Making a name for Anonymous

Digital Culture, Anonymous Publics and Transgressive Subjectivities

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Abstract

Recently, researchers from various domains of social sciences have been particularly concerned with the social, cultural, and political impacts of digital media. To give an account of the specific processes behind the formation of Anonymous, I develop a microsociological framework for the analysis of disembodied global forms – anchoring such forms in intersubjective reciprocity. In order to move beyond interpretative sociology's emphasis on language as society's integrative function, I privileged the dimensions of temporality, rhythms and patterns. I also focused on how "disembodied" internet collectives are enacted and assembled within computer screens, terminals, and the digital networks that connect them. My analysis takes into account those temporalities, projections and reflections, which point to the non-symbolic components of mediated sociality. Those dynamic interconnections behind the Anonymous collective are approached through the notions of *publics*, *networks* or even *swarms*.

Resulting from the awareness that digital artifacts and traces serve surveillance and identification – like personal documents and organizational records – the enactment of Anonymous relies on obfuscation and effacement of "offline" connections for the disruption of digital networks and meaning production processes. This poses a challenge to analyses that privilege the co-production of objects and knowledge. Particularly, when the research subjects are purposively oriented towards disarranging the very conditions of classification, stabilization and fixation. The Anonymous "entity" acts as material camouflage, allowing the accumulation and free appropriation of symbolic power: it is a material-semiotic generative presence/absence.

My focus is not limited to the production of digital artifacts, integrating objects of knowledge, cultural objects, techniques, iconography, genres, and even the word "anonymous". I followed those boundary objects that bridge and separate the invisible world of collective internet anonymity – where public manifestation does not compromise privacy – and the world of institutions and organizations – that of names and faces. What gets "lost" or effaced in practice is the possibility of enclosure

and of assessing contexts of practices and intentions. The result is the material and semiotic enactment of a "zone" of contingency and chaos, simultaneously producing patches of stability that integrate constant process of their own transformation and subversion. That zone exists at the margins of mediated channels, where different social worlds, knowledge circuits and sociability circles come together and overlap.

I conceive subjectification platforms as functions of material-semiotic and discursive practices, through which vast hybrid networks are (de)stabilized and (re)organized, creating ruptures and filling gaps, enabling alternative experiences and knowledges. To trace the formation of Anonymous, I privileged digital objects and discourses in context, analyzing old, seemingly irrelevant, or archived websites – a method I termed "internet archaeology". I traced the development of a particular medium, the 4chan anonymous imageboard, which other scholars have associated with the birthplace of Anonymous. In this website there is a suspension of taboo but also of belief since deceit and dissimulation, or "baiting" in troll parlance, are common practices. This setting was in stark contrast with the typical clean landscapes of social media and online public spheres that host self-presentation rituals and public profiles in which socially valuable subjects are enshrined and appreciated. Anonymous boards privilege subjectivities related with deviance, risk, danger, toxicity, unhealthiness, unpopularity, shame, taboo, and all sorts of social "monsters".

I also followed the movements of the collective through different periods and digital ecologies, considering how the its production of both digital communication infrastructures and representations of itself further enlarged the material and semiotic associations behind Anonymous. Despite being mostly invisible, this distributed and decentralized collective rely on its ability to quickly and effectively react, manifesting rapid changes and versatility in terms of scale of action and tactics. As such, it is able to generate spectacular events that gather the attention of mainstream media channels and are used to point to issues that are deemed to be of public concern. Thus, it acquires the power of agenda-setting and is capable of extending its reach well beyond the restrictive circles of anonymous digital sociability.

In the field of political science, the notion of "connective action" has been developed, emphasizing the role of communication, flexible personalized expression and beliefs in distributed action networks. Notions of personalized or everyday politics seem to aptly describe the place of Anonymous in today's political landscape. It points to the self-motivated quality of action, stemming from common internalized ideas, plans, images, and the sharing of resources. However, that same concept obscures the actual processes through which those diffuse elements "aggregated" in the formation of metastable cooperation networks, or how the new media and internet communication channels are articulated into semi-organizational forms. To overcome that

limitation, I combine other perspectives from semiotics, social and political theory to understand how those theoretically defined morphologies are enacted in practice. To do so, I address two central questions for politics: organization and representation.

The Anonymous activist method consists of diverse internet based campaigns, protests, and direct action, laying between the logics of activism, social movements, digital publics and fandom cultures. In line with the theory of Connective Action, it strives for inclusiveness, becoming a platform open to appropriation. Its morphology does not follow specific roles but is comprised of decentralized and semi-autonomous networks, cells, and lone wolves. Representation processes should also be considered in both their symbolic and non-symbolic character. The activity behind Anonymous tends to coalesce around signs, particularly icons, which are signs that represent objects by analogy, or metaphor, like the *diagram*, they exhibit structural resemblance. That form of representation, I argue, gave rise to iconography that both represents the connections behind Anonymous and enters equivalential relations with unmet political demands. Through those iconic enunciations, a political subject is materially enacted – the images of the mask and headless suit and the "you are Anonymous" rhetorical device represent both the digital interactive dynamics that enact the collective and a *demos*, the anonymous global "citizen of the internet". Those observations, I argue, explain the aversion to symbolism, identity and ideology in distributed action networks – autonomous self-organization is associated with the rejection of external patterning. Consensus-building, forms of identification, and the framing of issues is done through the precarious intersubjective construction and (re)production of the action networks themselves.

Introduction

Today, the associations between a fuzzy internet collective known as Anonymous and forms of social conflict, activism, disobedience and dissent are manifesting themselves throughout the world. That collective, the focus of my research, is arguably the most visible face of the connections between activism and the internet: ever since it staged street protests against the Church of Scientology in 2008, and particularly after the reactions against the stifling of ThePirateBay and Wikileaks in 2010, Anonymous has acquired the status of a highly visible, contentious global actor. While it seemed to have literally come out of nowhere, a closer analysis of that social actor's trajectory explains why it's emergence and rise to prominence was so unexpected: when the term Anonymous became associated with stable circles of anonymous interaction, it referred to what was mostly an obscure and secretive internet phenomenon that has been thriving and growing at least since 2006 on the English speaking internet. Nevertheless, this mostly unknown and invisible internet subculture had already caused profound impacts in the digital cultural landscape. After those initial forms of protest, Anonymous became involved in an increasing number of contemporary social and activist struggles at a global level, mobilizing around its own causes or alongside other social contentious actors. By 2016, a simple search engine query for news articles in renowned news media sites (such as theguardian.com, spiegel.de, bbc.co.uk) using the keyword "Anonymous" will result in tenths, if not hundreds, of results. Most are journalistic articles related to internet based activism: action oriented by ideals of justice and freedom – what is now commonly referred to as *hacktivism*. As a sociologist interested in digital technologies, I was perplexed by the increasing role of this collective in landscape of social struggles against powerful institutions, states and private organizations. Complex present-day social phenomena pose important challenges to the production of knowledge about the social world in general and to sociology in particular – they invite epistemological considerations about disciplinary traditions, considering both their limitations and possibilities.

The process of digitization and its impacts are convoluted and heterogeneous. In the late 20th century, digital networks and devices have become increasingly merged with people's everyday life, particularly in the social and cultural settings associated with terms such as "post-industrial society", "network society", "late capitalism" and "liquid modernity". In those settings, digital technologies were placed at the organizational cores of social and economic life. The ongoing developments in miniaturization of technology have turned powerful computers into portable, hand-help companions. Smartphones, tablets, and other devices can be taken with us at all times and everywhere we go. By combining such devices with the mobile internet plans offered by telecoms, individuals have the possibility of being uninterruptedly online. In an era where social transformation and market advantages are increasingly based on information and knowledge, digital devices and communication networks have become both the catalyst and the focus of interests, policy and investments. In addition, the malleability of digital objects, the heavy investments in digital technologies and the increase in internet bandwidth make digital networks an ideal replacement to other media, including older digital media. Those factors have contributed to making the digital central to, and constitutive of, cultural, social and political regimes at a global level. Interconnected digital devices are now entangled with many social processes and relations in many spheres – production and consumption, communication, knowledge production and circulation, political activity, organization of work, and forms of social control to name a few. Those transformations also influence social inequality, producing differences at the levels of access, literacy and control of those networks and devices. More often than not, those differences reinforce already existing structures of inequality both within countries and between different parts of the world.

