

How to Become War Machine, Or ... A Low Hactivist (Un)Methodology in Pieces

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, digital media and networks have been increasingly used to deploy dissent, opposition and resistance. More frequently, beyond traditional media as communicational tools, politically-oriented hacking subjectivities like ‘Anonymous’ employ media as weapons. However, a similar material deployment of media actions cannot be studied as a static, clearly definable ‘thing’ based on a representational order. These media actions, as well as their compositional relations, and the processes through which they are originated, are mostly ephemeral. Moreover, their deployment is always actualised in emergent and unstable contexts, within which the elements at stake – involving human and non-human components – are continuously in change, acting often beyond representation.

For this reason, I suggest a ‘low hactivist methodology in pieces’ as a theoretical and practical exercise of assemblage for recognising and dealing with similar criticalities without imposing any impossible objectivity. Inspired by Wark’s ‘low theory’ and Guattarian ecosophy, such a ‘scattered’ (un)methodology is conceived as a ‘method assemblage’ capable of activating, rather than framing, the virtual ‘lines of flight’ of the (problematized) objects of research. Within such assemblages, in fact, subject and object are critically put into question, allowing new methodological strategies to deal with hactivist media actions. Becoming ‘war machine’ is a temporary and fragmented attempt to ‘machinise’ with the forces populating hactivist media assemblages. Here, an ontological reframing is needed: a confrontation with humanist paradigms that enables, as a critical circuit, the blossoming of theory from the same actions at stake.

KEYWORDS

Hactivism; Low Theory; Media Ecologies; Method Assemblage; Post-Humanities

‘A “method” is the striated space of the *cogitatio universalis* and draws a path that must be followed from one point to another. But the form of exteriority situates thought in a smooth space that it must occupy without counting, and for which there is no possible method, no conceivable reproduction, but only relays, intermezzos, resurgences. (...) The problem of the war machine is that of relaying, even with modest means, not that of the architectonic model or the monument. An ambulant people of relayers, rather than a model society’.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 377)

‘Viénet wanted critique to détourn new forms, including comics, chick lit, cinema, pirate radio, porn. He thought every Situationist should be able to make films. One could translate that today to mean that the low theorist should know not only how to détourn some Hegel but also some code, or should at least be able to throw up a decent website or viral video’.

(Wark 2011, 156)

Preliminary notes (avoiding an introduction)

Media actions such as those actualised under the Anonymous moniker are not exact, clearly definable ‘things’. These actions, as well as their composing relations, and the processes through which they are originated, are mostly ephemeral and consequently hard to grasp, ontologically speaking. In addition, their deployment is always actualised in emergent and unstable contexts, into which the elements at stake – involving human and non-human components – are continuously in flux.

The studies that are focused directly on forms of employing networked media for political resistance have been often unable to recognise this instability, and are equally incapable of dealing with it. In particular, studies on ‘hacktivism’ attempted to unfold and frame networked media actions as ‘standard’ social phenomena or as fixed politically-oriented subcultural traits. The result is often that media actions fall into the background, in favour of a ‘technologised’ activism, or a politicised ‘hacking’ (Di Corinto and Tozzi 2002; Jordan and Taylor 2004).¹

Such results are due to the methodologies followed to approach these computing media actions. These methods are usually very ‘traditional’ and often centred uniquely on the ‘anthropos’, human or ‘social’ component(s) involved. This anthropocentrism depends on the ontological context fostering these methods, which in accordance with modern western tradition favours static ‘things’, humanist views and their prosthetic relations, rather than dynamic ‘realities’ and interrelations, imposing *being* on *becoming*. Such methodologies

¹ Di Corinto and Tozzi (2002) and Jordan and Taylor’s (2004) studies have been the first two extensive academic studies directed to identify and conceptualise ‘hacktivism’ as an emerging form of political resistance that is actualised through digital media and networks. Both are a valuable reference to understand the novelty of media actions and practices that link the application of countercultural attitudes to political activism. However, such studies are unable to posit the attention beyond an objectified relation of the media processes at stake. The result is a foreclosing of the political potentials of deploying digital media and networks, which does not grasp the capacity of creating novel material relations beyond the strict representational order of communication. Such objectified perspective equally informs more recent attempts to study phenomena of ‘hacktivism’: Sauter (2014) and Coleman (2014) are – even though by having different objectives and approaches – in this sense symptomatic of the limits of invoking a politics of representation that is based on the instrumental relation between media and their cultural substrates.

suggest a view of media as instrumental tools for the human-animal, outlining culture as the human outcome of this functional relation.

Following the path opened up by alternative perspectives on studying media and culture, my aim is to introduce the possibility of a more ‘creational’ methodology, which can be capable of confronting the media actions at stake with a novel critical compass. This involves a broader critical reflection in terms of rethinking media and mediation beyond the strictly classical tradition. In fact, according to William J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (2010, ii), media studies remain an “amorphous enterprise”, despite their ‘canonical’ institutionalisation. Media studies are an open space where novel critical perspectives are currently flourishing, allowing the reconceptualisation of the technological object, and of mediation, as a broader and not exclusively human ‘communicational’ process. Therefore, such a rethinking must also necessarily involve the methodological approach to these issues, thereby showing the impossibility of an enlightened exteriority from the same processes at stake: an objectified exteriorisation that characterises representationalism (Van Der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010).

