

New media idiocy

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Abstract

The article explores the concept of new media idiocy – both a new kind of idiocy and an idiocy performed in new media networks. The paper argues that instead of being neglected, idiocy needs to be appreciated if we are to enquire into the current forms of techno-human subjectification. Idiocy, following Deleuze, is interpreted as distinct from stupidity (a base mode of thinking); it is a mode of living that explores the true through the false. In new media, idiocy acquires a performative character; it is crafted, practiced and re-enacted collectively. Many forms of aesthetic expression, and especially those produced and circulated through social networks, such as memes and viral videos, have such performance of idiocy at their core. Moreover, it is through such expressive creation and performance of the idiot that the new forms of subjectification take place. Network culture's allowance for participatory creativity enables new media idiocy to establish new forms of visibility and availability in relation to digital networks. The process of becoming an individual or the formulation of political discontent are dynamically expressed and documented online as they happen. Such order of visibility problematizes the processes of subjectification and the emergence of the cultural as well as the political on the Internet. The article uses YouTube videos and subcultures of webpage production as its case studies.

Keywords

Creativity, digital aesthetics, Facebook, idiocy, meme, social network, stupidity, subjectivity, viral video, YouTube

Introduction

'How idiotic!' is more often than not an instinctive response to some of the most popular YouTube videos, pictures forwarded through Facebook or entertaining websites linked to by blogs. The highly sought products of network cultures and creative digital practices appear increasingly idiotic. This article argues that such a response is not negative nor entails a necessarily derogatory interpretation, but rather has the power to reveal something profound about the nature of certain

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forms of creative digital production, culture and subjectivity today. Instead of resisting such a perception, in this work, I propose to explore some contemporary forms of idiocy in relation to digital networks.

New media idiocy may, for instance, help us understand YouTube successes or the movement of cultural objects through social networks in terms of crafted, participatory *performance* as a mode of living with technical networks. Here, starting with a minor cultural artefact, I go on to explore not only the networks through which it is constituted, but also the modes of living exemplified through such constitution, where the unfolding of subjectification comes to rely on accounting for new factors, such as online forms of creativity and staying 'tuned in' to the globalized local communications. Such participatory and creative performance of idiocy as a mode of living, as a vector of subjectification, also become a framework within which the capacity to act politically in public, or for a political statement to concretize also appear to rely on the peculiarity of performing the 'funny and silly' (as with many of the placards at Bolotnaya Plozshad's demonstrations against Putin on 10 December 2011 featuring slogans such as 'Bring back the snowy winters' and 'Congress of ballet lovers').¹

New media idiocy here is both a new kind of idiocy and the development of idiocy as a dimension of digital media, both of which are joined together in union, as one is propelled, prompted and proceeds through the other. Thus, new media idiocy is not only idiocy as a particular aesthetic phenomenon engendered and played out through digital media, it is also the idiocy of popular new media performances and of modes of subjectification that are deeply networked and technical, and is also a new kind of idiocy itself, a creative atmospheric idiocy marginally but globally encompassing networked stages.

Conceptual legacy

Idiocy does not equal stupidity; however, it is worth considering the two concepts alongside each other as a means of introduction, as they are sometimes used interchangeably in the history of philosophical enquiry.

Stupidity is an 'ontological condition of human existence' (Boxsell, 2004: 187) according to Matthijs Van Boxsell, who constructs the term's cultural-conceptual history in his *Encyclopedia of Stupidity*. Here, from Kant to Zizek, stupidity becomes, first, the condition under which humans beings are born (as a baby 'a bit too large' it is rather stupid to face the necessity of getting through a birth canal 'a bit too small' (Forbes, 2005: 5) and a bit too early to be able to hold the head independently, like other mammals do). Kant here remarks on the unpreparedness of humans for survival, where the folly and stupidity of a natural, primary act of birth become a predicament which needs to be overcome in order for a human to become cultural (Kant, 2007). But even entrenched as a primary act between nature and culture, stupidity, here turned idiocy, secondly, becomes the condition under which any act can be performed in full. Here, for Zizek (1995), any act that pushes itself through a threshold of possibility, is idiotic in some respect.

However, stupidity is far from a shadow following human thriving in the bright sun of intelligence and meaningfulness. Stupidity is not the inverse of intelligence, but is an inverse of non-stupidity, and as van Boxsell reminds us, the most dangerous combination is formed in an intelligent fool. Stupidity is far from being counter-productive or fixed or indeed essentialist: everyone is stupid at times, and stupidity is a force through which wisdom can be acquired or things can be done. Here, certainly, stupidity is linked to chance and to humour (Bakhtin, 1984).

