

Spatializing Digital Economy: TikTok Houses as Agents of Labor Reterritorialization

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Abstract

In the academic literature, data is widely recognized as the crucial element in theorizing the operations of digital capitalism, while digital labor itself is mostly considered deterritorialized and space contingent. However, this vision places the production process exclusively within the realm of the digital, undermining the importance of space within which such production occurs. In the thesis, drawing on Ukrainian TikTok houses, I show that even in the digital economy the physical place can never be transcended. In fact, TikTok houses provided a strong case to argue for the reterritorialization of digital work, put at the very forefront of current capitalist development.

First, I explored how the economic, political, and spatial particularities of a certain locality condition the workings of allegedly space-detached digital immaterial labor. Then I described how the digital labor of influencers came to be shaped by the positionality of a worker within the house, the positionality of a house within the cultural market, and the position of that market in relation to foreign markets. Reintroducing a somewhat outdated notion of a “workplace,” allowed me to unravel the organization, maintenance, and control over the digital production within the houses, while an empirically informed analysis of it revealed that site-specific productive norms, schedules, and systems of control were developed and deployed. Concluding chapter of the thesis stressed the high sensitivity of organized and re-centralized digital labor to the local conditions that structure it.

The story of TikTok houses clearly testifies that digital capitalism *needs* the very material infrastructural base that sustains and reproduces it. This angle tends to be overshadowed by the prevalent framework which privileges the immateriality of deterritorialized labor. However, by shifting the perspective, I was able to show that the place still matters fundamentally and the rise of TikTok houses — i.e., facilities which re-concentrate previously disseminated workforce for accelerated immaterial labor — reflects the tendency towards the reterritorialization of labor.

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Introduction

- How would you describe what you're doing?
- Easy money, hard life.

This short, slogan-like phrase stays with me long after I finish interviewing Olena, a popular influencer (1.2M followers on TikTok). In her twenties, she became a member of one of the first Ukrainian TikTok houses and spent a year and a half living and working in that facility. TikTok houses are actual premises, homes usually rented by businessmen or – less frequently – influencers themselves, where they permanently (or irregularly) live and shoot videos. In 2020, when everything started, the houses emanated the promise of fulfillment, fame, and success; in 2021, Olena left for good with a feeling of bitterness, disillusionment, and relief. But also with gratefulness. This story reflects the broader tendencies and work experiences of people trying to make a living under digital capitalism. However, her and her colleagues' experiences are also unique owing to the infrastructure they had worked at, the TikTok house.

In 2020, TikTok houses became a big thing worldwide. After the first facilities had been established in USA and Russia, this business idea migrated to Ukraine. What makes the houses different across the countries is how they are embedded in the domestic markets, which legal frameworks facilitate their functioning, to which degree the economy of the nation-state of a respective country is integrated into a global economy as well as how successfully the houses themselves manage to get integrated into the national economy. The dissimilarities might be huge. However, what unites TikTok houses is the undercurrent idea upon which they were built: they are specific infrastructures that bring the previously dispersed labor force of popular and promising influencers together to enhance their digital productivity.

During the years of transition to post-Fordist economy, capital managed to transform the entire society into a “social factory,” thus releasing labor from the actual

factory walls. As Gill and Pratt pointed out, the dissolution of “mass worker” meant that labor has become “deterritorialized, dispersed and decentralized” so that the whole society was “placed at the disposal of profit” (2008, p. 7). The solidification of post-Fordist regime brought about the changes in the very nature of work: it became immaterial, communicational, and increasingly reliant on information technologies. At the time capital started commodifying the internet, the relevance of a physical workplace noticeably shrank in the academic discussions on digital economy. The theorists dedicated their time dealing with the issues of digital communication and consumption, audience labor, data collection, algorithmic governance, platform-mediated gigs, feminization of work and alike. To a large extent, labor was almost univocally considered deterritorialized and space contingent.

Indeed, to participate in digital content production, a person does not require a workstation or an official employment. One merely needs to find a nice angle to take a picture or shoot a video, so that the whole world becomes fragmented and reorganized to fit into a digital frame. Increasingly more people (“the whole society”) participate in digital production and content creation, leaving no place (“deterritorialized, dispersed and decentralized”) secure. Physical space becomes even less pertinent to the analysis of digital capitalism from the data standpoint. While surfing the internet, a person leaves digital traces that are saved, grouped, analyzed, and compiled into big data. What for? According to leading media scholars, digital economy is dependent first and foremost upon the data trade. Yet since every operation the data goes through happens online, the realm of the physical still remains unaccounted for. In view of the tendency towards the labor deterritorialization, set up already in the post-Fordism regime and heavily present in the way media theorists think of the digital economy, TikTok houses offer us an explicit case of labor re-concentration.

In this sense that newly emergent global tendency to erect facilities which re-concentrate the disseminated workforce¹ ***provides a strong case to argue for the reterritorialization of digital work, put at the very forefront of the current capitalist development.*** To state it bluntly, this thesis argues that even when we are talking about the internet economy within the realm of the digital with its emphasis on immaterial production and data trade, the material physicality of a workplace that sustains that production matters fundamentally. Contrary to the idea of the disseminated labor force and space-detached digital capitalism, what we see is the process of re-concentrating labor and re-assembling the space. In my thesis, I explore how these infrastructures came to be, who put them in place, and how they managed to organize, maintain, and benefit from the work of re-centralized digital labor force.

The research project was conceived in 2021, and the initial idea was to visit a house for fieldwork to collect the ethnographic material. One of the houses accepted my offer, and we started discussing the dates and people available for the interviews, including influencers, an advertising manager, and a founder. Coming to a house would have allowed me to make firsthand observations on the labor experience, productive process, and work conditions within the facility, collect data from informal communication and complement it with structured interviews. However, it did not happen. On the morning of 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine, bringing havoc to the country, which found itself drawn into the imperial war. People fled the combat zones and sought refuge in the safer parts of Ukraine and abroad; the infrastructure had been damaged or ruined, and many businesses ceased operating. TikTok houses were not an exception; they were frozen for an indefinite period — as well as my own project.

After the initial confusion, the situation on the frontlines and throughout the country stabilized to some degree, people started getting back to work and regaining their lives. I

¹ "Startup accelerators" serve as another example of that.

began contacting the influencers, their managers, agencies, and founders in the late summer of 2022. Ultimately, I conducted eight in-depth online interviews: seven with influencers from three discrete TikTok houses (which allowed me to draw careful comparisons between them and highlight differences) and one with a founder of a house. I call them *The Orange House*, *The Blue House*, and *The Black House*. However, the titles of those facilities as well as the names of Ukrainian TikTok creators, founders, and members of professional teams supporting the production have been changed to preserve anonymity. TikTok houses had a high turnover, so my seven interviewees happened to live in these premises during different periods of their functioning, from the outset in 2020 and till the late February of 2022. Some of them lived there for a while (a year and a half), some of them just for a few months. Most of my study participants were women (six interviews) in their twenties, a male influencer was also 20; a male founder² was 29 years old. However, even though the gender ratio seems uneven in the interviews, there were no huge disproportion in the composition of labor force in each house: they all included gender-diverse influencers. Probably, that asymmetry should be ascribed to the fact that women were more willing to give me an interview and later recommended other women as their colleagues. Considering difficulties that arose while connecting with potential study participants (low rate of responses; scarce interest in giving an interview to a researcher, but not a journalist; delays in transmitting messages from managers to influencers), I was not able to strike a gender balance. Apart from in-depth interviews, I have studied materials released by journalists, TV- and YouTube-channels between 2020 and 2022 that covered various aspects of the houses' operation. Additionally, I have familiarized myself with the content from the common accounts of three houses which allowed me to roughly estimate the interior design of the premises (since it was impossible to access the infrastructure otherwise).

² All the founders of three most successful Ukrainian TikTok houses were male.

I see the major methodological limitation in the lack of data, especially from *The Black House*. That business project was established last, in 2021, but seemed to have the most refined schedule, the clearest division of space, and the most demanding threshold for entrance. Therefore, the data I gathered is by no means exhaustive in capturing the totality of working experience of TikTokers, nor is it sufficient to draw definite conclusions about the changing trajectories of the houses in the country (let alone abroad). However, it enables me to substantiate the argument for re-concentrating the previously dispersed labor force and re-arranging a physical space into an infrastructure of labor, that stands in opposition to the prevalent framework on the functioning of digital capitalism which privileges the immateriality of deterritorialized labor. Moreover, my data provides a glimpse into the functioning of this new type of a workplace and allows to analyze the market functionality of the houses, their organization of production, labor reterritorialization, and structural challenges that undermined these infrastructures.

From afar, it seemed like the houses had been functioning quite smoothly, but as I began interviewing my study participants, another idea came to the fore. Both the founder and influencers, when asked if they would rejoin the project, provided a consistently negative answer, mentioning that TikTok houses exhausted themselves. It became clear that at the moment of the Russian invasion, the project had already accumulated a lot of discontent and suffered noticeable organizational challenges. Two of three houses – *The Orange* and *The Blue Houses* – were in a state of crisis and, presumably, on their way to disintegration. That is why I extended my initial research question to explore the structural reasons in the organization of labor leading to this tendency.

Two research questions guided my exploration:

1. *How TikTok house as a new reterritorialized workplace structured work processes, relations, and experiences of concentrated digital labor?*
2. *What were the structural instabilities that affected the houses' disintegration?*

Therefore, what started as an inquiry into a brand-new way of organizing digital labor ended as a story of a quick rise and fall of ephemeral work arrangements, which nevertheless had some enduring productive structures.

In the first theoretical chapter, I introduce the most noticeable frameworks that shaped the thinking about the internet economy and digital labor, as we see it today. Thereafter, I locate myself in the field, describing the points of convergence and divergence from these ideas, and bringing in theoretical frameworks that allow for embedding digital work into a logic of labor reterritorialization and spatial re-composition. Lastly, I explain how the income is created in the houses and what role do the monetization mechanisms play in that process. The second chapter explores the conditions of possibility for TikTok houses to emerge at the very specific place and time. For that, I give an overview of the state of Ukrainian economy for a reader to better grasp the allure of digital labor for the population in 2020. Next, I progress to the discussion of TikTok houses as a global phenomenon and trace the trajectory of this business idea before it was welcomed in Ukraine. The closing section of the chapter delves into a practical question of spatial arrangements within these infrastructures for accelerated digital production. The third chapter describes how the houses were structured as media projects and which roles they played as market agents. As it proceeds, I theorize about the houses' market functionality as production centers, contract distributors, and attention brokers. This analysis lays the groundwork for a consequent discussion of reasons contributing to disintegration of these facilities. Chapter four is dedicated to the detailed empirical discussion of TikTok houses as reterritorialized workplaces, the material conditions of labor, productivity norms, and deployed systems of control. This analysis, combined with observations on the market functionality of the houses, enabled me to uncover the structural instabilities underlying the organization of labor and productive process. They were slowly undermining the whole business idea, gradually crystalizing into

a tendency towards either stagnation or complete decay, even before the full-fledged invasion entered the picture, abruptly ending all projects and obscuring the fractures of this allegedly well-operating model. I end up with a thought that the most common perspective favoring the immateriality of digital economy seems ill-fitted to grasp the material space that fundamentally conditions and facilitates the digital production done by reterritorialized labor force at the very forefront of the current capitalist development. Thus, I suggest putting a much stronger emphasis on the spatial arrangement of labor when thinking about the operation of digital capital.

Chapter one. Theory

This chapter provides an overview of how scholars make sense of the digital capitalism. Here, I address a number of sub-questions, namely the organizational form of a platform, the role of data for the successful run of digital economy, the status of the audience attention, the nature of online labor, the role of spaces and infrastructures in establishing and maintaining the productive activity, as well as the mechanisms for realizing the income. While navigating through the theories, I pinpoint specific elements and conceptual angles in the current debates that would rather obscure my own exploration and, thus, assemble a framework better suited to address my research questions.

Platforms and data, the pillar of the digital economy

TikTok is a fast-growing techno-social business entity currently present in the lives of almost two billion people. Under the current name, the platform appeared on the market in 2018, and by the fall of 2020, it had gained approximately one billion users. Among other things, its rapid development seems propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, as just by the March 2020, the application was downloaded more than 115 million times. However new,

TikTok has already proved itself as a powerful player in the influencer market, which continues to expand. Influencer marketing relies upon the idea of promoting products or services to a large audience through individuals who have a strong following on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter. The increasing number of companies that used to work with Instagram and YouTube influencers are now willingly reconnoiter the terrains of TikTok.

Its operational model is that of a platform, meaning it co-opts the assets and activities of other actors (users) and leverages them to amass profits. Platforms' focus on data collection, systematization, and storage distinguishes them from traditional markets. As is indicated in TikTok policies, when a user opens the app, even before registering, the platform immediately harnesses her IP address, mobile carrier, location data for a mobile device (including GPS coordinates and Wi-Fi and mobile cell data) as well as the info on the device she used before to access TikTok (*Privacy Policy | TikTok*). Such a strong emphasis on data is hard to explain within the traditional schema of market relations where the actors contract to benefit mutually, yet it makes perfect sense if we approach the platforms as "anti-markets" (Stark & Pais, 2021, p. 50) driven by the data imperative (Sadowski, 2019, p. 1). The term itself refers to the recent strong tendency of big companies to accumulate an ever-increasing amount of data and revise their business models to incorporate it as a prime source of future profit-making strategies.