In the social imaginaries around the early internet, that network of networks was viewed as a separate, discontinuous and disembodied space. Its interface with people and organizations operated through a labyrinth of bulky computers, slow speeds, textual links and complicated addresses. Recent developments in online services and digital devices, as well as their enmeshing with routine activities, are blurring the distinction between the *online* and the *offline*, which was at the heart of those ideas about autonomous, computer mediated worlds. Digital technologies are no longer seen as distant, exotic and obscure technologies, harboring an independent "cyberspace" – they are now the place where we can find familiar names, faces, images, sounds, and places. The internet presence of physical sites and the availability of online maps, together with geolocation technologies, reshape our relations to the physical places we inhabit. People increasingly turn to the internet for their daily activities: to search for information about current events, find jobs, watch shows and films, listen to music, connect to others with similar hobbies and interests, find ro-

mance or search for erotic satisfaction. The popularity of low cost or "free"[1] internet based messaging, telephony, videoconferencing, and audiovisual exchange in social networks sites shows how communication and sociability are influenced by digital networks. The multiple ways in which we create, maintain and even terminate social relations and interpersonal ties are becoming digitized. Most of today's discourses about the digital, regardless of the more optimistic or pessimistic outlook, tend to express that seamlessness paradigm. Familiar terms such as "connection", "personal", "lightness", "smart", "open", and "speed" became deeply associated with, and were given new meanings by, the digital. Those metaphoric displacements of meaning result from a paradox of digital technologies: on the one hand, they take the form of highly intimate companions, shiny fetishized objects of our everyday lives and consumerist fantasies, but on the other hand, they are conceived as complex civilizational achievements, the cold and controlling machines that enact distant social, power and authority structures. That ambiguous character of our relations with digital technologies has become an important factor in contemporary sociocultural commentary, social projects and political utopias.

Digital technologies intensify profitable economic strategies based on knowledge about consumers and personalized design in the production of goods and services. Attracted by the possibilities for monitorization, prediction and persuasion, all sorts of businesses are deploying a wide range of digital sensors that surveil and extract information from individuals. Those sensors measure and record all kinds of activities and trajectories, from physical movements in space to the hypertextual displacements in website visits. Such information is used by complex and invisible algorithms to create behavioral models and user profiles. Google, the most popular search engine, indexes and ranks the WWW, the hypertext web, presenting itself as the *de facto* gateway to the myriad of content that populates the world wide web. It uses a range of mechanisms, among them browser cookie records which allow tracking user behavior outside the companies' web sites, to offer tailored arrangements of results based on the user's location, older searches, and previously visited web pages. The most popular social network site, Facebook, indexes and manages individuals' social identity and connections, creating a quasi-confessional, intimate spaces of personal profiles and interpersonal relations. Those services, which certainly present the web as something close to the user, increasing the likelihood of finding meaningful or self-validating content, have recently been heavily criticized for creating filter bubbles and strengthening biases. Furthermore, an increasing number of online and offline services started to accept login credentials from Google and Facebook as authentication methods, placing the two companies at the core of digital identity brokerage and management systems.

[1]Offered at no nominal charges by companies relying on advertising revenue business models.

Transformations in media and communication technologies are associated with changes in the spheres of communication, information politics and forms of symbolic power. The meaning and practical enactments of authority, credibility, authorship, communication, and the difference between public and private spheres are affected by these changes. Communicational contexts shape what is permissible and what is censored, who has a voice and even what the terms "voice" or "statement" mean. The struggles around information politics are thus also around ideologies, forms of sociality and, ultimately, forms of expression and action. Transformations at those levels have deep sociological implications. Increasingly, digital technologies not only mediate interpersonal relations but they also shape the relations individuals establish with themselves and with their own conduct. Individual conduct, in turn, is objectified by digital apparatuses, from which both reflexive and unconscious relations may result. My research is particularly concerned with how these developments shape contemporary subjectivities. As Deborah Lupton claims:

> In an era in which mobile and wearable digital devices are becoming increasingly common, the digital recording of images and audio by people interacting in private and public spaces, in conjunction with security and commercial surveillance technologies that are now part of public spaces and everyday transactions, means that we are increasingly becoming digital data subjects, whether we like it or not, and whether we choose this or not.
>
> Lupton, 2015, p. 3

When I began my research, I decided to focus on the highly visible activist branch of Anonymous. The urgent question was, or so it seemed to me at the time, to understand what set Anonymous apart as a form of activism, i.e. the distinctiveness of what had by then become the most visible face of digital dissent. The research process, however, led me somewhere else. When researching the origins of the collective, I would often find myself being led to a strange internet media ecology whose central hub and most influential site was the 4chan anonymous imageboard. That internet setting was in sharp opposition to the social media sociocultural landscapes of Web 2.0 giants. The enmeshing of internet and social life results in online services and social media being increasingly indexed to, and becoming indexes of, individual's identities. Facebook is the paradigmatic example of a social network that seek to fulfills the function of managing personal identity and interpersonal relationships. In that site, digital selves are carefully constructed through digital self-presentation rituals in social networks, where the neoliberal subject is enshrined, publicly and collectively venerated and idolized.

In opposition to those now predominant internet settings, 4chan is a place for anonymous interaction. At first, those occasional encounters with the anonymous

imageboard resulted in the repeated and immediate dismissal of the website and the hyperactive digital culture it harbored as a place for impenetrable and mindless activity. The imageboard had a strong visual character, particularly the site's main sub-board, where interaction occurs through "posts" or publications consisting only of text and a single image. I was overwhelmed by the violent impact of shocking images, combinations of cryptic discursive and visual tropes, aggressive terms, nonsensical humor, and floods of erotic content. I was barely able to grasp any meaningful interactions. Nevertheless, as I continued to plunge into the historical analysis of this collective, and even though I felt deeply disturbed and discouraged each and every time my search led me to that website, all the clues kept pointing there.

With time, it began clear to me that this anonymous internet culture's buzzing activity far exceeded that of the activist and vigilante branch of Anonymous in scope, size, and intensity, even though it was the latter that had a growing role as a social contentious actor in breaking news all around the world: I discovered that the remarkable forms of activism that had caught my attention were in fact just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Beneath this visibility threshold lied an incredibly rich sociocultural world, in which the meanings around Anonymous were collectively crafted through mediated forms of experimentation, cooperation, and conflict that seemed almost impossible to conciliate and articulate within any given formation. This culture was heterogeneous and hosted many internal conflicts, some divisive to the point of resulting in splits, cultural and technological divergences. Nevertheless, despite the internal differentiation and contradictions, one notion still stood as a firm basis of that diffuse social formation: the celebration of the anonymous internet.

The initial dizziness resulting from the exposure to what seemed to be a fierce competition around the ability to shock or cause nausea, exhibiting politically incorrect behavior, and overall taboo violating never truly disappeared. Nevertheless, while it is hard to pinpoint exactly how and when this shift took place, I slowly began to recognize and decipher the meanings codified in the often obscure tropes of those online spaces. That allowed me to understand the multiple and discernible activities that hid behind that curtain of shock and disorientation: serious debates, content exchange, organization of joint actions and, maybe most importantly, a very visual form of linguistic, social and cultural semiotic processing and critique.

That intrinsically elusive character of the collective forced me to a continuous back and forth between different possible research objects, strategies and theoretical traditions. Finally, I was able to articulate the perspectives that had both provided insights on the different processes I observed and inspired deeper contemplations. Among those perspectives is the artful ethnographic work of Gabriella Coleman,

who has studied Anonymous extensively. Her in-depth work was central for identifying interesting elements which could be further developed from a sociological perspective. Other inspirations came from communication, cultural studies, media studies, semiotics, and science and technology studies (STS). The diversity within the collective itself meant one could approach Anonymous from many other perspectives and employ very different methodological apparatuses. Since many of the used communication channels are publicly accessible, it is possible to employ naturalistic observation and/or participation in the ethnographic tradition. The activist developments of the collective can also be readily approached from a social movement perspective.

The choice of the term "collective" is itself problematic and results from the need to evoke a formation that is not properly a group, a community, or a *swarm*. In this dissertation, the term is used to refer to the interconnected social, technological, semiotic and symbolic dimensions that sustain the existence of this formation. My research is an effort to understand the sociology of Anonymous by putting the phenomenon within the context of an increasing digitization of social relations.

The method employed aimed at reconstructing the processes behind the formation of this collective. Through the collection and analysis of *traces* that those processes left behind, scattered in multiple mediated settings – which is why I named the method devised for the task with the term *internet archaeology* – I tried to discern the past playful and experimental joint actions that resulted in a particularly fragile, but nonetheless effective, sense of solidarity and togetherness that came to be associated with Anonymous.

The central topics of my dissertation are related to media design, usage strategies, internet popular culture, transgression, the production of meaning and digital subjectivities. Those complex connections are, or so I claim, central for understanding the contemporary world – they were both intriguing and bewildering, continuously coming up in the initial stages of my research, leading to the aforementioned back-and-forth. The importance of all those aspects, particularly the domain of the subjective, is shown by Lev Manovich's reflection on the nature of internet settings:

> The navigable space is thus a subjective space, its architecture responding to the subject's movement and emotion. In the case of the flâneur moving through the physical city, this transformation, of course, only happens in the flâneur's perception, but in the case of navigation through a virtual space, the space can literally change, becoming a mirror of the user´s subjectivity.
>
> Manovich, 2001, p. 269

The assessment of social reality is highly dependent on situated sensory apparatuses and in online settings this dependence is even stronger. It is not simply a question of perception, as Manovich reminded us, but the result of immediately responsive algorithmic construction of digital media, often tailored for a specific combination of traits identified in the user. It is thus not safe to assume a single, coherent, and objective social reality that could be discovered or uncovered by research efforts. Rather, social realities are multiple and are produced by processes in constant transformation. My approach is based on the general frameworks of the sociology of knowledge, a constructionist perspective that is in close dialogue with phenomenological thinking. Nevertheless, phenomenological and interpretative sociology typically circumscribes its concerns in the hermeneutics of interpretation and conscious strategies, often neglecting other aspects of social life. To complement this perspective, I emphasize semiotic processes at play in the collective production of meaning, particularly signs' iconic dimension. This articulation, operating through the analysis of signs, allowed me to integrate the materiality of digital objects and their contexts of production and circulation in the analysis of digital social life. My claim is that these material contingencies play a very important role in shaping communication and interaction. The semiotic distinction between a symbol, an index, and an icon is an abstract one that applies to *any* media – i.e. to all sorts of *representamens* or *signifiers* – more often than not in an ambiguous and overlapping way. Thus, iconicity is here broadly understood, not only as visual elements and images, but as encompassing other signs and cultural tropes such as discursive elements, rhetoric devices and even media design features.

Many of those who studied Anonymous highlight the relevance of its status as a symbol associated with online contentiousness and transgression in contemporary discourses. That symbolic strength is arguably the reason why Anonymous was able to gain relevance at a global level as a form of popular resistance. Anonymous represents a form, or even a platform, for subjectification, working simultaneously as an expression of a *demos* and its effective constitution: the anonymous *netizens* and their demands as defiant social actor. Subjectification processes are historically and culturally situated configurations. In the case of Anonymous, with its origins in celebratory experimentations of internet anonymity's possibilities for disruption and transgression of social norms, those configurations are deeply related to media design strategies and creative user dynamics. In my dissertation, I provide an account of the processes through which that status was acquired, contemplating their communicative, cultural, and technological dimensions. A framework for action that inspired people worldwide to stand up for their ideals of justice, some taking enormous risks, deserves a nuanced and detailed analysis. I believe that following closely the trajectory of that framework is to do justice to the creativity of those who,

for better or for worse, sought to contribute to this story, to make a name for Anonymous, whether by creating digital content, trolling, campaigning for causes, attacking websites or even leaking secret information.

Research Questions

My dissertation seeks to provide an account of a contemporary social, cultural, technological and political formation. It deals with the problems of action, agency, and subjectivity from a perspective that combines phenomenological sociology and materialist, object oriented frameworks. The main research question guiding my dissertation is:

> *How did "Anonymous" become a symbol that stands for online activism with a global reach?* This question is related to the ways in which participants in collective anonymous internet settings succeed in "making a name for Anonymous". Finally, inspired by Knorr Cetina's work on *global microstructures*, I ground those global structures in microsociological frames of analysis without losing sight of the more general effects. That means taking into account the heterogeneous digital media ecology's *affordances*, *design features* and *user activity*. It also entails going beyond a totally symbolic model for interaction and sociality, taking into account the material and semiotic dynamics that structure the circularity of affect, temporality and rhythms, *scopic* reflections, projections, and patterning.

Two other subquestions inform my research strategies and overall approach:

> *How do the distinctions between public and private, and between self and other, operate in contexts of anonymous sociality on the internet?*
>
> *What representations and subjectivities are associated with a digital culture based on the opportune exploitation of knowledge and visibility circles, moral and sign economies, collective attention and mutually affective engagement?*

Finally, I address those substantial questions from a critical transdisciplinary and pluralist perspective on the production of knowledge in social sciences, entailing

epistemological and ontological considerations that emerged from the ongoing dialogue between research design, the theoretical framework and actual observations.

Thesis Outline

The first chapter will approach existing literature about Anonymous from the perspective of social sciences. That chapter will be structured along the most common and important concerns I identified in that body of work. The main theoretical and conceptual references mobilized in this analysis will be presented and discussed in chapter two and three. Chapter four presents the method employed, which I termed *internet archaeology*, connecting it to the main considerations of the previous chapters. Those first four chapters provide theoretical, analytical and methodological reflections that guided my research.

The subsequent chapters reflect the empirical work and the substantial contributions of my dissertation. In chapter five, I introduce the history of an internet medium, the *anonymous imageboard*, and I characterize its technical and cultural specificities. I provide an account of events that reflect radically subversive developments within those already contentious settings in chapter six. That analysis is centered on collective projects of disruptive insurgency from which a controversial and visible digital subject emerged. Finally, chapter seven is an analysis of Anonymous as a form of digital activism. It starts by addressing another set of transformations through which Anonymous became associated with activism and ends with an investigation of public communications made on behalf of the activist collective, identifying how its discursive and stylistic specificities are connected to its trajectory – the focus of the previous chapters.

Chapter 1. Anonymous in the Literature

Due to its uncanny character and its engagement with high profile targets, Anonymous gained the attention of very different sectors of society, from media organizations and activist groups to judicial, security and legislative branches of nation-states. The projection it got as a prevalent category in discourses about social conflict led academics from various backgrounds, but particularly from social and human sciences, to focus on that emerging collective. In this chapter, I will present an overview of the existing academic literature on Anonymous, identifying the main trends and problematics and positioning my work. This exercise will later support my engagement in a dialogue with those other works that focused on the same collective.

1.1 Origins: the 4chan Anonymous Imageboard

The diversity of cultural influences and the fragmentation within Anonymous make it hard to precisely point a fundamental origin. Nevertheless, there seems to be some kind of consensus and most of the commentary on Anonymous traces its emergence to a specific internet social and cultural context: the stream of images and comments that flow on anonymous imageboards, in particular 4chan's most active sub-forum, the *random* board (Coleman, 2012, 2013; Auerbach, 2012; Jarvis, 2014;

Weidemann, 2014), also known as /b/[2]. According to David Auerbach, that website marks a discontinuity with theretofore familiar internet settings, claiming "there has never before been a space in which: 1. Discourse is primarily written rather than spoken. 2. Participants are mostly if not totally anonymous. 3. Interactions are evanescent, disappearing within hours, or minutes" (Auerbach, 2012, n. pag.). While interaction dynamics are often extremely complex, articulating a variety of cultural references, internet sites and geographic spaces, they are supported by a simply structured interface which could be qualified as rudimentary – especially when compared to the adaptive possibilities of today's social media technology. Interaction in 4chan's random imageboard is mediated through a form of publication called "posts", consisting of an image and optional textual comment. The publication of these posts initiates "threads", or conversations. The initial post, that is referred to as the "original post", becomes the visible header of the thread in the website's navigation. Other users interacting with these threads succeeding "replies" which may contain a text, an image, or both.[3]

While this medium doesn't seem particularly innovative, being analogous to many other online spaces, 4chan is quite unique. Unlike most Internet settings, the most conventional form of interaction in 4chan is characterized by extreme levels of openness. Accessing or participating in the interactive dynamics of the website requires nothing other than typing its address on a Internet browser, without the need for registration or the insertion of credentials of any sort. In addition, the practically unbounded thematic inclusiveness of /b/ makes it a place where no sort of expressions may be deemed off-topic or misplaced.

Anonymity in 4chan is not like in other Internet media, in which even anonymous participants are typically marked with identifying elements such as a name or pseudonym. On /b/, anonymous posts carry the "Anonymous" signature – the medium's default mark of authorship. This is the origin of the Publications in this forum are ephemeral, mostly anonymous, and occur at a mind-dazzling rate. According to a study by Bernstein et al. (2011), over 90% of the posts are fully anonymous and threads (conversations) in /b/ last. The median thread on that board had a lifetime of approximately four minutes and spends only five seconds on the first page, where they can catch more users' attention. Another striking feature of that relatively unknown website is the rate of publication: this study measured an average of 35,000

[2]At the time of the website's creation, the URL http://4chan.org/a/ led to the *anime* sub-board, dedicated to Japanese graphical creations. The random board, http://4chan.org/b/, was for everything else. Since that time, other sub-boards were created and removed. Today the website is divided into many other topics9 but the original /a/ and /b/ sub-boards still remain.

[3]The author of a thread's original post is referred to in the replies as "original poster", or OP.

threads and 400,000 posts per day, comparable at the time to Usenet's Big-8 newsgroups (25,000 posts/day) and YouTube (65,000 videos/day). The periods of higher activity were between 5pm and 3am or 4am EST, sustaining the authors' conclusion that the site's demographics are primarily North American. Lastly, the authors' typification of published content is also worth revisiting: themed threads revolving around a specific topic (28%); sharing content for enjoyment or critique (19%); questions, advices and recommendations (10%); sharing or requesting personal information (9%); call for discussion or debate over a topic (8%); request for a valuable item (8%); request for action, usually for *raids* – harassing other websites (7%); meta discussion of the sub-forum itself or playing with the site's mechanics (5%); uncategorized (6%).

Those findings highlight the strong interactive, proactive and reflexive character of that digital settlement. 4channers[4] use the website for collective consultations – questions, advices and recommendations – on often deeply intimate or controversial issues, using the protection of anonymity to engage in debates and forms of self-disclosure that are uncommon in other internet settings. They also see the site as a distributed resource, a way to access the wealth of knowledge and digital items available in the minds and digital storage devices of individual participants. The active component is highlighted in the medium's usage as a platform for launching coordinated action, usually of a conflictive nature – what participants call *raids*: the disruption of other internet settings. Furthermore, a significant amount of posts are related to joint reflexions and meta discussion about the sub-forum, the interaction between media design and human participants.

The aforementioned qualities make this medium very different environment from the world's most known social network site, Facebook. 4chan is barely moderated and interaction is often belligerent and unpleasant. According to Lee Knutilla, the imageboard is a "discordant bricolage of humour, geek cultures, fierce debates, pornography, in–jokes, hyperbolic opinions and general offensiveness" (Knutilla, 2011, n. pag.). Interaction is accompanied by the production and reproduction of digital cultural artifacts, mostly images – natively supported by the website – but also other types of multimedia objects. Participants exchange, store, and often rework those contents, creating a cultural and aesthetic environment in constant transformation due to the extremely fast pace of voluntary symbolic production.

Yet, that culture only emerged, Auerbach claims, with the widespread dissemination of the internet, an expansion that enabled the "first wide-scale collective gathering of those who are alienated, disaffected, voiceless, and just plain unsocialized" (Auer-

[4]A common term used for participants in 4chan. For participants in other anonymous imageboards, also known as *chans, the term channers is often employed.

bach, 2012, n. pag.). This perspective emphasizes the possibilities of marginal and specialized internet contexts of technophilia, digital cultural production and transgressive – often aggressive – behavior for a particular disfranchised segment of society. The fast rate of publication and the diversity of content make its interface opaque, an indecipherable surface at first sight, giving 4chan its unique character.

> In order to conceptualize and theorize the site, these contradictions should not be taken as problems that need to be solved. Instead, the instability should be foregrounded. Piecing together the site's content, interface, user base and moderation we get to the core of 4chan: an experience of contingency.
>
> Knutilla, 2011, n. pag.

As we will see, real time and disorienting contingency is truly at the core of that imageboard and its culture. In this fast-paced, culturally hyper-productive environment, the default signature *Anonymous* became itself a meme, but of a different kind. It was a different sort of "template", one which was not only meant to be impressed on the via the luminescence screen, but to be actively *performed*. Starting as an in-joke, participants started referring to it as if it was a real person (often representing themselves, fellow participants, or the larger collective) with a particular personality, set of perceptual mechanisms, thoughts, and means to act, to whom actions and communications were attributed.

1.1.1 Predecessors

Research on Anonymous, an elusive assemblage characterized by openness to participants, forms of expression, and action, may focus on its many different aspects. Illustrating this variety are the references to very different historical antecedents and predecessors found in the literature on Anonymous. David Auerbach, concerned with the culture of Anonymous – "A-culture" as he calls it – finds those origins in computer-mediated interaction environments with a particular set of characteristics:

> hacker boards like SlashDot and kuro5hin, and Usenet groups like alt.2600, populated not only by computer professionals but by amateurs, troublemakers, and freaks. A fast-moving discourse evolved, with people fighting

> viciously in flame wars over the slightest matters; pranking was a constant pastime. The more antisocial aspects of this behavior— willful, disingenuous provocation and malicious deceit— became known as trolling.
>
> Auerbach, 2012, n. pag.

He also considers the 1980s and '90s geek and hacker circles, BBSes, the early Usenet system, and websites like Fark and Stile Project to be precursors to A-culture.

Focusing on the Anonymous activist formation, the anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2012) traces the origins of what she calls the "spirit of lulz"[5], the collective's devotion to humorous transgression, back to the pre-internet times of critical cultural movements. The kind of disruptive and transgressive aesthetics of those movements are, Coleman claims, a central part of Anonymous. She draws connections between Anonymous and the early 20th century Dada artistic movement, the '50s Situationist political and artistic movement, the '60s Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers[6] and Yippies' Youth International Party,[7] as well as, more recently, The Yes Men[8] from the late '90s. According to Coleman, aesthetic forms of humorous transgression and critique

> serve many purposes, upending the conventions – and highlighting the absurdities – of a political system within which substantive change no longer seems possible, and generating the kind of spectacles that elicit coverage from the mainstream media.
>
> Coleman, 2012, n. pag.

Those pre-internet predecessors share with Anonymous an emphasis on aesthetics, iconic and ironic dimensions of cultural critique and spectacular forms of attention gathering and *détournement*. By actively engaging in the production of media spectacle, Anonymous enters a strong, bi-directional relation with mainstream media organizations. According to Phillips (2012), news reports of the spectacular, technology-enabled actions of Anonymous not only give them visibility, but also frame and

[5] The term *lulz* comes from the corruption of "LOL", the popular internet abbreviation for "laughing out loud", and was usually associated with the ethos of imageboard culture. The term is also used as a common justification for seemingly senseless acts of transgression (e.g. "I did it for the lulz", "4 the lulz").

[6] Direct action and revolutionary art group influenced by anarchism and Dadaism.

[7] A theatrical anti-authoritarian anarchist youth movement.

[8] Culture jamming activists.

reify Anonymous. In turn, that behavior was readily acknowledged by the collective and became instrumental to it, as participants attempt to exploit news media's attentiveness to such issues. Similar exploitation of the sensationalist elements in mainstream media reports had already been identified in Douglas Thomas' study of hacker culture, in particular the early '90s "new school" hackers:

> The media, as well as the public (…) learned to expect the worst from hackers, and as a result, hackers usually offer that image in return, even if their own exploits are no more than harmless pranks.
>
> Thomas, 2002, p.37, cited in Philips, 2012, p. 7

That connection between technological disruption and spectacular aesthetic cultural interventions is also drawn by D. C. Elliott (2009) in his analysis of Anonymous. His focus on high-tech "culture jamming" events led him to identify the CULT OF THE DEAD COW (cDc) computer underground group, formed in 1984, as "spiritual ancestors" to Anonymous. He notes that the group lacked the technological sophistication of today's digital tools and networks (Elliott, 2009, p. 108), relying on text file releases in Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes), zines and pamphlets. Elliott also draws a parallel between Anonymous and two US broadcast signal intrusion incidents during the '80s. The first, known as the Captain Midnight HBO Incident, took place on April27, 1986, when a satellite TV dealer in Florida jammed HBO's broadcast "in protest against HBO's recent policy of raising fees and introducing scrambling equipment" (ibid., p. 104), replacing HBO's signal with the following message for four and a half minutes:

> FROM CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT
> $12.95/MONTH ? NO WAY !
> [SHOWTIME/MOVIE CHANNEL BEWARE!]

The second signal intrusion, which became known as the Max Headroom Incident, took place in November 22, 1987, in Chicago, Illinois. The intrusion affected first the WGN-TV's broadcast of News At Nine, replacing the original signal with a buzzing sound and an "image of a man dressed as cult TV character Max Headroom" for twenty seconds, and later during WTTW11's broadcast of Doctor Who:

> This time, he appeared with synchronized audio, speaking in cryptic phrases, parodying Coke's advertising slogan 'Catch The Wave' while holding a Pepsi can, making a number of surreal references to the Chicago Tribune before being seen with his buttocks exposed, being spanked with a flyswatter by an unidentified accomplice, while exclaiming 'They're coming to get me!'
>
> Elliott, ibid.

For Elliott, both these incidents are clear antecedents and precursors of the "digital manipulations" of Anonymous and its forms of "technologised resistance" that are highly dependent on "the processing of cultural material" (Elliot, 2009, pp. 103-4).

Focused on disruptive technological tools, Molly Sauter analyzed the distributed denial of service (DDOS) tactics employed by Anonymous in Operation Payback, drawing similarities between Anonymous and groups like cDc, and Hacktivismo. She also argues that those tactics are an expansion of "the DDOS tactics used by earlier groups in the 1990s" (Sauter, 2013, p. 2), namely by the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) and the electrohippies. Analogous to Anonymous, they employed those tactics

> to draw popular attention to an issue and to generate public debate but also to directly engage with the target in a form of direct action. The DDOS was viewed as an auxiliary political act (…) In this sense, it was relatively unimportant to groups such as the EDT whether a given action was "successful," that is, whether it brought down a site (…) The number of participants and the amount of media coverage the action attracted were most relevant to a judgment of 'success' or 'failure' (…)
>
> Sauter, ibid., p. 6-7

Whereas the connections are evident, Sauter identifies some of the major distinctions between Anonymous' activism and that of its predecessors from the '90s. According to her, those predecessors faced two main obstacles for attracting participants. First, they were forced to make use of limited platforms such as specialized mailing lists and message boards for recruitment. The digital ecology of the internet changed drastically: popular internet sites already existed – e.g. the Yahoo search engine – and even some services that resemble today's social media sites – e.g. Tripod, Geocities, USENET – but they were mostly disconnected and had much smaller user bases when compared to giants like Google, Facebook and Twitter. Secondly, the cultural and linguistic references used by those activists tended to be professionalized and sometimes alienating, far removed from the circuits, icons and motifs of popular culture. The iconography and discourse of Anonymous, on the other hand, seems to use the language of the internet: it is adjusted, in style and content, to linguistic and cultural references shared by the great majority of young people living in technologically advanced countries.

Finally, Marco Deseriis (2013) sees important connections between Anonymous and the luddites in the shared goal of reducing the productivity of labor and capital through the targeting of specific kinds of machines, the reliance on collective pseu-

donyms – what he terms “multiple-use names” – and the aggregation of seemingly disjointed dissent within a common discursive space.

The identification of predecessors in the academic literature is useful for situating Anonymous within social history. It also enables the introduction of the main themes surrounding this body of research, namely media design strategies, communication, material culture, transgression, activism, pranks, and media baiting. A discussion of other approaches to this internet phenomenon is the main focus of the rest of the chapter.

1.2 Digital Culture Processor

Recently, anonymous internet settings have become the target of various comments, academic analyses and news reports. Those accounts tend to highlight the negative dimensions of those settings, usually connecting online anonymity to cyberbullying and cyberstalking, violations of privacy, or racist, misogynist and ableist behaviors. Anonymous imageboards adhere to a minimal moderation policy as an affirmation of freedom of speech, the guiding principle in the design history of that medium – a theme that will occupy parts of chapter 4. That principle is constantly put to test, which leads to frequent conflictive escalations. Allegedly motivated by the amusement that results from the ongoing disruptive attempts and subsequent emotional responses – amusement of those who actively participate in it as well as that of their audiences – the prevalence of that kind of behavior resulted in a culture of general expressive aggression and offense. That conflictive stance is so preponderant that it is became a strong component of the representations about, and the expected behavior of, imageboard users. The impacts caused by external incursions have carried such representations outside the anonymous internet ecology. But that freedom of speech is itself the result of a ongoing reflexive process. Users constantly test its limits by publishing illegal or highly controversial contents that lead the lenient moderators of 4chan to the (often) futile task of trying to ban participants from a website where user registration is not required (it is not even an available option except for staff). There is a permanent standoff between channers and those concerned in keeping the imageboard from being shutdown for hosting illegal content or activi-

ties. Conflict escalations are very frequent and even channers' favourite sites are not safe from the disruptive activities of their own users.

The aggressive or non-supportive behavior sometimes takes a more elaborate form: *trolling*.[9] According to Gabriella Coleman, trolling entails "often obnoxious, occasionally humorous and at times terrifying" acts carried by isolated individuals, disperse crowds, or in some extreme cases, internet trolling groups, specialized in "an unpredictable combination of trickery, defilement and deception" (Coleman, 2013, p. 4).

In imageboards, trolling is often compared to a form of art, involving cunning strategies of dissimulation. In troll parlance, these attacks often start with deliberate deployment of a "bait", which often takes the form of deliberately absurd or shocking expressions – sometimes indiscernible from hate speech – with the objective of triggering a defensive, emotional, or strongly reactive response from its target. Once the target engages, that response itself is already a victory for the troll and an indication of the possibility of a continued, possibly escalating, interaction. There is a popular internet expression, particularly relevant in anonymous internet settings, that seeks to render those mechanisms visible and suggests outright dismissal as the optimal response: *do not feed the trolls*. Trolls, in search for entertainment at the expense of others and an audience, often behave like hunting packs: a vulnerable "prey" is spotted, a signal is sent to their base camps searching for an audience whose elements may actively join the attack. They may also use whatever resources available to find a target's real name, physical address, phone number, and other personal information (a practice known as *doxxing*). This sometimes is followed by other forms of harassment, such as phone calls and having huge amounts of pizzas delivered to their homes (Knuttila, 2011, n. pag.).

While there are many negative aspects associated with the anonymous internet, they are not by any means circumscribed to that context. On the contrary, all of the negative behaviors commentators attribute to online anonymity (e.g. racism and misogyny) are pervasive and can be identified, even if in dissimulated forms, in all sorts of social contexts. Thus, to approach internet anonymity with an exclusive focus on on morally charged issues only strengthens that negative bias and prevents the exploration of its other aspects. Trying to overcome this reductionist stance, Elliott addresses the cultural practices of imageboards, claiming that "4chan represents something extremely new in terms of electronic community and globalised culture": a "worldwide culture processor, devouring anything that the users

[9]The term "troll" is internet slang for individuals who engage in disruptive online behavior aimed at provoking emotional responses from users or interrupt the normal forms of interaction usually with the purpose of amusement.

feed into it, and converting the material into recontextualised components that are subsequently integrated into 4chan's synthetic language" (Elliott, 2009., p. 98).

Coleman also identifies this discursive peculiarity at the written level, claiming that written communication in /b/ "seems to have reduced English to a bevy of vicious epithets, sneers, and text-message abbreviations" (Coleman, 2012). However, the hyperactive and playful lexical transformations far exceed the sphere of written language alone. That activity, according to Elliott, gave birth to "a strange new language built on the display — and redisplay — of recontextualised, replicated media artifacts", based mostly on collage, pastiche and satire which, driven by the immediacy of digital networks and devices, allows "for the almost instantaneous appropriation of new cultural artifacts that could be injected into 4chan's endlessly changing lexicon" (Elliott, 2009, p. 97). Mendoza also points to that changing signifying and culture processing function of 4chan. He claims that, despite the importance of understanding this online medium to provide an account of contemporary culture, the medium itself is an autonomy project and "requires a stage of disorientation because its method is continuously to produce and evolve a language of its own" (Mendoza, 2011, p. 4). One of the most striking features of anonymous boards is indeed their "disorienting" lexicon, forming a dialect that was exclusive to those obscure internet settings – at least when Elliott was writing about it. This "disorientation" is also related to cultural criticism and the knowledge barriers that mediate access to that sign economy itself. As Halpin notices, interaction relies on

> a dialect based on the perversion of popular culture. This new Thieves' Cant is purposely obscured from outsiders (…) [constituting a] virtual parlour dialogue that usually resembles some humorous and perverse version of a salon (…) [where] the entire conversation quickly becomes an addictive postmodern pastiche of videos, images, links and text that stretches anyone's cognitive limits.
>
> Halpin, 2012, p. 22.

