

## 'I'll Look Forward To It: An Essay on Expectation

### The impact of Positive Thinking on productivity

*When reading over the title for this section, I'm aware of selecting the term productivity over creativity. Yesterday I was with a friend and he asked why I use the word manufacture to describe the physical realization of artwork. I began to deliberate over the differences between manufacturing and making; whether Manufacture is a term solely applicable to the working of an Optimistic artist and Making might apply to an artist working with an approach influenced by Happiness? Manufacture seems aspirational, Making seems playful.*

*The main intention for using the term productivity rather than creativity is to draw the mind straight to the consistent and well-oiled worker, one who is more likely to work better when kept 'positive'. When I use the word positive I don't really mean it in an emotional sense, but more to signify a directional sense of moving forward.*

*Perhaps really my question is; what is the impact of desire for direction on the output of an artist? I often feel that my best ideas for work come, not through study or studio time, but at parties or parks- hanging out with my friends or wandering around streets.*

☺

*"When you set a goal, you've committed to CANI [Constant, Never-Ending Improvement]! You've acknowledged the need that all human beings have for constant, never-ending improvement." Motivational coach Tony Robbins<sup>i</sup>*

☺

Towards the end of the another section of this text I alluded to the internalized self-policing encouraged by Optimistic working; the regimented discipline that is instigated by a hope of achieving an imagined-future affect, for example success or control.

*In this manner of working Positive Thinking becomes an essential tool to keep on track towards this pre-determined goal.*

☺

In the book Smile or Die, Barbara Ehrenreich describes her research into the Positive Thinking industry that grew up in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the analogous boom of business culture. Aside from focusing on motivational posters, seminars, tapes and calendars, Ehrenreich highlights more unconventional methods used to generate positive thinking, equating to motivation towards achieving expected goals.

*"The employee, who had volunteered for the experience without knowing what was involved, was taken outside, told to lie down with his head pointed downhill, and held in place by fellow employees while the supervisor poured water into his nose and mouth. "You saw how hard Chad fought for air right there", the supervisor reportedly told the sales team. "I want you to go back inside and fight that hard to make sales".<sup>ii</sup>*

The desired outcome in a situation such as this, and in other less extreme versions, is to in-still the 'fight' necessary to push through to the winning position. Even if individuals can't be subjected to waterboarding at all times Ehrenreich goes on to hypothesize about the internalization of these encouragement exercises and their historical emergence via the self-criticizing Calvinism of early American settlers.

In Ehrenreich's theory the settlers' strict Calvinist lifestyles required the self to monitor its actions at all times and to live in fear of "meaninglessness". The constant, intense self-monitoring eventually led to the rise of "invalidism", a form of melancholy affecting many during 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

#### Commented [SSD1]:

General notes:

- In some cases unusual words are capitalised (e.g. Make). However, this is not done consistently and thus diminishes the emphasis created by capitalisation.
- Page numbers could usefully be included when quoting directly from a source (this relates to my values, see comment 12).
- There are two strands of thought that appear to be battling to be related – one is about artistic inspiration and the other about Instrumental Optimism.
- The text is clearly critical of 'productivity' and 'Positive Thinking' but at the same time seems to position the former as an aspiration – is this contradictory?
- The way different texts are introduced means that it reads like a series of summaries of bits of different authors' work.

**Commented [SSD2]:** This is an interesting interpretation. Rather than expressing optimism, for me the word manufacture represents a form of detachment: producing large quantities of something without (emotional) engagement. I think it might depend on what an 'Optimistic' artist is – perhaps you are discussing the 'Instrumental Optimism' referred to later in the text?

**Commented [SSD3]:** Labour studies have found that activities related to research being carried out, i.e. interest being taken in the workers, linked to them producing more stuff. It's known as the Hawthorne effect after the factory (Hawthorne Works) where it was first observed. (Mayo, E. (1960) *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*. New York: The Viking Press.) The link between 'interest' and productivity is perhaps less cynical than the later (and also I believe earlier) comment about 'internalized self-policing' where the artist is aware of other people viewing them and letting that control or modify how they act (which links to ideas of surveillance, control and power – particularly relevant would be various writings by Foucault).

**Commented [SSD4]:** How are these sentences related? What have they really got to do with being positive?

The first sentence seems to be what the overall text is trying to be about but the central ideas get a bit lost in the later discussion of Positive Thinking.

Is the situation discussed in the second sentence unique to artists? It's been talked about in relation to inspiration in (social) science research has been talked about in relation to social (Danermark, B., Ekström, M., Jakobsen, L. & Karlsson, J.C. (2002) *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. London & New York: Routledge.)