In recent years, novel ways of rethinking media have emerged, alongside more traditional approaches which customarily consider media as merely ‘neutral’, ‘middle’ tools for representing and/or communicating human culture.² Among these approaches, I follow the insights of media ecologies. This is a way of rethinking media useful to exploring the material components that interrelate within processes of mediation, as well as the processual conditions in which this mediation occurs. Moreover, this theoretical perspective reaffirms the political possibilities for practices involving media, because of their significant position in the production of human subjectivity.

Matthew Fuller (2005) sketched and applied an ecological approach to media, using several case studies. The concept of ‘ecology’ (or better ecologies) in relation to media eloquently expresses the “massive and dynamic interrelation of process and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter” (Fuller 2005: 2). In opposition to a tendency to overemphasise the immateriality of mediation – especially in several contemporary studies on digital phenomena – Fuller seeks to stress the materiality of media ecological interrelations. His use of the term ‘ecologies’ underlines the need to avoid dismissing the material constituencies of media: servers, cables, bodies, practices etc. However, this has to be done without diminishing the relevancy of processes, diagrams, connections, affects etc. – which are perhaps ‘less’ tangible, but not less material elements of mediation. Thus, to deal with media from an ecological perspective as proposed by Fuller (Ibid.) means to equally consider both these essential aspects of mediation, and to explore them in the processuality of ecological interrelations.³

² The most subtle and powerful expression of media as middle tools for representing human culture are the prosthetic assumptions of Marshal McLuhan (1964), whose famous slogan ‘the medium is the message’ well crystallises how media studies have been for long time more interested in the structural study of meanings rather than in the relations that processes of mediation could imply.

³ Following the history of the various uses and applications of the term ‘ecology’ in relation to media, Fuller (Ibid.) recognises a crucial difference as regards understanding media ecologies. Distancing an *ecological* approach to media from an *environmentalist* one permits a distinction from the latter, academically-well recognised, post-McLuhanite tradition of media ecology (in the singular form) (see also Stephens 2014). In fact, environmentalism supports a humanist vision of the environment, one in which sustainability occupies a pivotal position by making the ecology of the milieu safe first and foremost for the human-animal. Here a supposed equilibrium can always be reached, guaranteeing a balanced state “with some ingenious and beneficent mix of media” (Fuller 2005: 4). In contrast, ecologists treat the environment via its systematic dynamicity, considering each part in multiple and singular connections, “such that it can be regarded as a pattern, rather than simply as an object” (Ibid.).

Media ecologies have a key reference in the perspectives opened by the eco-philosophical work of Félix Guattari (1991; 1995a; 1995b; 2000). Media ecologies do not work analogically to describe the relationality of processes of mediation. Ecological are the ‘sticky’ relations into which media and the studies of mediation are both entangled. With media ecologies, it is not simply the case of applying a different way of looking about media objects, but the recognition of the presence of inescapable molecular relations.

Guattarian *ecosophy* involves an ontological reframing based on the ‘machine’, which needs to be implied to advance a novel post-human approach to ‘media actions’ (such as the hacktivist ones of Anonymous), and the ‘practices’ involved in their actualisation. Before discussing this ‘machinic’, ontological reframing, I will introduce a more speculative ground, able to recover hacktivism as part of an active circuit to break the distinction between theory and practice. These are assumptions offered by the studies of McKenzie Wark (2011; 2012; 2013), and especially his suggestion of *low theory* as a way to look for novel theoretical references to deal with contemporary forms of mediation.

On the one hand, the flowing nature of media ‘actions of resistance’ can be approached via static and more ‘traditional’ approaches. However, these can easily lead to standard descriptions, which are often unable to analyse the unstable challenges at stake. At worst, these can be a symptom of a sort of neglectful resignation, unconsciously assuming a fatalist surrender to the apparent impossibility of confronting such mediated ephemerality. On the other hand, I would like to read this instability as a possibility – an opportunity to develop more useful methodological strategies to deal with ineffable cultural processes and media ‘interventions’. This is a departure point from previous approaches to hacktivism, which seeks to avoid the attempts to frame and limit multifarious media actions of resistance; on the contrary, it relates to them, seeking the possibility to become ‘machine’ with them. My proposal is for a *low hacktivist (un)methodology, which attempts to machinically assemble with the media actions that are deployed in contemporary network ecologies*.

Firstly, I am going to introduce the concept of low theory in the next section. This sets the stage for introducing ‘hacktivism’ as a set of disruptive media practices and actions in need of a peculiar theory – activating a possible theoretical and practical ‘breaking circuit’. Secondly, I am going to theoretically question the necessity for a method that can follow such a strategy. Finally, an ontological discussion of ‘machinism’ will be briefly outlined, to epistemologically strengthen the proposed method and explain the possibility for this to relate to, rather than frame via humanist readings, hacktivist media actions of resistance.