It is worth differentiating between stupidity as a condition and stupidity as a mode of thought. The latter has been rigorously commented upon by Deleuze and more recently picked up in relation to computational management systems of organizations nurturing ignorance and stupidity, as constituent parts of the knowledge economy, by Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey (2012). In its Deleuzian interpretation, stupidity is a 'structure of thought' that conducts an enquiry into its own 'truths', one which is not erroneous, but 'base' (e.g. as it discovers and conveys 'the reign of petty values or the power of an established order') (Deleuze, 2006: 101–105). A base way of thinking is thought that has not achieved its Nth power, not yet the kind of audacious, powerful and joyous thinking, such as the one demanded from philosophy by Nietzsche (Deleuze, 2006).

Idiocy, in relation to the above, is a mode of living. Idiots, or 'neuropaths and psychopaths . . . explore . . . original ultimate ground at the cost of their suffering. . . . It is not what they say or what they think but their life which is exemplary, and is larger than they are' (Deleuze, 2008: 132). Whereas for Descartes, in the interpretation of Deleuze, the idiot is a private thinker, idiocy, in the Russian tradition, is a path of unique transcendental enquiry that only a few can bear. Deleuze suggests that the ordinary private thinker thinking 'by the natural right' and willing the truth 'goes mad' in the Russia exemplified by Dostoevsky to become a new kind of idiot, an idiot with a capacity to create (Deleuze and Guattari, 1999).

Whereas stupidity is not inherently erroneous, error or falsehood are taken into account and brought to their highest powers in art (Deleuze, 2006), becoming a mode of exploration of the true. Deleuze writes about Dostoevsky's idiots in the following manner: 'They bear witness to . . . the most extraordinary play of the true and the false which occurs not at the level of answers . . . but at the level of the problems themselves – in other words, in conditions under which the false becomes the mode of exploration of the true, the very space of its essential disguises . . . : the pseudos here becomes the pathos of the True' (Deleuze, 2008: 132).

It is, therefore, important not to confuse falsehood in idiocy with the base truth of stupidity. Idiocy is about gathering and crafting 'rubbish' that does not give answers or that has direct access to truth, but that enquires and stages encounters with the real through its force of insignificant, false and preposterous doings.

The Deleuzian private thinker maintains access to and deals with the absurd or the real by becoming an artist, a craftsman. Where stupidity is base thinking, idiocy is a noble *craftsmanship of modes of living*. Much like Prince Myshkin, the idiot is noble, and despite being a conceptual persona (Deleuze, 2008), also produces percepts and affects as it operates on the aesthetic plane, through the sensible. In fact, the craftsmanship of modes of living stemming from the capacity to create may yield various forms of expression from process-based performances to individual or collectively produced objects, requiring and developing different kinds and levels of skill. Here, certain kinds of making, of neither highly skilled nor unique craft, enquire into the mode of living, into the very process and meaning of participation in life on the grounds negotiated through idiocy.

Idiocy and the new media idiocy to be introduced here as the crafting of a mode of living is a concept that enquires into the changing forms of individuation, as the process of becoming of an individual or an object. Individuation (I use it synonymously with subjectification in this article) comes from the conceptual vocabulary of Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and more recently, especially in relation to technical networks, Bernard Stiegler (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; Simondon, 1992; Stiegler, 2009). Stiegler, in particular, expresses concern towards the new regime of individuation as the production of self which is launched when grammatization (the process through which functions, knowledge and complex skills are objectified, made discrete and turned into objects managed by technical systems, and lately by what Stiegler calls cognitive and

creative industries) is taken to a new level in digital media and hyperindustrialization (Stiegler, 2010a: 30–31, 47–48). Stiegler also pays particular attention to expression and production (craft, performance) as the medium of individuation (Stiegler, 2009: 42, 53). Relating to the concepts of expression as an avenue of individuation in digital media, I will discuss idiocy and new media idiocy in relation to individuation in more detail in the second half of this article, trying to steer away from the dichotomic problematic laid out by Stiegler, where technical systems either dis-individuate and proletarianize (deprive one of knowledge and the capacity for agency) or open a new perspective of ‘collective, collaborative and associative’ individuation that may lead towards an ‘economy of contribution’ constituting new forms of citizenship (Stiegler, 2009: 54). I would like to suggest a way to recognize a multiplicity of modes of living and expression through attention to a particular kind of aesthetic production developing on the Web. It is through idiocy, a new media idiocy that is not stupidity (in Stiegler’s use of the term²) that a way of getting out of a dichotomous judgement can possibly be found.