Thus, in the literature on the digital economy, data has taken a central place. Many theorists — like Nick Srnicek, Shoshana Zuboff, Jathan Sadowski, and others — consider it a cornerstone for the analysis of digital capitalism. Sure, companies have been gathering information for a long time; what is new now is the scope and priority of this process. However, just having records of user activity does not suffice, for data should be carefully stored, processed, classified, unified, and analyzed (Srnicek, 2017). All of the mentioned processes can be performed by a digital platform, and the more data and capacities for

data processing it possesses, the more valuable it becomes in eyes of its clients. As Srnicek affirms, rather than building a marketplace from the scratch, a platform provides the infrastructure to mediate between different groups, obtaining exclusive access to data at the same time (ibid). Later, a platform entices advertisers, who regard collaborations of this kind as highly profitable. No wonder, considering that “Individual targeting and the splitting up of the screen for presenting multiple ads allows to present and sell many ads at one point of time” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 27). Business models of this kind are widely used by Google and Facebook, the revenues of which seem dependent almost exclusively on the advertisement (Srnicek, 2017). TikTok also manufactures data from the activities of users (Sadowski, 2019, p. 2) and co-opts them without exercising ownership over them (Stark & Pais, 2021, p. 51) or paying users for producing data.

Another digital economy theorist, Jathan Sadowski, suggests shifting the framework from conceiving *data as a commodity* to thinking of it as *a form of capital*. He asserts that data is not merely something to be bought and sold, but it is a valuable and value-creating resource, so the data collection became pervasive and, thus, data systems abound with relations of inequality and exploitation (2019, p. 2). In his view, data has been used to produce commodities that would manufacture and transmit *even more data* to be collected, so the cycle eventually guarantees a never-ending circulation of data. In that regard, the logic of data accumulation resembles the formula of capital accumulation³, $D - C - D'$. The value from the extracted data can be derived in several ways, including profiling people, optimizing systems, managing processes, modeling probabilities, building premises, and increasing the value of assets (Sadowski, 2019, pp. 5–6).

Similarly to Sadowski and Srnicek, Shoshana Zuboff takes data as the vantage point to elaborate her analysis of the “surveillance capitalism”. According to her, “Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as

³ Where D stands for “data,” and C for “commodity”.

a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as ‘machine intelligence,’ and fabricated into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later” (2019, p.14, emphasis added). The creation of “behavioral surplus markets” comprised of voices, personalities, and emotions — that is being continuously collected, digitalized, and used to predict and model the behavior of users — became a novel frontier of capitalism. The whole capacity to live and feel becomes “the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation” (ibid, p. 15). That is how the system began feeding on every aspect of every human experience. Echoing this idea, McKenzie Wark states that “either your mind is erased, and your body is another mind’s vehicle; or your mind is subordinated to the will of another power” (2019, p. 28). For Zuboff, the mechanism of that subordination is clear: after the human desires and experiences have been carefully recorded and rendered as digital data, they can be nudged, coaxed, tuned, and herded toward profitable outcomes (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14). Wark stays at the abstract level and does not provide an explanation of that kind, yet her intuition about the current subordination of the mind as opposed to the “old” version of capitalism that “wanted hands, muscles” (Wark, 2019, p. 28) is insightful.

Introducing the spatial dimension

Added together, the described approaches highlight the production of data as the crucial element to our understanding of the workings of digital capitalism. However, the risk of constraining our thinking to the discussions of platform economy (Srnicek), data imperative (Sadowski), and creation of behavioral futures markets (Zuboff) is that this view places the production process exclusively within the realm of the digital, somewhat negating the importance of the physical space within which such production comes into being. The discussion on digital labor seems to be structured along the same parameters, spotlighting the processes of audience labor (Fuchs, 2015), co-production (Humphreys &

Grayson, 2008), and prosumption (Ritzer, 2014), that occur within the realm of the internet. Even the literature that deals with the content creation seems to primarily focus on communicative practices entailed by new technologies (Dean, 2013), algorithms (Bucher, 2018), monetization and governance strategies (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020), rather than the immediate work conditions. At the fundamental level, it seems like the actual non-digital time and place do not matter.

However, there is no doubt that the production of space is a constitutive moment within the dynamics of capital accumulation and class struggle (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 9–11; Harvey, 1997, p. 6). Despite the popular misconception that capitalism (digital capitalism included) is an a-spatial system, its processes shape geographical landscapes and influence the spatial development of cities, regions, and communications networks (Castree, 2009, p. 31). Clearly, this economic formation needs space but permanently tries to reconstitute it by generating built environments and infrastructures for accelerating production, shortening the cycle of profit accumulation, and maximizing wealth. This spatial operation of capital to constantly (re)shape geographies, (re)constitute places of production, and replicate them in different regions and contexts is a prime example of what Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize as the processes of de- and reterritorialization. They add, “What modern societies deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 257). The processes are enmeshed.

Previously under Fordism, corporations made profits from the mass production of commodities, thus capitalizing on dead labor; in the post-Fordist economy, the liberation of labor from factories led to the redeployment of capital to the territories of living labor (Cocco, 2007, p. 309). With neoliberal policies came new labor arrangements: new built environments expanded the site of production into the private sphere. TikTok house as a new place of labor embodies this trend – the tendency of digital capital to reterritorialize,

to not just bring work into space of everyday life⁴, but fundamentally *morph life into another site of production*. It does it by building new types of infrastructures. According to Larkin, infrastructures “facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (2013, p. 328). In this case, TikTok house, as an infrastructure for accelerated digital production, facilitated the process of labor reterritorialization. Hence, the *reterritorialization of labor* might be seen as channeling a freed labor power upon a new workplace organized around the enhanced convertibility of living labor into a digital immaterial commodity or attention asset (I discuss it shortly below). To create a TikTok house is to create a space of everyday life, a pervasive infrastructure for digital production that maximizes a digital worker’s value-creating potential, wherein nothing is lost, and everything might be exposed to online attention. That is how these structures were conceived and set up.

That is why we cannot conceptualize such a premise borrowing merely from the literature on the gig economy (Woodcock & Graham, 2020), for this framework does not allow to effectively include the spatial dimension in the discussion of digital production unless we talk about servers, work from home, or geographical landscapes shaping the routes of gig workers. However, the labor done by gig-workers and influencers oftentimes bears a stunning resemblance. The labor performed in TikTok houses seems similarly irregular, unpredictable, in many ways precarious, and is predicated upon short-term “gigs” (advertising contracts). Nonetheless, it differs hugely from the labor of, say, an Uber driver, delivery person or a care worker, because, in their case, the platform functions as a middleman facilitating a service and taking a fee. In my case, TikTok as a platform facilitates nothing in that regard but functions rather as an online space to showcase the content.

⁴ As is the case with working from home.

However, if we approach the houses from the data standpoint, our conversation will necessarily diverge into the realm of the digital, the extraction of informational traces by a vectoralist class (Wark, 2019, pp. 46–58), and its subsequent transformation into organized piles of big data. However useful, this discussion totally omits the living and working conditions of influencers who, by no means coincidentally, came to occupy one physical space of the TikTok house. Those premises were established to bring together various users (the dispersed labor force) and thoughtfully designed to enhance their ability for producing arresting content. Therefore, although the labor performed in TikTok houses by influencers is informational (i.e. computer- and smartphone-mediated), digital (i.e. renders human experience into digital form in a way digital media are reproduced), and is realized within structures of the digital economy, it requires another optics capable of grasping the physicality of place that produces and structures it. Therefore, in my discussion of digital capitalism and TikTok houses as specific infrastructures it generates, I purposefully diverge from focusing on data and rather explore how the laboring activity that originates digital content and attracts audience attention comes to be organized and conditioned, by whom, and how those actors distribute profits.

Audience attention: a resource, a commodity, a labor product, an asset

In general, “TikTok” and “work” are two words rarely seen together in one sentence. Lip-synching and creating dance videos, reactions, or sketches for the platform are perceived in the popular imagination as a form of leisure. The roots of a common misunderstanding lay in outdated notions of work which fail to provide a compelling interpretation of new types of labor. Previously, under Fordism, the capitalist class appropriated goods produced by workers and put them on the market for exchange, thereby transforming them into commodities, the material embodiment of workers’ oppression (Marx, 1959). In doing so, capitalists denied the opportunity for workers to gain the use-value from a produced

good, for the structural limit of an industrial economy is that one cannot extract use-value and exchange-value from the same product at the same time, a process some researchers referred to as “the logic of scarcity” (Rey, 2012, p. 412). The situation seems to unfold differently within the digital environment. Since the very nature of commodity has changed (it is not a tangible product anymore, but a service, an attention, an interaction), now a capitalist can sell the information from a person’s profile while a person will still be capable of extracting use-value from it. The logic of material scarcity gave way to the logic of immaterial (informational) abundance. And when “the information is bountiful, attention is scarce” (Terranova, 2012, p. 2); thus, digital platforms (and all the work produced for them and within them) came to be structured along the lines of *the attention economy*.

The total amount of human attention is necessarily constrained and therefore limited (Goldhaber, 2006). Christian Fuchs argues, drawing on the notions of prosumption (i.e., “productive consumption”, Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and audience commodity (Fuchs 2014), that the attention is being produced by users themselves whom we should regard as digital laborers generating value on the internet. According to him, given that all online activity is stored, assessed, and commodified by a platform, the act of consumption in the digital environment – scrolling, liking, posting – becomes productive. Therefore, users produce data in a two-fold way: by generating informational content, i.e. prosuming (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 19), and by viewing ads, i.e., producing attention that is bought by advertisers. I do not find Fuchs’ insistency that data is produces by random online activity of multiplicity of users theoretically compelling, for it seems that users produce merely digital traces, but data is created from these traces by highly educated professionals and algorithms (Srnicek, 2017). Neither does Fuchs’ understanding of audience labor in relation to value move me forward, since the attention, however limited, is being produced constantly and effortlessly on the internet. Users are in a state of a constant attention drift, so the trick becomes how to *capture* this movement and retain the

attention within the limits of one channel/platform/medium. Nevertheless, both perspectives recognize it as a scarce and valuable resource in the digital world.

This return of scarcity testifies to the normalization of the new economy — it allowed the internet to become a field where "all the axioms of market economics can once again be applied" (Terranova, 2012, p. 2). Human attention within the realms of the internet became measurable and assumed the form of "likes," "views," "followers," "downloads," and "shares," which opened it to financialization and marketization. The wealth of information generated the poverty of attention as a scarce resource which became a valuable asset in the internet economy.

Now, what does it mean to see the attention as an asset? Operationalizing the attention as an asset, as opposed to a commodity, allows me to stress its potential for growing and amassing capitalizable value, its permanent (re)constitution by human and non-human actors, and its structural predisposition to multiple capitalizations without losing ownership and control. In that vein, Kean Birch and Fabian Muniesa claim that the commodity form gives way to the asset form in technoscientific capitalism. By that, the authors, building on the definition of the International Accounting Standards Board, refer to the "resource controlled by the entity as a result of past events and from which future economic benefits are expected to flow to the entity" (Birch & Muniesa, 2020, p. 3). They elaborate that assets are anything that can be owned, controlled, traded, and capitalized as a revenue stream (ibid, p. 2), be that a piece of land, a skill, a patent, or — in the case of TikTok houses — the audience attention.

The nature of assets is fluid; they are constructs — among other things, legal constructs, so the ownership and control rest upon state enforcement of property rights (ibid, p. 5). Even though that is clearly not the case here, for the attention — measured as the number of followers, likes, or views — does not legally, *de jure* belong to an influencer, *de facto* he still has significant power over it. For example, fans tend to follow the

influencer if he leaves the house or breaks a contract with a client. It was a source of bitterness for the founder of *The Orange House*, as he mentioned to me that “bloggers take all their followers away when they leave” (Denys, personal interview).

As with any other intangible asset, attention implies a *capitalizable value*, for it “reflects the assessment of future earnings that accrue to the owner, rather than rising productivity” (Birch & Muniesa, 2020, p. 7). Sure, neither the jump in the number of followers nor a particularly successful video automatically translate into a productivity boost; however, it significantly raises the chances for a better contract in the future. The attention of an influencer’s audience can be sold to multiple clients on the internet, allowing for multiple capitalizations at once. That is not a rarity that TikTokers did the advertising arranged by the house while simultaneously working for the clients who had contacted them individually. Therefore, an asset holder’s goal is not to sell the attention a single time for the best price (as it would work previously with a commodity) but to extract a durable economic gain from it multiple times.

Lastly, the value of an asset is dynamic and dependent on the active management and negotiation over it by numerous actors: in our case, by an influencer, a client, a house founder, an advertising agency, and platform algorithms that might either enhance the visibility of a video or downplay it (Birch & Muniesa, 2020, p. 7). Olena, one of the interviewed influencers, recounts that she almost had a mental breakdown producing 15 videos a day over a span of four months with no feasible results (personal interview). Therefore, the valuation of the attention asset not so much reflects the inherent, fundamental qualities within it (like labor-power, let alone surplus time, as it would be with a commodity) but is rather based on the ongoing re-evaluations made by various human and non-human actors.

The nature of labor in TikTok houses

If the audience's attention is an asset, what constitutes the digital commodity and what kind of labor produces it? When I asked my study participants what they sell, they consistently answered “the advertising videos” and occasionally revealed their price lists. I intend to take this answer at face value and claim that the digital commodity the TikTok house members specialized in was paid content. However, the profile page of the house contained tons of unmonetized and uncompensated videos — is this content a commodity, too? I regard it as an embodiment of a *necessary immaterial digital labor* given away to retain the audience and increase the attention asset, but not a commodity in its own right.

When speaking of *immaterial labor*, I follow Maurizio Lazzarato, who had already in 1996 grasped the emerging tendencies in the production process: for him, labor becomes increasingly dissociated from the production of goods and shifted towards the production of the cultural and informational content of the commodity (2010, p. 142). The central site in the production process has been allocated to intellectualized living labor, which is to say, the capital tried to invade the very “soul of the worker” and make it a part of the factory. Not only the result, a commodity, but the very cognitive and creative capacities of a worker became of interest to the emergent form of capitalist economy that “seeks to involve even the worker’s personality within the production of value” (2010, p. 136). It follows that if previously labor was primarily confined to the factory floor and capital strove to suppress the subjectivity of a worker by the alienating production process of material goods, now labor left the factory walls and capital seeks to enhance the subjectivity of a worker in his immaterial production of “knowledge, information, communication, relationship, or emotional response” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 108). The economic landscape of the digital economy changed the very nature of commodity — it is not destroyed in consumption anymore: a video on TikTok does not disappear after watching it. On the contrary, it becomes increasingly more valuable with every new

consumer interaction as it attracts more and more audience attention. The asset value grows.

Nevertheless, as an example of a call-center operator informs us, not every immaterial labor is digital; however, the one deployed to produce content within the internet environment necessarily is. Christian Fuchs suggests thinking of *digital work* as “a specific form of work that makes use of the body, mind or machines or a combination of all or some of these elements as an instrument of work in order to organize (...) culture and human experiences, in such a way that digital media are produced and used” (2014, p. 351). Digital labor he sees as estranged digital work, which begs the question: at what stage the alienation enters the production process? Within platforms, the alienation is structural and, in the case of TikTok houses, layered. First, it occurs when the digital cultural commons in the form of unpaid content (the end-result of necessary immaterial digital labor) or users’ data become co-opted and capitalized upon by the platform; second, it is at play when the attention asset of the house profile amassed through necessary uncompensated labor of influencers gets appropriated by the house founder as well as when he takes a fee for arranging a commercial deal. This brings us to the question of monetization.

Monetizing the asset

TikTok house is a very good place to catch the audience attention, but, unlike YouTube, it does not provide the content creators with an in-built mechanism to monetize it. What happens is the influencers from the house either redirect their followers to other platforms (they call it “cross-platform conversion”) where such monetization is possible (e.g. YouTube), or they sell their capacity to produce content with integrated advertisement along with a guarantee of a certain amount of attention (their audience) attached to it. The higher is the attention asset, the stronger is the guarantee the advertisement will be seen

by a wider audience; the more skillful is an influencer, the stronger is the guarantee the advertisement will be well-received. Therefore, the audience does not labor and create value, but is leveraged as an asset in attracting clients and negotiating the terms of the deal as well as used as a potential buyers' pool to broadcast the commodity to.

Even though this model is not new and has been effectively put in place on YouTube and Instagram for a while, TikTok houses bring a new twist to it. Previously, individual agents and agencies connected advertisers with influencers and facilitated the process of contract negotiations. TikTok houses operate differently; they are separate structures which rely on agencies: they either create them or seek an affiliation and run their contracts through them. But their own role is different. I discuss in detail their market functionality in the third chapter, but for now it suffices to say that houses were established to bring the most popular and promising influencers together under one roof and incentivize them to create content for the common page which operated as a showcase of their capabilities to attract big clients whom otherwise (individually) were impossible to attract. The common page of a house attracts the attention of the audience which grows with time increasing the value of the asset. The arrangement seemed beneficial for everyone, for the influencers might expect better contracts from more affluent advertisers, the advertisers save their efforts in searching through and analyzing the credentials of available influencers, while the TikTok houses and their agencies made money from fees for their services (in Ukrainian TikTok houses, it ranged from 30% to 50% of the deal).

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The overview of the theories on digital capitalism provided the initial understanding of its basic building blocks (like platforms, data, attention economy, digital labor, monetization of value) as well as allowed me to highlight the points of my conceptual divergence. First, I

will not use data as an analytical tool while analysing TikTok houses, for it reduces the conversation to the realm of the digital and, thus, lets the spatial dimension slip away. On the contrary, my analytical perspective is designed to cover for the material physicality of a workplace that sustains the digital production. Which brings me to the insight that, contrary to the idea of the disseminated labor force and space-detached digital capitalism, what we see is the processes of re-concentrating labor and re-assembling the space. Second, even though I recognize that the labor performed in TikTok houses is digital, I approach it from a slightly different angle which enables tracking and analysing the laboring activity done *before* the content gets uploaded. More to this, how the content production is organized and structured constitutes one of the guiding questions of this work. Lastly, I consider the audience attention an asset, not a commodity. This conceptual move better attunes my framework to capture the circulation of value.

Chapter two. Locality

In this chapter, I argue that the economic, political, and spatial particularities of a certain locality condition the workings of allegedly space-detached digital capitalism. Namely, the story of the rapid rise and fall of Ukrainian TikTok houses is embedded in the specificities of the region. I open the chapter by sketching out the state's economy after the post-socialist transition. The long-lasting structural challenges of it, the advent of digital capital to the country, and the slow but continuous growth of influencer marketing along with the COVID-19 pandemic provided a hothouse environment for transplanting this business idea. However, the process was indirect and mediated by the Russian experience, which left an imperial mark on it. The closing section addresses the question of how TikTok houses as a new type of capitalist infrastructure assisted in the process of labor reterritorialization and describes the spatial arrangements within the analyzed facilities.

Embedding digital work in the context of Ukrainian economy

On the whole, Ukraine has been a playground for three types of capital: the domestic one embodied in the figure of an oligarch (political capitalist); the Russian one (the country inherited economic dependencies and infrastructure heavily tied to Russia); and the foreign capital which takes an increasingly stronger hold. (That is especially the case after the start of the full-fledged invasion which severely handicapped the state's capacity to pay back already existing debts and entailed a new flow of loans from the West needed to stabilize the crumbling economy.) This context, combined with a highly educated, motivated workforce and lack of possibilities for a decent job, has opened the country to alternative employments and digital work, both freelance, B2B (business-to-business), and contractual. But the roots of these structural instabilities run back to the history of post-socialist transition.

In the nineties, the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the substitution of the socialist logic of state ownership and resource redistribution for the market logic of private ownership and capital accumulation. Lawrence King and Iván Szelényi discern three main vectors of post-Communist development, namely hybrid capitalism ("capitalism from below"), patrimonial capitalism ("capitalism from above"), and liberal capitalism ("capitalism from without") (2005, p. 207). Ukraine took the second path. According to the authors, the crucial characteristic of the patrimonial type is that the transformation of the economy has been primarily facilitated "from above" by the old state elites, Communist nomenklatura (ibid, p. 208). In the 1990s, through the politics of mass privatization, they succeeded in converting most state-owned enterprises into private property, thus laying grounds for massive economic dispossession of the population. Ultimately, the major factories with high-added value production found themselves in the hands of a few oligarchic "families". Their model of wealth accumulation was based upon gaining fast

profits from existing infrastructure without upgrading it or investing in technical innovations. That short-term planning exhausted the Ukrainian industrial complex and put already lagging industries even farther behind international competitors while providing easy profits to emergent oligarchs. After a period of initial post-Soviet “primitive accumulation,” “families” managed to convert their economic capital into political power, gaining representation in local administrations and reaching the government and the parliament. As Volodymyr Ishchenko points out, they exploited informal patrimonial relations with state officials to create legal loopholes enabling enormous tax evasions and offshoring the profits (Ishchenko, 2022). As time passed, this kleptocratic informal network ran through the state apparatus, judiciary, and security institution (Ishchenko & Yurchenko, 2019, p. 3), enriching a few oligarchic “families” and their affiliates while depriving the majority of a decent living.

Meanwhile, with the transition from a planned to a market economy, Ukrainian oligarchs formed strong ties with the Russian kleptocratic elites to collaborate on cross-border trade and complement industrial shortages of each other. However, the relations proved skewed, as the private capital in Russia was consolidated earlier and to a greater extent which provided the Russian political capitalists with ample possibilities “to make decisive inroads to buy up strategic industries in Ukraine” (Bojcun, 2020, p. 169) capable of processing Russian energy, minerals, and chemicals. Furthermore, Russian elites regularly leveraged the energetic infrastructure of the former USSR to exert geopolitical concessions. Economy-wise, the USSR was developed as a system of interrelated member-states that relied on cheap Russian energy to run their production, ultimately putting Russia in a privileged position. The Russian government has been systematically using debts as well as oil and gas freezes to get in control of key assets in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia (Matveev, 2021, p. 10). Russia particularly targeted Ukraine to reabsorb it into its economic and political sphere of influence largely (but not

exclusively) because it holds the downstream transit facilities for Russian gas (Bojcun, 2020, p. 255). Overall, this reinforced the imperialist pattern of Russian–Ukrainian relations, forged business ties between the Ukrainian and Russian elites and facilitated a deep penetration of the Russian capital into neighboring Ukraine. To the power of interconnectedness of a Russian capital with Ukrainian one testifies that until 20 October 2022, eight months into the full-fledged war, merely one Russian oligarch has been sanctioned in Ukraine (Editorial, 2022).

The emergent classes of domestic and Russian capitalists surely were crucial actors during the transition, yet not the sole ones. Transnational capital also took quite an active part in the country's development. This process is captured in the idea of *transnationalization* of the state made possible via international institutions like IMF, WTO, and EU/EC (Yurchenko, 2012, p. 128). Between 1991 and 1999, Ukrainian elites have been accumulating loans from Western creditors (Kravchuk, 2015). On the one hand, that was reasonable considering the collapse of the Soviet system of production, which led to the situation in which the supply chains were broken, the budget deficit was growing, and firms could not afford to pay wages. During the transition, the influence of foreign capital in direct investments and loans increased greatly: the mentioned period is sometimes referred to as a “disorganized accumulation of debt” (Kravchuk, 2015). This pattern was complemented by establishing of the priority development areas and creating special economic zones that allowed the offshoring of revenues and massive tax evasion (Yurchenko, 2012, p. 134). Ultimately, these kinds of domestic and foreign economic policies that favored oligarchic capital, involved selective protectionism, and allowed for offshoring the revenues created, as Yuliya Yurchenko puts it, “black holes” in the Ukrainian economy (2012, p. 128). Starting in 2014, the role of foreign consultants became even stronger: the IMF advisors entered managerial positions at the National Bank of Ukraine, while foreign experts were invited to the government (Kravchuk, 2015). According to the

International Labor Office, in March 2014, to secure the IMF bail-out, a package of austerity measures was introduced that involved reduction of social benefits, freezing of public sector salaries, and raising the cost of public services (2018, p. 6).

The social and political grievances of the Ukrainian population were channeled through the *Maidan*, a form of political mass mobilization in response to attempts of elites to monopolize power and manipulate capital to their benefit at the severe expense of social goods. The last Maidan occurred in late 2013 – beginning of 2014 when the president-oligarch Viktor Yanukovych was ousted from the country. The escalation continued with Anti-Maidan counter-mobilization, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 with the subsequent unfolding of the armed conflict in Donbas (Ishchenko & Yurchenko 2019, p. 7), and a full-fledged Russian invasion in February 2022. Those events had substantial social and economic consequences. As ILO reports, real GDP plummeted by 6.8% in 2014 and by a further 9.9% in 2015, whereas on territories directly affected by military actions, the rate of unemployment increased from 9.1% to 14.4% (Donetsk region) and from 8.4 to 15.3% (Luhansk region) (Aleksynska et al., 2018, p. 6). By 2015, the national currency was devalued by 200%, while the inflation growth reached 143.3% (ibid). *Those events and dependencies set up the stage for economic stagnation and long-lasting structural challenges – uneven economic growth, skill mismatches when transitioning from planned economy to capitalism, low levels of productivity, high shares of informal economy and, most notably for our story, the continuing rise of undeclared and digital work* (Aleksynska et al., 2018, p. 6).

This disturbing state of Ukrainian economy has made the idea of online work and freelance increasingly attractive to the population. The market of digital work, including outsourcing of both skilled and unskilled tasks, has been steadily expanding eastwards, pushing it to the point when, according to ILO, in 2013–2017, Ukraine took first place in Europe in terms of work on digital platforms (2018, ii). In the structure of global digital

capitalism, Ukrainian labor force was deemed valuable for its high formal education completion rate, good language command (Aleksynska et al., 2018, p. 6) and relatively low price. Unfortunately, the scholarship on the advent of digital capitalism in Ukraine is hardly exhaustive. From the works of Jane Hardy, Graham Hollinshead, and Mariya Aleksynska, we know about the role of the growing IT sector in Ukraine and the offshoring of high-level software assignments, as well as understand some general trends and outcomes of digital work in Eastern Europe.

However, the data on influencer marketing (meaning the influencers' ability to affect purchasing decisions, endorse products, and create and place ads online) is scarce. The labor on platforms like Instagram or YouTube falls out of state regulations and essentially goes unnoticed. A cautious tentative assumption, derived from personal observation and interviews with influencers and a founder of a TikTok house, suggests that the Ukrainian influencer market was slowly rising and its role in the country was gradually increasing. At that time, a few celebrities appeared, like Yuliya Verba or Dmytro Varvaruk, who made themselves on Instagram and YouTube and started working their way to more established media. They have been making money from online advertising far above the average Ukrainian salary and already became a part of national showbiz and stardom.

Those online influencers were young, some of them minors; healthy and abled; conventionally attractive; with acting, singing, or dancing talents; mostly without higher education or in the process of getting it; from low-middle/middle-class households; and, finally, with the Ukrainian and Russian language command which opened them access to national and foreign audiences potentially convertible into followers – an important asset to in contract negotiations. The shining online success story of a few fellow citizens combined with the penetrating neoliberal ideologies of individual success through personal growth as well as cheap and fast Ukrainian internet and infrastructural openness of online platforms created necessary conditions for a young and eager digital “reserve

army” to emerge. Judging from my interviews, what also seemed to play a significant role in adopting the pathway of a digital aspirational laborer was a high level of distrust in the national educational system for its failure to provide decent jobs and ensure a stable income. Although some of my study participants (but not all) were in the process of getting a university degree, none of them actually expected that degree to direct their future or relied upon it for their upcoming earnings. What pushed them to education facilities in the first place was either the pressure from the older generations or an urge for a student experience. However, the demanding university schedule is barely compatible with the informal requirements of a blogger life who needs to be constantly present and active online. Here, the last piece of the puzzle enters the stage – COVID-19. In 2020, the year when TikTok houses were popping up massively, most of the world transitioned to distance studying. Combined with the skyrocketing popularity of TikTok, *those were the conditions of possibility for Ukrainian TikTok houses to emerge.*

The rise and global spread of TikTok houses

As I have mentioned, TikTok houses are actual premises, carefully selected, rented and renovated by businessmen, who later invite the most popular and promising influencers to live and work there rent-free. They are not a unique invention but a reinstalment of a tried-out model of “collab houses,” the first of which appeared in 2016 to unite famous YouTubers, so that they can enhance each other’s follower bases and online visibility. The first TikTok house – *The Hype House* – was established in December 2019 in Los Angeles, USA. After it turned out to be a major success, many similar projects popped up in numerous countries. One of the most prosperous ones was the *Moscow Dream Team House*, set up three months later, in March 2020, by a Russian entrepreneur Yaroslav Andreev. At that time, he had launched a range of houses, yet none became as famous as *The Dream Team*. Andreev’s business model was designed in a way, that all the houses he

launched were affiliated with an already functional advertising agency in his property, *WildJam*. This agency did all the work with clients and contracts as well as provided the necessary media support. In a way, the *WildJam* agency needed the houses to run its contracts through them, not vice versa.

In 2020, TikTok houses started popping up in Ukraine like mushrooms. The first ones to appear hardly had any sign of a sustainable business model and long-term planning: a typical house's lifespan barely reached a few months. Those houses imitated the form of *The Hype House* or *The Dream Team* without underpinning it with sufficient investments, infrastructure, and market analysis. These first attempts were made by young aspiring TikTok creators coming together and chipping in to rent a place in a big city like Kyiv or Kharkiv. The lack of media connections, financial backing, and discipline soon drove each of them out of business. As Sveta (3.5M followers on TikTok), my study participant and a member of a self-organized TikTok house, reports, "I left it soon because I haven't seen any results. People were just living there without shooting videos" (personal interview). This account is corroborated by the founder of one of the most prolific houses in Ukraine, *The Orange House*, who claims that the biggest challenge for him as a businessman was to work with "children," meaning disorganized labor force unable to think ahead and appreciate the infrastructure given to them. The figure of the *founder* embodied a solution to the mentioned ills. He⁵ would be the one who takes care of the discipline, develops a sustainable business plan, attracts investors and/or funds the house directly, creates possibilities to attract the attention of established media, hires professionals to increase the quality of the picture, and engages advertisers. In other words, not only was production given a specific workplace, but a system of disciplining labor was introduced as well. In the summer of 2020, two founders independently of one another established *The Blue House* and *The Orange House*.

⁵ In the case of Ukraine, the three most notable long-lasting houses have been established by men.

Here, I should make an important remark. Before exploring the infrastructural dimension and elaborating on the structure of TikTok houses as media projects, it seems essential to elucidate ways in which Ukrainian houses came to be connected to Russian ones. First, the Russian houses' experience would inform Ukrainian entrepreneurs' decision-making. As Denys, a founder of *The Orange House*, mentioned to me in an interview, "The Russian example played an important role, for it was the nearest market at that time" (personal interview). The house's affiliation with an agency proved instrumental for him in conceiving the sustainable business model for TikTok influencer marketing and managing advertising contracts. *That is why while setting up the house, Denys simultaneously established the affiliated agency to support it.* Another highly professional house would appear in a year, *The Black House*, which also ran contracts through its own (pre-existing) agency. Sure, this model is not the sole one, for *The Blue House* has functioned without an agency, but as the experience of the full-fledged Russian war has proven, the demise of houses did not entail the dissolution of agencies. The fact that they survived and keep producing nowadays clearly testifies to the adaptability of businesses structured in that way.

Second, the Russian imperial influence was once again reproduced, now in the digital sphere. Here, by "imperialism" I mean the use of economic power and influence to dominate and control other countries, regions, or economies. Since the Russian influencer market was more potent and richer in opportunities, it allowed Yaroslav Andreev to drain away the most visible and successful Ukrainian TikTokers from *The Blue* and *The Orange Houses* to *Dream Team*. The effect was twofold. At times, it devastated the morale of the house of origin leading other TikTokers to discouragement and give up the spirit of competition. As Sveta from *The Blue House* recounts, "*Dream Team* has lured some of our members, thus making our own team weaker. Everybody lost their heart" (personal interview). The opposite reaction was born of a desire to repeat the path of a more

fortunate colleague. The imagination of the career success of Ukrainian TikTokers has been shaped along the imperial lines, whereas the pinnacle of success was to work in Moscow. Of course, none of the Ukrainian founders could have offered a better deal to a hesitant influencer since the limits of an offer are determined by the potency and limitations of the domestic market.

The support of other TikTokers to their more fortunate colleague reveals the shared dream of moving away. Olena (1.2M followers on TikTok) from *The Orange House* says, “The way projects are done here and there is very different. Many of us wanted to get to *Dream Team* or *XO*⁶, and when somebody achieved that, we were happy for this person” (personal interview). Another comment of a TikTokker (880K followers) from the same house seems even more revealing, “Denys realized that his task was to ask TikTokers if they wanted to stay, while the task of TikTokers was to refuse the offer because it a priori couldn’t be more profitable than the one from *The Dream Team*” (Iryna, personal interview). That way, Kyiv houses on a broader map were relegated to preparatory structures, the base to conquer before the real career advancement.

Setting up Ukrainian houses

Even if rooted in the global digital economy and intermingled with foreign markets, TikTok house is a physical location, and finding a suitable place for it was not an easy task. Space matters, as the founders quickly uncovered. The idea of renting a living space directly in the city seemed attractive at first sight yet proved unsustainable in the long run. Young TikTokers tend to be distracted by the city enticements and forget about work discipline and productivity standards (Denys, personal interview). At the same time, the location could not be too removed from the city since TikTokers would find themselves caught in an isolated place without advanced infrastructure and social life to satisfy their needs.

⁶ Another successful Russian TikTok house now located in USA.

That lack of facilities disables an effective reproduction of labor and puts the project's longevity in danger. Additionally, this kind of geographical seclusion repels national celebrities from visiting a house which is also important to factor in, for the success of a house as a project is heavily dependent on constant networking and media exposure. That is why an ideal location should be convenient for TikTokers to quickly commute to a shopping mall or a city, so the influencers can relax and attend media events, TV programs, and public gatherings. *The Blue*, *The Orange*, and *The Black Houses* have chosen their locations according to this rationale: the outskirts of the Ukrainian capital proved the best place to start the project. That is why all three houses in question were located *nearby* Kyiv, even though for *The Blue House* this decision was not made from the start, and the house has moved numerous times before finally settling in on the Kyiv outskirts.

However, it was not enough just to rent a premise and start shooting; the interior space needed to be made suitable first. The rented facility should be transformed into a digital workplace. The premise Denys has found for *The Orange House* was perfect: except for walls, utilities, and a few pieces of furniture, the house was empty. The building was 40 kilometers away from Kyiv but 15 minutes from the nearest shopping mall. *The Orange House* was set up basically from scratch: it underwent renovation and was furnished anew. In charge of the process was Yaroslav, a professional who has been working as a production- and set-designer and who has helped to set up the shooting spaces for popular TV programs like "Holostiak" (Ukrainian spin-off of "The Bachelor") and "Master chef Ukraine". The renovation and furnishing of the premise were explicitly done with regard to how the space would look in the camera frame. The house was meant to be ready for shooting anywhere and facilitate the immaterial digital labor — anytime. As the founder of *The Orange House* recalls, "We installed 200 meters of a lighting strip, did some glass paintings, put some mirrors. We did everything we could, so it would be minimalistic but dope" (Denys, personal interview). Apart from arranging the house as a film set, some

rooms were reserved for technical equipment, computers, and cameras. At the same time, the TikTok house remained a place where people ought to live, so washing machines, microwaves, beds, and bedside tables were bought to accommodate the demands of people's everyday routines. The renovation costs amounted to \$50,000 (Denys, personal interview).

Similar preparations were held in *The Blue House*. A careful examination of their content allows for reconstructing the facility's interior design. Lightning strips with customizable colors have been installed throughout the kitchen, the corridor, the living room, and the bathroom. Pieces of equipment like softboxes and projectors can be visible here and there; the shooting areas are kept clean and glamourized. Neon signs with TikTokers' names hanged on the walls nearby the headboards to fit perfectly into the frame. The interior of *The Black House* differed in form, but not in principle. These houses did not look luxurious, yet radiated the cozy feeling of middle-class prosperity. That was crucial for two reasons: first, influencers preferred living in good conditions; but more importantly, the houses were supposed to look nice in the picture, so the produced content would not be downgraded by the TikTok algorithms⁷.

★

This chapter has shown that although TikTok houses are a global phenomenon tied to the operation of the platform, their functioning highly depends on the local context. That context includes the overall state of the national economy and the political landscape of a country, which defines the general appeal of digital labor for the population and affects the place those structures occupy in the domestic cultural market. More so, the position of it

⁷ The moderation practices of TikTok were designed to either limit or outright excluded the content from so-called "undesirable users", namely the "ugly" and the poor (Biddle et al., 2020). Particularly, the posts of users deemed "chubby", "obese", "too thin", and "with too many wrinkles", as well as videos shot in a rural environment, on construction sites, or in any other place not fancy enough were to be suppressed or excluded in order to maintain the platform's growth- and retention rates. The algorithms (the non-human agents) and the moderation team had to enforce these decisions.

in relation to foreign — be them more or less potent — markets determined the functioning of TikTok houses inasmuch as the constraints of the national economy. Except socio-political, the space brings geographical and very much physical dimensions to the picture. Neither the location to set up a house, nor the interior design of it were coincidental. Namely, TikTok house is a unique type of capitalist infrastructure at the forefront of the labor reterritorialization and, as such, it creates specific spatial arrangements put in place to accelerate the process of digital production. Therefore, the houses were explicitly designed as pervasive film sets: the rooms, the kitchen, the toilet, and the outer parts of the premises might have been readily exposed to the camera if needed. This kind of spatial arrangement provided advantageous conditions for shooting content any time one felt like it and imbued the whole totality of the house with a feeling of a reality show. However, the houses did not operate independently; they worked as a part of a larger structure. Which brings us to the question: what was the structure of the houses as media projects? And what role did they occupy in the market?

Chapter three. Market

The niche TikTok houses occupy in domestic cultural markets seems to dictate their functionality. In this chapter, before discussing the role Ukrainian houses played for the market, I explore how they were built as media projects. Apart from distributing contracts, these facilities played two different roles for the influencers depending on their level of popularity: the role of a production center and an attention broker. In the closing section, I describe in more detail how the houses were brokering the audience attention, the obstacles they confronted, and how the market double functionality of the houses contributed to the rise of contentions between influencers, thus undermining the unity of the labor force.

Media structure(s) and the division of labor in Ukrainian TikTok houses

Forgetting about the obviously unsuccessful first wave of attempts to self-organize into a TikTok house, the general contours of the project, determined by the division of labor, are more or less identical. Broadly, each of Ukrainian houses had:

1. A founder, who was supposed to create the immediate⁸ conditions for a TikTok house to emerge and maintain its effective operation. Usually, with help of the agency, he also worked on establishing and sustaining the attention conversion paths (discussed below).
2. An advertising manager/agency, who was supposed to connect advertisers to the house's labor force (influencers), negotiate contracts, and enhance the online visibility of a house's common account.
3. Influencers (TikTokers and sometimes YouTubers), who were supposed to amass online attention and convert their immaterial labor into digital commodities.
4. A professional filming crew (even if comprised of two or three specialists), who was supposed to assure the quality of the content.

Each of Ukrainian houses made variations to this structure followed from their own logic of operation, but every modification rested upon the sketched outline.

As the founder told me, *The Orange House* was conceived as a startup from the outset. According to Denys, the project was coming to life within a poorly formed market; a small number of people made it; there was hardly any solid expertise on the subject; the business market model was in the process of forming but still unstable; finally, no unit economics could have been applied (personal interview). His startup should have arrived at the point where the market model might be discerned and used to assess future profits when scaling up. These calculations were supposed to help in negotiations with potential investors. In reality, Denys was lucky to have an investor who did not demand detailed

⁸ I refer to "immediate conditions" as intentionally human-made and thus different from the broader historical conditions of possibilities that I have described in chapter two.

assessments except for a few PnL pages. The spending amounted to \$12,000–15,000 a month, and in total the founder has received \$200,000 in investments for the whole project. With its focus on innovation and growth (the aim was not to gain profits right away) against the backdrop of high market uncertainty (Pollman, 2019, p.159), *The Orange House* certainly deserves the name of a startup. It was finally launched in June 2020.

The whole project became a media edifice: the founder was thinking big. Influenced by the Russian model⁹, while setting up the house, Denys concurrently established *The Orange Agency*. It was responsible for processing advertisement orders from the house and orders from independent influencers whom Denys was also aiming to attract. The founder collaborated with a famous Ukrainian influencer and, with his help, succeeded in attracting the first TikTokers to live and work in *The Orange House*. This influencer soon withdrew from the project. Apart from the house and its affiliated agency, Denys's media edifice included one department responsible for music production and another department to assist external clients' with their social media accounts.

Parts of <i>The Orange Media</i>	Responsibilities
<i>The Orange TikTok house</i>	Content production for TikTok and YouTube
<i>The Orange Agency</i>	Work with advertisers, contract negotiations
<i>The Orange YouTube</i>	Management of the content for YouTube channel
<i>The Orange Production</i>	Assisting external clients' with their social media accounts
<i>The Orange Music</i>	Music production

The labor was divided respectively: the workings of the house were the domain of the founder; meanwhile, the manager from *The Orange Agency* connected to and communicated with advertisers; and the commercial production lead was responsible for administering extrinsic social media accounts. Additionally, the project employed a YouTube producer who controlled the operations of the YouTube channel attached to the

⁹ The agency (*WildJam*) gets affiliated with the house (*Dream Team*).

house. At some point, the crew evolved and, together with film editors and camera operators, amounted to 13 waged professionals working for *The Orange Media*.

The house itself was inhabited by TikTokers (referred to as “house members”), a film editor, and a few camera operators. In the early stages, the house crew included a cook, a house manager responsible for discipline, and a visiting cleaning person. Together they form an auxiliary team of the house, invisibilized executors of material labor maintaining order and infrastructure that supported the immaterial digital production. However, after a while, this rather cumbersome structure of the house was curtailed: a cook and a house manager were fired. The rationale for this measure was twofold: the investment fund was limited, so the founder decided to cut off personnel and make their work a common duty. The second reason concerned the house manager herself, as she failed to establish sustainable trusting contact with the house members and facilitate their labor in a non-confrontational way.

Among the influencers, the founder appointed two managers responsible for the most promising platforms for *The Orange Media*, TikTok and YouTube. According to my study participant, who at some point became an account manager, these positions were waged \$1000 a month (Iryna, personal interview). The appointed influencers continued producing for the house’s profile and receiving advertising contracts, but it was the managerial role that secured their previously unstable income. These managers were responsible for assuring the content flow, generating new ideas for the profile of the house, prompting the idle members to work, uploading videos, and developing a far-reaching content plan. However, it also changed their perception inside the house by other members and invoked conflicts.

In the same month of June 2020, *The Blue House* was opened. Compared to *The Orange House*’s model, its structure was light and easy to follow. It had a founder — Bohdan; a range of invited TikTokers to produce content and amass digital attention; an

advertising manager to facilitate the communication and handle the contracts between clients and influencers. A professional filming crew was invited to the house later and, according to my study participants, was never considered a part of the team by house members (Viktoria, personal interview). The duties of shooting, editing, and uploading videos to the platform were laid on TikTokers themselves. Unlike in *The Orange House*, no account manager was responsible for the permanency of content flow. The members of *The Blue House* took daily shifts to take care of that processes: they encouraged their colleagues to produce, controlled the quality of the video – a function later delegated to the professional crew – and took care of the proper timing to upload the content. Hence, the amount of unpaid labor was increased and spread among the workforce. The next chapter contains a more nuanced discussion of that process.

A year later, in June 2021, *The Black House* was opened. Structurally, it resembled the Russian model: a house affiliated to already well-performing agency. Even though *The Orange* and *The Black Houses* are similar in their connection to agencies, the most crucial distinction is that the founder of the former conceived the house as a startup, while the founder of the latter envisioned the house as a branch of its already prosperous business. Another similarity is that there were actually two founders of *The Black House*, an investor and a famous influencer. The latter used to be a member of *The Blue House* but left it to organize his own project. Unlike disorganized TikTokers of the first wave, he realized the importance of financial backing and long-term planning; that is why he approached the founder of *The Black Agency* with an idea to set up the house (Sveta, personal interview). However, a year spent in *The Blue House* as a digital laborer enabled him to develop a profound understanding of the house's inner workings and, thus, avoid common errors. For instance, the members of *The Black House* had their own rooms, as opposed to the crowded environments of *The Blue* and *The Orange Houses*. Another innovation was related to the picture quality: in the newly established *Black House*, the influencer and the

investor introduced a rule, according to which it was forbidden to upload videos for a common account made by smartphone (only professional equipment was supposed to be used).

The labor was divided along similar lines: TikTokers had to constantly fill the common account with content and produce paid videos for clients. The founder-influencer of *The Black House* concentrated a few roles in his hands, simultaneously performing as a popular TikToker, a talent hunter, a house manager, and a TikTok producer. The founder-investor mainly dealt with the financial part and continued overseeing his well-operating agency. The meetings with the production crew — film editors and camera operators — were scheduled, so they just visited the house but were not living there.

Overall, the example of three houses testifies to the dominance of the same structural pattern based on the identical division of labor. But if we scale up to the level of the domestic market, what role do TikTok houses occupy as a market agent, and why is it deemed valuable by other market players?

Market functionality of the houses

Ukrainian TikTok houses had layered market functionality and simultaneously performed various roles for different influencers. This variety becomes visible if we embed the house in the context of a “career path” of a digital aspirational laborer. Below, I roughly sketch out the “stages” on this “path” and follow them sequentially while keeping in mind that this is not something predetermined and, therefore, might have digressions and alterations.

First “stage”: entering the house. Presumably, this is one of the most arduous periods for a young aspiring digital producer, for her work is free, invisible, and not recognized as work. She struggles her way out of a “digital reserve army” (a wide, dispersed mass of users with low number of followers striving to become famous and, optionally, make

money through the media platforms), attracts and retains followers, thus accruing the asset of audience attention and, if fortunate, converting it into first advertising contracts, cooperations with agencies or membership in a house. Most bloggers fail to go through this “stage”. Of course, they do not necessarily aim at getting into the house *per se*, but if invited, it seems like a career jump to them; therefore, the offer is rarely refused.

Second “stage”: the house as a production center. if an aspiring digital producer receives an invitation at the point when her asset of audience attention is relatively moderate, the house functions for him as a production center. Collaborations with other members of the house, traffic trade with them, improved traffic conversion across platforms, and extensive networking allow a newcomer to boost his online visibility and promote him to a new recognizable level. Nonetheless, houses reluctantly accept micro-influencers and, thus, institutionalize attention thresholds, for, at that “stage”, bloggers profit from the house much more than the other way around. For example, *The Black House* did not even consider an influencer with less than 500K followers. However, since the membership in the house is based on the user potential to grow and attract attention, TikTokers are selected as if they were projects for investments and collaborations. After evaluating an influencer’s potential to fast and efficiently accrue the attention asset, exceptions have been made, as it repeatedly happened in *The Blue* and *The Orange Houses*.

Third “stage”: the house as a contract distributor. All the influencers living in a house are supposed to produce content for the common account. Due to the fact that TikTok does not offer a monetization mechanism, these videos are nothing else than an embodiment of an uncompensated labor rendered digital and put on the platform to maintain and, ideally, increase the attention asset of the page (i.e., the number of views, likes, and followers). Appearing in the videos for the common account is not just a duty of an influencer, but

also, especially for a newcomer, a nice opportunity to attract audience of her colleagues (“traffic transfer,” *perehonyat’ audytoriyu*), thus increasing her own statistics. The common account functions like a showcase of abilities of the influencers and their online personas, it testifies to the creative potency of a house.

If a client wants to order an advertisement video, he approaches the agency and negotiates the terms, including assignments, timing, price, and others. If he approaches the influencers directly, they will normally forward him to an agency for further negotiations. Sometimes a client might ask the agency to advice the best candidature for his particular request; then, the agency evaluates the assignment and recommends respective influencers. What seems certain is that *agencies, in coordination with founders, centralize power over the distribution of contracts – which means that they exercised a direct influence on the incomes of the house members*. Sometimes agencies attempt to equalize the field of opportunities and lobby less famous influencers to a client; sometimes they play their role more passively acting like a middleman who takes the fee for merely connecting the parties and facilitating their communication.

Fourth “stage”: the house as an attention broker. This seems to be the most balanced “stage” in terms of cooperation between the house and its members. The popularity on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram does not automatically translate into mass popularity produced and distributed through established media where the connection between creative industries, fame, and capital is more solid. However, the problem is that digital and non-digital environments seem loosely connected – that is why the role of the house is to convert the audience attention amassed within the digital environment into the non-digital attention derived from popular TV shows, cinema, music industry, national showbiz, etc. The attention from established media is also redirected and converted into digital attention: that way, the houses facilitate the growth of the digital market. On a pragmatism

level, the conversion paths usually work that way: celebrity guests visit TikTok houses, and by doing that, they are trading the attention of their audience gained from the non-digital sphere for the digital attention of influencers. The conversion of digital attention to non-digital as a rule happens when the influencers are invited to popular TV programs, music clips, or as a cast in a movie. Those examples do not exhaust the variety of strategies TikTok houses and agencies apply to transform somebody popular on the platform into a celebrity that is recognized nationwide, but still they give us a sense of how that conversion might happen. Therefore, *TikTok houses as attention brokers build conversion paths, thus bridging the gap between the digital and non-digital markets and facilitating the attention trade and attention conversion from respective audiences.*

According to one of its members, *The Orange House* even had a waged professional specializing in that kind of labor. His name was Petro, and he was hired partially because of his connections. Mykola claims that “Petro has been working for a long time on TV, and that is how he has formed a large contact base with various celebrities and their managers. In our house, he was responsible for inviting guests” (personal interview). TikTokers from other houses, when asked about the most significant gains from their work experience in the facility, tend to use the phrases like “networking” (Iryna, *The Orange House*), “rise in media exposure” (Victoria, *The Blue House*), “getting acquainted with a huge variety of Ukrainian stars” (Olena, *The Orange House*). Evidently, they sought ways to enlarge their reach to the non-digital environment.

Before moving to the final “stage”, I have to mention that the second, third, and forth “stages” regularly overlap; it is preferable to see them not as a chronological sequence, but rather as a heterochronic unity. (Nonetheless, the vector of an influencer’s development still follows the mentioned order, from 1 to 5.) A house may simultaneously promote (as a production center, “stage 2”) a young coming-to-fame influencer to an advertiser and, if successful, allocate her a commercial deal (contract distributor, “stage 3”). But a house

even more often gives contracts to its most popular influencers (contract distributor, “stage 3”) and curates their way into a non-digital market (attention brokerage, “stage 4”). Also, when celebrities visit a house, they interact with every member of it, which means that, for a less popular influencer, at this moment, a house combines the roles of production center (“stage 2”) and attention broker (“stage 4”), because it increases her digital attention asset while simultaneously contributing to her non-digital recognizability.

Fifth “stage”: leaving the house. When the attention asset of an influencer equates to or surpasses the attention asset of a house, her digital labor becomes elite. It becomes redundant to her to stay at the house, since she already has an abundant reach to digital and non-digital markets, enjoys a significant flow of contract offers, and can perform the function of attention brokerage by herself, avoiding paying unnecessary fees for the contracts to the house. At this point, influencers tend to either leave TikTok houses and sell their elite digital labor individually or search for a more advanced house¹⁰ which can offer a reach to new markets and conversion paths. An elite influencer might also focus on switching to non-digital markets altogether and attempt to consolidate her presence there. It becomes evident that during the second “stage”, the imbalance between a digital worker and a TikTok house privileges the former, while in the fifth “stage”, the latter. The success of a TikTok house as a market agent thus lies in its ability to evenly distribute contracts and permanently enhance its capacity for attention brokerage.

TikTok houses as attention brokers

The brokerage of attention is not a phenomenon that occurs exclusively after a digital laborer has entered the house, which performs that function for her. There are a few

¹⁰ In the case of Ukraine, that would be the Russian houses — the situation which merely reinforces the imperialistic pattern.

“grassroots” online practices to enhance the attention asset and administer the traffic transfer and traffic conversion across platforms. Influencers understand that better than anybody and, often driven by a calculated rationale, reciprocally appear in each other content. Also, they organize “giveaways”, a pretty expensive strategy of rapidly attracting a vast amount of attention that diminishes in time but surpasses the previous level. Even though those trade-offs are resource-consuming, they happen across different levels of influencers’ popularity. With the rise of TikTok houses, these grassroots practices became institutionalized.

TikTok houses took a role of attention converters. In Ukraine, businesses were slow to recognize TikTok as another advertising space, still preferring to use traditional media along with more established platforms like Instagram or YouTube. In the interview, Denys told me that one of his major mistakes was expecting the flow of orders, “We were ahead of the market because we did everything in 2020, but companies started allocating funds [for TikTok campaigns] in 2021–22” (Denys, personal interview). At that point, there was no legal framework to facilitate the contractual relations between a house and a client, “We were told: dudes, we can allocate money just for advertising campaigns, and for that, we organize pitches and work with a winner. I realized we could not rely on big money, just on small funds assigned to some ‘experimental projects’” (ibid). Therefore, the role of the houses was twofold: first, along with advertising agencies, they have accelerated the growth of digital markets, pushing for the development of legal and business frameworks; second, they facilitated the attention brokerage between the digital and non-digital environments by networking and building conversion pathways.

Those pathways included inviting popular celebrities to a house for a day to “hang out”; probably, that was the most widespread practice across the houses. A star would appear in tons of TikTok videos made during that day with various influencers, thus attracting their audiences to his own account and vice versa. If a star was a singer, she

might have invited an influencer to sing with her or participate in a new clip, thus extending the recognizability of this influencer beyond the platform. It was not a rarity that a founder effectively organized an invitation to a popular morning TV show, where influencers were broadcasted to non-digital audience. Their nicknames would conveniently appear at the bottom of the screen, contributing to the flow of new followers. In the January 2022, a comedy movie “Love and the bloggers” premiered in Ukraine, among the actors, featuring popular TikTok and Instagram influencers (some of them were members of a house) and celebrating the life and creative potency of a contemporary Ukrainian blogger. Noteworthy, the founder of one of the houses was among the producers of the movie. That event reflects a significant shift towards more decisive strategies designed to promote digital celebrities beyond the platforms where their fame originated and for a while was constrained to.

However, the limits Ukrainian houses faced while trying to trade audience attention point to the limits of domestic markets and their lack of connectivity. Despite mentioned examples, more established cultural industries in Ukraine (for instance, music or TV) were still slow to integrate and solidify new players (platforms) within the cultural market, which hindered the attention conversion. The exodus of the most popular TikTokers to the Russian *Dream Team* can be read as a flow of an elite digital workforce to a more successful attention broker. TikTokers frequently used the phrase “There are more opportunities in Moscow”. The efficiency of Russian TikTok houses relied not only on better development of their markets but also on better functioning conversion pathways and generally higher recognizability of digital capital. This case shows the leveraging of a better developed Russian economy to deprive the Ukrainian cultural market of its most notable and promising influencers, an imperial dead end Ukrainian influencer market hardly managed to escape up until the invasion.

Ukrainian TikTok houses simultaneously played distinct roles for different digital workers inhabiting them. Despite *The Blue* and *The Orange Houses*' members occupying the same living space, performing their labor in the same infrastructural environment, and having the same relation to the means of production, their positionality towards the house as a market agent divided them. For less popular influencers, it usually functioned as a production center, while more fortunate enjoyed the fruits of a house as an attention broker. That undermined the unity of interests of the labor force: while the former group strived to stay in the house to increase its attention asset to the fullest, the latter attempted to leave as soon as the house exhausted its networking capacity and failed to provide the brokerage function. The interests of less popular TikTokers appeared aligned with the interest of the founder of the house, who also wanted all the labor force he invested in to stay and make a profit for him. In contrast, the interests of elite workers were different, for they wanted to search for better opportunities without paying fees to the project. Thus, we see how the differences in career chances and positionality within the digital and non-digital markets divorced the elite labor force from its less fortunate colleagues.

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This chapter examined the division of labor both within the house and the market. It appeared that successfully operating facilities are based upon four structural elements determined by the division of labor assigned to the 1) founders, 2) influencers, 3) ad managers/agencies, 4) filming crews. This structure allows to distribute the necessary tasks to enable the most effective accumulation, conversion, and capitalization upon the audience attention, the backbone of attention economy. Precisely the operations over the audience attention determined the market functionality of TikTok houses as production centers, contract distributors, and attention brokers. That implied, TikTok houses played

different roles for different segments of their own digital labor force; the divide was based on the attention asset of an influencer. For the less popular influencers, the house functioned as a production center increasing the number of followers and thus laying grounds for selling the newly acquired attention to an advertising client in the future for a bigger price, while for the more popular one, the house functioned as an attention broker, where the asset of digital attention has been converted to non-digital recognizability through meetings with celebrities, invitations to participate in music clips, and other strategies. Additionally, the more popular TikTokers disproportionately benefited from advertising contracts appointed to them by the agency of the house, which did not always try to distribute them equally. Therefore, we see how an allegedly space-contingent digital labor came to be shaped by the positionality of a worker within the house, the positionality of a house within the cultural market, and the position of that market in relation to foreign markets.

Chapter four. Workplace

In this chapter, I examine how certain practices of disciplining the labor force, developed in the TikTok houses, conditioned the process of digital production for the platform. I am arguing for the necessity to re-introduce a somewhat outdated notion of a “workplace” as an integral element in the analysis of allegedly “deterritorialized” digital economy, for it provides a privileged vantage point to unravel the organization, maintenance, and control over the digital production. Thus, the chapter is divided into two parts. First, I explore how the infrastructural setup of the houses reflects the tendency towards the labor reterritorialization. By that, I mean not only that TikTok houses brought the most popular and promising content creators under one roof, but also that the design of these facilities became conducive to enhance the convertibility of that living labor into digitalized commodities. Then, I proceed to an empirically informed analysis of the organizational

process. As we shall see, in attempts to secure the smooth functioning of a new workplace, site-specific productive norms, schedules, and systems of control were developed and deployed. In contrast to the view of schedule-free and spontaneous digital creativity, the re-concentrated digital labor force did follow the established rules (even if they were laxer and offered some room for maneuvers). Yet despite the efforts, these measures failed to assure the smooth content production and the houses faced internal challenges.

Enmeshing spaces, reterritorializing labor

Even though the production process — discussed below — alternated across Ukrainian TikTok houses, the tendency to enmesh the working space with a private space appeared quite common. “We didn’t have private rooms, strictly speaking. Everybody’s room served as a shooting set — and everybody was okay with that,” tells Mykola from *The Orange House* during our interview. “We shot everywhere — it all depended on the idea for a video. We fixed up the light and started shooting; there were no prohibited spaces,” I hear from Lera, a member of *The Blue House*. “Generally, the whole house was a potential shooting set,” recounts Sveta from *The Black House*. At the same time, the common attitude across all the houses is very acceptive of this infrastructural arrangement, as exemplified in this testimony, “We knew where we are moving in” (Iryna, personal interview).

That contraction of the boundary between the working and the living space not only reflects the tendency of the capital to reduce the spatial distance to assure the utmost fast flow of goods, services, and labor power — “annihilation of space by time” (Harvey, 2006, p. 377) but attests to the propensity of the digital capital to morph the space of social reproduction into a site of production. Antonio Negri captured the trend in its infancy when describing the decomposition of a “mass worker” into a “social labor-power” with the

following capitalist restructuring – through mechanisms of abstraction and socialization – of labor (1988, pp. 105–8). More contemporary examples of socialized labor and uprooted, scattered across territories decomposed class would be bloggers, influencers, and ordinary users who produce content directly from their homes – a new “workplace” made possible by information technologies (*Revolution 11/13 | Toni Negri: Philosophy & Political Activism Have Always Been Embedded in My Life*, 10 May 2022). But the initial period of decentralized production and dispersed labor, especially prevalent in the early stages of the internet, now gives way to the centralizing tendencies. TikTok houses appeared as the new types of infrastructures aimed at *concentrating* previously dispersed labor force in one place to accelerate the accumulation of attention asset and effectively sell digital commodities. Whereas Negri’s “social workers” were not tied together *physically* by facilities of their exploitation, TikTokers *physically* were living and working under one roof.

The immaterial digital labor they perform in these enmeshed workplaces was also reterritorialized. Namely, the new territory of labor imposed new expectations upon its workers and by infrastructural means nudged them to fulfil them. At the surface level, the labor force was required to merely produce content, but the hidden request was to effectively generate the feelings of authenticity, joy, and sociality itself. Frequently, TikTokers produced uncompensated videos about themselves “as they are”. Lera, a member of *The Orange House*, asserts, “I live my life, people watch me, and I get money for that” (personal interview). This attitude – prevalent among my participants – testifies to the fact that the site of production has moved inside the subjectivity of a worker and now resides in her ability to invoke an emotional response, do deep acting, and sustain communal bonds.

Even if the content of an influencer fell out of a “lifestyle” genre, it still needed to be substantiated by the influencer’s emotional and affective work. In the autonomous Marxist

tradition, this kind of work is conceptualized as *affective labor* and denotes “labor that produces or manipulates affects such as feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 108). TikTok videos are not merely about doing a lip-sync, dancing, or narrating a lifestyle; it is a place where your personality should work to produce a certain feeling. Mykola observes that “Most TikTokers were playing themselves, but even then, they made themselves look better, so it would be more enjoyable to view. ... Camera changed some people, and they became what they weren’t in real life. ... But if viewers liked watching this version of you, you had to give it to them” (Mykola, personal interview). The house provided a well-arranged infrastructure – the background, the lightning, the equipment – accessible 24/7 for that type of digital immaterial affective work as well as the professional crew to assure the quality of the content. Not only that, but also it *influenced* the content.

In *The Orange House*, to ensure the strongest online engagement and retention rate, some videos for the YouTube channel were purposefully made provocatively. For instance, the house released a series of interviews with TikTokers and their hot takes on other house members with whom they continued to live and work. Iryna, who introduced me to this layer of working experience, admits that “It all looked like a kindergarten, *but it worked*, because a bit later we all watched released videos, who said what and about whom, and were completely shocked” (personal interview). Besides, the house occasionally resorted to the practice of “vile editing” aimed at accomplishing the same goal but by technical means. By that term, I understand a specific strategy of subtly manipulating the filmed raw material and distorting it during post-production to make a situation or relationship conducive to extracting the most powerful emotional response from the audience – frequently jeopardizing the peaceful coexistence of influencers. Iryna recalls, “There were some videos edited inadequately to produce the impression that somebody was a hypocrite, somebody else was lying, and somebody else was trying to get under

someone's skin" (Iryna, personal interview). She attributes the responsibility for these ideas to account managers and the technical crew; however, what is of interest here is that this kind of content did not fall under censorship since it actually raised the attention asset, contrary to the content with smoking or drinking (Olena, personal interview) which was erased for good from the house profile.

These strategies along with the infrastructure itself facilitated the tendency to invade the very "soul of the workers" (Commisso, 2006) with their capacity for having emotional life, forming bonds, and building personal relationships, turning it into a monetizable digital spectacle. Ultimately, this proclivity to produce scandalized content culminated in the emotional exhaustion of the house members who "were unable to distinguish between a YouTube shooting and a real life anymore" (Iryna, personal interview). The tendency of digital capital to reterritorialize labor by redesigning workplaces and creating new infrastructures was thus complemented by its internal drive to stage, highlight, and turn into capitalizable value the very capacity for sociality, alienating and appropriating it within the structures of platform economy.

Organizing digital production

This engineered sociality was organized and maintained by the imposition of productivity norms, expectations from peers and oneself, introduction of managerial positions, and a system of shifts. The rest of the chapter explores how the digital content accessible globally on the platform appears rooted in the practices, work routines, and strategies of control developed locally. When approaching TikTok houses, one should remember that they were not just regular homes where people lived together and occasionally collaborated, but rather carefully designed workplaces sustained by a specific organization of labor. Below, I explore how certain standards, requirements, and work routines structured everyday lives of the influencers.

Due to the unstable, experimental nature of the project, the production process, productivity norms, and control over labor in Ukrainian TikTok houses were in constant flux. The organization of labor underwent a few rounds of changes until it stabilized. That trajectory is utmost visible in the permutation of strategies of control, alternating productivity standards, and constant negotiations occurring in *The Orange House*. My study participants happened to live and work there during various periods, from the outset of the project in June 2020 until the Russian invasion in February 2022; therefore, when asked on that matter, the answers differed and thus reflected the changing nature of the labor process. Evidently, the management of the house strived to stabilize the work process by setting up a fixed schedule with consistent productivity norms, bringing managerial positions within the facility, and even introducing contracts. *The Blue House* was a much smaller project with no pressing need for highly elaborated strategies to organize production; nonetheless, their process constantly fluctuated, too. As for *The Black House*, by the time of June 2021, when it was established, the previous experience of one of the founders led to the institutionalization of a few ground rules and productivity norms that clarified the production process from the start. The lack of data on *The Black House* precludes analysing tendencies within it, yet current interviews allow for careful speculations on the stability of their labor process.

The Orange House kept a waged cameraman and a film editor inside the house on a permanent basis, a measure specifically designed to facilitate the continuity of digital production. In contrast to pre-arranged shootings, the constant presence of a small crew assisted with faster implementation of ideas and warranted the availability of technical support – and, by extension, assured quality control. For instance, Mykola (550K followers on YouTube) attests that the shootings took place every day; he worked for 13 hours and

did not feel exhausted (Mykola, personal interview). On the other hand, Olena (1.2M followers on TikTok), who used to live in the house from the start, reports that influencers were supposed to make content for TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram for the house account apart from producing content for their pages, and at some point, she felt deeply exhausted by the process. Thus, the testimonies of the house members differ, and while for some of them, the constant need to produce and unstable, unguaranteed income contributed to the fall of the motivation to work, others recount that they were never so productive in their lives. However, judging from the words of the founder and some of the members, a relatively fixed schedule and productivity norms were introduced after a while. Shootings took place once a week, during which TikTokers were supposed to produce 35 videos for a common account (Iryna, personal interview). Then, according to the founder, shootings for the YouTube channel happened twice a week, while videos for TikTok were shot during one session every week (Denys, personal interview).

Speaking about YouTube shootings, I should make an important remark and distinguish between the “free labor” and “unpaid labor”. Tiziana Terranova (2013, pp. 33–34) characterized “free labor” as freely given, unwaged, and often enjoyed – basically, almost all user-generated content falls into that category. For TikTokers, it is self-evident that most of their content would never be compensated; however, they accept this and work for free (often joyfully), *hoping* to increase their asset of audience attention which later converts into an advertising contract. On the other hand, by “unpaid labor”, I refer to labor on the platform, which excludes this kind of prospective thinking and *hope* for future gains from a lucrative contract or monetization. Basically, it is blatant exploitation, coercion to work. This kind of coercion took place in *The Orange House* when influencers were producing for the YouTube channel, for all the income from monetization was appropriated by the founder. Influencers from *The Orange House* never saw their free labor for TikTok as problematic, yet they expressed a visible discontent with the unpaid labor for

YouTube. Not only did it impose additional duties upon them and took away their time, but also contributed to the rise of exhaustion and considerations to leave.

The production control has been mutating as well. Initially, the founder had appointed a house manager who lived together with influencers and was supposed to secure the work discipline and productivity rate. However, that person lasted for half a year until being fired. According to Denys, he decided to dismiss her as a part of cost cuts. In contrast, Olena insists that the manager was ousted from the house by TikTokers for being commanding and unhelpful. At some point, the founder attempted to introduce the system of account shifts, wherein people in turn were responsible for assuring the content flow by generating ideas, organizing and administering the shooting, and uploading videos to the house profiles on TikTok and YouTube. That ended in failure, for “TikTokers are not motivated to shoot videos for the house account. If you assign daily a responsible person, they will either produce a stereotyped content or be done with work three minutes before midnight squeezing all the content within that timeframe” (Denys, personal interview).

Thus, we see that the founder’s expectations from the members of *The Orange House* was not only to engage in both free labor for TikTok and unpaid labor for YouTube, but also to keep track of the common accounts. Naturally, the attempt to give additional duties without offering a reward failed, so another measure was introduced. The control over everyday productivity was redistributed to two account managers on a permanent basis: the first took care of the TikTok house profile, while the second oversaw the YouTube channel. These positions were waged \$1000 a month (Iryna, personal interview), surpassing the average wage in Kyiv, which at that time amounted to approximately \$600. The labor was divided, waged, and responsabilized.

Judging from the limited data, *The Blue House* had more of a lenient and flexible schedule with the implementation of arranged shootings during the mid and late periods of operation. A member of the house, Lera (1.9M followers on TikTok) recollects her

typical day, “I wake up, cook something, and contemplate my plans for a day. Once a week, we had an off-premise shooting” (personal interview). Her friend Victoria (2.8M followers on TikTok) corroborates the story, “I didn’t have a fixed schedule. Well, I knew that apart from the common account, I must develop my own” (personal interview). In *The Blue House*, the influencers produced content merely for TikTok common account, a condition that eased their workload and freed time for popular social gatherings to enhance media exposure that, according to them, happened quite frequently. These meetings were hard to plan long ahead, so the schedule fluctuated accordingly. As for the control over the content flow, the house instituted a system of shifts:

The house set up a schedule – among ten members, every day, there were two people on duty: they were responsible for taking care of Instagram stories and uploading 3–5 TikTok videos. When you are on a shift, you are supposed to be in the house, film all the hustle, and attend organized events. ... Seven days a week, but on Sunday, we might have a day off: then everybody is on a shift and is expected to make one video. Ten videos in total – hence, the content for the common account (Victoria, personal interview).

This system distributed the managerial duties among the labor force without compensating them for their efforts. Here, we see a peculiar trend at work – contrary to the tendency towards the division of labor commonly found in large organizational structures, the small-scale *Blue House* project followed the path of the *condensation of labor*. The founder himself (Bohdan) performed several roles usually assigned to several specialists: on a par with the already employed advertising manager, he searched for clients willing to pay for ads; like account managers, he tracked the content flow; at times, he came up with ideas and orchestrated the implementation of them assuming a role of a blogger; ultimately, being a founder, he provided a proper work environment, negotiated

labor conditions with newcomers, developed a strategical vision of the project, and appropriated 30% from the clients' contracts.

The system of shifts was backed up by an inventive disciplining tool based on gamification. Naturally, what precludes you from quitting or doing shoddy work if you are on an uncompensated shift? Fines might operate as a negative sanction, but penalizing already unwaged labor cannot last long. That is why Bohdan came up – and the idea was supported by TikTokers – with a system of accumulated reward derived from penalized labor. It functioned pretty smoothly:

If you failed on your shift, you get fined: for missing to upload an Instagram story, you must put 200 UAH in a jar; for a TikTok video, the sum rises to 500 UAH. That jar grows bigger during a month, and at the end, the jar goes to an influencer who'd made the most viewed video for the common account" (Victoria, personal interview).

Under those conditions, the fruits of unwaged labor derived from fines were amassed and redistributed among the workers on a competitive basis. That strategy effectively obscured the exploitative nature of uncompensated shifts and condensed labor while providing a winner of the "all against all" race with its individualized and highly reduced – compared to the amount of money that should have been paid for doing shifts – substitute. Of course, in the long run, that strategy would not suffice to keep the motivation high and ensure a sustainable productivity level, but it functioned much better than merely a system of fines once introduced – but quickly abandoned – in *The Orange House*.

One of my study participants, Sveta (3.5M followers on TikTok), migrated from *The Blue* to *The Black House*, which gave her a unique opportunity to compare labor processes. According to her, the attitude towards shootings was more serious in *The Black House*. The production norms were set at the bar of 20 videos per session, given that the house

regularly arranged three professional sessions a week — which combined to 60 videos/week (Olha, personal interview; Sveta, personal interview). This organization of labor allowed for making an abundant archive capable of maintaining a stable content flow, accumulating a digital stockpile, and effectively scheduling work time.

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This chapter re-introduces the notion of a workplace in the analysis of the digital economy. The fact that TikTok houses looked like real homes, however glamourized, might be confusing, for it conceived their nature as digital workplaces, where labor was sustained by infrastructural means and specific organization of production. As infrastructures, houses brought together the most popular and promising content creators among the dispersed labor force in one place designed to transform the private space into a production site for the purpose of amassing and capitalizing upon the digital attention. This workplace created an advantageous environment to monetize the sociality of its members, as well as providing them with advanced instruments and technical support to create content. The production process was organized and maintained by the imposition of productivity norms, managerial positions, and a system of shifts. These measures were designed locally to assure the stability of the houses. Nevertheless, analyzing influencers' material work conditions allowed me to reveal the productive tensions and internal instabilities that had been gradually pushing the houses towards disintegration. This theme becomes the focus of the final chapter, where I show how the projects designed to freely operate in the global deterritorialized digital economy confronted severe challenges rooted in local conditions of a reterritorialized workplace.

Chapter five. Disintegration

So far, I have largely explored the creation and diffusion of TikTok houses in Ukraine.

However, as I showed in the introduction, by the time I concluded the thesis, most of them dissolved and stopped producing. There is an obvious reason behind this: the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And yet, in this chapter, I argue that to understand this breakdown we need to go beyond the external factors and concentrate on internal ones, namely the high sensitivity of organized and re-centralized digital labor to the local conditions that structure it. The fact that the TikTok houses failed to assure the smooth production of content should be largely ascribed to the internal challenges besieging the projects. Apart from the structural problems in organizing and disciplining labor, the houses failed to effectively carry out their market functions. Under this view, their dissolution reads less like an aftermath of the Russian invasion, but more like a last nail in already compromised projects.

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Among the structural problems eroding the stability of TikTok houses were the founders' inability (or reluctance) to secure the income of house members and decrease their workload, coerced labor, lack of personal space, uneven distribution of contracts leading to the growing gap between the levels of fame, income, and prestige among the workers of the same projects. Let us start the discussion with contracts, the legal agreements between parties designed to secure their rights and responsibilities. Either there simply were not any, or they were not recorded by notary or otherwise legalized. Conclusions should be drawn carefully, for the information on that is convoluted and insufficient, especially considering that the legal arrangements in houses have changed throughout time. What seems certain is that initially, neither *The Orange* nor *The Blue House* has signed any binding papers with their influencers. Lera from *The Blue House* testifies that

“We didn’t have any contracts” (personal interview); Victoria corroborates that all she had was “an oral agreement” (Victoria, personal interview). Sveta, who managed to sequentially live in her underaged years in *The Blue* and *The Black Houses*, claims that her mother has signed some agreements each time, but she never clarified the nature of them, let alone the nuances of the deal.

The Orange House changed that policy only after its most potent TikTokers had been lured away to Moscow (Olena, personal interview). The contractual relations were introduced to hinder this unfortunate leak or at least assure the fee for the house, if one of its members was hunted. The founder of *The Orange House* justifies the absence of contracts by the fact that “Our influencers aren’t ready to sign agreements. They say ‘I don’t know what happens in a month or two’ [so why would I sign it?]” (Denys, personal interview). Rhetorically, the founder shifts the explanation from the lack of institutional enforcement to the mere unwillingness of influencers to enter contractual relations, referring to their age, “I thought bloggers were like [professional] workers. ... *But they are like children*. I had an impression that *things were falling apart*, and I just kept it together by my own effort”. This perspective puts all the weight upon the supposed immaturity of influencers omitting the structural problems they confronted in their day-to-day working experience.

“Children” vs structural problems

The fundamental thing, why I am saying that all TikTok houses tend to dissolve, is that people in their eighteen—twenties do not appreciate what they are given, they do not respect their contribution and importance [of it,] they treat that [the project] as a children’s camp.

Denys, the founder of *The Orange House*

What was seen as “being a child” by the founder seems like a reasonable response to the nature of labor and working conditions within the house. Even though influencers never

saw a problem with giving away their free labor to TikTok, they never made their piece with uncompensated coerced labor for a YouTube channel. It remained a constant source of their discontent. The solution introduced by the founder of *The Orange House* stabilized the schedule and reduced labor time, so the work became better structured and more time-efficient but never addressed the issue of resource redistribution. The income generated from YouTube monetization forever stayed under the founder's unilateral control. Given that the project, during one and a half years of its existence, did not manage to become profitable, the inclination of the founder to re-invest the income is certainly strategical in one regard yet short-sighted in another, for it fails to recognize the repercussions of such a decision upon the living labor that actually generated the income.

As for the income digital workers received, it was neither secured by a contract that guaranteed wage nor stable since the paid workload (orders for advertisers) may peaked one week and dropped dead the other. Almost every TikToker I spoke with confirmed that. Mykola from *The Orange House* recalls, "Guys had advertisement as their main source of income. Some months, they got a lot, some month very few..." (personal interview). His words echo the ones of Lera from *The Blue House*, "There could be a month when I could sell just a single ad; on the contrary, there could be a month when I sell many. That was a highly unstable income" (personal interview).

The influencers tried to mitigate the damaging effects of this instability by engaging advertisers personally. Although it was now allowed at first, to work with clients bypassing the agency, but later became normalized. However, an obligation to work foremost for the common account of the house to fulfil the productivity norms significantly curtailed influencers' time to work for personal accounts, thus making profits from contracts gained individually. This arrangement always laid upon an agreement between an influencer and a founder that the latter would provide a regular flow of advertising deals to the former (charging a fixed fee along the way). However, *The Orange House* frequently failed to live

up to that promise. Although every TikTokker was equally obliged to create for a common account, it was not a rarity that a client, after visiting it, would want to work with an influencer with the biggest number of followers and/or views. That situation generated a hierarchy based on attention asset wherein the most popular TikTokkers kept getting the best client offers, leaving their colleagues behind, adding to the accumulation of discontent of the latter. Iryna recollects, “I got some ad offers, but few because I didn’t have a large follower base. There were fellows who got much more ad offers. It all depended on the number of active users and followers” (personal interview). In the same vein but with a much bitter sentiment, Olena testifies, “When I got an offer to become a member of a house, I was promised the moon... Everything was going very slow; we had few ads, and we were paid little... They didn’t invest money into us or organize collabs with big bloggers, even though they had promised. I got sick of that; we didn’t have anything...” (personal interview). Mykola told me he did not receive a single ad offer, for he was foremost a YouTuber, not a TikTokker. Hence, his way of making money was to monetize his YouTube channel – and from that income, he also paid a percentage to the founder). Despite that, he preserved the strongest sense of loyalty to the project, “The issue was that many fellows treated the house rather as a job. And when they didn’t get any profit from it, they ceased working – but I treated it as my solace (*otdushyna*)” (Mykola, personal interview).

These voices from *The Orange House* represent the variety of attitudes – neutral (Iryna), negative (Olena), and positive (Mykola) – which inform the judgements of their (un)paid workflow, but what seems to unite them is that they happened to be in a lesser demand compared to some of the other colleagues from “an elite workforce”. Of course, apart from emotional distress, that situation generated considerable income discrepancies when some members could barely afford food while others engaged in conspicuous consumption (Mykola, personal interview). Except for a limited time, when the founder

distributed on an individual basis \$500 to influencers who did not have contracts (later, the sum was cut off to \$200 and then to nil), which barely functioned as a sustainable solution, this structural inequality ingrained into *The Orange House* was never fully addressed.

As contract distributors, agencies (or an advertising manager in case of *The Blue House*) sometimes interfered and suggested less popular members of the house to advertisers, however the process of leveling the field was never prioritized by agencies and founders, since their profits directly depended upon the number of contracts they closed with help of the influencers. Thus, the rates for producing and posting an advertisement video for a client were set by them. For example, in *The Blue House*, the founder set the price to \$500 for one TikTok advertisement video. The houses charged a percentage from every deal of their TikTokers with a client and, in the case of *The Orange House*, appropriated the whole sum from YouTube monetization for future development of the house. The percentage of *The Orange House* reached 50%, while it was 30% in the case of *The Blue House*. There is no data on *The Black House*.

When the constant work with unstable income puts you in distress, one needs a comforting private space for recreation. Nonetheless, enmeshed workplace of the TikTok houses created the condition of *no escape*. A few influencers called “residents” from *The Blue* and *The Black Houses* lived at their own apartments and attended houses either daily or for pre-arranged shootings, but they always could go back home. However, the common experience of a TikToker from such a facility is different, for most digital laborers lived in the houses where they worked. Enmeshed, reterritorialized workplace that sought multiple capitalizations of emotional life and, at times, conflict were unable to provide a shelter for recreation and retreat. If some of TikTokers had a work conflict with a colleague, it splashed into an experience of everyday living — and vice versa. People could not find refuge from the discords of the workplace in a safe environment of private space since

physically leaving work simultaneously implied leaving “home”. The opposite tendency was also true, for “when people start being friends, others notice that — and it may later negatively influence the shootings” (Sveta, personal interview). The vocabulary TikTokers used to capture this lack of a private space consisted of words like “dorm,” “roommate”, and alike. When Iryna mentions that her experience of being in a TikTok house is “an experience of living in a dorm”, followed by “The thing I understood for myself is that I don’t want to participate in a TikTok house anymore” (personal interview) attests to the fact that it constituted a powerful source of unease for her as well as for some of my others study participants. Evidently, that fact did not go unnoticed by the founders either. Denys told me during the interview, “Flame wars and internal uprisings have been flooding the house” (personal interview). The following phrase by Sveta, a person who happened to work in two houses, summarizes the tensions in that kind of enmeshed space, “TikTok house is about TikTok, it is not about living together” (personal interview).

An ungrateful business of brokering attention

Apart from the labor conditions of a reterritorialized digital workplace, another reason Ukrainian TikTok houses were gradually falling apart seems to lay in their fragile market position as an attention broker. Looking back at the project, the founder of *The Orange House* sums up, “All the projects with houses are short-lived: influencers become celebrities and need nobody no more. After half of a year, projects crumble” (Denys, personal interview). The words of one of *The Blue House* members contain the same intuition, “Houses will work [in the future] only for entry-level bloggers. On the contrary, I don’t see a reason to be in the house for independent bloggers: I already have all the connections with other [famous] bloggers...” (Lera, personal interview). This idea presents an irreconcilable paradox for Ukrainian TikTok houses as market agents in 2020–2022: they were never conceived of as production centers — hence the reluctance to work with

beginners – and thus strived to recruit celebrity bloggers with a high attention asset; however, they rarely could offer digital resources or profitable contracts inaccessible to influencers themselves at this level of popularity. Famous TikTokers went to those facilities for a different reason. Victoria, who accepted the membership in *The Blue House*, already having 1M followers, shares her rationale, “I thought to myself: Okay, I got my subscribers, but the house is more about *media exposure*. You visit different projects, people invite you to be in the clips...” (personal interview). Along with other influencers, she valued the house as an agent of attention conversion that bridges to the non-digital market and allows for transitioning and consolidating her presence there as well as for accruing attention generated elsewhere but directed to the digital environment.

However, suppose an influencer for some time attends social gatherings, TV programs, and concerts arranged by the house. In that case, she necessarily broadens her own network of contacts while capitalizing upon conversion paths paved by the house. After a while, having neither legal warrants nor a personal reason to stay, influencers with their enriched social network tend to leave the project, taking their attention asset. The houses had no viable options for retaining the elite labor force except to keep advancing their capacities as attention brokers and elaborating conversion pathways. However, that process’s efficiency, pace, and scale seemed to depend on multiple market factors that a house had to accommodate while staying useful to its own elite labor force. That appeared to be an overwhelming task.

Russia and the end of things

All Ukrainian TikTok houses stopped operating on the morning of 24 February 2022, when Russia launched a full-fledged imperial invasion of Ukraine. In a moment, the houses from digital workplaces became shelters covering people from missile attacks and shelling happening all over the country. *The Blue House* hosted several people for a day before they

fled to Western Ukraine (Lera, personal interview), while some members of *The Black House* spent a few months in the place before moving further (Olha, personal interview). *The Orange House* provided a temporary asylum to a dozen people for a week before they managed to leave for safety (Denys, personal interview). None of the houses has officially announced its shutdown, yet it is clear that during wartime, nobody would be willing to invest, manage, and sustain such a project, let alone be responsible for a team gathered under one roof, when the whole territory of the country is daily under Russian shelling. The founders stopped paying rent and utilities to the owners of facilities; the repurposed premise of *The Orange House* still awaits to be renovated back to its original state. Currently, it has no electricity, no internet, some windows are broken from a shock wave, and a shell crater stares at you in the backyard (Mykola, personal interview). Instead of a promise of fame and success, the facility radiates violence and emptiness.

The trajectories of people fleeing war diverged significantly, as some went abroad and stayed, while others sought refuge in different places across Ukraine. Putting it in more abstract dehumanized terms, due to the external factor of Russian imperial military logic, Ukrainian labor — digital labor in particular — became utterly dispersed. Influencers stopped producing necessary uncompensated content for the common account of their houses and focused on individual accounts. None of the houses has announced the official shutdown of the project, but after February 24, only few new videos were released.

Since the houses cannot guarantee advertising orders or media exposure, TikTokers see no point in contributing their free labor anymore. Nevertheless, sometimes their trajectories merged back again. My study participants from *The Blue House* told me that now they rent out flats in the same residential building in Kyiv, which they half-jokingly refer to as “a TikTok house”. But even if they recollect the experience with a certain feeling of gratitude, they do not want to return to it. As Lera shared with me, “What we need is not particularly a house, but a *community*, a place where we could come and gather... I’d prefer

to be a member of such a community, but not of a house” (personal interview). Her words suggest that although labor remains dispersed physically and is not connected by a common infrastructure of life and work, it has a strong tendency to stay concentrated socially. Another evidence of the tendency for labor re-concentration may be found if we look at some ex-members of Ukrainian houses who, after fleeing war, found themselves abroad. They told me that they seek collaborations with local bloggers (“grassroots attention brokerage”) or long-term contracts with established advertising agencies (Sveta, Olena, personal interviews).

In all, that is out of the question that the Russian imperial war bears the sole responsibility for the disintegration of space and dispersion of labor, but the dissolution of the very idea of a TikTok house should be attributed to the project’s own internal dynamics, structural problems, and market challenges described above. After the three houses in question were frozen for an indefinite time and people fled in all directions, neither of my study participants saw a compelling reason to be a part of that kind of project in the future.

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This chapter showed high sensitivity of digital labor to the local context by examining the reasons leading to its disintegration. The way TikTok houses operated in Ukraine revealed several unaddressed structural instabilities. Their ultimate failure should be attributed not only to the external reason of the Russian invasion, but to also to the internal challenges in the organizing production and disciplining labor. The production process in the houses contained a number of ingrained flaws that put in motion the deep tendencies undermining the long-run stability of the project. Those flaws included coerced labor, unguaranteed income, the lack of personal space, and uneven distribution of advertising contracts among the digital labor force. Apart from the structural problems, Ukrainian TikTok houses

failed to perform well their market functions. From that angle, the Russian external invasion simply put an ultimate end to already deeply challenged projects.

Conclusions

In the academic literature, data is widely recognized as the crucial element in theorizing the operations of digital capitalism. Given the recent strong tendency of big companies to accumulate an ever-increasing amount of data and revise their business models to incorporate it as a prime source of future profit-making strategies, that analytical focus seems well-attuned to reflect the actual tendencies. However, restricting our thinking to the discussions of platform economy (Srnicek, 2017), data imperative (Sadowski, 2019), the creation of behavioral futures markets (Zuboff, 2019), audience labor (Fuchs, 2015), platform-mediated gigs (Woodcock & Graham, 2020), monetization and governance strategies (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020), algorithms (Yeung, 2018) and alike bears a risk of missing out the spatial dimension of this emergent economy. These visions place the production process exclusively within the realm of the digital, undermining the importance of the physical space within which such production comes into being.

In my MA thesis, I explored the embeddedness of digital labor in the economic, political, and spatial particularities of a certain locality, arguing that the place of work can never be fully transcended. Contrary to the vision of space-detached digital capitalism with its lexicon of “cyberspace” (Barlow, 1996) flows of data (Dean, 2016) and frozen temporality (Hassan, 2009), the place itself, as well as the local context and its actors, actively condition digitally mediated labor. Locality is not something to be waved aside, for the reconstitution of space is inasmuch central to digital capitalism, as its other key pillars, like its obsession with data (van Dijck, 2014) and attention (Terranova, 2012). More so, for its effective functioning, digital capitalism *needs* the very material infrastructural base that

sustains and reproduces it. The place matters fundamentally. Following that logic, I have demonstrated that the rise of TikTok houses – i.e., facilities which re-concentrate previously disseminated workforce for accelerated immaterial labor – reflects the tendency towards labor reterritorialization.

The story of the rise and fall of Ukrainian TikTok houses was initially designed as an inquiry into their effective functioning. The model under which houses were operating in 2020–22 seemed innovative in how it structured the labor process, labor relations, and experiences, as well as what kind of disciplinary measures were imposed to assure productivity norms. The Russian invasion in February 2022 brought wreckage to the country, modified my original project, and obscured the fractures of this allegedly smoothly operating model. One would be prone to say that Ukrainian TikTok houses ceased functioning because of the full-fledged war, which is a truth, but only a partial truth.

Ukrainian TikTok houses appeared in the summer of 2020, at the historical conjuncture of the COVID pandemic, the rapid advent of TikTok, and the continuously stagnated economy of the country. Its long-lasting structural problems, rooted in the history of massive economic dispossession in the nineties, aggravated by new dependencies from Western creditors and reinforced by the political turmoil, contributed to the increasing attractiveness of digital work for the population. The influencer market was slowly gaining power. The first wave of houses was abrupt and short-lived, but the projects that survived it shared a similar basic structure that relied upon the division of labor and allocation of four functional roles performed by different actors: founders, influencers, advertising managers/agencies, and filming crews. The founder was supposed to create the immediate conditions for a TikTok house to emerge and operate as well as seek ways to establish attention conversion pathways; TikTokers were supposed to convert their immaterial labor into a digital commodity and amass the online attention; the advertising manager/agency was supposed to communicate with clients selling the produced

commodity, the house workforce, and the audience attention; and a professional filming crew – even if comprised of two or three specialists – was introduced to assure the quality of the picture. Each Ukrainian house made corrections to this structure while preserving the core of it, those four roles.

Except distributing contracts among its digital labor force, the usefulness of TikTok houses as market agents proved to be twofold: for less famous TikTokers, it played a role of a production center and boosted their digital popularity, while the more prominent influencers enjoyed its fruits as an attention broker (but only up until they needed it). Generally, the houses performed the first role frequently, but reluctantly, since the attention asset of a coming-to-prominence TikToker tended to be lower than that of a house, which meant that the house needed to “invest” in a newcomer for him to catch up with other members. At this “stage”, an influencer was seen as an investment, so the profits from his labor were postponed for the future. Instead, TikTok houses strived to limit their market functionality to the role of an attention broker, bridging the gap between the digital and non-digital markets, paving the attention conversion pathways, and brokering the attention of respective audiences. The non-digital attention – derived from traditional media like TV, the music industry, or showbiz and later redirected to social media – broadened the digital market and allowed for more lucrative contracts with future advertising clients.

Even though that seemed like a promising business, the attention brokerage suffered several obstacles in Ukraine, namely the slow and cautious entrance of big clients into the digital sphere along with their anxiety to work with influencers, the absence of legal frameworks better adjusted for doing business within the digital environment, and generally weak convertibility of the digital fame and attention into the non-digital structures of capital. Simply put, in Ukraine, you can be very famous on TikTok or Instagram, but your fame, your audience, and your ability to make money stay tied to the platform and rarely extends to non-digital spheres. TikTok houses and affiliated agencies

attempted to create the conversion pathways to extend the width of both markets as well as convert and accumulate the audience attention, which turned out to be the most important asset when negotiating the contract. However, it proved to be a nearly impossible task within such a limited timeframe.

TikTok houses acted not only as production centers or attention brokers but also as infrastructures that effectively concentrated previously scattered, unconnected digital workforce, thus facilitating the reterritorialization of labor. As a starting point, I took Antonio Negri's idea of a "social worker", wherein the demise of industrial capital with its figure of a "mass worker" entailed the dispersion and the following socialization of productive labor. With the changes brought about by post-Fordist regimes, the increasing reliance on information technologies, and commodification of internet, the labor was almost univocally considered deterritorialized and space contingent. Thus, an uprooted and spread-out across territories bloggers, influencers, and users might be seen as a "class" that produces data and content for digital platforms, which these entities later co-opt and capitalize. Nevertheless, Negri's "social workers" were not tied together *physically* by facilities of their exploitation, while TikTokers *physically* were living and working under one roof. That was my point of departure from his line of thinking, for it became clear that, in this case, the digital capital deployed another strategy when erecting new types of infrastructures to gather the disseminated labor in one place. Instead of the dissolution of space, we see space embeddedness; instead of "social factory," we see a new workplace. TikTok houses, with their customizable lighting, wall graffiti, and technical equipment, epitomized this new workplace adjusted to enhanced digital productivity. They did not just "brought work to home", but infrastructurally enmeshed the living space with a workplace, morphing the space of social reproduction into another site of production.

Lastly, I challenged the idea of space detached digital production by revealing the high sensitivity of organized and re-centralized digital labor to the local conditions that

structure it. The analysis of material conditions of labor and production process in Ukrainian TikTok houses indicated several instabilities in how those facilities functioned. Given that two of three houses happen to recruit new members with relatively high discrepancies in their number of followers, that generated a hierarchy based on attention asset. And when advertising clients wanted to order a video, they would usually go on the common page of the house (everyone put their labor into filling it with content) and choose influencers with the highest numbers of followers. That way, the necessary uncompensated labor of the whole team — a common content — ended up benefiting the most prominent influencers while leaving others behind. The differences in income followed. This inability of the houses to equalize the amount of advertisement given to every member or at least to assure a minimal decent compensation for work for a common account appeared as a structural issue which was never resolved.

Apart from the necessary uncompensated labor given to the common account at the expense of developing your own, one of the houses institutionalized additional work requirements to produce for a YouTube channel. However, the house did not offer its workers any fruits of their labor, as the monetization from the channel was appropriated by the founder and allegedly reinvested. The facility's members never made peace with that arrangement which became a powerful source of discontent. What appeared to be common for all the houses was that for some members, the lack of personal space became increasingly pressing with time, and they wanted to find some asylum to chill and recover. Interestingly, they needed to recuperate not so much from work but from other members with whom they were sort of trapped. They captured their experience using words like “the dormitory” and “a roommate”. TikTokers — from two analyzed houses — shared rooms with one another for a prolonged period, sometimes two or three people inhabiting one place. This infrastructural arrangement and demands of the attention

economy — that drives social media platforms — to stage, perform, and ultimately capitalize on social connections effectively assisted labor reterritorialization.

Listening to my study participants, I could not help but think that two of three houses had been slowly deteriorating for some time before the full-fledged Russian invasion, and the idea of a TikTok house as an enterprise worth pursuing was crumbling. However, as the experience of twelve months of the full-fledged war has shown, the demise of TikTok houses did not entail the dissolution of marketing agencies once affiliated with them. They survived and kept operating, even nowadays. More so, the idea that agencies are the way to go in the future seemed to gain a stronger hold among founders. Initially, I conceived the houses as the pinnacle of the process, but, while working on the thesis, it became clear that they constituted just a part, however important, of the larger dynamics. And the influencer advertising agencies played an integral role in it. Nonetheless, the dynamics of labor de- and reterritorialization cannot be exhaustively explained by the workings of one facility, even if of integral importance. What should be put into the analytical spotlight is the whole field of influencer marketing. That suggests a possibility for an inquiry. As of now, TikTok houses seem to be a thing of the past.

Before closing, I feel like there is one covert tension that has been driving my own work. Despite my study participants' articulated reluctance to return to houses, they all feel thankful for their projects; some TikTokers, in fact, recollect that period as "the happiest time in life" (Olena, personal interview). Influencers I have talked to — even the most disillusioned ones — imbued all the interviews with a feeling of gratitude which constituted a meaningful opposition to my own rather grim observations of the labor process in a reterritorialized workplace for enhanced digital production. Their overarching, deep sense of fulfillment seemed to be rooted precisely in the emotional connections, communal bonds, the feeling of professional self-realization, and the growing self-worth occurring within the built environment of the house. That is why this gratifying experience is very

hard, if possible, to disentangle from the infrastructure that simultaneously makes it possible and ruthlessly exploits it. And while my study participants may lack the perspective to embed it into a broader functioning of digital capital, I certainly at times failed to recognize that behind what I called “their labor” hid what they called “their lives”.

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