Secondary notes: a heretic low theory of hacktivism

In a banal sense, the notion of ‘hacktivism’ emerged as a trendy journalistic portmanteau to describe a sort of ‘mutant’ union of the hacker with the activist. The result is the *hacktivist*, a strange postmodern ‘creature’. Such a form of political media interventionism has been described by journalists and academics as the consequence of the merging of the unorthodox mastery of computer skills with a political propensity for social change.⁴ To introduce here my first point, hacktivism will be read from two different positions, which are based on the

⁴ I am not referring here to specific writings in particular. The merging of the hacker community and of the activist one into hacktivism is the implicit and recurring argument in the academic studies on the subject; see for instance Jordan and Taylor (2004); Taylor (2001; 2004; 2005).

concept of low theory, as this is intended by McKenzie Wark (2011; 2014). Low theory is a speculative theory that does not aim at recognition but to challenge, a theoretical instance that questions the superiority of an institutionalised ‘High’ reasoning via experimentality and creative origination. More significantly, low theory can be extracted also from fields often marginalised by academic studies – as it can be, for example, through the futuristic speculations of science fiction.

From a ‘High’ perspective, hacktivism can be conceived as the assembled coupling of the wasp and the orchid (Guattari 2011; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), while from a ‘low’ one as the “conceptual games” pathologically and obsessively pondered by Travers and Dr. Nathan in James G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (2001).

The inter-realm coupling between the wasp and the orchid is the favourite case for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to consider the rhizomatic ‘lines of flight’ opened by the ‘machinic assemblage’ of these two. It is reductionist to regard the wasp/orchid relation as a simple, reciprocal pollination and food relationship. Elements of pleasure involve the wasp in the gesture of flying but, more importantly, this “attachment between two heterogeneous worlds” produces a “new surplus-value of code (...) that exceeds the simple totalisation of the involved encodings” (Guattari 2011, 122). What emerges is a novel ensemble (a machinic assemblage), that originates an unpredictable evolutionary path, following rhizomatic, non-linear ‘lines of flight’ – virtual, and unpredictable lines of escape (*lignes de fuite*). The encounter between the wasp and the orchid is “an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10).

Pushing forward the wasp/orchid assemblage, it is possible to consider the encounter between heterogeneous entities on a lower – more speculative – plane, through the fragmented visions of James G. Ballard’s novel (2001).⁵ In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, assemblages of mediated images are falsely organised in hierarchic numberings, opening a proliferating series of overlapping relations without possible ends. The fragmented writing assumes the form of dense and ironic segments, portraying the rhythms of the techno-hypertrophy of post-industrial societies. Ballard explores this hypertrophic condition that annihilates the receptive capabilities of subjectivity, within a continual affective exchange between it and the mediated urban landscape, leading to the fractal explosion of Travers-Travis-Trabert (the non-protagonist). Employing a Deleuzian and Guattarian vocabulary, here, the lines of flight are extremely deterritorialised, introducing the ecological continuity of a process of reterritorialisation without end, the culminating point of the digital rhizome. Any pleasure is suffocated by over-communication, while evolutionary lines fall into a pathological cybernetic loop – a hyper-calcified Guattarian refrain, a repetitive recurrence that obstructs subjectivation.⁶

⁵ I use the word ‘plane’ in its geometrical meaning. This word comes from Latin; *planum* (plain) was in fact used to describe the flatness of surfaces: this was a term central in Euclidean geometry until seventeenth century. Conversely, from eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with differential geometry the French term *plan* (plane) assumed centrality to describe the reflections that led to differential topology. This field of mathematics, where notions such as the ‘smooth structures’ find place, is centrally at stake in the conceptual elaborations of Deleuze and Guattari. Concepts such as multiplicity or smooth space directly confront with the relativity introduced in mathematics by differential topology; see Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Positioning ‘low’ and ‘High’ theories within such a geometrical space allows to avoiding an opposition between the two that would be based on a hierarchic dualism.

⁶ I employ the concept of subjectivation, rather than the one of subjectivity, following the studies of Guattari. Guattari never thought of subjectivity as a structural psychological element of the individual. He, in fact, developed a

From such a speculative vision, hacking and activism are constituent parts of hacktivism, but in processes of proliferating heterogeneity, as in the degenerations of Travers. It is, then, by developing from the heterogeneity of resistant media actions, that hacktivism can be theorised at a *low plane*: the ignored, denied and unrecognised plane, the one through which hacktivism can be recovered with its heretical heterogeneity as what McKenzie Wark (2012) defines *low theory*.⁷ A theory that, opposed to High Theory, plays in the margins, untimely and speculative, standing outside academic recognition, but ready to be reactivated towards novel criticalities.

‘As opposed to High Theory, low theory does not necessarily play the game of quantifiable recognition within the academy. It experiments instead with the creation of new relations between practices and modes of communication. It may pass through the worlds of scholarship, journalism, politics, aesthetics, and literature, but it is not bound by the rules of any of these. It makes up its own’ (Wark 2012, 206).

Low theory is the opportunity for a critical thought that escapes the institutionalisation of High Theory (Wark 2011). It is always heretical, since it is excommunicated from the grand thoughts that lead, through a cascade effect, to the main interpretations and philosophical speculations of a certain time (see also Wark 2013). Rethinking hacktivism as a low theory of resistance for network ecologies means reactivating it as a critical speculation that follows – on the contrary – bottom-up peripheral routes into which experimental networked media practices can play a significant heretical, practical and theoretical role. Low theory is “dedicated to the practice that is critique and the critique that is practice” (Wark 2011, 3). In this sense, low theory is immanent, since it problematises critical distance as usually understood.

More broadly, in my attempt, hacktivist resistances aspire to be activated through a *low theorising* that concerns all the planes of reasoning. Such a way of conceiving worth is endeavour to the specific reactivation of Letterist and Situationist Internationals, followed by Wark (2011). This is a re-enabling of the vanguards’ practices and demands in the current situation, through one of the most famous slogans of May 1968: ‘*Sous les pavés, la plage*’ (Beneath the street, the beach). These vanguards – in the words of Wark (2011: 17) – were, in fact, “the other side to the spectacle of bohemia, its delinquent side, its marginal side”. Similarly, the hacktivist, more than the hacker or the activist, can be studied as the excommunicant of contemporary network culture: the marginal noisemaker, banned from democratic discourses on how to manifest dissent, and criminalised for her/his irreverent and disdainful on-line behaviour.

Crucially, those international organisations of avant-garde artists, intellectuals and political ‘makers’ were able to translate their collective marginality into a “low theory specific” to this, with its own peculiar critical practices (Ibid.). However, at the end of their collective imagination, such specificity turned against itself, paradoxically, through excommunications

theory and practice where subjectivation is posited as a process, a way of ‘producing’ the subjectivity of an individual. This choice was directed to emphasise subjectivation over subjectivity, with the aim of stressing – for theoretical and practical reasons – the emergent and multiple elements involving such a process.

⁷ To define micro-political, networked media actions such as those ‘deployed’ by Anonymous in their relation with situated media practices, I develop the ‘plural’ concept of *hacktions*. Hacktions, as hacktivist media actions of political resistance, are discussed in full in my doctoral thesis, which will be defended at the University of Lincoln. I develop such a concept to processually involve hacking media practices (in particular the hack) and relate this to a potential ecological disruption with ethico-political consequences.

and expulsions, and then led to sectarian positions and the undermining of their political subversive way of acting. From the perspective opened here, a low theory of hacktivism can, then, occupy the position of the heresy of digital cultures – too radical for customary hackers, too geeky for conventional activists – by directly germinating from active media practices and their multiple, networked actualisations: hacktivist media actions of resistance.

So, low theory offers the ground for a more speculative theoretical ‘circuit’, where theory can be inspired also by ideas and practices laying outside academic recognition. Here, hacktivism can be rethought, recouped or better recycled as a resistant low theory, through a do-it-yourself crafting approach that, inspired by the hacker culture, permits media actions to be an active part and not a mere object of study. The suggestions of low theory allow a disruptive method for disruptive media actions: a theoretical and practical methodological creation that does not frame and impose its own humanist rationality. Rather, it allows the flow of the virtual lines of flight that would be possibly originated by encountering and becoming with the actions in question. The discussion of this methodological strategy is the argument of the next section.

Questions on method: or how to practically assemble it

John Law (2004) has studied the limits existent within defined, stable and traditional methodologies in the field of humanities. Law engages directly with relevant questions that are closely concerned with objects of study such as hacktivist media actions of resistance. Within his innovative and deep study of researching methods, Law (2004, 2) asks very explicitly: “How might method deal with mess?”

This is a question that involves a broader issue on how to study and approach phenomena that are often “complex, diffuse and messy”, in the field of academic research (Ibid.). When confronting such ‘objects’ it is necessary to be deeply reflexive about the modalities of thinking about method. Here, what is implicated is the methodological answer to a set of phenomena that are ineffable, hard to grasp and frequently hard to systematise together.

Law does not suggest the complete dismissal of traditional methods, since humanities have based their excellence as a set of disciplines on these (Ibid.). However, he notices how often these more ‘traditional’ methodologies are incapable of coping with an increasingly complicated reality. In this sense ‘reality’ has to be regarded as a kaleidoscope, one which has been made more complex by ontological assumptions about the relevance of processes, relations, interactions, emotions and feelings etc. Above all, this ‘reality’ is a complex entity, and it is further complicated by the burgeoning position of technical computational machines. In fact, computing machines operate in various fields – from economics to biology – frequently beyond direct human comprehension.

Furthermore, and in relation to this, Law asks how a coherent description is able to grasp something that is neither coherent nor linear, being conversely blurry and without sharply delineated outlines. As he suggests, even though standard methodologies are very fruitful when researching and studying standard objects and fixed realities, these methodologies do not lend themselves to being easily moulded and adapted to the study of ephemeral objects, and irregular and indefinite ‘realities’ (Ibid.).

Law argues that these difficulties directly concern the “normativities” of methodological discourses, which generally implicate both the subject and the object of academic studies (Ibid, 4-5). On the one hand, strict rules usually need to be followed by the observer, originating a procedure in which the methodology imposes itself on the researcher. Consequently, the description, or more frequently the production, of defined realities is moulded by the designed outlines. On the other hand, the object is also frequently limited by preconceived assumptions regarding the existence of stabilities and fixed invariants, a reality that lacks the qualities of repetition and recurrences. The outcome can be the circumscription and capturing in stable descriptions of variances and complexities, which produce results that are liable to be misconceived or not clearly grasped (Ibid, Chap. 2).

Finally, another “hygienic concern” that Law (2004, 34) recognises is what he calls “singularity”. This is still a widespread issue, followed by a very rigid preconception within the humanities, and more broadly in several other fields of academic research too. Singularity pertains to the presumed impossibility of achieving certain knowledge of a set of multiple processes, without following an exact and definite method. This calls into question the possibilities of dealing with unstable and perpetually in motion ‘objects’, acknowledging in particular that the objective of a study cannot be the comprehension of an ‘out-there’ reality, but rather a critical – practical and theoretical – ‘continuity’. In fact, this ‘out-there’ does not exist as a stable and fixed ‘stand-alone’ object, being incessantly produced by, and intertwined with, the practices and frameworks attempting to ‘discover’ and define it (Ibid.).⁸ Therefore, it is crucial to find a methodological strategy that already assumes the possibility of not seeking any kind of stability or fixed entity. This is a methodology that acknowledges the transient features involved, yet does not aspire to necessarily find more than a few unstable patterns. The necessity is for heterogeneity, in particular when a research study does not attempt to firmly define and limit the objects at the core of the study. Such an objective follows what can be considered as an ‘ethical’ choice.⁹ Such a choice involves ‘noological’ questions: a vital requirement to voluntarily avoid a shift from the “war machine” to the “apparatus of capture” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In fact,

‘each time [that] there is an operation against the State – insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act – it can be said that a war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared, accompanied by the reconstitution of a smooth space or a manner of being in space as though it were smooth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 386).

The *war machine* is a particular “assemblage”, “constructed along lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari in Deleuze 1995, 33). Its aim is not the war *stricto sensu*, but a particular “smooth space”, a minoritarian nomadic space (Ibid, part one; Deleuze and Guattari 1987).¹⁰

⁸ In relation to what stated about a reality that is increasingly complexified by novel assumptions and discoveries, it is possible to note that the point discussed here is a central one in quantum physics. Quantum mechanics, in fact, demonstrates how a studied ‘object’ will always lose its ‘conditions’, which are conversely modified by the relations that are originated from the practices attempting to study it.

⁹ Both Deleuze and Guattari, in their own work, deal with ethics in Spinozian terms. Hence, ethics involves the potency (power-to) of entities, their virtual potential: this is exactly where capture is at stake, in the attempt of anticipating and driving tendencies.

¹⁰ The function of war machines in primitive societies is at the core of the influential ethnographic studies of Pierre Clastres (1987; 2010). In particular, it is the opposition between the State machine and the war machine that informs the theoretical position of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). According to Clastres, in fact, the war machine allowed primitive societies to avoid social and political hierarchies, maintaining an indivisibility that is based on difference, against the totalising machine of the One – that is the State machine. For this reason it is possible to say that the aim of war machines is not simply the violence of war *per se*, rather the attempt to escape the unifying and fascist essence of the State. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) develop a thought that opposes the

The method that I propose has to theoretically ‘plug in’ and become continuous with the ‘hactivist war machine’, diagramming the peculiar assemblages into which this is formed.¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) described when the objective of the war machine becomes the war: this happens under the appropriating exercise of the *apparatus of capture*. The development of a critical methodology ethically attempts to avoid this, through a low theorising that opposes the reifying tentacles of the state-thought – precisely to avoid the capture of the ‘virtualities’ media actions can possibly originate.

Then, the greatest problem for a method is to face the ‘image of thought’ that produces it. This is a ‘noological’ question (is this image a rhizome-like one, which allows possible lines of flight, or a root-state form that blocks and over-codes the virtual escape of flows?). The state-form image of the apparatus of capture produces what Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 377) call the “striated space” of “*cogitatio universalis*”: a linear universal image that follows a rigid path “from one point to another”, imposing its supreme rationality. Here, a possible solution to avoiding the presumption of contrasting an image of thought with a new, ‘higher’ and universalist one can be found in a particular mode of methodologically operating suggested by John Law (2004). This is a partial neologism that creatively separates itself from ‘traditional’ ways of thinking about method, being able to *relate* itself to unstable realities, detecting and amplifying variations and complexities. “Method assemblage”, as Law calls it, does not “produce or demand neat, definite, and well-tailored accounts” (Law 2004, 14). Moreover, it is not engaged in such a way of proceeding, “precisely because the realities [it] stand[s] for are excessive and in flux, not themselves neat, definite, and simply organised”. “Method assemblage works in and ‘knows’ multiplicity, indefiniteness, and flux” (Ibid.).

The strategy of the method assemblage is a way of reflecting on a methodology of research that epistemologically recognises the blurriness and fluidities implicated in the process of research itself, and not only the media actions to which it aims to be entangled. This equally allows not to falling into the supreme rationality of the thought of the State. A method assemblage is beneficial in pointing out the feasibility of originally and actively shaping a methodology that is able to relate to the emerging messiness of media actions, and of the non-linear processes these implicate. In this way, the idea of method is not completely abandoned. It is reversed on itself through a practical exercise of assemblage, which concerns its theoretical devices, and can equally entangle the media actions it investigates.¹² Such a method can be fragmentally assembled, without imposing onto its objects. This allows practically (or materially) a ‘hactivist’ (un)methodology in pieces, which can be directly composed by a do-it-yourself, *crafting* operation, which follows a hacking-inspired attitude.¹³

rigidity of dialectics and its recursive movement from, and to, the One. This is the reason why they posit a ‘noological’ question, broadening Clastres’ argument towards what they call the ‘image of thought’.

¹¹ Within hacktivism media are deployed as weapons, which means that the assemblage they took part can be, a posteriori and in its emergence, recognised as a war machine. For this reason, hacktivist media resistances can be recognised as war machines, because of the lines of flight these are capable of virtually activating, in the ‘vectorialised’ space of ‘third nature’, via the heretical, unorthodox ‘deployment’ of media as weapons (about third nature and the central position of vectors in mediated ecologies, see Wark 2012). There is no space here to deal with this fully, but this definition moves from the spectacular visibility through which Coleman (2012) defines the politics of Anonymous as ‘weapons of the geek’. Therefore, for the rest of the piece, I am going to already assume that hacktivist ones can be read as war machines (again, as ephemeral machinic assemblages which aim is to avoid the shift towards the State form, and not the war) – even if the reasoning to reach this point is not fully developed in this piece.

¹² The practical exercise of assembling the method by connecting various theoretical devices is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹³ Hacking, and in particular the hack, can be pushed beyond its conceptual boundaries towards media actions as ‘hacktions’. Such a conceptualisation allows a ‘deterritorialised’ definition of resistance that is able to deal with

The concept of ‘method assemblage’ is directly entangled with the Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical machine, implicitly offering the possibility of activating and/or crafting a specific ‘unstable’ methodology. Such a ‘hands-on’ methodological practice fosters a heterogeneous character that attempts to avoid an enlightened exteriority. For this reason, this (un)methodological strategy (which finds inspiration in post-structuralism) has to be arranged within the neo-materialist breaking of the humanist tradition. The strategy of the method assemblage shares, in fact, with new materialist ontologies the contention of humanist transcendental superiority over an objectified, ‘inert’ matter. Rather, it suggests a more complex interactive agential cultural analysis (Braidotti 2002; 2006; 2014; Barad 2007; De Landa 1997; 2006). Especially, the (un)methodological practice has to attempt the circumvention of ‘representationalism’, which often recursively re-emerges also in post-structural theorisations (Van Der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010). This circumvention is offered by the concept of the ‘machine’, and by the ontological shift it implies, which will be discussed in the next section.

Therefore, to conclude, I am going to sketch the ontological framework into which the undertaken practical and theoretical strategy involving the method is articulated. This ontology, in fact, embraces from the outside the introduced methodological reflections, relating to the method and opening this to the range of theoretical devices useful for its assembling. However, it is problematic for an ontological assumption to be posited as a foundation, because this will create an epistemological hierarchy (which comes first: the ontology or the epistemological knowledge on which it is based?). Here, to avoid such a “vicious circle”, Manuel De Landa (2009, 27) proves to be of great assistance. The “bootstrapping of an ontology” – he suggests – means to ‘launch’ an ontological reflection, as in computation a software is launched on a hardware (Ibid.). In this way, a realist ontology, such as the one I am going to outline, “may be lifted by its own bootstraps by assuming a minimum of objective knowledge to get the process going” (De Landa 2009, 27-28).

Machine, machinism, machinic... ‘bootstrapping’ the ontological framework

The concept of the method assemblage follows a ‘machinic’ logic, a practical application that allows the active involvement of hacktivist media actions rather than imposing on these. This method implies an ontological realism, a broader *machinic ontology*, which needs to be activated, or better – as said – bootstrapped. The machinic phylum or machinic ontology, from here ‘machinism’, is developed throughout all the work of Félix Guattari (1995a; 1995b; 2011; 2013), but several lines are equally outlined in his work with Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari 1977; 1986; 1987; see also Deleuze and Parnet 1987; and Deleuze and Guattari in Guattari 2009). Unfortunately, dealing fully with all the aspects of Guattarian ontology is beyond the scope of this study. However, many scholars have studied this aspect of the work

the immanent processuality of my argument. I am not discussing here hacking as a practice. However, the reference to crafting and DIY is to be intended as part of a broader argument that involves media ecologies and archaeologies, and the emphasis of such approaches on materiality (Fuller 2005; Parikka 2012). I define hacking as an applied material practice that implies points of abstraction. This opposes humanist-inspired theories on hacking that wants it as a set of cultural variables to characterise restricted social groups. Rather, the collapse of the false division between nature and culture suggests to us the impossibility of such a strict characterisation, allowing the recognition of hacking beyond the actuality of computing technologies. Similarly, the reference to the ‘pieces’ has to be also intended in relation to the central position of materiality for hacking. Since hacking implies experimental knowledge and material application, theoretical devices can be connected as various pieces; the result is a sort of theoretical constructivism to practically forming the ‘scattered’ methodology that is the argument of this piece.

of Guattari (see Berardi, 1997; 2008; Genosko, 1996; 2002; 2009; Lazzarato, 2006; 2008; 2014; Raunig, 2008).

I am going to sketch some points of this realist ontology. In fact, thinking machinically allows the ontological recognition of the ephemeral and heterogeneous emergent assemblages that arrange ‘resistant’ media actions. Moreover, machinism permits the practical creation of the method (because this is based on the concept of machinic assemblage), but especially the post-human attempt of becoming with, rather than framing, ‘hactivist war-machines’. A machinic thought cannot be posited within the methodological reflection, it circumscribes this. So, for a thought to become war machine and avoid the state-form, it has to follow a certain ‘externality’. This means the ontological reframing is a kind of ‘counter-thought’ that fosters the method and its conception, smoothing it from the inside, while externally relating it to media actions – practically activating the circuit break I suggest. Furthermore, here, I am not following any attempt to systematise the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the machinic assemblage in a specific theory, such as the one developed by De Landa (2006). In fact, Deleuze and Guattari voluntarily leave the theorisation of the machinic assemblage in a fragmented state because of their decisive attempt at breaking with modernist, universalist epistemologies.

Very briefly, machinism is a process-relational ontology that implicates chaos and complexity theories; it is composed of different thresholds of intensity which can be defined and observed within scalar systems. However, despite its possible description, it remains difficult to arrive at a clear ‘definition’. Machinism is a way of rethinking the technological beyond the philosophical tradition that spans Aristotle to Heidegger. Moreover, it is also a way of profoundly questioning ontological homogeneity. In addition, it is a diagrammatic theory and method that Guattari developed to create positive and functional practice in his work on ‘schizo-analysis’ at La Borde clinic.

What is worth highlighting is that this is not a linear way of dealing with the ‘machine’, which is a concept used in deliberately and intentionally ambiguous terms by Guattari (and Deleuze). Here, the technical machine begins to be rethought as underdetermined by a broader thematic and terminology. One of the premises of Guattari’s intentions regarding the machine and, more broadly, how his ontological reflection can be read as ‘machinism’, relates to the rethinking of the classical ‘prosthetic’ scheme of the object-tool. This in Guattarian work is carried out by the ontological reversal of the traditional view of the relationship between technics and machines: a key point for post-human studies of culture, since this allows a repositioning of media objects. In fact, these can be rethought as directly constituted within, and in relation to, broader assemblages.

To be clearer, in the philosophical tradition, firstly one thinks of the problem of technics, and then subsequently of the machine. Guattari suggests turning this perspective around. Within machinism, as regards the machine, the questioning of techne becomes the subsequent one. The machine should not to be regarded as an expression of techne; on the contrary, it should be viewed as an antecedent to this: “The machine becomes preliminary to technics rather than being its expression” (1995b; *transl. mine from the French edition, 1992*). This is a crucial assumption in detaching technology from a static ontological ground and its constituency from a strictly humanist perspective, opening its multiple and diagrammatical emerging character towards a broader context of existence.¹⁴

¹⁴ A similar point, in a machinic reading, also allows superseding a ‘false’ dualism traditionally central within media and cultural studies. This is the dualism between cultural and technological determinisms, which has

The machine does not regard the resemblances existent between human-animals, non-human ones and technological objects. It deals instead with the ensemble in which these, together with their milieu, are captured and/or 'enslaved' within specific processual conditions and relations. Machinism disproves the 'classical scheme' of the tool as an extension of the human being. This is an assumption broken by processes of *territoriality*, *deterritorialisation* and *reterritorialisation*. In fact, according to such processes, each machinic component is processually involved to unstably forming an emergent ensemble together with the other components.

These terms are all correlative, and are conceived in relation to the broader thematic of the territory. It is not possible here to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of the territory, nor the wide use of the lines of flight into which this is opened up, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. However, it is important to understand the processes through which a territory can be caught and the subsequent eventual re-composition of this. In particular, it is worth noting that the recognition of similar forces emerges within the arrangement of the machine. The machine breaks with the prosthetic assumption of the subject-object relation between the human-animal and his/her tool; and it does this rupture through the recognition of the processes involving the territory. Within machines, materials are deterritorialised to form novel 'matters', but these do not enter in prosthetic relations with a supposed subject. Both reterritorialise in novel ensembles, in machinic compositions that conceptually assume the failure of the humanist separation, conversely recognising, on the contrary, the relationality and the processuality of a common movement (deterritorialisation).

Moreover, machinism is oriented towards alterity and externality, guaranteeing relations 'in becoming' with multiple components and subjectivities. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1977) the idea of a 'desiring-machine' is introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, suggesting the recognition of 'desire' as an immanent productive force. Deleuze and Guattari (1977) contrast the machine with the structure as being two different regimes of coping with desire. The immanent molecular contingencies of the encounter between parts of the machine contrast with the stability and continuity of the molar structure. Machinic production and motion are counterposed to structural meaning and representation. In particular, the desiring machine finds its contingency with the flows that traverse it, as well as the cuts it is capable of operating on these.

The Deleuzo-Guattarian 'machine' is part of a broader way of philosophical enquiry that deals directly with processes and relations. Process-relational ontology is a very old, 'pre-modern', way of thinking, which can be found in non-western thoughts (for instance in Buddhism). Even though such a way of thinking about the centrality of processes and relations cannot be read as a homogeneous grouping, it can be introduced by a very strong opposition between *being* and *becoming*. In fact, rather than considering the world as a set of static 'things', process-relational ontology stresses the dynamism of movement and processes that constantly occur throughout life. This realist ontological plane is posited on relational encounters and events, avoiding permanent structures, as well as idealist or transcendent essences.

characterised the discipline for a long time, involving the questioning of the relations and original influences between culture/society and technology. The reversal of the technological machine within a broader abstract machine nullifies the question by superseding this through a co-determinism into which technological and cultural/social machines co-emerge and constantly influence reciprocally. Machinism reaches points to supersede determinisms that are similar to Stiegler's (2012) discussion of technology via processes of individuation. Deleuze and Guattari equally find inspiration in the work of Simondon (1989) – even if this is not always an explicit reference in their writings.

In machinic ontology, *becoming* is not a *being* that moves, or that shifts from a point to another. These points are just anchors and becoming happens ‘in the middle’: a becoming is the virtual ‘line of flight’ that the suggested post-human method aims to relate to rather than frame. Becoming deals directly with the potency of affection. It involves two or more terms, yet cannot be identified within these; it is neither a subject nor an object that becomes, but both can be caught in a becoming. Becoming is a process of affection, of intensive transformation, that directly deals with a relation or, in Spinozian terms, ‘to affect or being affected’. For Guattari, it is precisely affects that are at stake in machinism, which cannot find its ground in scientific explanations, proofs or mathematical calculations. It is, in fact, through affects that diverse components can intensively enter in novel sets of relations, enabling the formation of new machinic ensembles.

Therefore, in such a realist ontology, the subject and the object do not exist as such as pre-given entities. These both arise mutually, within processes of co-emergence. Rather than assuming them to be different poles of existence from which analysis can start, as classic phenomenology does, a relational ontology attempts to supersede this anthropocentric dichotomy. Subjects and objects are constituted in the mutuality of their relations, relations composed of a myriad of in-between states within which continual negotiations occur.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) and in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), the relational ontology of the machine is re-articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in the concept of the ‘machinic assemblage’. This is a concept matured to recharge the heterogeneous elements of the emerging ensembles with a certain agency, and underline the systemic abstract machinic plane through which specific assemblages can be mapped. ‘Assemblage’ is the English translation for *agencement*, and, according to John Phillips (2006, 109), it is a ‘composite’ concept that is indivisible from the wider ontology of the Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptual machine. Therefore, it is worth noting that the concept of the assemblage also ‘assembles’ with the broader conceptual universe of Deleuze and Guattari – it is indivisible, rather than separated from this universe. For this reason, the attempt to define *an* assemblage theory fails by being systematised in the exact boundaries it implicitly refuses.

More accurately, assemblages are conceived to emphasise the set of connections that exist between heterogeneous elements (bodies, expressions, objects etc.), which momentarily come together, originating novel functions in ensemble. This concept can appear very similar to that of the ‘machine’. In fact, the assemblage *is always* machinic, and it operates through the connective lines of flight already introduced. In addition, this machinic dimension underlines the absence of a precise location for the setting of an assemblage, while stressing on the contrary the productive character of it as well as its ‘external’ diagrammatisation. It is this machinic quality of the assemblage that allows the formation of temporary relations, which arrange the various elements within it. Such a machinic becoming guarantees possible and unstable outputs for the proposed creative (un)methodology: research practices that might be originally invented case by case, moving as kinetic diagrams; cartographies that are capable of mapping the emergence of certain assemblages.

Open conclusions: how to become war machine... with media actions

Having highlighted the essential features of machinic assemblages enables us to observe and study networked mediated actions under a novel light. For a method assemblage, like the one

proposed, is crucial to move within the path I discussed, to become war machine with media actions, rather than separating and imposing a humanist, enlightened exteriority on these. This can allow speculatively positing hacktivism as a set of heretic media actions and practices within a sort of circuit that creates its own low theory. Hence, when micro-political lines of flight are triggered, these ephemeral hacktivist media actions can be equally re-conceived as disruptive ‘war machines’, which emerge in multiple forms through the assemblages composed of heterogeneous, unstable component parts. Moreover, such a methodological proposal can guarantee to critically question traditional approaches in the humanities (especially in media and cultural studies), suggesting a post-human, ontological reframing that vitally reflects on the non-representational relations between human-animals and technologies – reconstituting the false division between nature and culture.

Finally, moving within the assemblage and its machinic ontological ground enables us to underline the terms through which the method is assembled. Even though in some cases such a method can look quite ‘static’ (as for instance it is the dimension of writing), it can still follow its ephemeral and temporary nature. This is the case of a hacktivist (un) methodology that is roughly related to the mediated actions with which it will try to be machine. The machinic thought, which stimulates and originates the specific assemblages of this suggested methodological strategy, moves within the delineated ontological rethinking and its implicit critique of static totalities. Therefore, a similar methodology does not give up applying linear readings of contemporary cultural phenomena (such as the hacktivist networked media ‘resistances’ of Anonymous and the entailed political subjectivities). On the contrary, it takes advantage of the ineffable and widespread nature of these phenomena, to reinvent itself and open novel practical and theoretical strategies for digital post-humanities.

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