This sign economy, sustained by the constant creation of digital artifacts, has particular valuation systems mostly based on rarity and affective, aesthetic and iconic values. Certain cultural objects acquire a special status of *memes* – important referents in this economy that are frequently used as interaction templates – through their collective and distributed inscription into numerous digital artifacts. The expression "internet memes" usually refers to those phrasal or visual templates based on popular culture – often famous cultural products as blockbuster feature films or popular TV shows, but also to little known videos and games that became prominent in that contingent ongoing exchange. As a *emic* category, it was used by participants for collective self-reflexive assessments of their own forms of interaction. Again,

while internet memes became a known cultural genre, easily identifiable in the mainstream global social media cultures, they were already the preferred "method", to use Mendoza's terminology, of participation in anonymous imageboards. Those usually comic – but sometimes part of complex forms of aesthetic metacriticism – multimedia objects contain a *surplus* enjoyment value, working as a currency. They offer a quick way of anchoring discourse and different cultural references in digital multimedia objects, allowing for extremely fast mutual affection processes that can immediately evoke particular domains of meaning and symbolic universes.

A highly reflexive and unstable character results from those forms of communication that constantly takes as its object the complexities of the relation between individuals and collectives. That character renders visible many of the dynamics that are often hard to identify in more stable collectives and has been identified by several researchers. Elliott (2009), who approached Anonymous from the perspective of a globalized material culture, describes 4chan as a world where geography, identity and class dissolve in the visual and textual artifacts that flow through the website. In a similar tone, David Auerbach points to the fact that 4chan's /b/ subforum consisted in "the first heavily populated social space in which traditional relations between the individual and the group are overturned", where "the force of anonymity, combined with the inability to assert one's own particularity, facilitate the leveling of individual differences even in a large collective" (Auerbach, 2012, n. pag.). Yet, personal information sharing within an anonymous digital space works against that leveling of individual differences. Psychologists studying anonymous behavior online came to the conclusion that

> [when] social category membership information is known and salient, intergroup differences may be highlighted and actually become accentuated in the relatively anonymous context of CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] compared to the more individuated and interpersonal setting of FtF [Face to Face].
>
> Spears et al., 2002, pp. 557-8

To counter this, and to enforce effective anonymity, the exposure of individual information is considered a violation of the prevailing imageboard ethos. Participants take seriously the task of refraining from disclosing personal information while interacting. Warnings, ridicule or even punishment through harassment are the common responses to publications that revolve mostly around its author. Excluded from that are forms of self-disclosure that are deemed to contribute in some way to the debate and reflexion – even though such assessments are themselves subjugated to divergent criteria. Those interaction rules preserve the anti-statutory ethos and prevent individuals from standing out from the indistinct collective. Nevertheless,

the highly competitive character of those environments, which rely on individual expression and contribution, means this is an internal differentiated site for multiple connections. Collective anonymity is enforced and upheld in conjunction with a very high levels of individual creativity and as a way to surpass individual limitations. That puts anonymous imageboards in opposition to homogenizing crowd effects. In the words of Coleman:

> even as Anons collectively enforce a prohibition against seeking personal fame, they do not suppress individuality. Anonymous is not a united front, but a hydra, a rhizome, comprising numerous different networks and working groups that are often at odds with one another. (…) even if Anons don't always agree about what is being done under the auspices of Anonymous, they tend to respect the fact that anyone can assume the moniker.
>
> Coleman, 2012, n. pag.

Anonymous is enacted through efforts to escape ascribed identities. Nevertheless, as Weidmann argues, it also takes the form of "a certain 'collective identity' (in the form of shared values or even a political agenda)" (Weidmann, 2014, p. 3). For Weidemann, this paradox is explained by the primacy of affect in detriment of *a priori* identity elements: she claims that "manifestations [of a collective identity] are rather the outcome of circular affection within a particular infrastructure than the other way around" (ibid.). Those dynamic relations between social formations, collective identity, infrastructures and self-referentiality are central for the arguments in this thesis.

When trying to make sense of Anonymous, and of the processes that concur in the formation of a symbol that stands for transgression and political dissent with a global reach, the concept of identity is problematic. Said concept fails to grasp the unstable connections of certain contemporary social phenomena, particularly one characterized by highly contingent "openness" to individual participants, causes and methods. Marco Deseriis's analysis of the "multiple-use name" and "improper name" – open reputation systems designed to be freely appropriated (Deseriis, 2012) – is useful for understanding connections such as those behind Anonymous. Those notions point to a signifying function that does not overlap with with collective identities, despite the complementarity. Participants in distributed actions under those names are endowed with anonymity while maintaining the ability of mutual recognition and of accumulating/mobilizing symbolic power outside institutional frameworks. Those names are fundamental for certain historical processes of subjectification. The title of this thesis, "Making a name for Anonymous", seeks to capture my main objective: to understand the (re)configurations of the appropriation of the "improper name" *Anonymous* and their transformations.

1.3 Boundaries and Operational Organization

Anonymous mostly relies on publicly available communication infrastructures on the internet. The anonymous imageboards, and in particular 4chan's /b/ board, were central hubs within that internet culture's digital media ecology – consisting of other less known *chans (textboards and imageboards), websites, wikis, forums, social media sites, and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) servers. The Anonymous branded IRC servers host a variety of channels which "have hundreds of people on them chatting in the strange cant of 4chan, with various channels existing for different languages such as French and Spanish" (Halpin, 2012, p. 26). Coleman's ethnographic work gave special attention to IRC, which allowed her to observe the unfolding of real-time communication and coordination activities. IRC enabled rapid but more organized interaction through the use of (optionally stable) handles and public or private channels ("chat rooms"). Those servers, she argues, functioned "like an online social club open 24 hours a day", a place "where lulzy humour flourishes and intimate bonds of fellowship are formed" (Coleman, 2013, p. 12).

But the activities of Anonymous are by no means restricted to these platforms. Popular social media sites, e.g. Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook, and even dedicated web pages are also used for communication, particularly the statements meant for the general public. Other digital platforms such as Scibd, The Pirate Bay, Pastebin, and even Wikileaks are employed for the distribution of legally or illegally obtained data (Jarvis, 2014, p. 9). Those media are also used by particular audiences of Anonymous activities, such as the journalists who cover the movements of the collective.

The generalized used of pseudonyms outside imageboards results in circles of recognition, reputation building, and internal hierarchies (Sell, 2013, p. 12). Technical expertise tends to support a greater authority of opinion, which contradicts the culture's anti-hierarchical ideals of openness. Nevertheless, those skilled experts "don't erect entrance barriers nor control the evolution of Anonymous" (Coleman, 2012, n. pag.). As Coleman argues,

> despite the lack of stable hierarchy some Anons are more active and influential than others. Anonymous abides by a particular strain of meritocratic populism, with highly motivated individuals or groups extending its networked architecture by contributing time, labor, and attention to existing enterprises or by starting their own as they see fit.
>
> Ibid., n. pag.

They may emerge as elites who develop, maintain and control the technical resources used by participants, "but these elites have erected no formal barriers to participation, such as initiation guidelines or screening processes, and ethical norms tend to be established consensually and enforced by all" (ibid.). Those anons

> build and configure technology at work and for fun, communicate and collaborate copiously with one another using these technologies, and, most significant, derive and express deep pleasure and forms of value by inhabiting technology.
>
> Coleman, 2011, p. 512

In addition, knowledge about digital technologies, how to use them in a safe and efficient way – with emphasis on maximizing internet anonymity – is conveyed within those networks "where they coordinate their actions and in so doing perhaps also make geeks of those participants who decide to don the mask of anonymity" (ibid., p. 516).

The symbolic, technological, social and cultural openness of Anonymous results in a high degree of heterogeneity and the typical aggressiveness is constantly producing internal differentiation and divergence – often leading to sectarianism. A very illustrative example is the purism of those who believe the original ethos of anonymous imageboard is not reconcilable with any forms of activism or orientations towards social justice. They reserve terms such as "white knight", "moralfag" or "SJW" (Social Justice Warrior), used with a derogatory connotation, for those who direct the anonymous hordes in the pursuit of alleged noble causes or the common good. As I mentioned earlier, anonymous imageboards like 4chan do not rely on user registration – which would result in the need of a pair of credentials to access the website – and most of their contents have no identity marks. Those elements, anonymity and the lack of formal barriers to participation, are traits that are transversal to the different configurations of Anonymous. Heterogeneity in this collective follows divisions along many axes, and it also may be found within the activist oriented sectors of Anonymous.

While it is possible to identify core, transversal values, there is diversity in terms of strategies, tactics, goals, and communicational infrastructures. For instance, some anons affiliated with Project Chanology are critical of cyber-attacks, detaching themselves from the Anonymous networks that promoted them (Coleman, 2013, p. 6). Diversity and obfuscation mean it is hard to precisely delimit Anonymous as anything other than the context of given indexical and iconic connections – its signs and genres. Those considerations, or similar ones, led Jarvis to conceptualize Anonymous as a *meme-complex*. His perspective, informed by communication science and

memetics, understands internal differentiation as a result of that complex and its evolution: despite the similar public face, different networks that borrow from the Anonymous meme-complex are formed around new "memes or tactical practices", which result in "new forms of mimicry and remixing" (Jarvis, 2014, p. 7). As a consequence, an extensive knowledge of the Anonymous' tropes and symbolic universes is extremely important, signaling membership and acting both as an inclusion and exclusion mechanism. As Elliott notes, participation in Anonymous is participation in its sign culture (2009, p. 106), depending solely on a "willingness to participate" and rendering both its user base and general directions extremely unstable (*ibid.*, p. 109). For Jarvis, this reveals the mass inclusion logic of Anonymous: by signaling membership through mimicry or remixing, "anyone can be 'Anonymous' and adopt portions of the meme-complex" (Jarvis, 2014, p. 6). Coleman also points out that logic, when claiming that, "to be part of Anonymous, one need simply self-identify as Anonymous":

> No single group or individual can dictate the use of the name or iconography of Anonymous, much less claim legal ownership of its names, icons and actions. It has now become the quintessential anti-brand brand. Naturally, this has helped Anonymous spread across the globe.
>
> Coleman, 2013, p. 12

For Coleman, one of the most important features of Anonymous is its unpredictability, mutability, and dynamism. Those features are related to its lack of formal organization: participants may work as independent lone wolves, in small teams or, in large-scale operations, massive swarms (ibid.). Anonymous thus takes the form of an ever changing assemblage, finding new causes, targets and, as Elliott states, "new ways to fuse art, culture, technology and politics" (Elliott, 2009, p. 109). "The symbols and practices they share and use as tools of publicity" are, according to Jarvis, the sole element that consistently links the different Anonymous actors and agents (Jarvis, 2014, pp. 6-7). The widespread dissemination of the (narrow) association between Anonymous and a loosely bound network of skilled computer hackers results, according to Coleman, from the current mass media's obsession with digital media, cyber-attacks, infiltrations and leaks. Participation in Anonymous is fluid and highly dependent on individual contribution, taking many different forms. Even the activist branch of Anonymous, according to Coleman, reflects this diversity by including "hard-core hackers as well as people who contribute by editing videos, penning manifestos, or publicizing actions" (Coleman, 2012, n. pag.). Anonymous relies on hackers, programmers, security experts and systems administrators to build and maintain communication infrastructures and to infiltrate information systems in or-

der to gather information. Nonetheless, despite the dominant representation as *hacktivists*,

> individuals without technical skills can participate by collectively writing press communiqués, giving media interviews on IRC, designing propaganda posters, editing videos and mining information that is publicly available but difficult to access.
>
> Coleman, 2013, p. 12

For Anonymous, Jarvis claims, the digital networks of the internet are not only a space of organization and autonomy but also the site of protest and subversive action (Jarvis, 2014, p. 12). The tactics employed by Anonymous are diverse and heavily dependent on anonymity and mediated communication. Those tactics "include digital sit-ins (DoS attacks), social engineering, 'dox' (information gathering and distribution), digital graffiti [another term for website defacement], technical hacking, and trolling" (ibid., p. 13).

For all this, "Anonymous has attracted significant attention, sometimes admiration and sometimes fear" (Coleman, 2013, p. 13). This leads Sauter to the conclusion that the evolution of Anontmous "should be understood not as unique events but as an evolution in digital activist tactics, particularly in the realms of media manipulation, recruitment, and participant impact":

> Whereas earlier actions by groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) typically consisted of an activist core organizing a relatively small population of other media activists, artists, and special interest groups, Anonymous pushed a horizontal structure that opened the tools and mechanisms of protest organizing and action to the population of the Internet at large.
>
> Sauter, 2013, p. 2

Coleman suggests that, while there are proactive interventions such as exploring security vulnerabilities ad leaking sensitive information, operations tend to have a reactive or supportive character: "existing local, regional and international events and causes can trigger action from Anonymous" (Coleman, 2013, p. 12). Other social conflict mobilizations, such as the Iranian Green Revolution, the 15-M movement in Spain, the Middle Eastern and Northern African unrest – known as the Arab Spring – and the Occupy movement (ibid., pp. 3, 6) are examples which counted with the help of the Anonymous activists. That reactive tendency is in the basis of the "processual model" of Anonymous constructed by Jarvis. It integrates five different circles, related to the moments or stages of an operation:

> 1) Internal communication: the network identifies a target, actors decide whether to join an operation, and the tactics are coordinated;
> 2) Meme-complex: creation of publicity materials via mimicry and remixing;
> 3) External communication outlets: public notification of operation progress in real time (through open networks such as Twitter);
> 4) Media, academics, and citizens: support the spread and replication of the meme-complex (We are Anonymous);
> 5) Operation Target responses: which is optional and may be done through communicative engagement (public, through mass media, or private direct contact with Anonymous), direct attacks to Anonymous networks (DDoS attacks, Viruses, etc). At this point, the network may respond to the target responses, which means a return to the first stage, closing the circle.
>
> Jarvis, 2014, p. 9

In spite of the constant media coverage of hacking stunts performed by anons in ever increasing parts of the world, Anonymous lacks the human, financial, and organizational resources that state-supported hacking may mobilize in order to build dedicated teams for recruitment, coordination, and the development of sophisticated tools such as military-grade software (Coleman, 2013, p. 3). The same cannot be said about notorious absentees from said constant reporting: the unknown organizations that integrate the shady world of criminal, profit driven black-hat activities, or those that develop and sell intrusion and surveillance capabilities to governments and corporations. Hacking Team and Gamma Group being examples of recently exposed commercial organizations of that latter sort. The reason behind this visibility is Anonymous' willingness to seek the limelight and capture attention, a participatory character and conflictive rhetoric which put it on par with other social conflict actors, and the strong aesthetics: "its maverick image and transgressive antics" (ibid., p. 13).

That news media coverage is also related to a recent shift in the contemporary informational and media ecology, namely the relationship between news media, reporters, and sources. With the advent of the internet and its affordances in terms of anonymity, the proliferation of anonymous sources and the practice of "leaking" information have become increasingly important for both journalism and activists. As Saskia Sell claims, from a journalistic perspective, there is a connection between anonymity and the possibility of engaging with the public sphere. She endorses the possibilities of anonymity for journalism and answers the criticisms on both the use of anonymous sources and the possibility of public utterances under the protection of anonimity:

> By claiming to provide more security for the allegedly silent victims of public utterances, the provision of security for those who dare not to be silent in pub-

> lic is at stake, e.g. whistleblowers or political activists who would face severe punishment if their identities were disclosed. The risk of silencing those who bring in vital and at times controversial or even undesirable argumentation into the public discourse is higher than the risk of exposing someone to defamatory trolling under the anonymizing veil of untraceable digital communication. Even the inclusion of unwanted arguments or utterances into the public sphere can provide positive outcomes – be it only the possibility to publicly oppose them. By denying access to the public sphere, by ignoring unwanted positions, one does not necessarily get rid of them. On the contrary, this could rather lead to fragmentation and radicalization within society and the public sphere. By giving people a chance to utter their thoughts without the barriers of social desirability, others receive the chance to recognize and oppose unwanted claims or ideologies.
>
> Sell, 2013, pp. 8-9

That observation introduces an important reflection: anonymous internet settings have also been associated with heavy trolling, which often integrated multiple forms of aggression, discriminatory discourse, forms of hate speech and even behaviors that could be classified as bullying and stalking. While those extreme cases are out of the scope of my research, I invite the reader to critically reflect on Sell's stance – despite her claims and reasoning, the amount of suffering caused by certain online behaviors should not be taken slightly. Those negative dynamics, in which the bodily and the emotional play central roles, are particularly interesting for a critical perspective based on gender and race relations. Nevertheless, I believe those issues deserve a fully focused research effort instead of the marginal exploration I could try to fit in my dissertation. To glance over subjects like those would do no favor to a better understanding of the Anonymous collective nor to the "silent victims" of that kind of behavior.

Most analytical sketches and blueprints aptly describe the morphological boundaries and forms of organization of Anonymous. Nevertheless, those scholarly works tend to address the present shape of Anonymous without providing an account of the transformations in the mediated processes that culminated in that morphology. Weidemann, who also focuses on anonymous digital sociality, argues that "within the infrastructure of 4chan, users simultaneously observe both the content of others' posts and what others are *doing*: their movements on the screen, the rhythms of their activities in posting anything, writing words or sentences, posting pictures or videos". Thus, the dispersion of participants goes hand in hand with the "shared and simultaneous perception of one another" (Weidemann, 2014, p. 7). Those problematics seem to insert her analysis of Anonymous in a classical interpretative sociological approach based on phenomenological social theory. Nevertheless, the latter tradition is highly associated with the representational and symbolic dimension of social life.

Weidemann's perspective – inspired by the spontaneous circular reaction and the mutual affection of crowds and swarms identified by Herbert Blumer (1946) and Eugene Thacker (2004a, 2004b), as well as Gabriel Tarde's ([1901] 1969) reflections on mediated relation of publics – seeks to go against that framework by addressing Anonymous through an analysis of non-representational and non-symbolic collective behavior.

Others have characterized Anonymous as a form of digital subjectivity. For Mitchell, for instance, there is a novel psychoanalytic dimension in Anonymous which entails a "different form of subjectivation" (Mitchell, 2013, n. pag.). Anonymous' existence as an action oriented network is singular, according to the author, representing "a qualitative departure from a politics based on identity" that points to the possibility to "draw broader conclusions regarding the nature of identity and political action" (Mitchell, 2013, n. pag.). From a very different theoretical standpoint, Halpin claims that the collapse of consumerist networked individualism, accelerated in the recent crisis of capitalism, does not result in "the end of subjectivity" but in the rise of "a new form of collective subjectivity without individual identity" (Halpin, 2012, p. 21). Following those lines of reasoning, Felix Stalder (2013) claims Anonymous is an example of digital swarming which, in his view, is a voluntary act and, as such, it is not opposed to conceptions of the acting subject.

Another explanatory void in academic literature is related to the exaggeration of the negative in imageboard cultures, namely the mostly exclusive focus on trolling and aggressiveness, which is often put in stark contrast to the idealist ethos of their subsequent activist developments. An example of this trend can be found in the work of Jarvis, which qualifies the 4chan imageboard as a "non-supportive environment", attributing the cultural production to "(real or imagined) disagreement rather than cooperation" (Jarvis, 2014, p. 5). Despite frequent aggressive conduct, competition, and disagreement, I consider Jarvis' depiction of 4chan to be overly asocial. As Knutilla writes, "/b/'s enigmatic in–jokes, disparaging language, distressing gory images and unbound arguments are often matched with glimpses of astute political discussion, heartfelt moments of virtual friendship and sparkling banter" (2011, n. pag.). It is important thus also important to better understand what are the particularities of collaboration and solidarity in anonymous imageboards.

1.4 Conclusion

The existing literature on Anonymous, despite its achievements, nuances, and insights, seems to leave unanswered some questions about the complex social dynamics behind this social formation. Most authors, with some notable exceptions, seem to neglect the historical development of Anonymous: the connections traced to its origins in anonymous imageboard cultures are presented as little more than the result of a mere accident. The lack of said connections strike me as bizarre: the ubiquity of user control through registration and identification is itself a sign of the exceptional character of those anonymous media. My research strategy starts with the history of media design strategies and adoption behind English speaking anonymous imageboards. My goal is not to produce a recollection or timeline of technical decisions and feature implementations but to understand the interaction between design strategies and digital culture, of media adoption and forms of appropriation.

Technologically inclined people, or what Coleman calls “geeks”, are a very important component of those who participate in Anonymous. She claims that they engage in a very close relation with technology that goes beyond the instrumental, reaching existential implications. I content that these individuals draw meaning not solely, or even particularly, from technology itself – at least not more than the average teenager in the most technologically advanced contexts – but from transforming relationships with the social world around them and, perhaps more importantly, with themselves, through transgressive experiments with digital technologies. Those aspects, and how they help to understand how Anonymous relies on both digital systems, bodies of knowledge, skills and technologies of the self – the relations between digital objects and subjectification processes. Those relations that are key elements for my research are relatively unexplored in the existing literature.

Another important aspect that is relatively absent from the literature is how Anonymous is influenced from its exterior. The strength of this influence is such that it led Jarvis to consider participation in the circulation of the *memes* associated with the collective the sole condition to be a part of it, regardless of the (supportive or antagonistic) attitude. I think this affirmation, which implies that everyone who even mentions or comes into contact with those signs is immediately part of it, is an exaggeration. Furthermore, it neglects that anonymity itself is the acknowledge condition for participation. Nevertheless, I concur that both positive and negative coverage does provide Anonymous with “legitimacy” (Jarvis, 2014, p. 8) if by that term we understand its existence as social reality and its status as an acting subject.

That particular form of enactment is also one of the main themes of my research. To trace the processes that originated this social formation, I followed complex forms of influence and interaction that cut across very different media ecologies. I argue that those dynamics are not only related to spectacular forms of attention grabbing, cycles of augmentation and feedback, and digital forms of popular culture appropriation, but also to the exploitation of the "gaps" or disconnections between spheres of knowledge and visibility, signifying and classificatory systems, moral economies, and the infrastructures of media ecologies.

Most research on this collective recognizes the cultural particularities of imageboard culture. Nevertheless, those specific digital multimedia forms of expression are – increasingly – associated with (globalized) popular internet culture at large. That relationship between communicative dynamics and the formation of this collective is also one of the main concerns guiding my research. Jarvis uses the notion of meme-complex in order to understand the "networking" of different material, social, and semiotic networks. In order to avoid lumping together all these dimensions under the notion of *meme*, I turn to other theoretical traditions, mostly inspired in semiotics, that provide greater insights for the analysis of digital forms of influence and representation.

From a sociological perspective, this collective is structured by an interesting and mostly unexplored opposition between the positions of Weidemann and other analysts that have studied Anonymous. While most tend to focus on its status as a symbol for an acting, or activist, subject, Weidemann claims the most defining characteristic of Anonymous is its material and affective dimensions, thus refraining from considerations about symbolism, language and subjectivity. That confrontation, I claim, is also the site for contention within the collective itself. Some anons believed the collective should remain tied to simple and immediate search for laughs and (mostly expressive) transgression and circular reaction that characterized its inception while others have pushed for the embrace of ethical causes, structured ideals, social-contention and activism.

One of the reasons that drew me to study the history of Anonymous from its early stages was to anchor my analysis of the collective in contemporary digital cultural and social forms. Moreover, the mediated and obfuscated character of online interaction renders visible the *thingness* of digital culture – the reliance on the digital objects that circulate through mediated and communicational practices. The sociotechnical dynamics surrounding this collective seem to pose important challenges to research practice in theoretical and methodological terms. The seemingly contradictory perspectives on immediate reflex-like circularity, which is not symbolically mediated, is also central issue for politics, particularly the component of representa-

tion. Political theory tends to ground subjectivity in ideology, which belongs in the realm of the symbolic. Weidemann's analysis suggest, on the contrary, that what is important for Anonymous are the temporalities, rhythms, and other non-symbolic patterns of collective activity. In order to integrate those views and the valuable insights they provide for a sociological conceptualization of Anonymous, my dissertation turns to social theory that privileges non-symbolic, material and affective dimensions of social life to rethink digital relations, objects and subjects.

Science and technology studies (STS) provide interesting conceptual and methodological frameworks for such an inquiry – particularly the works of Serres, the phenomenological sociology of Knorr Cetina, and Actor-Network Theory and its emphasis on material semiotics as developed by Latour , Law and Callon. To complement that analysis I also engage in a constructive debate with Foucault and Deleuze, thinkers associated with what is often termed "poststructuralist" and "continental" philosophy. My thesis puts Anonymous in relation with an historical and sociological account focused on the relation between digital media design, discursive and audiovisual formations, and contemporary social collectives.

Tracing the origins of the practices that gave birth to Anonymous as both a collective and a platform for subjectification, particularly their semiotic (re)processing dimension, truly makes evident the material constrains on this sort of mediated dynamics. This, in turn, and as we shall see, is an effort to move away from mystifying notions related to "disembodied" collectives, opening the analysis of digital culture to social, semiotic, and material contingency – thus to the possibility of a historical approach to the production of objects and discourses.

Chapter 2. Subjects, Objects, Collectives

2.1 Introduction

> It is hard to believe that we still have to absorb the same types of actors, the same number of entities, the same profiles of beings, and the same modes of existence into the same types of collectives as Comte, