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## Empowerment as an affective-discursive technology in contemporary capitalism : insights from a play

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## **Empowerment as an affective-discursive technology in contemporary capitalism: Insights from a play**

Over recent years, an increasing body of research in social and cultural studies has investigated the contemporary processes of social change from the point of view of affective capitalism. In this article, we take under scrutiny one of its technologies, namely, empowerment, by which we mean a state characterised by feelings of strength, ability and power that enable agency. More specifically, we investigate the way empowerment is presented in a cultural product, a play that tells a story about personnel training in a factory, shown in a city theatre in Finland. By linking recent theorisation of affective capitalism with an investigation of the intertextual and interdiscursive relations of the play, we analyse how the factory workers' pursuit for good life through empowerment recycles and exploits the affective-discursive elements of sexual and spiritual awakening. In conclusion, we discuss the play as a reflection of and on contemporary social processes. By presenting empowerment as a technology employed to interpellate in particular female subjects, the play contributes to the critique of neoliberalism as a gendered project, with women as its ideal subjects.

Keywords: affective capitalism; empowerment; gender; intertextuality; interdiscursivity; multimodality, theatre

## Introduction

Over recent years, an increasing body of research in social and cultural studies has investigated the contemporary processes of social change from the point of view of affective capitalism; the ways in which ‘our capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies’ (Karppi, Kähkönen, Mannevu, Pajala & Sihvonen, 2016, p. 9; Massumi 2015). The techniques, tactics and technologies involved in these transformation processes are varied, as previous research has shown (e.g. Vänskä, 2016; Graefer, 2016). In this article, we focus on a particular technology of subjectification that, we maintain, is both symptomatic and emblematic of affective capitalism but that nevertheless has received only little attention in the discussions of affective capitalism so far: that is, empowerment.

Empowerment is inherently laden with affect, namely, with the feelings of strength, capability and power that characterise the result of the process (Bröckling, 2016), as the notion of *empowerment* itself indicates. Its role as a technology of capitalism might at first seem counterintuitive. Empowerment emerged as a critical concept in the context of the liberation movements of the sixties (cf. Bröckling, 2016). However, during more recent decades it has undergone a co-option and transformation by and in contemporary capitalism similar to a number of other originally emancipatory concepts (Bröckling, 2016; Kauppinen, 2012; Saari & Harni, 2016). The political scientist Barbara Cruikshank (1999, p. 68) has captured the essence of this transformation as follows: ‘The left uses empowerment to generate political resistance; the right to produce rational and entrepreneurial actors’. Along with this shift, the notion of empowerment has become ubiquitous, appearing in contexts as diverse as education,

social work, popular media, development aid and – not least – business organisations (Cruikshank, 1999; Kauppinen, 2012; McRobbie, 2009; Bröckling, 2016).

While critical studies in sociology, political sciences and media studies, among others, have interrogated empowerment as a technology of subjectification in contemporary capitalism (e.g. Bröckling, 2016; Cruikshank, 1999; Keating, 2010; McRobbie, 2009), the analytical focus in these studies lies rather on the rationalities and techniques than on the affective attachments that are mobilised through the notion of empowerment. Moreover, they have paid little attention to the discursive construction of the process of empowerment. The present study seeks to contribute to filling these gaps through a framework that joins affect and discourse. Following the understanding of Jan Bloemert (2005; see also e.g. Machin, 2013), we take discourse to ‘comprise [--] all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural and historical patterns and developments of use’ (Blommaert, 2005, p. 3).

Moreover, we view affect and discourse as inescapably intertwined. In previous literature within affect theories, affect has been described in various – and oftentimes diverse – ways. Brian Massumi (1995, 2002), for example, sees affect as prepersonal experience of intensity that – unlike emotion and feeling – exists prior to consciousness and cannot be defined or communicated through linguistic signification. In his view, affect is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential that also has a political dimension in that this potential can be used for affective modulation of people’s attitudes and behaviours – a form of power characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Massumi, 2015). Along with Massumi, Lauren Berlant (2011) has theorized the operation of affective attachments in the contemporary neo-liberal era. She discusses people’s investments in fantasies of good life, which often turn out as relations of ‘cruel optimism’, fateful fantasies that prevent people from reaching what they are chasing for.

While Massumi and Berlant count among scholars who view affect as an extra-discursive phenomenon, others, including Sarah Ahmed (2004, 2010) and Margaret Wetherell (2012), stress the relational nature of affect and criticise the separation of discourse and affect as untenable. Wetherell, for example, approaches affect as an intertwined part of discursive practices and states that it is the situated, multisemiotic practices – and the way they organize affect – that should be at the focus of research. She calls for a stronger connection between affect theories and discourse studies, claiming that the latter could provide fruitful methodological tools for reaching the affect research's goal of understanding 'the entangled forms of assembling constituting social life moment to moment' and 'the working of power through patterns of assemblage' (Wetherell 2012, pp. 349, 351).

Drawing on the above mentioned theorising of Wetherell, in particular, we also view discourse as mediating affect in and through affective-discursive practices within different contexts of social life. In addition to discourse (in the singular), we make use of the concept of discourses (in the plural), which we understand as systems of knowledge that signify and organise the social world by multi-semiotic means (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Foucault, 1972). Building upon this theoretical background, in this study we analyse the affective-discursive construction of the process of employee empowerment using as our case a recent play, *Ansa*, performed in the city theatre of Jyväskylä, Finland. More specifically, we analyse how the play taps into the affective-discursive fields of (female) sexual and spiritual awakening in presenting such process, or put differently, how the discursive elements related to sexual-spiritual fields provide the very resources for linguistic signification and cultural coding of affect within the process of empowerment. In the play, the association to sexuality takes place largely through references to heterosexual romance in romantic fiction and career self-help

literature, both culturally feminine genres, and the linking to spirituality through connections to Christian tradition and discourse. However, by spiritual we particularly mean the new forms of spirituality, arising as part of the subjective turn in modern culture and its sacralisation processes – seeing the sources of significance in unique, personal experiences and relationalities instead of established and given supra-self orders (see Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