Idiocy exists through acts that are tiny but networked and global. Such acts are primarily aesthetic compositions and it is through such an aesthetics that I will first introduce new media idiocy.

‘Guitar’

The video clip ‘Guitar’ was first posted on YouTube in April 2007.³ It features a man, Peter Nalitch, singing a song with some basic lyrics – in a tastily ‘corrupted’ form of English – while dancing in and around an old Kopeika car (a legendary Soviet analogue of the people’s car: the Lada 1200⁴) and by the riverside in a rural area with strong resemblance to that of Moscow-style dachas (small summer countryside cottages). The lyrics feature passages, such as: ‘I’ve never been lonely / Cause me is so cool’; ‘I have never been clever / Because need it never / Baby, you have a possibility / Play it with me’ and ‘I put on my pyjamas / And go to Bahamas’. This exuberant construction is crowned by the chorus that includes the following lines: ‘Guitar, guitar, guitar, guitar / Come to my boudoir’ or ‘Jump to my Jaguar’.

By September 2007 the song became a hit in Russia. Nalitch was referred to as a ‘Russian singing sensation [that] takes the Internet by storm’ (by the Russia Today TV channel). By 2010 Nalitch had appeared on multiple TV programmes both in and outside Russia (combining new media and traditional media coverage that led to interrelated peaks of attention); he gave concerts, recorded a solo album and represented Russia at Eurovision 2010. YouTube opened its Russian interface with ‘Guitar’ featured on the front page. By March 2011 the clip had been viewed more than 5 million times.

A significant element of the unfolding of this cultural object is its imaginary geo-cultural positioning and its further relation to the condition of being both local and global. When first published, ‘Guitar’ was perceived in Russia as being performed either by a Gypsy or a Greek, a Bosnian Serb, an Armenian or even a South American. Running to thousands of comments, its discussion thread includes responses in over ten different languages, including Ukrainian, Polish, Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Mongolian, French, English and German. With its spread across linguistic borders, the clip is assigned to a culture that is deceptively recognizable but not quite owned by anyone in particular, as if neighbouring, or presented by immigrants, embodying a neighbouring from within.⁵

Here, compared with Deleuze and Guattari’s proposition of minor literature and the use of German by Kafka, a Prague Jew (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994), a correlation can be found in

Guitar's evocative sense of belonging, searching for and positioning in a way that is not obviously political, communal or given as marginal within the dominant. Its search for a voice, as well as the voice itself, are pseudo, false, a joke that triggers a loss of orientation. Such loss is a reaction to the simultaneously 'global' but physically and often linguistically restricted human-technical presence, to being 'tuned into' the networks. 'Guitar' is joyous as it disperses an already mediated (as seen by a stranger) home culture globally, through international English on YouTube, while simultaneously appropriating the global by saving and savouring tiny hints of local marginalia that survive this triple mediation. 'Guitar' is about inhabiting the Babel-like global condition while being able to carry the inflections of a particular language or material culture: Soviet objects, grammatical construction or the use of a certain phrase (for instance, 'boudoir' is a Russian word borrowed from French, that carries an erotic, sexual overtone; whereas for an English speaker it might just mean a room or a 'female' room for dressing; whereas the heavy and generally Slavic accent of the singer makes it harder to detect his mother tongue). In a way, 'Guitar' is about the existence and thriving of the local, marginal or specific in the age – and through the linguistic and technical grammar of – the globalized, centralized, and generalized (as exemplified by the status of the English language and the dominance of the YouTube platform) and also about the power of inhabiting and enriching such a grammar. At the same time, not unlike the examples to be explored below, 'Guitar' celebrates this Babel-like condition as one of empowerment, interconnectedness and a shared festival of enjoyment of human life all over the (planet's) networks.

