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Operative: smart phone – Tactics of the vigorously opposing thumb

2015

It's late at night, 1:34 a.m. Eastern Time, to be precise, and I can't sleep. That's not surprising as it's 82 °F and 81% humidity. The fan is going, but it just spins around the thick air and brings no relief. Though to be honest, it's not the heat that holds sleep in abeyance. An iPhone 5 screen's brightness exceeding 40 lumens at a distance of just a few centimetres inhibits melatonin production, and so the natural sleep hormone deficiency means that although traditionally reading was a sure-fire way to send me off, 1 page max, I keep that phone screen glowing, surreptitiously stroking the screen. I suppose it's not exactly reading that I'm doing, since after a few lines, no matter how interesting the post or article might have been, my thumb gets impatient and needs to stroke that glass again propelling my brain from content to content, on and on and on and on. I google this cultural memory of *tossing around in sweaty sheets in small Brooklyn room*.

Romanticising my current state: I don't even toss, my body is held in extended suspense while that thumb moves frantically. Obsessive caressing! Not too proud at my revelation that what I tell my motor functions to do is to caress, to care and calm, to incessantly stroke *something* better. I am beyond exhaustion and yet I won't let the precious object go. I scroll and scroll and I assume some deep down motor-memory got tricked. It's the exact same motion I used as a kid on my blanket "Omama", meant to calm me down and send me off, while this light is meant to keep me up and serving, like like like, furnishing out my semi-conscious instinct profile.

My boyfriend happens to be 5,500 km away and I wonder if the lack of strokable flesh next to me fuels this night-time hypnosis. What do I need calming from, though? Bluntly thought, I blame my need for comfort on the anxiety or claustrophobia, the deep sadness and simultaneous inertia I get from being caught in a hyper-real hyper-capitalist crisis, the doomy feeling of accepted, helpless boredom in a crisis-laden yet anticlimactic groundhog day. This thing, *THEY*, too big to even describe, infiltrating my every move. Utterly depressing to realise "my every move" being

mainly my over-exercised thumb, tricked into working overtime, creating affective commodities for a massive data overlord. Utterly depressing that this realisation is 20 years old<sup>1</sup> and what's new?

Late-night-post-hypnosis-proactive-optimism: Who are you, who are *THEY*? “Everybody knows” neo-liberal times are defined by our lack of opposition, the naturalising of neutralising of enemy lines. We're all in it together. Blaming the screen is as cheap as blaming the system. Fuck *THEY*. Find “they”. Note to self: Must learn to make iPhone iPhone<sup>2</sup> again. Top. Thumbs up to that. Like.

The thumb has always been special to us, the imposing opposable head of the 5-finger family, a comforter, an indicator of value (good, bad, indifferent), a saviour or condemner to gladiators, a check for “seen” it, and in the Hasta mudras the location of the EGO, the ultimate surrogate pacifier. We are not unique in the animal kingdom among hominoids in having opposable thumbs, though “the extensive contact between the pulps of the thumb and forefinger are distinctive in humans”<sup>3</sup>—it's a difference of quality not of kind. We are not unique in sucking our thumbs, or stroking ourselves or others in moments of anxiety. I am not unique in putting my thumb and index finger in Gyan Mudra now, hoping a brief meditative pose might get me away from the glare-stare.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Curtis' 2011 documentary *All Watched Over By Machines Of Loving Grace* tracks the exploitation of affect from the 90s on.

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Shklovsky's (1917) famous dictum: “And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thumb#CITEREFJonesLederman2006>.

As I sit there trying to *observe, not judge, observe, not judge* my thoughts, the images of the day flicker past. Fucking High Line<sup>4</sup>! Fucking Times Square.

What a trek. What a waste. What a spectacle!

Come to think of it, my virtual maze of hazy half-dreams, of back alleys, avenues, and highways that I flâneur along with my thumb is not so unlike the good old and from my current position, through my glazing and glared eyes, frightfully archaic city out there. That city, where you actually have to use your legs – isn't that a waste of energy resources? The insomniac city in its machinic monstrosity is a maelstrom of noise, a torrent of light, impossible to escape: which way to the main street, where's the subway, what direction, what time? That dusty electric blue nightlight of Times Square, 1.3 miles away up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in a dystopic urban jungle (I finally get that awful term) of high rises, past stock touristic destinations now seems to be the wise old grandma of the iPhone screen glare, new generation of lack-generator: a fraction in size but infinitely more cunning. I imagine a shrill whahahaha come from its shitty speakers. Like an ageing siren calling to her wreckage, the billboard screens of Times Square hail me as a consuming subject, while the phone, the consumed object, does nothing to woo me, I'll come and stroke it anyway, more fool me, stuck in a pattern of re-victimization.

Times Square in its haloid 24h LED daylight-likeness is of course a simulacrum of itself. As the most visited place on earth<sup>5</sup>, it gave up long ago as a site of entertainment and desirability in its own right, it is now the sight to which tourists come to act out the Facebook share: to see, document and post the signification of that industry, to be “bedazzled by its signs and symbols” and simply to have been there. Thousands of faces trying to hide the anti-climax of real-life

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<sup>4</sup> The High Line is a 1.45-mile-long linear park built on an elevated section of a long disused New York Central Railroad in Manhattan, now regenerated as a spectacular intervention. <http://www.thehighline.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Times Square is the most visited place globally with 360,000 pedestrian visitors a day, amounting to over 131 million a year.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Times\\_Square](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Times_Square).

checking-one-off-the-list. The iconic view back down 7<sup>th</sup> and Broadway is always already a sign of itself emptied out and only continuously circulating as an image of images. The city here, the city everywhere in NYC, is a spectacle: an object, a product to be “imbecilically consumed,” a “pap” for the dumbed down end-users. IRL, though, can I not still circulate through these passages of city in different, proactive, tactical ways? Can we make the city into a situation and resist speculation, or rather: is that even relevant now? Since IRL is not so real life at all anymore, what with the site of capital production and circulation being virtual, would this be resistance in a relic? Theme park paint balling for the lefties? So then what happens if I take the Situationist’s spatial tactics into my virtual territories?

Let’s Wikipedia the *dérive* (Dérive 2014):

In psychogeography, a **dérive** (French: /dɛ.riv/, "drift") is an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually urban, on which the subtle aesthetic contours of the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously direct the travellers, with the ultimate goal of encountering an entirely new and authentic experience. Situationist theorist Guy Debord defines the *dérive* as "a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances." He also notes that "the term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of *dériving*."

That just sums up my 3h bedtime scrolling perfectly.

Whereas in real life, urban pre-internet life, that is, where we still had tasks to do, jobs to get done, the unplanned drift was a transgressive act. If we transpose this aimless stroll onto online

terrain, we trot as docile subjects, as this is exactly the behaviour we are “meant to” show. The virtual realm is set up as a playground for transgression. Our subconscious wanderings are mapped, our psychogeography cartographed and turned into data. My disillusion says it isn’t hard labour we’re meant to do, even though politics makes us believe we should, and uses guilt as leverage. Jobs, the things the market tries to get rid of in favour of profit, the things politicians try and create. Our actual labour takes place online, where we’re trial subjects, with our “subconscious travellings” and “rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord 1970) closely observed and evaluated and turned into commodified data, to be sold to marketing interests. Our occupational injury is not the “tennis elbow”, much more frequently derived from cashier motions or factory work but the iPhonitis, the swipe-thumb.

Back in 1994, Carmen Hermosillo aka humdog already wrote (Hermosillo [1994] 2011, n.p.):

i suspect that cyberspace exists because it is the purest manifestation of the mass (masse) as Jean Baudrillard described it. it is a black hole; it absorbs energy and personality and then re-presents it as spectacle.

In a prescient analysis of internet 1.0 she continues:

i created my interior thoughts as a means of production for the corporation that owned the board i was posting to, and that commodity was being sold to other commodity/consumer entities as entertainment. that means that i sold my soul like a tennis shoe and i derived no profit from the sale of my soul.

The feedback loop of a hyper-capitalism was already being tried out albeit on community pages, self-confessional uploads and direct reposting to others. The snooping into lives by a big machinery was already clearly installed:

the reality is that cyberspace is an increasingly efficient tool of surveillance with which people have a voluntary relationship [...] many cyber-communities are businesses that rely upon the commodification of human interaction. they market their businesses by appeal to hysterical identification and fetishism no more or less than the corporations that brought us the two hundred dollar athletic shoe.

What humdog realised two decades ago has now infiltrated our every online act. Money is not just made from me spilling my guts out, but from tracking down my subconscious clicking, my “liking” my “friend’s” critical gut-spilling post, following her link, reading the first few sentences of it, scrolling down, “aimlessly” finding a BuzzFeed quiz on what my spirit animal is: that being a bear, the result returning a link to the viral video of a family of bears playing in a US yard pool, me pasting that back onto my Facebook wall together with a comment about spirit animals and a picture of me wearing my bear-glasses: and that gets a lot of “likes”, and so it explodes. 2.0 Capitalism (who are you?) has taken that attempted *dérive*, the venture to get out of the system into account: it tracks us on our tours, and our very psycho-geographical transgressions, route making is what the net now lives off. Our labour is turned into analyzable data, profiled and sold back to us. Not only do we work for free, we pay for our equipment, for its running costs and end up desiring and eventually investing in some unnecessary 3<sup>rd</sup> party product. The hands laying

down the paving stones for these perverse routes we take are carpal tunnel syndrome ridden yet affirmative thumbs ups.

Guy Debord (1970) generalized this long ago as:

The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: “What appears is good; what is good appears.” The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply. (Thesis 12, n.p.)

Take out the “inaccessible” in its presentation and you’ve got Facebook. What you like is the route you’ve taken. Algorithms. My algorithmically suggested Facebook friend Levi Bryant has posted his recent piece on how “we dwell within a milieu of things, objects, or what [he calls] machines. That what “we mistakenly take as free choice turns out in so many instances to be the agency of these things or machines acting upon us” (Bryant 2015). Bryant goes on to claim:

to be sure I choose which hallway to walk through, but what I don’t choose is the form of choice dictated by hallways, or roads, or paths, themselves. These things lie before me as so many choices already chosen within which I might make my choices. I live in a world where my being is mediated – where it is afforded and constrained – in an endless variety of ways. (n.p.)



The problem is one of shorthand semiotics – I must stop accepting freebie cognitive schema. I’ve become so used to the metaphoric vocabulary used for referring to “online” as a space, a landscape, a city with routes and pathways, that I briefly thought de Certeau’s “tactics” (de Certeau 1988, xix) in spatial practice could provide me with a tool for resistance. The iPhone is a strategic<sup>6</sup> threshold to cyberspace wherein a regime can enforce a particular spatialization, a production of space that is ideological—in Lefebvrian terms a “representation of space” (Lefebvre 1991, 74). Even our tactical velocity within this system, through appropriation and the trickiness of insinuation—the operation of the perruque<sup>7</sup>—that we hope can resist, is co-opted by the viral world, such that it seems all “resistance is useless”<sup>8</sup>: *the system* actively encourages us to make new pathways, as that feeds the algorithms, generates constant market research. So whether a rocking— or a work horse, on the iPhone, the spatial practice of swiping, tapping, typing feeds back into the strategic space via the representational spaces of a platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. We play along a mythic origin of the enhanced yearbook, an electronic system for keeping in touch with loved ones near and far, while credit agencies evaluate your worthiness in relation to that of your “friends”. Almost immediately the structuration of the online yearbook becomes a bullying feedback loop for data transfer from “us” to “them”. Facebook is a mass of virtual forces actualized as code in which the flow of data as resource, digital interaction as transfer of capital is not merely algorithmic in that sets of operations channel information out and back – commodifying experience/emotions – but more than this is genetic in that these flows change the virtual interface of Facebook. The like button, originally designated

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<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau (1988, xix) distinguishes between “strategic” which “assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *propre* (*propre*) and thus serves as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it. Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model” and “tactic” a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional localization) [...]The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety.

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau (1988, 25) defines his term perruque as the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen.

<sup>8</sup> *Dr Who: The Dalek Invasion of Earth* (Flemyng, 1966).

as a way to express an evaluation of information posted, is now a way for users to flag information, such that the Facebook system knows to return it algorithmically to other users pages. At a first turn, users tactically usurped the like button giving it their own functionality within the strategic structure provided by Facebook. At a second turn, Facebook, now uses like counts as a commercial selling point to their true business partners, who direct commodities to Facebook worker-users because “like” is a measure of distribution and not of taste. The thumbs up seems closer related to a tyrannical Caesarean sign of power, a gatekeeper of what stays and what goes. In this way, tactical pathways that resist the strategic structures are quickly co-opted by a virtually coded structure, much more so and with greater speed and invisibility than any former restructurations. Seeped through this field of viral reallocation of resources in new structural formations, the reality that capital now relies on bilateral transferral of data and not on unilateral production of material is a dream come true for “them”.

The system of capital as realized by Marc Zuckerberg has converted strategic space into a domain where it seems to the user-worker that you are allowed be tactical when in fact you are obeying the strategic operation: in other words, the emergent regime has strategically co-opted the tactics of user-workers that reform its strategy, making that structuration once again invisible. The perruque is grotesquely inverted, picture this.

Let’s say spatial tactics don’t work because we mistakenly called all that lies behind the screen, cyberspace “a territory” as if it inhabited one plane, as if it were but a miniature version of the layer of the city that the Situationists disrupted. For the real obstacle to any kind of old-school resistance is founded in the Mac culture of concealment: the OS interface implodes complex code

operations onto a Platonic shadow play of simplistic reductive icons whose origins are revealed only to the very few, über-operators of that torch app<sup>9</sup>.

The iPhone, clearly a complex and complicating tool, seems to serve many practical functions – whatever that means, as most of what now would be described as basic needs were unthinkable luxuries a decade ago. Bernard Stiegler understands tools as an archival record, a trace of a need that emerges in a specific social formation (Stiegler 1998, 254). Tools do not only serve their practical function but they store information about the need that they fulfilled in coming into actual form: a hammer as a prosthetic extension of the arm—the shaft grippable in the hand through the action of fingers and opposable thumb, and a weight at the end of the shaft—supplants the inadequacy of our own limbs to perform hammering tasks. As a primary tool, it carries that need-history within its formation, the expansion of the boundaries of the body, and the memory of incorporating what is outside the body, the object hit, into the body as a thing acted upon. It records and archives the lack of shelter for example and the need to be dry, the need for a roof and allows us to understand ourselves as domestic subjects. Stiegler calls it epiphylogenesis (Stiegler 1998, 140) – the concentrated accumulation of singular human experience in technics – as an exo-interno relationship that exemplifies what it was we needed.

Key to this “externo-internalisation” are rates of change. Siegfried Zielinski writes, the rate of change of “what we call civilization” (Zielinski 2008, 6) progresses much faster than the development of geological and biological evolution. These rates of change in anthropological processes are different only in degree, yet *appear* to be different in kind because our human scale

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<sup>9</sup> I’m sorry for being so blunt and badly allegorical, but just mentally replace Plato’s fire as shadow caster with the free torch app, the one that in return for its availability is allowed to access your contacts directory.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_Cave](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_Cave)

cannot comprehend the rates of change that occur on those planes of geology and biology<sup>10</sup>: they appear too stable and unchanging relative to our nomadic drifts, migrations and concentrations of population on the one hand, and on the other, the highly flexible and malleable “culturally acquired ability to collect and store knowledge and experience and to pass it on to others” (Zielinski 2008, 6-7).

So, even a basic hammer performs a technic task of hammering, while also performing the technological operation of a human emerging that may hammer, reminding it and archiving its previous lack, its need to do so, and therefore characterizing it towards external self-understanding. Our rapid development as a species can therefore be partly attributed – rather than relying on genes to do their trick of sieving out the good ideas – to an efficient archiving method based on *post factum* understanding and evaluating of our lack, our Bedürfnis, that is external to us and therefore communicable, sharable. This relationship, however, is corrupted in the current episteme of falsely indoctrinated needs in order to increase spending power; therefore, any tracing back from emerging tool to self-understanding through fulfilled need can only be a misrecognition.

The phone’s shiny responsive surface is a machinic technology that is too complex for us to grasp (she says, as she clutches her phone) – from single media instances (a text message) to multi-media operations, text, image and sound transfer (Snapchat); to carnivalling cross media instances, where the operation used is a camouflaged pretence under which it performs the majority of its computing task. The free drawing app, say, that you allow to access and share your directories, the messenger app, that is able to access your camera and all of its recordings. The

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<sup>10</sup> See Manuel De Landa (1995) “The Geology of Morals: A Neomaterialist Interpretation” <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/manuel-de-landa/articles/the-geology-of-morals-a-neomaterialist-interpretation/>

phone's user interface is modelled for quick interchange, so of course I won't spend hours reading the more than dubious small print, it doesn't fit the smart phone's trigger happy etiquette. If the tool did have a function of archiving previous needs for such a drawing app or a no doubt useful flight tracker app, I wonder how to recognise myself through those needs. Capitalism really has messed with the term "need", and this profiling us for ourselves that the iPhone as a tool does, happens with a bypass action of sending the archive to an external evaluator that turns it into market data that then sells it on to another set of active agents that then eventually loop it back into our primitive injured hands in the shape of algorithmically altered feeds and customised advertisements creating a high frequency loop of misrecognition and subsequent need for ...allsorts. In this mess of disguised, hidden-agenda identity production I'm not surprised at my constant confusion in relation to "me".

In an analogue near past, labour and its mechanisms seemed to have had a different relation to their visibility. In researching for an exhibition that I am currently working on, I came across Roland Barthes' "Plates of the Encyclopaedia" (Barthes 1980, 23-40), wherein he writes on the illustrations of Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*:

contrary to modern images, man [...] participates in the machine in a manner that is both active and delicate [...] dressed neatly as a gentleman; this is not a worker but a little lord who plays on a kind of technological organ, all of whose gears and wheels are exposed.

what is striking about the Encyclopaedic machine is its absence of secrecy; in it there is no hidden place (spring or housing) which would magically

conceal energy, as is the case with our modern machines [...] energy here is essentially transmission, amplification of a simple human movement;

[The machine] is never anything but an enormous relay; man is at one term, the object at the other; between the two, an architectural milieu, consisting of beams ropes, and gears, through which, like a light, human strength is simultaneously developed, refined, focused, and enlarged. (1980, 25)

Barthes registers the uncanny feeling, the suspicion of a too-good-to-be-true harmony. The simplicity of the technology seems to be its effectiveness: easy of operation, singular function, transparent transformation:

hence, in the gauze-loom, a little man in a jacket, sitting at the keyboard of a huge wooden machine, produces an extremely fine web, as if he were playing music elsewhere; in a completely bare room, containing only a maze of wood and tarred ropes, a young women sitting on a bench turns a crank, while her other hand rests gently on her knee, A simpler idea of technology is inconceivable. (1980, 25)

The mental image I conjure up is not unlike Apple's advertising strategy of collapsing work and play into one and selling the comfort of a use-from-home lifestyle. The crucial difference is that the little lord at work-play here is in control of his instrument, he operates the tool with full awareness of its functions, sharing the inner working with us, the readers of the encyclopaedia.

Making visible, however, is not merely the removal of a screen that obscures. Take, for example, John Carpenter's 1988, *They Live*, in which the hero, Nada's epiphanic moment unfolds when after putting on a pair of sunglasses a purple and luminous green billboard advertisement for Control Data proclaiming "we're Creating the Transparent Computing Environment" is revealed to have the true subliminal monochromatic message OBEY. He looks around and has it specularly revealed that all active members of "the system", "they" are zombie like creatures. Nada's gaze turns to view the whole boulevard lined with strident imperatives—messages of a rampant capitalism: CONFORM, WATCH TV, SUBMIT, SLEEP. Messages which would be apparent enough in the chromatic world if the subjects of capital awoke from their slumber. But cushioned by the precepts, conventions, and whitewashing of a consumerism whose ill-effects lie obscured under the mask of self-satisfaction, the workings of the system are hidden in plain sight. The message of the film is apportion blame and seek revenge; in its monochromatizing of a complex socio-economic world more comical in stance than political in engagement.

In an equal mode of simplicity, the world is commonly supposed to have changed one year after Carpenter's cult classic: 1989<sup>11</sup> saw the singularity of the first HTTP transfer between a client and a server via the internet, the first public realisation of HTTP. Yet hypertext was already demonstrated in "the mother of all demos" the retrospectively named conference demonstration of a fully integrated hardware and software system NLS that is at the base of all windows and mouse interfaces on personal computing. Doug Engelbart and his Stanford research team, were actualising Venvar Bush's Memex machine, itself perhaps not far removed from Borges' (1962) *Labyrinth* series. And as gratifying as it feels, don't we know that modern, post-modern, or even

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<sup>11</sup> See for example H.U.O's dictum that 1989 is a watershed date for a new generation of artists at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/08/art-conversation>

hyper-modern capitalism is not a clear-cut zombie villain easily defeated by a few roundhouse kicks and kung-fu throws.

Talking of which: the ancient Chinese military treatise *The Art of War* advises:

*it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss. If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or may lose. If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will always endanger yourself.*

In other words “all warfare is based on deception.”

The illusion that a singular unified thing exists as a hermetic whole which I can antagonistically oppose, or not, is unsustainable, therefore I have to not only rethink “it” as an emblem of “they” and “me” as a warrior for “us” but consider possibilities of nuancing my tones a bit.

In the classical world, what speaks is the individual [who] is coextensive with being. In the romantic world it is persons who speak, and this is quite different: the person is defined as coextensive with representation. These were new values in life and language. (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 143)

Now in our, post-internet<sup>12</sup> age, Deleuze’s ([1969] 2004) claim rings true:

For a long time we were stuck with the alternative: either you are persons or individuals, or you sink back into a sea of anonymity. Today, however, we

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<sup>12</sup> Here meaning an era that follows the widespread adoption of the internet, not specifically in art, but in all modes of interaction in society.



are uncovering a world of pre-individual singularities. They are not reducible to individuals or persons, nor to a sea without difference. These singularities are mobile, they break in, thieving and stealing away, alternating back and forth, like anarchy crowned, inhabiting a nomad space. There is a big difference between portioning a fixed space among sedentary individuals, according to boundaries or enclosures, and distributing singularities in an open space without enclosures or properties [...] a fourth person singular. ([1969] 2004, 143)

Know Thyself, operator: such nomadic singularities defy the persons that fail before a simulacric, icon screen, the one I try “so hard” not to identify with, the perfect subject to the Zuckerberg empire. Individual, isolated, alienated, injured. Yet, the crucial aspect of Deleuze’s nomad is that they are not individuals to which meaning is attached as properties, nor persons fit to interact in an episteme of representation. We should look at the iPhone-equipped-nomad as a disassembling individual who makes sense along the lines of de- to reterritorialization, dislocating the material certainties that we now attribute to the digital world by seeing them as virtual. An intervention that could dissolve the apparently hermetic unit of the interface between our lived experience and a coded world that is the iPhone screen.

Whereas Deleuze’s example of an assemblage<sup>13</sup> still echoes the structures of society so prevalent in his age’s discourse, the one that Jane Bennett (2010) takes up and brings

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<sup>13</sup> “Taking the feudal assemblage as an example, we would have to consider the interminglings of bodies defining feudalism: the body of the earth and the social body; the body of the over- lord, vassal, and serf; the body of the knight and the horse and their new relation to the stirrup; the weapons and tools assuring a symbiosis of bodies—a whole machinic assemblage. We would also have to consider statements, expressions, the juridical regime of heraldry, all of the incorporeal transformations, in particular, oaths and

into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is one I can use as a model of how to engage with my phone, with a computer-organised, market-driven, neo-liberal reality in a...meaningful way, a complex existence which seems to have an efficacy without a causality.

The *International Herald Tribune*, on the day after the blackout, reported that ‘the vast but shadowy web of transmission lines, power generating plants and substations is the biggest gizmo ever built. [...] On Thursday, August 14 2003, the grid’s heart fluttered. [...] Complicated beyond full understanding, even by experts — the grid lives and occasionally dies by its own mysterious rules.’ [Anthropomorphising] gestures toward the inadequacy of understanding the grid simply as a machine or a tool, as, that is, a series of fixed parts organised from without that serves an external purpose. [...] To the vital materialist, the electrical grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of master, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood — to name just some of the actants. (2010, 24-25)

Vital materiality allows for the multiple planes and surreal, non-categorizable encounters that Foucault’s ([1970] 2002) “Preface” to *The Order of Things* only attributed to textual virtuality:

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their variables (the oath of obedience, but also the oath of love, etc.): the collective assemblage of enunciation. On the other axis, we would have to consider the feudal territorialities and reterritorializations, and at the same time the line of deterritorialization that carries away both the knight and his mount, statements and acts. We would have to consider how all this combines in the Crusades.” Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1990, 80).

This book first arose out of a passage in [Jorge Luis] Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. ([1970] 2002, xvi)

I’d say this exotic system of thought is upon us with the infinitely surreal coexistences within a computing entity. RAM being just that – random access memory – that can hold all these classifications in one space as to-be-actualised potential. The confusion comes with the user friendly interface, the one that paints old-worldly and creepily coherent pictures where we, singularities, know it’s not that flat. Text, code, has allowed multi-dimensional exclusive

disjunctions, including every possible combination except total falsehood<sup>14</sup>, as A-OK, and yet we pretend that chaotically structured existences are “a camera” “a calculator” “a map” “my whole social network” all living on the same plane. Who are you kidding, though!

Ultimately, I am looking for autonomy, and that is not found in engaging with the mess of code disguised by pretty pictures. I need to find an operation for my digits that connects to the archaic hand posture and slowly and consciously moves into 2.0. Resistance by not accepting it as a singular tool allowed to archive my needs, by not allowing my needs to be fed back to me, but by acknowledging it as an equally fluid singularity that wouldn't have me engage in old-school profiling anyway. How though?

Bennett's description of the mental process of deconstructing the seemingly and potentially antagonistic agency of assemblage into its individual texts, planes, motivations, currents, can be a way to get to temporarily know your enemy and to resist the futile and static blame game. Rather than a deskilled labourer identified by chronic RSI, an automatic operator, I *did* want to be an autonomous *opérateur*, for central to the *opérateur*<sup>15</sup> is a defamiliarization of text, such that the content of its signification, especially as a melodramatic simulation of a lived world, is relinquished for a focus on the operation of signification: texts in their own right related side by side in reversals read with the “‘theatre of the voice’ (Kristeva 1985, 265) and not in a *mise en scene*, but rather in a *mise en lecture*” (Puchner 2002, 124). But come to think of it, I have to let go of any notion of autonomous and analogue control, I have to see text not as the only virtuality

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<sup>14</sup> See  $P \nabla Q$  at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclusive\\_or](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclusive_or)  
<http://www.millersville.edu/~bikenaga/math-proof/truth-tables/truth-tables.html>

<sup>15</sup> Mallarme (date) describes the *opérateur* in *Le Livre* as an agent that doesn't enact text to give it mimetic meaning but operates the text for itself as the “manipulator of a machinery of precisely numbered loose sheets, executing a specific number of operations on them” Martin Puchner (2002).

to be taken apart, though a simplistic reading of CODE might suggest that, but one actualisation of textURE. This texture, that I as singularity am part of, is what I have to learn to engagedly disassemble.

Agency is, as Bennett says, “distributed across a mosaic[wherein the human strive] is perhaps best understood on the model of riding a bicycle on a gravel road. One can throw one’s weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant *operative* in the moving whole” (Bennett 2010, 38). So let me find my place operative (to be pronounced with a French accent).

In a world of distributed agency, a hesitant attitude toward assigning singular blame becomes a presumptive virtue. Of course, sometimes moral outrage [...] is indispensable to a democratic [...] politics. [...] Outrage will not [...] disappear, but a politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good. A moralised politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins [...]” (Bennett 2010, 38) similarly to the They, in *They Live*, “the neo-liberal system” in my own cheap shot description of what is too big for me to refer to with a precise terminology “becomes unethical to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort. (Or rather frustrated resignation and resentment for those not eligible to make such decisions). “An understanding of agency as distributive and confederate thus reinvokes the need to detach ethics from moralism and to produce guides to action appropriate to a world of vital, crosscutting forces” (Bennett 2010, 38). With a democratic wish for equal distribution, I can’t give up on agency so easily, yet I can’t want it all either.

Fighting my hypnotized, static and archaic use of this precious tool, the smart phone, will have to begin by knowing it. Knowing it, not as a fixed entity with determinable characteristics known by a fixed entity with a determinable profile, but as and by a fluid, ever changing assemblage that keeps us on our toes. Not as a programmer, I have not got the computing power to equal its literal functions, but as one assemblage onto another. Engaging as operative does not ask for an intellectual analysis and subsequent categorising and flattening onto one plane or into the filing cabinet<sup>16</sup> but demands unfolding and temporarily recognising as practice, a present continuous. As I practice “disassociation” of my senses in meditation – decoupling every noise, sound, smell, taste and recoupling them in various ways while observing their textures, trying to experience them and their individualities separately as well as part of the whole, my conflicted relationship with the phone, the tool, social media, data sharing, privacy, self profiling, stage entering, networking, spatial dyspraxia, and the caressing of all of these must be untangled not once and for all but ritually, for fun even, as a parlour game, again and again. “Art as Technique” (Shklovsky [1917] 1988) still serves as basis of my mission.

I’m afraid to say my current mentor though is a night-time companion, the owl that I found as a freebie on my nocturnal *dérive*. Not all is virtual and I did eventually get up from my insomniac rigidity and got my legs into gear and out onto the by now stormy and cool NY streets that never sleep. *The Way of the Owl* (Rivers 1997, 25) states: “Give up your resistance to resistance. Engage the enemy as you find him, not as you wish him to be. Once you embody this principle, you will realise an instant and dramatic improvement in your performance. When you abandon the inertia of analysis and judgement, you will no longer be stuck. You will remain fluid, active, and alert.”

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<sup>16</sup> The invention of the vertical filing system in 1898 by Edwin Siebels was considered by the patent office an “idea” not a “device,” to which end, he was not granted a patent. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin\\_G.\\_Seibels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_G._Seibels).

Copy paste to “Update Status”. Big thumbs up to that!

(10 likes already)

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