. Pasquinelli sees a chance here for achieving a communal creative sabotage of the system, which can be used to provide a contribution to a common – at a symbolic, representative and material level.

Despite these fruitful theoretical interventions and ardent appeals for practical analysis and action, there’s still something that doesn’t gel. Pasquinelli wants to do too much within too short a scope, which means that his insights are not thoroughly thought out. You can already sense this at the beginning of the book – you keep searching in the introduction for the eventual position assumed by Pasquinelli, and for what he actually has in his sights in his analysis of the zoo of *Animal Spirits*. With elegance and inventiveness he jumps into the theoretical dance around the right way to view the abysses of previous failures and excesses, but in this break-dance he reveals too little faith in his own bestial right, and the connection between theoretical insight and materialistic elaboration is not completely satisfactory. His *Animal Spirits* is not quite the moving body of a new political practice. That is certainly no easy ambition, and Pasquinelli can only be commended for having made this salto bestiale. At any rate, it’s a real relief that we again have a funky book to get excited about, with or without a Potere Operaismo 2.0 as decor.

Willem van Weelden is an Amsterdam-based teacher, lecturer and independent writer on new media culture, media theory and interaction design.

Crosslinks

The Dismear of Art: www.onlineopen.org/the-dismear-of-art

Tags

Commons, Philosophy

This text was downloaded on February 3, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/animal-spirits-a-bestiary-of-the-commons