The grass-roots becoming of cultural figures, such as 'Guitar' happening in conjunction with the specific mechanisms of valorization that new media has to offer has been claimed as revolutionizing the production of politics, public spheres and culture since the inception of the World Wide Web and were already celebrated in early expressions of optimism such as, for instance, Negroponte's *Being Digital* (1995). Such a revolution, however, appears never to have really taken place. This becomes especially evident upon a consideration of the Google pagerank algorithm that was directly modelled on the sciences' citation index as a means of measuring esteem and importance (Brin and Page, 1998). With pagerank at the backend, it is increasingly difficult to locate any alternative cultural object or knowledge produced via circumstances other than the involvement of large-scale mass media (recently Google also started factoring in and heavily favouring links from social networks). The ascent of Nalitch, though not devoid of mass media participation, does serve as an example of the 'democratizing' power of networks, but it more emphatically draws attention towards the specific conditions in place to ensure and assist such a rise, something that is neither random, nor a flash-in-the-pan, nor solely viral.

In recent years, the exploration of viruses, swarms, and new forms of net contagion, explored by the RAND Corporation in terms of newly projected kinds of war (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001), in network theory, and, to go back, in Tarde's theory of imitation and 'mass' psychology, have been interestingly thought through in relation to the physico-cultural existence of modern technological networks by Sampson (Sampson, 2012; Tarde, 2009). In such terms, network communication is not necessarily governed, commanded and maintained, but happens as sets of semi- if not non-conscious autonomous encounters between agents of different orders. Such encounters in turn, may have a character that is 'natural' in the sense of a natural process being started off by a virus entering an organism it will end up killing. The natural laws that govern such processes are certainly being determined and discovered, but they are not necessarily yet to be found in programming textbooks.

To move this discussion into a specifically cultural domain, one could say that objects commonly referred to as memes (understood here as certain kinds of digital cultural objects, pictures, words, pieces of code that travel around the globe in a passage of momentary glory) can indeed be

seen as having a viral character and behaviour. But it is also important to emphasize that 'Guitar' has some very specific aesthetic characteristics that assist its spread in becoming internationally powerful, but that are not fully describable through the concept of a contagion. 'Guitar' does not solely relate either to the crowd psychology, mimicry or repetition that pump memes as a body runs blood. Here, to continue with the viral analogy, 'Guitar' would rather correspond to a virus craftily bred and purposefully and knowingly administered to the self by a doctor for the purpose of inoculation.

Simplicity, humour and craftsmanship

What is fascinating about 'Guitar' is the specific aesthetics and sensibilities it engages with, and which in fact determine the success of the song. Here, it may be seen as confusingly both dominant and marginal, macho if not chauvinistic, though in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but those qualities do not undermine or indeed get to the core of why 'Guitar' became so popular across so many borders. What makes it an international hit is its idiocy.

The success of 'Guitar' lies in a certain enunciation and performance of idiocy, which this article proposes as *new media idiocy*. The immediately evident idiocy of 'Guitar' can be discussed along three lines: formal simplicity; humour; and DIY aesthetics.

New media idiocy has a formal relationship with simplicity that acquires its own formalist quality, almost a formalist coherency. Such simplicity is rooted in a certain naivety that is required to synthesize freely and globally⁶ at a level where every element in the composition is positioned in order to be able to speak independently as well as be immersed in a global 'porridge'. 'Simplicity' is the certain naivety that allows a non-professional to speak.

Such simplicity, almost a minimalism, should not be confused with either illiteracy or sophistication. Musically and visually, 'Guitar' is excitingly dilettante at the same time as it is powerful. For instance, it includes four melodic themes (whereas some professional pop songs may feature only one or two); it refers to Bregovich and turbo folk, Cesaria Evora, Latin American music, Greek melodies, Manu Chao, classic Jewish melodies and romances. The melodic treasury is backed up by an operatic timbre of vocalization and a strong lyricism of tone. It is also evident that the idiocy of its simplicity is of course clever.

The gesture of its naivety is double: there is a formalization of simplicity that, under investigation, turns out to be not quite so simple; its minimalism turns out to be precise, and its dilettantism exhibits such vital power that the simplicity itself undergoes a process of distillation.

This layered simplicity is fundamental to new media idiocy. Simplicity here is related to the Cartesian–Deleuzian private thinking mentioned above (thinking relying on the personally known, given by the right of birth as opposed to being publicly taught, but with a mutation of the known into the absurd and the creativity of the incomprehensible). It is also a simplicity manifest not only as a mode of thought, but as a kind of performance allowing for certain actions, such as cultural synthesis, amateurism and a display of emotion linking these two. There is a thin line that separates such simplicity from the commonsensical, but it can be firmly drawn. The energy required to generate such simplicity ensures that profound transformations take place.

The second element of Guitar's idiocy is wrapped into three folds of humour. The first one is laughter (its lyrics and dances are funny, its objects – such as the old model Lada in place of a Jaguar – are humorous too). It is sincerely comic. The second is its vital joy, the sexual charisma of the singer; here humour is joyous, vital. The third layer is parodic. Nalitch performs as a clown; he acknowledges his work as a hooligan song, where behaviours are as much mocked in their self-observation as they are made or conformed to.

Idiocy is strongly related to humour, moreover, to a specific or more than one kind of humour. In line with a Bergsonian understanding of humour, the humour of idiocy cannot be completely divorced from estrangement and reversal as its paradigmatic functions (Bergson, 2008: 47, 54). However, there is humour in a behaviour exploring the non-obvious as the only way, at times, to pursue a transcendental feat, and such humour can be parodic and tragic, as well as vital, even if it requires a reconceptualization of self-harm, anorexia and anguish in terms of a forceful and productive 'dark vitalism' (as in the unfolding of the life of a cancer tumour that kills the living host body) (Goriunova and Fuller, 2010; Nietzsche, 2006: 28–29). Contrarily, the humour of idiocy is 'kind'. It is the humour of an amateur that needed to produce the simplicity explored above, and to maintain a performance of idiocy in terms of its being made, spread, loved and returned to.

The third characteristic of 'Guitar' is its DIY character that recursively connects to the formalism and emotional base of simplicity touched upon above. 'Guitar' transmits a 'homemade' feel, a sense of bedroom production. There is no high-resolution version of the clip in existence. Compared with other rapid successes on YouTube, it is extremely simple in terms of the effects or movements used, and retains a sense of the authenticity of amateurism. Laying open the trashy techniques used in the mainstream, the clip is seamful as it does not hide its apparatuses of production, and as such 'Guitar' exhibits a certain relation to truth, in terms of presenting and questioning its expression, perception, composition and formulation. The authenticity of bare form and the rapture of clownery include Flusserian apparatuses of complexity in a state that is unravelled rather than closed upon themselves (Flusser, 2000: 21–56). For Flusser, the human is a player and a functionary who has to undergo a reduction in agency when enrolled into the class of systematic things that he calls apparatuses, including technical ensembles and industrial and socio-economic complexes, in the production of digital objects (Flusser, 2000). Playing with and exploring such coded ensembles as a reductive combinatory game incorporating and coding human agency is, in the case of 'Guitar,' not only embraced but reinforced and destabilized through a radical lack of fastidiousness, almost a negligence, a refusal to engage in the scrupulous exploration of the human–technical allowances.

The seamfulness of 'Guitar' exhibits its own making, it possesses an elegance and a binding force that makes it work as a holistic aesthetic enunciation. There is a recursive complexity to such a device: the work is a parody that presents and enquires into authenticity. As a parody, it is more authentic than the authentic, but it is also authentic in the first place.

To sum up, the work exhibits the capacity that Deleuze called 'the pseudo as the pathos of the true'. In the special case of this video, it closes the circuit as it produces itself, as a simplicity that is not simple, in the three existences of humour and as an authenticity that is revealed through formal naivety and parody. Such qualities, albeit in a way that could be approached through different formal and conceptual apparatuses, appear to be present in many examples of cultural objects that are forceful in their new media idiocy. If with 'Guitar' it is possible to separate the actual clip from the audience that is not invited to co-create it, it is increasingly difficult to do so with other examples of new media idiocy, such as those described below. Here, it is not the objects that exemplify new media idiocy, but the wider audience that become co-creators and participate in the production and performance of idiocy.

The idiotic craft and re-enactments

'You are the man now dog' (YTMND) is a phrase emitted by Sean Connery in a dialogue with a junior writer in the 2000 film 'Finding Forrester'. It is also a URL and the title for a webpage registered and designed by the young New-York-based programmer Max Goldberg in 2001. By

2004 it also became the name for a significant community based around the manufacture and appreciation of web pages made under rules specified by Goldberg with his first random, by now – seminal, page: the juxtaposition of an image, a sound and a text – ‘a singular focus’.⁷

Such pages (again referred to by the same name) resemble the web pages of the early World Wide Web, a test page indeed, with tiled images, or a simple animation or an animated gif, a looping sound file and a zooming text (made with Java). ‘People started sending me sites where they had bought a domain and copied my site exactly, except changing the image and sound to some degree,’ Goldberg explains. ‘I wasn’t asking people to do it or suggesting it at all. It just started happening.’

How can such a cultural movement be understood? The question of why Goldberg registered a domain by that name and made a web page that looked like a mid 1990s web-design class exercise here looks insignificant compared with the question of why this almost imbecilic creation was taken up as a model after which some 550,000 more web pages were created.

Here, new media idiocy can be proposed as an answer again. Compared with ‘Guitar’, YTMND has more explicit references to popular culture and the re-use of existing material; its DIY character is defined by a very strict set of parameters and it seems that its humour is more flat, dryer. However, in a certain way, YTMND exhibits a similar formalistic simplicity, sincere laughter together with irony and parody, and the global mixing and repositioning of material. It is worth noting that both examples discussed seem outdated, non-modern. In the case of YTMND, the wallpaper-like positioning of images, animated gifs and text give it some of the flavour of early net art (an art movement exploring the aesthetic potential and material of the Web and digital media, focusing on non-institutional forms of organization and non-essentialist forms of aesthetic enunciation). Here, again not dissimilarly from the previous example, the acquired flavour is fake.

In the YTMND movement, the practice of idiocy is emphasized, drawing into the analysis such terms as unrestricted ‘creativity’. Amateur and grassroots creativity, along with the arena of the creative industries and creativity as a mode of operation of cognitive capitalist structures, has recently been charged with a lot of contradictory attention. Much has been said about the various kinds of castration that creativity undergoes in order to fit into a size complementing contemporary forms of capitalist organization. An ability to creatively participate in the production of issues, political debates, cultural artefacts and social movements delegated to every layer of the social pyramid through the software-based operations of digital networks has been both greeted as democratic and condemned as philistine (Florida, 2004; Osborne, 2003; Toscano, 2008). Excitingly, YTMND provides a platform to think beyond the debate on ‘participatory creativity’ (the web pages only exist as a momentary cultural movement and despite being individual work, make sense more fully as part of a movement). Such creativity is not discredited by its idiocy but is, in fact, enlightened by it. The creativity of the YTMND movement reveals something about creativity that gets concealed in the boom of Web 2.0 ‘creative practices’: it does not develop us into freer and happier individuals, nor does it bring us towards a better society or political system altogether. It is a creativity that is processual and performative and as such it does not have to culminate in outstanding achievements or a product of any kind. Such creativity has an individuating, subjectivating function.

Here, the space, time and mode with which the development of new media idiocy bursts open to drag everyone along, is like that of a non-circular, non-linear centrifuge. It is not only that a page is made, spread and enjoyed quickly, but it is enacted, and the becoming of an idiot, a false one, is tried-on, however hastily. Even the recently overused term ‘participation’ can be usefully applied here: new media idiocy is produced through craftful participation, a participation that is not

summed up by one or two clicks, but is compositional, conceptual and performative itself. Such a participation is itself the practicing, the performance of idiocy, of everyone joining in together.

This performative character of new media idiocy is perhaps best exemplified in the phenomenon that is 'Mr Trololo'. The title, 'Mr Trololo', is devised to refer to remarkable Soviet singer Eduard Khill for his performance of one particular song – a vocalise, 'I am coming back home' in 1966 – rediscovered by the US-centred YouTube fanbase in late 2009–2010.⁸ Khill performs a song with no words in it, only interjections – hence the 'Trololo' – and a plentiful quantity of impeccable grimaces expressing various kinds of happiness. The song gave rise to a relatively small, mainly American subculture of Mr Trololo impersonations, look-alike contests, beatbox performances, parodies aired on TV and VJ/DJ remixes.

The impersonation of an idiot in Mr Trololo culture is a participatory craft similar to that of creating a YTMND web page. Performing the idiot here evokes creativity as an integral part of the process of individuation, something that has always been technical but that is taken to a new degree of technicity with social networks and participatory platforms. Idiocy as a mode of living is always a network of becoming, of subjectification. New media idiocy manufactures modes of living, manners of individuation as a performance and a craft, and it is through joining in, taking part in its production, through re-enactment of the performances of idiocy that individuation occurs. Such individuation, the movement from the pre-individual to the individual and transindividual of the humans, from the abstract to the concrete of object, or the relations among them, is an ongoing process. For Simondon, the well-spring of individuation is the pre-individual and the process of becoming an individual is never finished, but rather goes back and forth between the two. Here, it is useful to think of a child individuating from the pre-individual physical, psychic, social commonalities shared amongst the human species into a subjectivity that is never complete. There is no space here to do justice to Simondon's argument laid out across many books and lectures, nor to account for its various applications in theory. But it is very useful for the purpose of this article's argument to mobilize concepts loosely inspired by his work with regard to creativity, craft and participation as they manifest through idiotic objects and performances on the Web.

I do not suppose that idiocy is a specific quality of the pre-individual that finally gets expressed because the cordons previously guarding what becomes public, known and evaluated have significantly weakened. The drastic change that the current condition brings about is that networked technology lays open, catalyses or expresses processes of individuation, of a human, an artefact or an assemblage in certain novel technically mediated ways. Such bareness should not be confused with a proneness to more democratic means of inclusion, or indeed accountability, but is rather an invitation to participate in laying bare, documenting, expressing the process of becoming in more detail and at a fundamentally earlier stage. In simplistic terms, a tormented teenager might now leave the data footprint of her angst, which can also be disrupted, conjoined, capitalized upon by other interests, where previously her individuation, personal and collective, would have taken place privately, without an acquisition of public attention or a voice on the scale it may receive today. On a different scale, the mumbling, instant, repetitive, easy, playful, junk, worthless creativity that is expressed in new media idiocy is a creativity that has not yet been individuated, or is in the process of, being concretized. As an 'atmospheric' creativity, such creativity is a part of individuation, which previously only revealed itself privately, and it is utilized or brought to the fore with new media idiocy.

There is nothing judgmental in this statement: it can be greeted as a stage long awaited and fought for by thinkers of multiplicities and singularities, or can be mourned over as a condition under which certain processes of the production of 'excellence' may deteriorate along with the

individuals embodying them. Such suffering is not new, either: in a quote mentioned earlier, Deleuze refers to the suffering of an idiot that bears witness to the true through the false, but here the suffering itself is transformed. It is, usually, not painful. In new media idiocy, sorrow can hardly be found. The happy idiot is a non-dangerous, friendly idiot whose performance is discovered and greeted instantly through the networks, by the multitudes.

It is important not to see new media idiocy as substantiated in cultural artefacts or behaviours on their own. Idiocy is a kind of individuation that produces, at different levels, those objects and behaviours, subjectivities, as well as collective performances, the taking part. In fact, the individuation general idiocy offers has only recently gained power and became a very successful way to concretize a collective movement: to be heard politically; to concretize an object of achieving media attention; to individuate the human and to experience her individuation through expression, and so on. Here, to return to the recent Russian anti-Putin protest movements, people wearing blue buckets on their heads in protest against the over-abundance of vehicles displaying warning lights and granted different rights on the road (Elmer, 2010) or organizing toy demonstrations in public spaces (Elder, 2012) not only respond to the prospect of state violence against them, but also produce expressions that are shaped to become hot currency in the media, and in the social networks, to function along the logic of idiocy. Here, the power of the 'I like' or 'Share' button on Facebook and other elements engineering public emotion on Web 2.0 cannot be underestimated. The capacity to mold behaviours and expressions in anticipation of fitting in and capitalizing on the functional allowance of certain elements of technological design awaits a dedicated software studies researcher. There are large communities of Facebook users whose main flow of posts are exchanges of such idiotic expressions; but more traditional media, such as newspapers and TV are captured by the individuating logic of idiocy as well, bringing it to the fore while covering political protest or grass-roots creativity alike.

It is, however, equally important not to regard new media idiocy as a new kind of carnivalesque, a transgression. There is not always and not even often a crystallization of the subversive through the idiotic. As a mode of living, of expression and of individuation, idiocy is performed to a varying degree of coherency or success; it is not one condition or style that is applied to convey the message but is a vector along which various non-uniform kinds of performances concretizing idiocy are carried out.

If new media idiocy is a vector of individuation, a coloration or modality of a certain process of individuation that acquires power in the digital era due to the specific affordances of digital media networks and other structures they undergird, it does not only allow for more insight into the process and the role of creative expression in individuation, but it also reformulates the question of the 'good' of technology. Moving away from optimistic accounts of the 1990s and 2000s that greeted democratic participation and citizen journalism, an almost a unified voice has been recently formed that criticizes the effects of participation in social networks, and of staying 'tuned in' to computational processes (Dean, 2010; Hayles, 2007; Turkle, 2011).

Rather than oscillating between the negative and the positive, new media idiocy can offer a route to understanding a multiplicity of effects grounded in the modes of individuation technology offers and takes part in. Here, it might be more useful to speak of general idiocy instead of or alongside a Marxian 'general intellect' of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Virno, 2004). General idiocy would be a sum total of objects, behaviours and individuations that are false, absurd, simple, humorous, troubling. It is, as a general common idiocy, a phase state of the multitude. Such idiocy is especially exciting as it is not stupidity as critics would fear; at the same time it is far from engendering straightforward digital empowerment.

The main question this article leads towards is what is it in the oscillation between the pre-individual and individual as it comes into being in the current techno-social condition that makes the idiotic vector of individuation so popular and visible?

The problematization that is created by sets of practices, sensibilities and actions of new media idiocy is the manifestation of a certain relation (Deleuze, 1999: 54). As such, new media idiocy does not present a new subject, it enquires into the changes to the process of subject formation and maintenance.

New media idiocy enquires into the reformulation of subjectivity, into the new conditions of individuation. New media idiocy is false but authentic, and materialist in its relation to technical media. The ease with which it can switch from breakthroughs to meaninglessness is characteristic of network human-technical architecture at large and the software mediation of culture in particular. Creativity in the individual and collective process of becoming idiot produces phenomena that may be neither aesthetically brilliant nor politically very sound, but constructs forms of performance and craftsmanship that allow the inhabitation of the present, creating modes of living that explore the true through the false. Idiocy problematizes the mechanization and exposure of subjectification; it is light and funny, but also very dark in what it asks and reveals through its behaviour: the trouble of the current human condition.

Notes

1. Photographs from the demonstration can be found at DervishV Livejournal account (<http://dervishv.livejournal.com/304461.html>) and Creative Plackards from Bolotnaya Plozshad Demonstration (http://www.1tvnet.ru/content/show/tvorcheskie-plakati-s-mitinga-na-bolotnoi-ploschadi_06636.html) (accessed 17 September 2012).
2. In his recent work, especially in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (2010a) and *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010b), Bernard Stiegler calls for a system of care to be put in place that will enhance the 'cure' side of technicity (as opposed to the 'poisonous' in his theory of the pharmakon). What he sees currently happening is 'a formation of systemic stupidity The elites have been proletarianized . . . deprived of knowledge of their own logic and by their own logic – a logic reduced to a calculation without remainder and leading as well to a market of fools' (Stiegler, 2010a: 47). 'The battle for intelligence' (Stiegler, 2010b) Stiegler calls for may be well justified, but the aim of this article is to introduce a differentiation between stupidity and idiocy and argue for the recognition of the latter as something missed in the current debates.
3. Peter Nalitch (2007), Guitar, Youtube.com (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOzkN8dHnjK>) (accessed 17 September 2012).
4. 'Kopeika' – legendary Lada (VAZ 2101 or Lada 1300 abroad), produced in 1970–1984, was possibly the most common car in the USSR.
5. In fact, Nalitch is an architect from Moscow. He started taking vocal lessons not long before he produced, along with his friends, the clip at his dacha, where a Kopeika of his neighbours is parked nearby in the forest. The clip was truly intended as a joke produced on the spot.
6. 'A certain type of naivety was necessary to realise some of popular music's most creative compositions James Brown possessed an uncanny ability to take musicians from disparate musical fields and synthesise their talents into a cohesive ensemble. However, this is the musical legacy of a man who by most insider accounts was considered a near musical illiterate. Hence what is under debate here is the validity of any such notions of literacy or indeed any form of "common sense", which are only preconceptions of inherited thought' (see Scannell, 2004).

7. You are the man now dog, 2001–present (<http://ytmnd.com/>); original page by Goldberg (<http://picture.soundtext.ytmnd.com/>); see also an exhibition YTMND curated by Paul Slocum, Max Goldberg and Guthrie Lonergan in March 2009 in the And/Or Gallery in New York (<http://www.andorgallery.com/shows/22.html>) (accessed 17 September 2012).
8. Mr Trololo, 'I am very glad, because I'm finally returning back home (Trololo)', Youtube.com (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdi8YKDbzLE>) (accessed 17 September 2012).

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