**Commented [SSD5]:** Naming and framing: Near the start it might be useful to provide some examples of 'so-called' Positive Thinking, like motivational slogans etc. The phrase is being used as if it has a universal meaning, different readers might interpret it differently.

As a reaction or antidote to this depression caused by constant self-criticism came the birth of the 'New Thought' and 'Christian Science' movements. These new lifestyle options aimed to re-address the balance between man and god, offering an alternative to hard Protestant morals with a new emphasis on Supply of Love.

'New Thought' gave birth to seedling models of Positive Thinking but what it had tried to escape from, the harsh self-judgement required for Calvinist living, it eventually returned to;

*"The American alternative to Calvinism was not to be hedonism or even just an emphasis on emotional spontaneity. To the positive thinker, emotions remain suspect and one's inner life must be subjected to relentless monitoring...the most striking continuity between the old religion and the new positive thinking lies in their common insistence on work...the Calvinist monitored his or her thoughts and feelings for signs of laxness...the positive thinker is ever on the lookout for negative thoughts."*<sup>iii</sup>



The Positive Thinking employed by the instrumental Optimist, the one working towards a goal imbued with a promise of happiness, only has time for emotional states which harmoniously aid smooth progression towards the desired end-point.

In his book, A Brief History of Happiness, Nicolas White introduces how a harmony of personality and aims played a key role in Plato's idea of the good life. A good life course was one with harmonious goals. A person would work to fulfil what they 'lacked' in a straight forward and synchronous manner. The lack identified and the methods to fulfil would come together as part of one straight journey, in a type of goal fulfilment similar to role-play computer games. The acquisition of one item or the solving of one problem would lead smoothly into the following acquisition or problem. Each acquisition or problem would play a specific role in a non-contradictory system.

Plato's system of harmonious desires supports his Ideal society, where each person works towards the task they are deemed best at. It works through pre-identification of goals and subsequent assessment of suitability and importance of desires. There are primal desires demanding instantaneous gratification, such as wanting to scratch an itch, and there are long-term supervisory desires, such as desiring to harmonise all other desires. In this hierarchical system the supervisory desires should supersede the primary desires, as being more aligned to maximum benefit over minimum time.



Offering an opposition to Plato's non-conflicting system of desires is Aristippus who believed it was possible to live well regardless of supervisory desires. Positive Thinking's 'supervisory desire' may demand a specific direction for productivity in exchange for the good life, but Aristippus's opinion was that those free of supervisory desires (which reprimand and keep on track similarly to the super ego) could function in a happier manner. This is also a view echoed by contemporary psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in his book Going Sane;

Commented [SSD6]: Jargon? Perhaps needs to be explained.

*"Lives dominated by impossible ideals...are experienced as continual failure. Sanity involves learning to enjoy conflict and giving up on all myths of harmony."*<sup>iv</sup>

The coherent planning of Optimists working towards pre-identifiable goals is a rigid course in contrast to the fluid Happiness model offered by Aristippus, which is stimulated only by the present. The Happiness method is an unstructured series of satisfactions, small moments that an Optimist may only see as a distraction. It is a now for now existence with no over-arching voice demanding a future equating to an optimum culmination of calculated actions.

Commented [SSD7]: Instrumental Optimists?

Commented [SSD8]: Instrumental Optimist?

This alternative generation through unpredictable evolution seems artistically comparable to Robert Morris' Anti-Form, where "chance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied" and the plasticity of materials are "registered in autobiographical terms". An artwork may manifest unexpectedly and its 'final' form may articulate its own coming into being – it is not shaved of 'imperfection' in a process of preparation. In Critical

Commented [SSD9]: Reference?

Design Marti Guixe has called this state of evolution “Anecdotal Manufacture”, which also finds parallels with Len Lye’s ‘Absolute Truth of the Happiness Acid’.

Commented [SSD10]: Reference?

*“All the evolutionary experience of the species is stored in the nucleic acid of one cell...When art draws on this information it resonates with our sense of essential selfness, and we experience the aesthetic value as happiness.”<sup>v</sup>*



This approach to an artwork coming into being is undefined by a beginning. It might not even be possible to identify a beginning, except in retrospect. It comes when least expected and certainly not by hoping to make an artwork. It is divorced from any prescribed function possible to identify at the outset. It is ‘made-up’ through living or conceptual ‘derive-ing’, the maker accidentally hitting upon a rupture like Ranciere’s 19<sup>th</sup> century joiner who gains, during his day-to-day activities, a new focus generated through his task in hand.

Commented [SSD11]: I think I get the sense of this (who knows?) but it could be tidied up to better convey a meaning.

*“Being a worker meant a certain form of fitting between a sensory equipment and its destination. It meant a determined body, a determined coordination between the gaze and the arms. The divorce between the labouring arms and the floating gaze introduces the body of a worker into a new configuration of the sensible; it overthrows the ‘right’ relationship between what a body ‘can’ do and what it cannot.”<sup>vi</sup>*



This method of making is akin to stumbling onto something, like a view through a window, but I would argue that it requires an awareness of the frame to begin with.

Commented [SSD12]: I would agree with this statement but wonder about the relationship between ‘methods’ and ‘outcomes’ in the text that follows - also discussed in the previous three sections. Shared agreement about what is valuable as an action or outcome is arguably partly gained by participation, using and adapting a method or approach. Becker talks about this in relation to conventions in different art worlds. (Becker, H.S. (2008[1982]) *Art Worlds*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.) Generally sociologists discuss this a lot – e.g. Norbert Elias and the development of manners. This prompts a question – how do you come to (implicitly or explicitly) frame yourself as part of the value system? Garfinkel’s *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967 Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc.) provides a useful way to understand this process.

It may be, as in Margaret Iversen’s *The Aesthetics of Chance*, “the replacement of the desire to do something with the desire to see what happens” but it also acknowledges certain parameters that allow this to occur;

*“...it is not a matter of unbridled spontaneity or sheer chaos. On the contrary, in these cases the operation of chance occurs only in the context of certain predetermined conditions, much like a deck of cards or paid of dice”<sup>vii</sup>*

It is possible to wander off track when not ‘encouraged’ by goal-orientated Positive Thinking, but a supervisory system of right, wrong and ‘appropriate’ uses of time is still important in contributing to our grasping of the importance of these directionless inspirations.



In a debate about Jacques Ranciere’s text ‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster’ between Ana Vujanovic and Dmitry Vilensky at Teorija koja Hoda, Vilensky raises a problem with the idea of emancipated learning. To demonstrate his point Vilensky gives the example of an art school where students are allowed to do as they please, either going to the provided lectures or not. He is opposed to this complete freedom on the basis that many of the students, instead of going to lectures, spend their time just going out and “smoking pot”.

What Vilensky argues is that before we can learn without deliberately setting out to learn we have to first experience a more traditional, disciplined technique of learning.

In my own imaginary extension of Vilensky’s school scenario, an art student is experiencing problems with their current practice – a conceptual or academic issue about how to proceed. On a given day they have two choices of how to spend their afternoon. They could go to see a talk by a visiting lecturer or they could go to see their dealer and get really stoned. Choosing the latter they forget about their problem. They visit their dealer and sit with him for a while talking and smoking.

In this imaginary afternoon, whilst the lecture is going on at school, the truant student is passing time at the dealer’s house and chatting about something unrelated such as the best way to cultivate cannabis or a re-telling a humorous life story. But, as this information is being relayed, something clicks in the truant’s brain

and although seemingly unrelated, the conversation arouses an unusual but acceptable solution to the student's unresolved academic issue.

The key to this 'emancipated' resolution however is that the student has previously been encouraged to 'know' and made aware of the legitimacy of their ability to alchemize information. Without this they may not feel confident enough to transfer a stoned fantasy into an epiphany. It's the difference between being hit on the head with an apple and discovering gravity.

**Commented [SSD13]:** See comment 12 – the only reason this realisation is useful is that the student understands (perhaps implicitly) the 'value' of the education. Whether or not that process of valuing is instrumental e.g. to get grades that lead others to value the student or to help the student get a job. Although it's possible that other things are operating that are not related to this – there can be physical realisations gained from coming to an understanding about something that are embodied and can be difficult to disentangle from the social.  
The gravity analogy doesn't work for me.

---

<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Ehrenreich, B. 2009. *Smile Or Die*. London: Granta.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Jefferies, S. 2006. *Happiness is always a delusion*. The Guardian, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Cantrill, A. *The Absolute Truth of The Happiness Acid*. Available online at Senses of Cinema <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/lye-2/> (Accessed 20/08/11)

<sup>vi</sup> Ranciere, J. 2006. *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Available online at Art & Research <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html> (Accessed 15/08/11)

<sup>vii</sup> Iversen, M. 2010. *The Aesthetics of Chance from Chance: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures.