



Wearing the world like a debt garment: Interface, affect, and gesture

Gregory J. Seigworth

abstract

What happens when the relationship to credit and debt becomes more about a body's 'going through the motions', more about touch or gesture than about belief or guilt (or sin)? In what ways then does living-with-debt gradually and continuously alter the atmosphere of existence, weaving through and between bodies as a garment to be rhythmically engaged – worn loosely or tightly – and never too easily shrugged off? How should we understand the contact zones, infrastructures, and interfaces where credit and debt are managed, habituated, eluded? Bookended by scenes from *Feed* (a young adult's dystopian science fiction tale of life under real subsumption in late-capitalism), this essay will pursue various 'threads' toward an ontology of debt – moving beyond the realm of the economic to also consider the ethological, ecological, existential, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of indebtedness in our era of affective capitalism.

...how to elaborate debt as embodied; i.e. what could be called, for the lack of a better word, "affective capitalism", where the *affect* bit refers to the bodily and often non-cognitive states and excitations; of desires and impulses; whether in the brain or in the gut. Could this be connected to the wider interest in brain sciences in the context of digital culture (interface design)? (Parikka, 2011: blogpost)

First thing felt¹

In an early scene from M. T. Anderson's young adult sci-fi novel *Feed* (2002), the story's teenage protagonist Titus wakes up somewhere on the moon – on the morning after his wireless brain-feed had been hacked at a dance-club – to discover that something even more sinister and truly unsettling has transpired.

The first thing I felt was no credit.

I tried to touch my credit, but there was nothing there.

I felt like I was in a little room.

My body – I was in a bed, on top of my arm, which was asleep, but I didn't know where. I couldn't find the Lunar GPS to tell me. (Anderson, 2002: 35)

Credit or, in this case, its absence is a thing to be felt, a point of contact, accessed by touch. Meanwhile, the body as a whole is adrift, and with parts (sleeping arm) out of place. Both of these details – the relation of credit and debt to our sense of embodiment (and disembodiment) – will prove instructive for the aims of this essay. But to linger for a moment longer over this 'first thing felt'... why does the seemingly more pertinent matter (where am I? where is the rest of me?) follow *after* the tactile inquiry that Titus makes about his credit? In what kind of future, does the contact with credit precede the relation to one's own limbs, to one's entire body, to one's sense of place in the world (even if that world is the moon)?

Meanwhile back on present-day Planet Earth, Bill Maurer – in his book *How would you like to pay? How technology is changing the future of money* (2015) – investigates the potentials that have arisen at the intersection of mobile money and digital currency. Maurer maintains that the basic factors giving contour and tempo to our everyday experience with money are fairly straightforward: 'Existing behavior. Existing infrastructure. Backgrounded technology' (2015: 18). For one brief moment though he does wonder aloud about the ways that the emergence of 'wearable computing, the so-called Internet of Things, and new distributed [payment] systems' bears upon the question 'how *should* we like to pay? What are the moral and philosophical aspects of payment that the collision of new technologies and money brings to the fore?' (28). Although answers to these questions are beyond the immediate scope of Maurer's book, it is precisely the moral and philosophical aspects that arise with the intertwining of new

1 This essay is indebted to lots of folks who read or listened and then responded with insights and suggestions. In no particular order: Jennifer Daryl Slack, Matt Tiessen, the editors of this issue (especially Lotta Kähkönen), Andrew Murphie, Jussi Parikka, Joe Deville, Robert Seesengood, and Jenna Supp-Montgomerie.

technologies, money-practices, and the affective capacities of a body that will join up as the prime focus here.

Beginning with a brief traversal through debt and morality, this essay will – through a set of loosely connected sections that I’ll refer to as ‘threads’ – take up the adaptive behaviors, the algorithmically-refined interfaces & infrastructures, and ubiquitous technologies of mundane credit-debt practices that have come to array or drape themselves about and through the body as a kind of garment: what I am calling a ‘debt garment.’ Repurposing the words of St. Francis of Assisi who advised that one should ‘*wear the world as a loose garment, which touches us in a few places and there lightly*’ I will endeavor to show how – through ongoing processes of touch, even if only the barest wisp of a touch or the slightest flourish of a gesture – we find ourselves today wearing the world as a debt garment. Its weaves and folds are composed of the soft modulations that Gilles Deleuze claimed were the subtle suturing points and supple guidance systems that contribute to contemporary processes of subjectification within ‘societies of control.’ Unlike the segmented ‘molds’ and institutional encasements of disciplinary societies, Deleuze argues that, in our era, ‘control’ is much more about free-range undulations and the data-sampling derivations of cybernetic meshworks, continuous and unbounded. As such, Deleuze adds: we might speak then ‘no longer [of] a man confined, but a man in debt’ (1995: 181).

It is through attention to the lived socialities of debt that I hope to gradually pry apart the parentheses in Jussi Parikka’s epigraph regarding affective capitalism and its implications with the increasingly fluid ontologies of interface design. At this essay’s close, I will return to *Feed’s* Titus and the affective atmospheres that permeate the gestural space of his own body following its full re-immersion in the tactile interface-affordances of credit and debt. But this time, in his renewed awareness of the ways that he is perpetually wearing the world as a debt garment (where the lightest touch is smothering), Titus tears at the hem and seams of the debt garment interface: pushing, feeling, depleting, tracking its system-wide movements, punishing himself all the while. Far beyond the reaches of any kind of atonement. Until there is no credit left to touch.

Thread #1: A somewhat breathless and miniature genealogy of debt / guilt

In a previously unpublished writing-fragment ‘Capitalism as religion’ (written in 1921), Walter Benjamin begins by confidently – if not also somewhat breathlessly – enumerating the three [but wait, no, four!] aspects of the religious structure of capitalism: (1) Not simply mimicking the structure of religion but operating in precisely the same practical and conceptual space as religion – just even more

excessively, capitalism is ‘a purely cultic religion’ (1921/1996: 288) such that it demands (2) ever greater fealty from each of its worshippers (‘no “weekdays” in capitalism: every day is Sunday in ‘all its sacred pomp’ [*ibid.*]) and (3) by growing so large in its expansion of despair and guilt that capitalism engulfs even God, ‘to the point where God, too, finally takes on the entire burden of guilt, to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret *hope*... until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation’ (*ibid.*: 289). Within capitalism’s cult, Benjamin continues, God ‘is not dead; he has been incorporated into human existence’ but remains, at the same time, ‘hidden’ and ‘addressed only when his guilt is at its zenith’ (*ibid.*: 4).

Benjamin readily acknowledges of course that it is Nietzsche, in *On the genealogy of Morals*, who got here first, proclaiming that his philosophical understanding of the ‘paradigm of capitalist religious thought is magnificently formulated’ (*ibid.*: 289). In Nietzsche, the whole discourse of indebtedness parasites Christianity, becoming a morality play in parallel: concerned with its own historically particular construction of capitalist subjectivity around guilt and obligation and conscience and interiority (although Benjamin notes that this parasitic relationship of capitalism to Christianity in the West eventually undergoes a reversal). Hence, for instance, Nietzsche cannot help but call attention to the etymology of the German word *Schuld*; says Nietzsche: ‘the major moral concept *guilt* [Schuld] has its origins in the very material concept *debts* [Schulden]’ (cited in Conway, 2008: 61). It is a congruence that Benjamin refers to as ‘the demonic ambiguity of this word’ (1921/1996: 289) And, to some extent then, Benjamin’s fragment efficiently sketches – in miniature – Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, as well as his notion of ‘the eternal return’, to describe how the ‘intensification and development’ of capitalism depends upon an ever-accumulating, continually proliferating recirculation of debt / guilt that finally grows ‘right through the sky’, breaking open the heavens (*ibid.*).

But almost as soon as Benjamin manages to capture the Nietzschean genealogy in this highly condensed form, he sputters out a few short paragraphs later (name-checking Freud and Marx along the way): first writing himself a brief in-text memo about the need to work up a comparison ‘between the images of the saints of various religions and the banknotes of different states’ (*ibid.*: 290), followed by a long list of references to be further explored. But Benjamin does offer one partially fleshed-out paragraph at the close of the fragment about how ‘the first heathens certainly did not believe that religion served a “higher”, “moral” interest but that it was severely practical’ and, thus, ‘religion did not achieve any greater clarity than about its “ideal” or “transcendental” nature than modern capitalism does today’ (*ibid.*). This seems perhaps a slightly off-kilter

assertion, one that is at least partially out-of-sync with those more standard readings of Nietzsche's Christianity/capitalism mutual parasitism. It is as if Benjamin is saying: fealty to or belief in such structures, in the end, has less to do with morality or guilt or conscience or sin (as any kind of interiority or trajectory of redemption or transcendence) but, rather, is more connected to what is divulged through, say, more 'practical' externalizations and sets of outwardly directed acts as found across bodies, gestures, surfaces.

This is not unlike what Deleuze and Guattari, via their own uptake of Nietzsche in their *Anti-Oedipus*, trace out in their genealogy of the debtor-creditor relationship: not something derived through relations of exchange and mutualized states of obligation and reciprocity but, even more, forged through modes of inscription, markings, and codings (1971/1983: 190). The prime focus of these inscription-processes is the body (historically, at first, the body as a brute, physical entity but, later, located more within the adjacent atmospheres of a body's capacities / affects). Additionally, like Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that, in securing fidelity to the project of capitalism, an inner-dwelling sense of belief is not required –

the capitalist is merely striking a pose when he bemoans the fact that nowadays no one believes in anything any more. Language no longer signifies something that must be believed, it indicates rather what is going to be done...Moreover, despite the abundance of identity cards, files, and other means of control, capitalism does not even need to write in books to make up for the vanished body markings. (*ibid.*: 250)

In the transitions from sovereign to disciplinary to control societies, debt, say Deleuze and Guattari, has become simply 'a debt of existence, a debt of the existence of the subjects themselves' (*ibid.*:197). From actions taken directly upon – marking – a body (sovereign) to those enclosures that come to bear upon the souls of a citizenry (disciplinary) to the 'self-transmuting' weavings that transpire throughout and alongside the real-time movements and habitualized patternings of daily existences (control), we glimpse the dim outlines of making of a debt garment – perhaps growing looser or more intangible over time in some ways (in an era of flexibility, convenience, all-access) and yet tighter in others (with, for instance, the impersonal encroachments of various check-mechanisms, data-gatherings, and profiling machines).

All this goes toward saying that more traditional Nietzschean-based conceptualizations of debt that adhere closely to its initiating moralizations are no longer as entirely applicable to contemporary processes of subject-formation; the wages of sin and the bearings of guilt do not circle around and impinge upon a body – on any and every 'body' – in the ways that they once might have. While

there may be the vestiges of some residual form of morality-as-social-obligation still at work up and down the line of current entanglements of credit and debt, the affective frissons of guilt and conscience and belief do not quite operate with the same force or along the same vectors as they once (or ever?) did.

Thread #2: Materializing debt, or, debt has a hand in making and destroying worlds.

Despite a great deal of (worthy) attention given to the calculative and speculative ambience of today's credit and debt practices, debt is – and always has been – material: affectively so. Long before the time when old materialisms were new again, there was the ancient belief in the matter of our inextricable bindings to each other and to our world through an immanent and mutually constitutive indebtedness. In fact, the earliest known philosophical utterance in the Western World is a fragment credited to Anaximander (c.610–c.546 BCE) that, in one translation, reads:

The beginning of all beings is the unbounded and *from there* is the coming to be of all things and *into there* is also their passing away according to necessity and they pay each other their justified debt and penance for their injustice according to the law of time. (cited in Gillespie 2013: 57)

For Anaximander, every being (human or non-) arises from and returns to undifferentiated matter – what he called the 'apeiron' which has been translated variously as the 'unbounded' or the 'unlimited' or the 'infinite' (Gillespie, 2013: 56–57). But in that moment in the *capacity for* coming to be and of taking – however briefly – consistency of form, each being (and all beings) accrue debts to one another and to an always-more-than-'natural' world.

We then should never forget to remind ourselves that debt's ontology binds us to the never-less-than inherently social and relational: despite any ongoing attempts to get each us to imagine that we must finally bear our debts individually / personally. In his *The social life of money*, Nigel Dodd says matter-of-factly:

Debt is arguably what makes money social, defining its capacity to be what Simmel called a claim upon society. Or to express this in another way, it is debt's fundamental sociality that makes it possible for money to exist. (2014: 92)

But I would hasten to add (and Dodd would no doubt agree) that this sociality of debt – a debt that arises at the very moment of one's coming into existence – is never fully sealed up or sealed off from the world as a whole; debt and the social are never solely constituted by the human.

So, although we might primarily think of debt in strictly quasi-moral and monetary terms, debt is likewise always and necessarily *ecological* and *ethological*. Debts arise as the processual or lived-relations to the immanence of the world, of a world, of singular worldings, or what Jakob von Uexküll referred to as a creature's 'umwelt': the interleaved milieu where it becomes impossible for a body and its world (or a world and its bodies) to ever be sifted out as fully separable entities. Thus, any critical discourse of debt must endeavor to unfold the variety of ways that relationships of credit / debt can be alternately world-making and unmaking: and, in ways that do, by necessity, always fold the other-than-/more-than-human into their composition.

Thread #3: Debt always marks an imbalance, a mismatch of resources and rhythms.

Credit / debt relationships are, by the very nature of their taking-place and by their ensuing trajectories, *asymmetrical*. It probably goes without saying that, around the issues of credit and debt, questions of access, power and lived potentials / precarities are arrayed or distributed unevenly across spaces and, especially, passages of time. An all-at-once collective and singularizing arrhythmia – sometimes barely perceptible, while at other times impossible to ignore – has long marked the expansion / contraction of human–nonhuman bonds as credit and debt. And, thus the constitutive materialities of credit and debt can never be fully discharged. That is one way to understand what Anaximander might have meant by the rising and falling rhythms (the bindings and dissipations) of 'injustice according to the law of time'. The cumulative asymmetries / arrhythmias of human indebtedness to the whole matter of each other (and the entirety of impersonal matter that transcends any such intimate relatedness) can offer one way of registering this reciprocating-but-thoroughly-uneven worlding: the anthropocene, then, as simply the tipping point when the ecological debts owed by humans to the world strikes an irreconcilable imbalance.

Thread #4: Living debt today: a new aesthetics of existence, often a time of bare existence.

Immediately after Deleuze remarked that 'A man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt', he hastened to add that, with so much of humanity 'too poor to have debts and too numerous to be confined: control will have to deal not only with vanishing frontiers, but with mushrooming shantytowns and ghettos' (1995: 181). The accountings of debt and credit in control societies take on a wider compass here – not merely concerned with biological life or even less cognitive

life, but, more precisely, as Maurizio Lazzarato argues, focusing on ‘existential life’ or, that is, as he continues: existence as ‘the force of self-positioning, the choices that found and bear with them modes and styles of life’ and, hence, in debt we find a renewed emphasis upon the way that ‘the material of money is [grounded] not in labor time, but the time of existence’ (2012: 60). Debt long preceded market exchange and wage-labor as the chief means for securing the ties of human beings to the ongoing organization of the social. However, for a time – stretching from the late industrial age through the mid-20th Century Fordist era (when the ascendancy of productive capital and wage-labor served as the foregrounded bases for most efficiently holding social relations together) – the creation of debt as a prime project for subjectivation within the social fell briefly into eclipse in the West particularly. But it is now, once more, the intimacies and abstractions of everyday credit-and-debt management that have reasserted themselves, beginning in the mid-1970s and surging more fully into the present. Debt returns with a vengeance (see: the re-emergence of new debtor prisons) as an effectively pre-primed and deep-seated suturing mechanism for fastening broken and frayed affective ties to the sub- and supra-personal conditions of sociality, as a chief marker for the time of existence itself.

This ‘renewed emphasis’ upon ‘the time of existence’ calls for, then, a means of evaluating the felt or sensed values that attend to living with credit / debt as modes or styles of life, as an alternately ruthless and occasionally opportune stylistics of living-on or living-through, as an art of timing and as a perpetual shuffling and transformation of affective–material forces. Thus, it becomes possible to imagine – not just the ethological, ecological, existential, and ethical approach to credit and debt – but an impersonal yet visceral *aesthetics* of credit and debt as well.

Lauren Berlant’s work in *Cruel optimism* – with its call for a ‘materialist context for affect theory’ – provides one way of glimpsing what an aesthetics of debt can offer to critical analyses. Here Berlant focuses on ‘how the activity of affective attachment can be located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field in ways that clarify the process of knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation’ (2010: 51-2). How, then, to offer a critical accounting of credit and debt that squares up with the paradoxical nature of ‘modes of life’ that remain tied optimistically, if not also precariously, to those obstacles that actually impede one’s flourishing? What might be revealed through an aesthetic inquiry into modes of living-with-debt that leans more decidedly on the realms of the material and sensory?

Could it be that, at the level of entire populations, the existential bearings of indebtedness – again, what Lazzarato calls ‘the force of self-positioning’ – have

never been more bare, yet more exposed to techniques of aestheticization today, for better *and* for worse, than at any time before in history? At the very least, one could plausibly claim that the matters of self-positioning – of locational awareness and embodied movement – are lived differently now than in times-past and, in part, this ongoing alteration is linked to significant technological and economic shifts. Or, from a slightly different angle, as Brian Massumi phrases this transitional moment in the opening pages of his *Power at the End of the Economy* (in his own darkly humorous way):

when markets react more like mood rings than self-steering wheels, the affective factor becomes increasingly impossible to factor out. It becomes obvious that the ‘rationality’ of the economy is a precarious art of snatching emergent order out of affect. The creeping suspicion is that the economy is best understood as a division of the affective arts. (2014: 2)

Perhaps then it is less the matter and more *the manner* of self-positioning, locational awareness, and embodiment movement that threads through and connects the frayed aestheticized layers and moods (more so than ‘modes’) of social existence. While this particular thread ends here, I promise that I will circle around to rings – ‘mood’ or otherwise – soon.

Thread #5: Debt is woven into everyday life as a wearable infrastructure of feeling.

Lived relationships with debt and credit continually configure and are reconfigured by the resonances that rebound or refract around / through the place-positions (an embodied locational awareness) of the particular and the general. There is nothing especially new or somehow wholly unique about this. However, I would argue that the telescoping movements between the particular and the general (between near and far, between singular and generic, between action-at-a-distance and intimacy) are engaged differently in our present moment. That is, the material and ambient actualities of debt and credit are less about assembling any kind of perpetually trailing block-by-block, well delineated spatio-temporal envelopes for subjectivation (i.e., disciplinary societies). Instead, contemporary workings of debt and credit are *more concerned with* how to inflect themselves, more fluidly, at what Nigel Thrift calls ‘the rate of life itself’ (2012: 144): as found, for instance, in the ways that the algorithmic, ‘real-time’ machinic modulations of the corporeal and incorporeal run alongside and then slightly in front of the rhythms and ever-emerging (re)(de)stabilizations of the ‘quantified self’, as various existential registerings slip ever more seamlessly into the pervasively calculative environments of the everyday. Ever more subtle undulations of credit and debt content themselves in moving forward and

spreading lightly (but forcefully) across the sure and steady extraction of vastly smaller profit-takings through a heightened, densely packed coordination of pinprick pilferings of the mundane.

Perhaps, even more so, the ecologies of 21st Century credit–debt capturings – with their various mindings and tendings – are increasingly coming to function as new kinds of everyday *textures* to be engaged with and quite often worn: like a pair of shoes, like a ring, like a cloak, like a patch, like a badge, like a hairshirt, like a halo. This kind of lively, wearable, mobile texture fits around its in-dwellers as a swath of ceaselessly churning surface-effects strung along in the socially networked / experientially-attentive modes of digitized living and through the multiplying push-feeds of miniaturized, instantaneous self-to-ecosystem relays. This is what information-architectural theorist Malcolm McCullough calls ‘foraging across the abundant facades’ of our ‘ambient commons’ (2013: 161-4). Or, along the same lines, consider such texturings in the ways that Susan Elizabeth Ryan does, in her illuminating *Garments of paradise*, when she calls attention to the cultural interface of dress (‘skin/dress/tissue/textile’ as interconnected interfaces) and how the creation of ‘[a]ffective wearables reflect the biometric information registering on or through the skin, from on or beyond the body, and activate either a remote display or one that is worn as clothing or accessory’ (2014: 134-135). Promise or threat: wearables and the movements of capital steadily converge along ever-widening circuits of extraction and expressivity.

Nigel Thrift describes this as the rise of an immanently ‘expressive infrastructure’ marking a next phase in the operative logics of capitalism: a logic – one of many of course – operating as a ‘new medium [that is composed of] neither time nor space nor time-space but something else, something closer to movement moving’ (2012: 151). This ‘movement moving’ becomes a means for fashioning a perpetual composition and regeneration of the forces of innovation as distributed amongst and engaged through the subtlest nestlings of the inanimate, inorganic and incorporeal with the quite permeable (to-affect-and-to-be-affected) human. And Thrift ventures that this expressive infrastructure relies perhaps most of all on ‘a project of channeling and damming affect and imagination through the laying down of technology (and the practices associated with it) that demands more than concentration and acceleration but also reworks the substance of what we regard as the world, down to the smallest grain of interaction, through an architecture of intimacy’ (*ibid.*: 144). And he sums up: ‘This new kind of massed and yet also individuated land *will feel with us* through its ability to pre-empt and nudge our thoughts [by] placing consciousness everywhere, revealing new means of extracting surplus and thereby turning a profit’ (*ibid.*: 155).

So, this is the fresh (and perpetually refreshable) terrain where the extractive-conjunctive assemblages of creditworthiness and indebtedness roam – characterized by what, as Joe Deville (2015) observes, are a wide variety of ‘attachment devices’ for debt, each with their own particular ‘lures for feeling’. As such, these mobile and evanescent credit and debt assemblages must always seek the means to traverse – often in a single bound – the particular and general, the massed and the dividuated, the granular and the planetary in the ongoing process of soliciting and securing debtors’ bodily dispositions to their debt devices.

Thread #6: The shifting weight of debt-carriage is distributed through posture and touch.

If this rolling composition of debt’s own architectural intimacy is best conceived as the sensory arrival of a more complexly interwoven, restlessly innovative texturizing worlding, then critical analyses of debt might be well-served to consider the sort of roles then that *tactility* and *touch* play in the accommodation and adaptation of bodies to the haptic affectivity of everyday indebtedness: along with bodies’ potentials for resisting, disarticulating, or swerving away from such apparatuses of capture too.

After all, Lauren Berlant argues that a materially-based affect theory can be understood as a means of writing a ‘*proprioceptive history*, a way of thinking about represented norms of bodily adjustment as key to grasping the circulation of the present as a historical and affective sense’ (2010: 20, italics added). And I would likewise claim that the worlding-relationality and extra-somatic sociality that practices and assemblages of credit and debt have always brought into existence – perhaps now more pronounced than ever before – are also the primary affective interfaces by which we transduce the sense to our (shifting) place or non-place in the world: at once, existential-ecological-aesthetic-ethological. This continually evolving, expressive infrastructure raises fundamental questions about the ways that people – quite literally – ‘*carry*’ *debt* now and how they (we) will carry debt in the future.

The first thing I felt was no credit. I tried to touch my credit, but there was nothing there.

We are all touched through our relation to debt in different ways. The forms and formatings of this ‘touch’ are varied, complex, and interlaced. How then to consider the very nature, the sensation, the matter of this *indebted touch* itself? For instance, what roles do mobile / pervasive communication devices play – as key nodes in an always-evolving ontology of the day-to-day – in giving tempo,

contour, and 'feel' to a visceral registering of debt-carriage? Still further, as techniques of perpetual digital connectivity pass from the handheld and into an ambient architecture of affective affordances and consumer / debtor captures, how do these real-time coordinations intersect with the more typical and historically sedimented moral, impersonal and financial calculations of credit-access and debt-opaqueness?

Debt weighs on the matter of bodies and subjectivities and worlds, and this weight is distributed across an expanse of small-scale, up-close interactions while simultaneously engaging with more far-flung large-scale calculations. If the ubiquitous nature of 'proprioceptive' debt has become one of the defining aspects of our era, then debt's pervasiveness cannot be directly confronted as merely an issue for consciousness-raising and critique. Instead, debt must be met and addressed in its myriad entanglements with matter and the social, in debt's extensions (and overextensions), its sympathies and aggressions, its engagement with bodily potentials and movement-restrictions, and combined then as an expressive infrastructure where the techniques and technologies of existence fold and flow in and through our touchy-tactile carrying capacities for indebtedness.

Thread #7: Practices of living debt and credit will come to be navigated less by touch and more by gesture, like a fin slicing through air.

Treating touch and tactility as principal points of focus for future-oriented work on issues of credit-debt work are, however, not quite on the mark. If we are to begin to address the load-shifting moving-movements in the ways that credit and debt are carried, then we'll need to understand that the hand is *often the final place* where things – like debt – pass on their way toward disappearing: like some new version of well-worn magic trick, disappearing into the surround, into the ambient umwelt of intimacy and extrusion (although such a disappearance is rarely fully complete and can come boomeranging back at you).

That is, to return to the anecdote from *Feed* that opens this essay, it should be clear that Titus is not actually reaching out to physically 'touch his credit' rather he is making a credit *gesture*. Titus' body – or, more precisely, the movement space-time of his body's proprioceptive envelope – has become an interface for his credit: part of one continuous surface of credit / debt affordances and bodily affectivity. Here affect and debt have come to operate in the same rhythmic-gestural-conceptual space, occupying the same wedge of existential locational-positioning, and all the while moving at the rate of life itself. In his oft-referenced essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', Walter Benjamin wrote of the barely noticed ways that bodies tactilely appropriate architecture and

how the turning points of history are often located in the gradual altering means of sensory appropriation (1936/1969: 240). Such is increasingly our circumstances today with the growing tactile and rhythmically attuned appropriations and expropriations of debt with the rise of the gestural interface.

William Bogard, in an essay called ‘Control surfaces and rhythmic gestures’ (2013: n.p.), shows how ‘haptic research has already discovered ways to diagram the surface of the human skin as a data entry and retrieval system’ and how these surfaces are a modulating space between a body’s capacity for gesture *and* a technical assemblage’s own complex modes of entrainment.

As an illustrative example, consider the ‘Fin’ ring. Tagged with the catchphrase ‘Wear the World’, this ring (currently in the midst of product design and testing) is a kind of wearable expressive infrastructure that turns your palm and fingers into a numeric keypad and your entire hand into a gestural interface. The hand thus serves as fin for navigating through thin air.

How Fin Makes Your Life Easier



Figure 1: chart showing the basics for how the ‘Fin’ ring will operate²

2 <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/fin-wearable-ring-make-your-palm-as-numeric-keypad-and-gesture-interface>

See also, Fin’s promo video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ6PVBvQf-g>

Bogard writes that:

...control is about engineering the human body's interface with surfaces, flesh to glass, then distributing those connections in nested rhythmic figures, timing their onset and decay, and modulating their intensity (amplitude, frequency). How often do you check your email, or scroll through a screen? Tap, double tap, swipe, pinch, wave, hold, drag, blink, utter – a controlled gesture can be any rhythmic movement, including thinking, that connects you to a ubiquitous world of digital screens...Every interface, in effect, is a gesture, a moving diagram that marks the connection of bodies...[T]he control of interfaces is the control of the temporal distribution of gestural figures, the timing of connections, their onset, frequency, repetition, decomposition, and so on. (*ibid.*)

And this particular cybernetically-inflected historical turning point, as signaled by the gestural interface, reveals the capacity for technological assemblages to adjust to bodies, their machinic components, and ongoing events on the fly through 'the ability to make minute and flexible adjustments in the timing of events, to produce moving figures, not just fixtures' (*ibid.*): that is, to move not just at the rate of life itself but to inhabit its smallest, seemingly-inconsequential vibrations, its rhythms and gestures.

Similarly, as we saw in the case of Titus, the credit / debt gesture serves as an open-ended, congealing-and-re-congealing set of rhythmic affectivities continually contoured through their dovetailing with a seamless real-time access-loop of credit-debt modulations. The debt gesture is the infinitely adjustable accretion and replaying of gestural surfacing-contact moments; it is how the matter of indebtedness turns into the affective *manner* of bodily compartments. The debt gesture becomes an intimately-dividualized means of wearing the world.

Thread #8: The multitude beckons: 'Pants sale'

Maurizio Lazzarato, at the end of *The making of indebted man* (2012), holds out some modicum of future hope for what Nietzsche called 'a second innocence', marked by the moment when Nietzsche says that 'atheism might release humanity from this whole feeling of being indebted towards its beginnings, its *causa prima*. Atheism and a sort of *second innocence* belong together' (Lazzarato, 2012: 164). Lazzarato argues this would be a

...second innocence [oriented] no longer toward divine debt, but toward *mundane debt*, the debt that weighs in our wallets and forms and formats our subjectivities...We must recapture this second innocence, rid ourselves of guilt, of everything owed, of all bad conscience, and not repay a cent. (*ibid.*)

But, as we have seen, ‘mundane debt’ is precisely what the gestural interface is set to rhythmically inhabit through the touch-free intimacies of surface control: making our wallets weightless perhaps while continuing to form and format subjectivities in new modulatory ways. It is, you might say, easier now to imagine the arrival of worldwide atheism than to somehow imagine an end to indebtedness.

In the penultimate scene from M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*, Titus – who, by this point in the story, has long been back in touch with his credit – has just arrived at home after leaving the death-bed of his ex-girlfriend Violet. (Violet has been turned down by her insurance company for risky brain surgery that might save her life: in part, because the algorithms that follow and guide her everyday buying behavior are no longer able to construct a recognizable consumer profile based on her purchase history and browsing activity.) At the same time, the planet is falling into environmental catastrophe. People are developing huge weeping lesions (which for a time become a new fashion statement, a new aesthetic). Hair is falling out. Lips are curling back exposing everyone’s gums and teeth. Giant cockroaches and rats are roaming in huge swarms through the ventilation systems of the decaying infrastructure. Forests are being chopped down because ‘air factories’ are more cost-efficient. The oceans are mostly dead. Yes, you won’t find a contemporary young teen science fiction story much more bleak. And Titus is no hero in this tale; he loves this world, he lives a life of privilege, and blithely perseveres in the midst of all this decay. He broke up with Violet at the onset of her illness, but her fate has also stirred something in him: something he cannot quite put his finger on.

While Titus cannot articulate anything close to a semblance of resistance or even the vaguest political tactic (whenever Titus tries to narrate a story it always ends up, he claims, sounding like the opening credits of a sit-com or like the voice-over to a movie trailer), he does have the debt gesture and so he uses it, over and over again, feeling himself at one with the entire expressive infrastructure, its moving movement, its intimately exteriorizing impingements: the very (dis)embodiment of affective capitalism.

It all begins when Titus notices that there is ‘a special on draft pants at Multitude’ (yes, Multitude)

I ordered the draft pants from Multitude. It was a real bargain. I ordered another pair. I ordered pair after pair. I ordered them all in the same color. They were slate. I was ordering them as quickly as I could. I put in my address again and again. I ordered pants after pants. I put tracking orders on them. I tracked each one. I could feel them moving through the system.

Spreading out from me, in the dead of night, I could feel credit deducted, and the warehouse alerted, and packing. I could feel the packing, and the shipment, the distribution, the transition to FedEx, the numbers, each time, the order number traded like secret words at a border, and the things all went out, and I could feel them coming to me as the night passed.

I could feel them in orbit. I could feel them in circulation all around me like blood in my veins. I had no credit. I had nothing left in my account. I could feel the pants winging their way toward me through the night.

I stayed up all through the early morning, shivering, ordering, ordering, and was awake at dawn, when I put on clothes and went up to the surface, and watched the shit-stupid sun rise over the whole shit-stupid world. (Anderson, 2002: 230-1)

And so Titus' debt-gesture becomes a way too of gesturing toward the process of grieving, a touching but touch-free moment of reaching for what-is-not-there from out of the very midst of a world of indebtedness that you are always already wearing.

references

- Anderson, M.T. (2002) *Feed*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1921/1996) 'Capitalism as religion', in *Selected writings. Volume I: 1913–1926*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1936/1969) 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in H. Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berlant, L. (2010) *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bogard, W. (2013) 'Control surfaces and rhythmic gestures', *Theory & Event*, 16(3). [<https://muse.jhu.edu/>]
- Conway, D. (2008) *Nietzsche's on the genealogy of morals: A reader's guide*. New York: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (1995) 'Postscript on control societies', in *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1972/1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deville, J. (2015) *Lived economies of default: Consumer credit, debt collection, and the capture of affect*. New York: Routledge.
- Dodd, N. (2014) *The social life of money*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gillespie, M.A. (2013) 'On debt', in P. Y. Paik and M. Weisner-Hanks (eds.) *Debt: Ethics, the environment, and the economy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Lazzarato, M. (2012) *The making of indebted man*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Massumi, B. (2014) *Power at the end of the economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Maurer, B. (2015) *How would you like to pay? How technology is changing the future of money*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McCullough, M. (2013) *Ambient commons: Attention in the age of embodied information*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Parikka, J. (2011) 'On borrowed time: Lazzarato and debt', *Machinology*: 29 November. [<http://jussiparikka.net/2011/11/29/on-borrowed-time-lazzarato-and-debt/>]
- Ryan, S. E. (2014) *Garments of paradise: Wearable discourse in the digital age*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Thrift, N. (2012) 'The insubstantial pageant: producing an untoward land', *Cultural Geographies*, 19(2): 141-168.

the author

Gregory J. Seigworth is Professor of cultural studies in the Department of Communication and Theatre, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Greg is the co-editor, with Melissa Gregg, of *The affect theory reader* (Duke, 2010). He has most recently co-edited, with Joe Deville, a special double issue on 'everyday credit and debt' for the journal *Cultural Studies* (2015, Vol 29: 5/6). Greg has published widely on affect studies, everyday life philosophy, and the work of Deleuze & Guattari.

Email: Gregory.Seigworth@millersville.edu