The play we analyse suggests that the process of empowerment in contemporary capitalism is fuelled by different affective investments, and as mentioned, in particular the libidinal energies of sexual and spiritual awakening, presenting empowerment essentially as a culturally feminine technology. In analysing these connections, we especially utilise the before mentioned notion of cruel optimism introduced by Berlant (2011). However, while Berlant's focus is on fantasies of good life stemming from a pre-neoliberal era that in the face of the 'crisis ordinariness' of neoliberalism no longer can be achieved, in the case of the play *Ansa*, the promises and attachments are generated and exploited by neoliberal power itself as part of surplus value production (cf. Massumi, 2015). The employees' desire of good life through empowerment becomes unachievable and 'cruel' both due to its inward focus (see De Vos, 2012) and the crisis-prone unpredictability of contemporary capitalism.

We have chosen to analyse a cultural product for two main reasons: the first is the opportunity it gives to empirically analyse the process of empowerment. In a cultural product, this process manifests itself in a condensed and accentuated form. It should be noted, though, that the play itself is a critical commentary on ongoing social realities and processes, and for this reason, it cannot be treated as straightforward evidence of the nature of contemporary capitalism. However, although we do not take a cultural product such as a theatre performance to be a reflection of social reality per se,

we do maintain that in order for a play to work as a social setting the audience has to acknowledge a reciprocal relation between the real world and the interactional construction unfolding in front of them (see Hazel, 2015). In other words, for a play to work, discourses recycled in the play need to be recognisable by the audience. Rather than a truthful reflection of social reality, a theatre performance can thus be viewed as an analysis of this reality in its own right that comments on and highlights aspects of societal developments by means of art, which is the second reason that makes an analysis of a play particularly interesting and socially relevant. In this way, the object of our analysis has two layers: contemporary social reality as interpreted and performed via the artistic means of theatrical expression.

Before proceeding to the analysis, we will introduce our data and methodological approach in more detail. In conclusion, we will return to the question of the play as both a reflection of and a reflection on contemporary social processes and consider the possibilities of using art pieces as data in discourse studies.

### **The musical *Ansa* and the methodological approach**

The play, a musical called *Ansa*, ran on the large stage of the main theatre in the city of Jyväskylä in central Finland through the autumn of 2016 and the spring of 2017. It was the third adaptation of the musical, written by a famous Finnish playwright and director, Sirkku Peltola. The version performed in Jyväskylä was directed by Fiikka Forsman. In the research project, one of the actual performances was videotaped by using two cameras; the analysis is based on this embodied and temporal performance and thus on the adaptation of Forsman.

*Ansa – Musikaali liian hyvästä ihmisestä* ('Ansa – a musical about a person with a too kind nature') tells the story of Ansa Vallittu, a middle-aged woman who works in a factory making muesli bars in a small town in Finland. The gender division in the factory is clear: the managers on all levels are exclusively men, the workers in the factory are women apart from Rashid, a sympathetic immigrant of Turkish background. Ansa is unmarried and has no children, but she has a cat. She spends all her spare time helping others: she regularly visits her mother in an old people's home, takes care of the house of one of her mother's former doctor, called Birgitta, while Birgitta is away on conference trips, looks after the children of her fellow worker Tuulikki while she is spending time with her lover, and takes food and alcohol to the local down-and-outs. Finally, and only if there is time left over, Ansa goes to her choir practice.

This all changes when a consultant comes to the factory with the mission of introducing the workers to a new, more productive approach to work, through a personnel training programme entitled *Kaikki peliin* ('Giving your all'). The name of the protagonist, which is a pun, gives a first hint as to how the story is going to evolve: Ansa – a rather old Finnish female name – is a homonym that also means 'trap'. Ansa's last name, Vallittu, resembles the word *valittu*, which means 'chosen' in Finnish. Not only does Ansa embrace the call of the consultant with enthusiasm, but she also falls in love with him, both with rather destructive consequences. The story is mostly set in the muesli bar factory, where the training programme takes place; it includes the consultant's pep talks for the mental 'empowerment' of the workers, and Nordic walking training to boost their physical fitness. The other contexts of Ansa's life and her relations with the other people referred to above function as a frame story that reflects her conduct and persona.

In the following analysis, we will examine four scenes from the play central to the process and outcomes of Ansa's empowerment: 1. The consultant's opening talk, 2. Ansa's wedding, 3. Ansa's visit to the old people's home and 4. The consultant's departure. As mentioned, our study focuses on the question of how the play taps into the affective-discursive fields of sexual and spiritual awakening in presenting the process, and in order to analyse this recycling of discourses, we will examine the intertextual relations of the before mentioned scenes. By intertextuality we mean the interrelationship between different semiotic systems and meanings that arise from this relation. Following the notable definition of Norman Fairclough (1992), we see that there are two kinds of intertextual relations in our data: manifest intertextuality and constitutive intertextuality, namely, interdiscursivity. The former refers to explicit references to other semiotic systems while the latter means recycling different genre conventions and discourses in a given system. In our analysis, we will examine how these intertextual relations are employed in representing the process of change and empowerment of the lead character in our data. Importantly, while focusing on the core scenes of the play, we will also draw on a number of other texts – such as self-help literature, women's magazines and the New Testament – to analyse the intertextual and interdiscursive links to be found in the play.

In the play, these intertextual relations are embedded in wider genre specific conventions of drama that further modulate the representation of the process. The play's narrative structure appropriates the classical plotting and Freytag's Pyramid (see Lowe, 2000), with Ansa's wedding coming out as the climax of the play. According to Lowe (2000: 260), classical plotting is 'a uniquely powerful system for the narrative articulation of claims about the order of the world', for it 'asserts the deep causality' and invites 'a collective, systemic perspective on human value'. What can be seen in Ansa,

is the employment of the conventions of a classical tragedy but with a neoliberal spin, the unachievable pursuit for good life through empowerment being the main cause for the tragic events and inescapable destiny of the protagonist. At the same time, the play also uses dramatic conventions that relate it to epic theatre, making it appear as a critical, ironic commentary on societal developments and essentially a satire on contemporary management techniques and neoliberal ethos. Among these conventions are various estrangement effects (such as the consultant addressing the audience), and in particular, the use of choreographic movement and music whose semiotic resources would, however, need a separate study (see e.g. Machin 2010).

Since our data enacts the conventions of human face-to-face interaction, we also utilise the methods of conversation analysis (e.g. Sidnell & Stivers, 2012) in studying the sequential unfolding of the dialogue.

### **Unpacking the affective-discursive construction of the process of empowerment**

In this section, we will investigate the manifest and constitutive intertextuality of the core scenes of the play, and more specifically, the way they signify affect within the process of empowerment. Our interest lies in both the intertextual relations between the different scenes in the context of the play and the way the scenes further connect with the social world outside the play. In our analysis, we will therefore examine how intertextuality on the one hand creates coherence in the play and helps the audience to perceive the connections between the different events unfolding in front of them, and on the other hand, makes these events culturally recognisable and guides the audience's interpretation of them.

### *Stimulating a desire to change*

In the first scene analysed, the consultant has just arrived at the factory and is delivering his first motivational talk to the factory workers. The talk has a clear design in that it consists of three main functional components. Firstly, there is an orientation part where the speaker creates a context for his talk by introducing its theme and connecting it with the life-world of the recipients. Secondly, this is followed by the main part of the talk, where he elaborates on the theme and teaches or counsels the audience, and thirdly, a conclusion, where he recaps the talk and the goal of the training, the audience members now openly accepting his ideas. Therefore, the discourse structure and the rhetorical functions of the opening talk resemble the conventions typical of sermons (see Cheong, 1999). While this constitutive intertextuality is already present in the generic features of the whole activity type, the elements of religious practice also noticeably increase as the talk unfolds, manifested in the consultant's use of different semiotic resources. This can be seen from the extracts below. Extract 1 is from the very beginning of the opening talk, where the consultant sets up the context for his talk and, more broadly, for the training programme.

Extract 1.

01 C:           lähtökohta (.) koko tälle kurssille (.) on sellainen hyvin merkittävä tosiasia  
*the starting point (.) for the whole course (.) is that kind of very crucial fact*



\*POINTS TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE

\*POINTS

02 että \*<sinä olet MINÄ oo yy> (.) ja tämän minä oo yyn osakkeista (.) \*sinä (.)  
that \*<you are ME inc> (.) and all the shares in this me inc (.) are owned (.)

\* C JUMPS DOWN

03 omistat kaikki. \*(.) sinä olet johtaja ja suuromistaja.  
by \*you. \*(.) you are the director and the sole proprietor.

((lines omitted: C continues his talk))

04 C: ihanaa kun pääsitte paikalle. (.) kiva nähä teitä kaikkia. (.) MINÄPÄ  
wonderful that you could come here. (.) nice to see you all. (.) I THINK I

05 KYSYN TEILTÄ JOKAISelta nyt ihan henkilökohtasesti (.) että oletko  
WILL NOW ASK EACH ONE OF YOU personally (.) if you are satisfied with

\*POINTS

06 tyytyväinen tulokseen. (.) mitä. (.) onko (.) minä oo yyn pääjohtaja \*siellä  
the profit. (.) what. (.) is (.) the general director of me inc over \*there

*satisfied with the profit.*

As seen from the extract, the consultant begins his talk with two claims that define the workers and their world from the viewpoint of the training: *<you are ME inc> (.) and all the shares in this me inc (.) are owned by you* (lines 2-3). In so doing, he shows his superior expertise in the matters under discussion and establishes for himself an epistemic and deontic authority (cf. Nissi & Lehtinen, 2016) to instruct the workers. More importantly, he also establishes for the workers the entirely new identity category of ‘leader’, with the category bound devices (see Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015) of omnipotent power and accountability. Later on, in lines 5-7, the consultant asks how the workers have been able to fulfill this role. Asking something ‘personally’ can be seen to be marking the question as potentially delicate, and in this case, to be projecting a negative answer. In this way, the question is used to create a need, and therefore, to legitimate the training programme (cf. Kauppinen, 2012).

All these features connect the talk to neoliberal self-management consultation and the related self-help literature, and more specifically to the works of the American management guru Tom Peters. In his work, he has developed the idea of a person as the ‘CEO of Me Inc.’, namely, the idea that one should run and manage his/her personal life as if it was a company (e.g. Peters, 1997). On a broader plane, this idea of personhood connects to the neoliberal notion of entrepreneurial self (e.g. Bröckling, 2016), which decouples leadership from the actual organisational and socioeconomic position of the person and instead connects it with one’s possibilities of managing one’s motives and aspirations independently, for oneself, thus conveying a powerful emancipatory message. In the context of the play, it is precisely this ‘turn to oneself’ that opens up a

new horizon for the employees of the factory for pursuing ‘a good life’ (cf. Berlant, 2011).

Interestingly, while tapping into neoliberal ideology, the talk also draws on religious discourse. The religious overtones are due to the topic itself, the pursuit of ‘true and inner riches’ being one of the core doctrines of Christianity. Moreover, the consultant stands above his audience, which makes his performance parallel evangelical sermons and the pastor preaching from the pulpit. This is further emphasised by his use of questions that aim to extract a confession of ‘failures’ and are personalised by a direct verbal addressing as well as pointing. Further, the consultant uses metaphors that are in the form of a copular clause (*you are me inc*) and thus resemble the type of metaphors commonly found in the Bible (e.g. Matt. 5:13 You are the salt of the earth; 1 Cor. 12: 27 You are the body of Christ; John 15: 5 I am the vine; you are the branches)<sup>1</sup> (see Kela, 2014). By doing so, the orientation part also brings new kinds of affective elements into the world of the play. In the consultant’s talk, the affect is built through the before mentioned intertextual references, but also various means within the turn design. These include, for example, the use of an evaluative lexicon (*wonderful, nice*), and most of all, prosodic features, such as a loud voice, emphasis and a slow pace (e.g. <*you are ME inc*>) that mark the core parts of the turn. At the same time, they display the speaker’s heightened emotive involvement (Selting, 1994) in the activity and thus form a model for the right kind of stance.

During the main part of the talk the consultant elaborates on the themes introduced earlier. Extract 2 shows how he explains the goal of the training, construing the workers as its co-beneficiaries and thus pre-empting potential resistance related to the deontic asymmetry of the setting (cf. Clayman & Heritage, 2014). In interdiscursive terms, he explicitly performs the neoliberal move from viewing the interests of

employers and workers as antithetic to each other to aligning them with each other (cf. Rose, 1999; Kauppinen, 2013). Here, the focus of the training shifts from the realms of work and livelihood to the meaning and course of one's own life – thus echoing further the neoliberal idea that the entrepreneurial approach should be extended to all spheres of life (e.g. Bröckling, 2016; Kauppinen, 2012).

#### Extract 2

01 C: tällä (.) projektillahan ei ainoastaan varmisteta työnnantajan tulosta ehei (.)  
*this (.) project will not only ensure the profit of the employer oh no (.)*

\*POINTS

02 vaan ennen kaikkea että \*sinulla (.) että sinulla siellä on <mielekäs työ>. (.)  
*but most of all that \*you (.) that you over there have a <meaningful job.> (.)*

03 ja elämä (.) sinusta tulee minä oo yy joka on yhtä kun menestystarina. (.)  
*and life (.) you will become me inc which means a success story.*

04 @MINÄ oo yy on TYÖ TOTUUS JA ELÄMÄ@. ((fanatic voice))  
*@ME inc is WORK THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE@.*

((lines omitted: C continues his talk))

05 <minun> on siis muututtava jotta tämä (.) <voiton maksimointi>  
*so <I> will have to change so that this (.) <maximisation of the profit>*

06 olisi mahdollista. (.) ensimmäinen este muutokselle on se (.) että me emme

*would be possible. (.) the first barrier to the change is the fact (.) that we do not*

07 tarkkaan tiijä mitä me haluamme. (.) tärkeintä on siis löytää  
*clearly know what we desire. (.) so most of all one has to find the*

08 HAlu.  
*DESIre.*

Importantly, while earlier references to the Bible were fairly implicit, now the consultant noticeably modifies one of the core Biblical metaphors, and thereby brings into the activity existential and transcendent dimensions with new connotations of mission and true purpose: *ME inc is WORK THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE* (line 4) (cf. John 14:6 I am the way, and the truth and the life). Moreover, his talk about a transformation into new life (*you will become*, line 3) seem to recycle the religious discourse on renewal and resurrection. At the same time, the consultant stresses and seeks to activate individual agency: transformation and a new life are available to anyone, so long as one knows what one desires. Claiming again access to the epistemic world of the audience, the consultant poses ignorance about what one wants/desires as the ultimate obstacle to change and readiness to identify one's desire(s) as the solution. By way of this modulation of the affective states (cf. Massumi, 2015) of the employees, the consultant not only evokes a powerful fantasy of a good life (Berlant, 2011), but also activates a sense of agency – the possibility to search one's own desire – and moral responsibility to do so in his audience, thus turning their capacity to be affected into a managerial strategy (cf. Karppi et al., 2016: 9). As the seemingly emancipatory potential of his call increases so does its hidden cruelty: not only are the affective investments in a fantasy of a better life by way of personal empowerment to make sure that the

employees never break out of their constrained position (cf. Berlant, 2011), but also the primary goal of this agitation is to turn these investments into increased production capacity for the company (cf. Massumi, 2015).

While intertextual references to the Bible and, more broadly, to religious discourse, increase throughout the play, the affective intensity of the activity also escalates – shown, for example, in the use of a fanatic voice quality (line 4). However, the growing tension is also due to the sexual undercurrent that begins to emerge as the opening talk unfolds. In the previous extract, the lexeme *desire* can already be seen to have a sexual meaning. In line 8, it appears without a grammatical object so that it refers to a mental or physical quality of a person (cf. one wants/desires something ~ one has the desire to do something) and thus potentially connotes sexual desire. Later on, the sexual implications are seen, for example, in the teasing exchanges between the consultant and the factory workers, and later still, in their prolonged gazes and the use of haptic modality, which denote a new kind of affective relation between the participants (cf. Cekaite & Holm Kvist, 2017).

Extract 3 demonstrates these changes. Here, the consultant has been teaching the workers about this inner transformation and now wants to measure their ‘force field’ in order to customise the training (lines 1-4). The remarks about hidden energies and specialised fingertips again bring into the activity religious – and more specifically new age – connotations and present the consultant in a somewhat suspicious light. The sexual implications arise at exactly the point when the consultant turns his gaze to Ansa (line 4). The gaze is noticeably extended (cf. Kidwell, 2005) which marks the symbolic importance of the encounter.

Extract 3

01 C: jos (.) sallitte (.) minä mittaan sormenpäilläni teidän jokaisen lähtökohdan.  
*if (.) you allow me (.) I will use my fingertips to measure each person's starting*

\*GOES TO TOUCH EACH WORKER WITH HIS FINGERS

02 (.) ku minulla on (.) \*koulutukse ja kokemuksen myötä (.) herkistyneet (.) nämä  
*point (.) because I have (.) due to my \*training and experience (.) sensitised (.)*

03 sormenpäitten ihoanturat. (.) nii (.) mittaamaan ihan kliinisesti (.) jokaisessa  
*skin pads on my fingertips. (.) so (.) to measure really clinically (.) the*

\*TURNS GAZE TO ANSA AND LOOKS AT HER INTENSELY

04 ihmisessä \*(.) <piilevää voimakenttää>.  
*\*<force field> (.) that is hidden in each person*

05 C ROLLS UP HIS SLEEVES AND LOOKS AT A'S BODY, GIVES OTHER WORKERS AN  
INVISIBLE ITEM TO HOLD, THEN WALKS BACKWARDS WHILE A STANDS STILL



06 C STANDS VERY STILL, BREATHES HEAVILY AND BEGINS TO WALK TOWARDS A



07 C SUDDENLY RAISES HIS HANDS TOWARDS A'S HEAD, KEEPS MOVING HIS HANDS CLOSER TO A WHILE GRUNTING, BOTH BODIES VISIBLY TENSE, WORKERS MOAN WITH INCREASING INTENSITY



08 WORKERS' MOANING PEAKS WHEN C FINALLY TOUCHES A'S HEAD, C CLOSES EYES, A CLOSES EYES, BOTH BODIES VISIBLY RELAX

The extract demonstrates how the consultant, after turning his focus to Ansa, shifts his gaze to her lower body (line 5) and thus indicates explicitly the sexual potential of the situation. Now the affective intensity of the activity increases dramatically, all the participants displaying anticipation through their frozen bodies (lines 5-6). The tension heightens still further as the consultant begins to move towards Ansa (line 6) in order to touch her (line 7). His step-by-step approach to Ansa's body is accompanied by his rhythmic grunts and the workers' moans (lines 7-8), which can be seen as non-lexical

response cries vocalised on behalf of Ansa that thus create and display the intersubjective experience of a worker collectivity (cf. Kupetz, 2014). Here, the action unfolding on the stage can be seen to signal sexual excitement and climax, but also religious ecstasy, where members of a congregation are perceived as being spiritually slain through the actions of the preacher.<sup>2</sup> The heightened affectivity of the activity is expressed through the withdrawal from the verbal exchange, prolonged pauses as well as the synchronous organization of action (see Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2015). In terms of interdiscursivity, both the sexual and the religious activity represent a situation that is culturally associated with ‘letting go’, that is, the deliberate loss of one’s own subjectivity. In the play, the iconicity of the setting is particularly expressed by Ansa’s arching back and open arms (see line 8) that may display both sexual submission and the prostration of the body, and denote her inner change as she gives up any resistance and completely surrenders herself to the consultant and the training.

### ***Giving oneself up to the fantasy of new life***

In the previous section, we demonstrated how the training begins to recycle elements of religious and sexual activity so that the process of finding the workers’ desire – the inner drive – starts to simulate a sexual and spiritual awakening. The sexual and spiritual dimensions show some markedly gendered associations. On the level of the story line, the awakening that the protagonist Ansa experiences through the training resembles the iconic popular cultural story of an inexperienced girl who falls in love and discovers her sexuality, circulated in various versions in romantic fiction (cf. Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). On the textual level, the gendered associations are conveyed

through frequent use of the conceptual metaphor WORK IS MATRIMONIAL RELATION that can be abstracted from different expressions in the consultant's opening talk (e.g. *employment should be seen like a relationship, it requires respect ~ it also belongs to love that we have desire ~ no one surely marries just to get divorced* when he is talking to the workers about work) and are found in various guises in different popular career self-help genres targeted at women, and thus appearing distinctive to these specialist discourses (e.g. Garnice, n.d.; Kauppinen, 2012; cf. also Herrmann & Sardinha, 2015).

Importantly, the conceptual metaphor refers to a group of family-related conceptual metaphors in the Bible, such as THE CONGREGATION IS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST or CHRIST IS THE GROOM OF THE CONGREGATION (e.g. Matt 9:15 How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast; Rev. 19: 7-8 For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear) (see Kela, 2014). In the context of the play, with its introduction of passion, devotion and fidelity as characteristics that can all be found in a good employee, the conceptual metaphor brings in a new interpretative layer and creates forceful moral expectations about the nature of a good worker. It also establishes an intertextual relation between the different scenes. The next scene, which symbolically portrays the actual inner change of Ansa – giving herself up to the fantasy of new life – is presented as a culturally recognisable activity type associated with the matrimonial relationship, namely, as a wedding. Unlike the previous scenes, it is not performed through a spoken dialogue but through music and dance, which suggests that it is allegorical by nature rather than actually taking place in the 'real' world of the play. The use of music also brings into the play the aspects of tone, melody and rhythm that

themselves act as semiotic resources and convey affectivity in particularly prominent ways by allowing a distinct grandiosity of action.

Extract 4

\*BODY RAISED BY SOME TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT

01 A: \*@♪tahdon tahdon♪@ ((harsh, steely voice))

\*@♪I will I will♪@

02 @♪haluan olla raudan rakas teräksen morsian♪@

@♪I want to be the love of iron the bride of steel♪@

((lines omitted: song continues, C arrives on the scene))



03 @♪kaiken antaa kaiken kantaa kaiken kestää kaiken♪@

@♪all it gives all it bears all it takes all♪@

The scene is presented as a wedding by different semiotic means that include language as well as embodied and material resources. Firstly, there are participants with the conventional institutional roles of a bride (Ansa) and a groom (the consultant), marked as such by their wedding dress and a shirt whose whiteness symbolises the piety and

purity related to the activity (cf. van Leeuwen, 2011). Secondly, the turns of the bride have intertextual references to the liturgical wedding vows (*I will*, line 1) as well as to the Bible text that is customarily quoted in the wedding ceremony (*all it gives all it bears all it takes all*, line 3 ~ cf. 1 Cor. 13: 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things). Together the different semiotic means accentuate the allegorical nature of the scene: Ansa gets married to the new rationality of work, personified in the figure of the consultant. Her sudden empowerment and transition from a meek, docile woman to a new, resolute woman – indicated by her rising body and harsh, steely voice – is shown to grow out of this union in which Ansa couples up with her new life partner, a new rationality of work.

However, while the scene's constitutive intertextuality utilises the features and connotations of a Christian wedding it also evokes other interdiscursive relations – the scene presents a group of dancers with eroticised bodies, marked by their red dresses (cf. van Leeuwen, 2011), bare skin and dance movements, as well as the groom, who does not gaze at his bride but moves from woman to woman and from body to body (see line 3). This, in turn, makes allusions to adultery and degeneration and signifies the nature of Ansa's inner change as something grotesque and dirty. The scene evokes an affective world, in which the libidinal energies of spiritual and sexual awakening blend; while circulating tropes of resoluteness, reliance and surrender that the empowerment as an affective-discursive technology here draws on, it also hints at its double standards, or, indeed, its corrupt and degenerate nature.

***Living out the fantasy***

The wedding scene is a turning point in the story line of the play and it is followed by an interval. After the interval, Ansa is transformed. The transition is emphasised by her changed relations to her surroundings: the new, empowered Ansa no longer lets others boss her around, she stops offering to help others and no longer shows any understanding of other people's shortcomings. Instead, she throws herself into her work and demands the same from others, and uses her spare time to spread the word about the new principles of life she has now internalised. Despite the newfound sense of strength and energy, her new attitude and orientation do not seem to bring her closer to the envisioned better life, but seem instead misplaced and start to have tragic consequences – the real cruelty of the evoked fantasy begins to materialise in Ansa's life as she actually brings misery to her surroundings and her relations with her close ones break down. These changes are again shown through manifest intertextuality, this time by recycling elements from the consultant's talk into Ansa's talk, which links back to the opening scenes and explains the actions of the lead character. This can be seen from Extract 5, below. Here, Ansa goes to visit her mother in the old people's home, where there are other elderly people (S1, S2, S3, S4) and their nurse (N).

#### Extract 5

01 S1: istus ny plikka persuuksille ja kerro tota (.) mihinä oot ollut ku et ole  
*come on girl sit down on your bum and tell me (.) where you have been since*

02 neljähä viikkoho käyny.  
*you haven't visited for four weeks.*

03 S2: kun ei edes sojta tai preivillä heitä.

*since you don't even ring or send a letter.*

04 S1: äiteensä aivan tuskas orottanu.

*her mother has waited in agony.*

05 S3: terveen näköinen se on. (.) jotain täynnä.

*she looks healthy though. (.) full of something.*

06 S2: mitä.

*what.*

07 S3: <jotain täynnä.>

<*full of something*>.



\*POINTS TO THE RECIPIENTS

08 A: <niin olenkin>. (.) \*@ELÄMÄÄ@. ((joyous, ecstatic voice))

<*yes I am*>. (.) \*@LIFE@.

09 S2: hyvä hy[vä.

*good go[od.*

10 A: [heh heh heh ja nyt (.) otetaan teidänkin elämästä  
*[heh heh heh and now (.) we will get one hundred percent*



\*PUSHES S4'S WHEELCHAIR

\*S4 FALLS TO THE FLOOR

11 \*(.) sata prosenttia irti @KAIKKI peli\*in@. ((fanatical, intense voice))

\*(.) out of your life too @GIVING your a\*ll@.

12 N: @ooh eino@. ((shocked voice))

@uh eino@. ((name))

13 S1: @eino@. ((shocked voice))

@eino@.

14 All: (-) ((general mumble))

\*N RUSHES TO HELP S4

15: A: [pelisäännöistä sen verran että \*pidetään tämä tilanne semmosena rullaavana.

*[about the rules that \*let's keep this situation kind of rolling.*

16 (.) tarpeen vaatiessa vessaan ja tupakille. (.) vessaan ja tupakille. (.) säilytetään

(.) *if need be to the toilet and a smoke* (.) *to the toilet and a smoke.* (.) *let's keep*



\*ANSA FLITS AROUND THE ROOM

17 tilanteessa virtaa. (.) \*@flow flow >flow flow flow flow< flow.@ ((manic))

*the energies up.* (.) \*@flow flow >flow flow flow flow< flow.@

18 (.) ja @hei hei hei hei hei. (.) otetaan tämä nyt ihan ilosesti

(.) *and @hey hey hey hey hey.* (.) *let's take this just*

19 vastaan@. ((stranger's voice))

*happily@.*

((lines omitted: A continues her talk))

20 ensi alkuun (.) me arvioimme teidän perustavoitteita ja sitä kautta lähdetään

*to begin with* (.) *we assess your basic goals and in this way start to*

21 synnyttämään muutospainetta.(.) kaikki (.) kaikki te varmaa (.) haluatte

*create a need for change.* (.) *all* (.) *all of you surely* (.) *want*

22 muutosta. (.) vai mitä. (.) <mauri>.

*change. (.) or what. (.) <mauri>. ((name))*

23 S2: mitä.

*what.*

24 A: <haluaako mauri muutosta.>

*<do you want change.>*

25 S1: juu. (.) iha varmaa.

*yes. (.) certainly.*

26 ANSA CHUCKLES HAPPILY

27 A: irma.

*irma. ((name))*

28 S2: miksei sitä.

*well why not.*

At the beginning of the extract (lines 1-5), the residents of the care home ask why Ansa has been absent recently and comment on its consequences. The scene presents an exchange that can be understood as a representation of the everyday world (see Pollner, 1987) with its expected causal relations and moralities – which differs from the world that has begun to emerge earlier in the play. The contrast between the old, known and ordinary world and Ansa’s new reality is made clear, for example, through the residents’ use of a casual register that includes a strong, rural accent and a colloquial lexicon indexing normality. However, Ansa no longer engages with the ordinary world

and her intersubjective understanding sustained in and through social interaction breaks down when she is with the residents: she does not respond to the request addressed to her (lines 1-2) (cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2014) or produce an account as a response to the blame (line 3, 4) (cf. Buttny, 1990). It is only after one of the residents comments on her physical appearance (line 5) and in this way invites a description of her first-hand experience that she takes the turn and explains her inner state (line 8).<sup>3</sup>

Here, Ansa recycles the core theme from the consultant's earlier talk, that is, the discussion about a new life (see Extract 2). Her turn resembles the consultant's talk also prosodically with her loud voice, heavily stressed words and intense, fanatical voice quality. Moreover, Ansa makes a pointing gesture similar to one frequently used by the consultant (see Extract 1). Importantly, in this way, she is not only seen to circulate the consultant's message, but also to endorse the affects and the model stance put forth by him. These intertextual relations increase further as she begins to teach the residents about the changes needed (line 10 onwards), recycling into her turn the consultant's words and phrases as well as his actions, such as the use of direct questions. Some of these elements are clearly recognisable from the earlier scenes (e.g. 'we will get one hundred percent out of your life', lines 10-11; 'do you want change', lines 24-28, cf. Extract 1), whereas others appear recycled due to the features characteristic of consulting and strategy discourse (e.g. 'we assess your basic goals and start to create a need for change', lines 20-21). However, in Ansa's turn, they seem disproportionate – and tragicomic – as they are recontextualised (Linell, 1998) from the context of workplace training into the end-of-life context of the care home and its frail residents.

As mentioned, while Ansa engages with her own world and its self-ruling affect she also disconnects herself from what is going on around her; one of the residents, for example, falls to the floor (line 11) but she does not react and thus deviates from the

usual emotional order in organising human action (see Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). Some recycled elements are also fitted into Ansa's turn as ready-made components (see lines 17-19), separated from her own voice by prosodic cues and thus further emphasising the distorted nature of her empowerment. In this way, the scene can also be seen to draw on constitutive intertextuality, as it employs the stereotypical features of extremist religious practice: Ansa has been indoctrinated into a new belief system and acts it out and convert others at all costs. As such, the scene also represents a further aspect of how empowerment as an affective-discursive technology draws on the affective energies and discursive practices of spiritual awakening in the play.

### *Becoming disillusioned*

Towards the end of the play, the storyline takes a sudden turn. The training project has come to an end and the workers have been presented with certificates in a grand ceremony. Immediately after they have heard the delightful news that the training programme has been successful – the production capacity of the factory has increased by 1.6 per cent – they hear that the company has been sold to a foreign capital investor and the whole production unit will be moved abroad; developments that – demonstrating the unpredictable nature of contemporary capitalism – make the optimism evoked in the workers 'cruel' in the Berlantian (2011) sense. For Ansa, these unexpected events lead to a profound crisis as her new life falls apart and she becomes disillusioned with the ideological underpinnings of the training. Here, the scenes unfolding on the stage are again made comprehensible through their interdiscursive relations, namely, by recycling both the cultural representations about deconversion and

relationship breakdown and being abandoned: the consultant leaves Ansa, who, in turn, gives up her new faith. The beginning of this process is shown in Extract 6, where Ansa meets the consultant after they have heard the devastating news. The extract begins with Ansa's asking about the reasons for the management's decision, her weepy voice quality now marking her mental confusion and emotional turmoil.

#### Extract 6

- 01 A: @miten tässä näin pääsi käymään tuotantohan piristyi@. ((weepy voice))  
*@how could this happen the production actually perked up@.*
- 02 C: nii. (.) en tiiä se on (.) uh (.) se on tämä (.) tämä (.) <globalisaatio> (.)  
*yes. (.) I don't know it is (.) uhm (.) this (.) this (.) <globalisation> (.)*
- 03 semmone väkkyrä (että perkele). (.) ääh (.) (ku) ei siitä näköjää yhtää voi  
*is such a whirling (that fuck me). (.) uh (.) (since) one clearly cannot know*
- 04 tietää se o (.) (joo no) (.) no krh eipä tässä nyt voi ku (.)  
*at all it is (.) (oh well) (.) well krh ((hawks)) here one can do nothing but (.)*
- 05 öö (.) tätä (.) aa tota (.) aa (.) rohkeutta (.) vaan toivottaa ja @>hei hei  
*uhm (.) this (.) well uhm (.) uhm (.) courage (.) only hope and @>hey hey*
- \*POINTS AT A
- \*TAKES A SUITCASE PREPARING TO LEAVE
- 06 hei< (.) \*voimavarat käyttöön kyllä \*tekeväälle löytyy aina  
*hey< (.) \*put your inner resources to use an \*active person surely always*

töitä@. ((intense, perky voice))

*finds work@.*

07 A: joo. (.) meitä on kuusisataa.

*yeah. (.) there are six hundred of us.*

\*PUTS THE SUITCASE BACK ON THE FLOOR

08 C: nii. \*(.) joo ne on ikäviä hommia nämä tämmöset. (.) ne on ikäviä

*yes. \*(.) yes these are painful things. (.) these are painful things*

09 hommia ne on (nämä tämmöset). (.) ilman muuta. (.) (-) (.) mutta (.) elämä

*(these kinds of things). (.) absolutely. (.) (-) (.) but (.) life*

10 (.) se on epäoikeudenmukasta (et) se on lähtökohta. (.) @ei tässä nyt

*(.) it is unfair that is the starting point. (.) @the only thing one needs here*

11 tarvita ku vähän sitä muutoshalukkuutta@. ((intent, perky voice))

*is a bit of that desire to change@.*

12 A: voijaanko me tavata.

*can we meet.*

13 C: tavata.

*meet.*

\*C TRIES TO WALK AWAY FROM A; A FOLLOWS

14 A: \*yksityisesti. (.) vaikka (.) kaikki peliin projekti päättyikin niin haluaisin

*\*privately. (.) even if (.) the giving your all project is finished I would like to*

15 yksityisopetusta.

*have private lessons.*

Ansa's question about these sudden events could also be seen as criticism of the consultant, who in his turn seeks to shift the blame away from himself by referring to 'globalisation' and its unpredictable nature (lines 2-4). In other words, he presents himself also as a victim of broader economic and social structures that are beyond his control and thus positions himself in the same category as those like Ansa and the other workers who are suffering the consequences. However, after that the consultant shifts back to his usual institutional role and tries to give some motivational advice and instructions as to how to manage the situation. Here, the consultant has difficulty trying to formulate his turn, which could be seen as an indication of the disintegration of his world too: his turn is fragmented and consists of numerous pauses and hesitation markers (lines 4-5) before he finally utters a clearly designed component of advice and encouragement (lines 5-6). This is produced with a changed voice quality and has a certain formulaic character, which distinguishes it from his previous turn and relates it intertextually to his earlier performances, including the usual arousal of affect.

However, in the context of his turn and the whole activity, it seems just as disproportionate as Ansa's talk in the care home (see Extract 5) and thus marks the vacuousness of the training programme and its ideology. Ansa, too, does not reciprocate the consultant's affective stance, but produces a turn that can be heard as sarcastic (cf. Rockwell, 2000), reflecting a withdrawal from the world of the training and its visions and promises. The fraudulent and destructive quality of the training is further

emphasised by the consultant's next turn, in which he keeps switching between the roles of an ordinary person and the consultant (lines 8-11).

Nonetheless, the whole tone of the scene changes in line 12, when Ansa asks to meet him privately. The question and especially the request to have private lessons brings a sexualised undertone into the conversation. This time, the sexual vibrations are not initiated and led by the consultant as part of the coaching process, but by Ansa, who reveals through these questions her despair not only at being betrayed and left alone but also at having fallen for the consultant in the first place. She has found the desire, but this is clearly not the kind of desire the consultant was seeking to evoke. The consultant shows surprise and unease at the suggestion, indicated by his repair initiation (line 13) (see Svennevig, 2004). Here the story line of the play connects again with the popular cultural story of an inexperienced girl falling in love and being let down. At the same time, the scene reveals the false nature of Ansa's empowerment; instead it was a loss of subjectivity and complete dependency on the guidance of the consultant.

Later in the evening, after the consultant has declined Ansa's request and left, the company management and the consultant celebrate the newly closed deal with the capital investor at a local hotel. The hurt and revengeful Ansa appears at the hotel and introduces herself as the consultant's escort. She insists that he dances with her, leads him aside and stabs him to death.

## **Conclusion**

The musical *Ansa* is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional analysis of the spirit and processes of contemporary capitalism, and especially their gendered and class-related

dimensions, conducted by means of art. In this study, drawing on Margaret Wetherell's theorisation of affect and discourse, we have sought to unpack and analyse a particular aspect of this complex cultural product, namely, the affective-discursive and intertextual construction of the empowerment of the protagonist Ansa, in order not only to analyse the play itself but also to reflect on current social realities. Viewing the process of empowerment as an affective-discursive technology of contemporary capitalism, we investigated in particular how it taps into the libidinal energies of spiritual and sexual awakening. To theorise the critical aspects of the kind of empowerment represented in the play, we drew inspiration especially from Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism showing how the 'cruelness' of the neoliberal empowerment goes beyond Berlant's (2011) original idea.

On one level, the play is the story of a lonely, middle-aged woman who, discovering her sexual and romantic side, falls in love with the wrong man. In the context of the play, this story line becomes an allegory of the neoliberal version of empowerment and the kinds of subjects particularly susceptible to its call. Mobilising a range of affective investments, empowerment presents itself here as a culturally feminine technology. It is no coincidence that the consultant, representing the new rationality of work, and the whole company management are male. The play suggests that, attracting with its feelings of power, strength and agency, this version of empowerment speaks particularly to those with the least actual power and agency, represented here by the female workforce of the factory. In so doing, the play supports the suggestion put forward in the context of feminist media studies that women might constitute the ideal subjects of neoliberalism (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 7) – or at least neoliberal empowerment.

In the conclusion of his analysis of the seemingly inescapable evocations of the entrepreneurial self, the *Leitbild* of the neoliberal real fiction, sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (2016) contemplates the possibilities of finding ‘ways out’ and muses on two scenarios: depressive exhaustion, and resorting to humour and irony. In its story line, the play does not offer any much brighter perspective than depressive exhaustion: thanks to her empowered state, Ansa has enough courage and self-determination to murder the consultant. Subsequently, however, she embraces her destiny and makes no attempts to escape when, in the final scene of the play, the police arrive to arrest her. As a form of art, on the other hand, the play offers the possibility of temporarily moving outside hegemonic discourses to confront them with irony, highlight their grotesque nature, and change, if not directly society, at least, perhaps, our view of it.

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### **Notes**

1. All the Bible verses are from the New International Version.

2. In fact, as the scene continues, the consultant next moves to other factory workers and makes them fall on the floor with his hand.

3. The S2's open class repair initiator *mitä* 'what' (line 6) as a response to the assessment is probably used to display 'hard of hearing' and thus the category of 'old' in the context of the play (see also line 22).

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## Appendix. Transcription symbols.

The transcription of the data extracts follows the conversation analytical transcription conventions with some simplifications.

.	Falling intonation
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
>word<	Faster pace than surrounding talk
<word>	Slower pace than surrounding talk
WORD	Loud talk
@word@	Change in sound quality
heh heh	Laughter
(.)	Pause
[	Beginning of overlapping talk
*	Beginning of overlapping embodied action
POINTS	Embodied action
(word)	Item in doubt
(-)	Talk not heard
((word))	Transcriber's remarks