Interview with
Antonio Casilli

Waiting for robots
[En attendant les robots]

This interview was carried out by AOC
in partnership with the French Institute (Paris)

texte tekst

Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

It began with a two-centuries-old, regularly recurring debate, about technological progress and its consequences for the "end of labour". Today, this discourse revolves around the rise of artificial intelligence. No matter how little one understands the concrete conditions in which algorithms and machine learning systems are developed, we all grasp the sheer magnitude of the data feeding it. However, this data is itself produced by human labour, overseen and coordinated via digital platforms: the average Google or Facebook user, Deliveroo couriers, and Uber drivers. "Microworkers": those internet day labourers hired for a few cents an hour by global companies, who carry out the so simple, yet so fundamental tasks of entering and sorting the data used by the algorithms. The forms of globalised exploitation, and the vulnerable working conditions generated by this "digital" labour (from the latin digitus; the finger that clicks on the mouse, or taps on the smartphone), are far more immediate threats than the reactionary fantasy of a "great replacement" of workers by machines.

What was your writing process?

The subject almost chose itself. The link between work and technology is a common thread of my research: as much when considering the Italian "post-operaismo" of the 1990s and 2000s, as for the controversy surrounding "digital labour" in France, which I set off with my book What is Digital Labour? [Qu'est-ce que le digital labor ?] (INA, 2015). And then the perfect excuse for writing this book came thanks to the French academic ritual of the

'accreditation to supervise research'. At a certain stage in their career, researchers are invited to present their body of work, as well as new paths for future research, which is then assessed by a jury of colleagues. So throughout 2018 I composed a first draft over 600 pages long, which was evaluated, amended, and expanded on by my colleagues and collaborators. I then reworked the text to include their suggestions, make it more readable, and better structure the argument of the book, cutting it down to 400 pages.

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

In my book, I seek to unpack the misconception that, in the future, intelligence and autonomy will be the sole purview of technological artefacts. At the foundations of this text is a profoundly humanist message, inviting us to give recognition to the humans who dream up and maintain these machines. But the book also carries a political message, taking a stand against the discriminations and inequalities that give excessive value to the work of IT engineers and designers, and denigrates that of the "cyber-proletariat". Like Godot (which the title of the book alludes to), robots are the bearers of a messianic promise, ever postponed, the purpose of which is less to bring universal prosperity than to discipline the workforce by foreclosing the idea of a world freed of harsh and coercive working conditions.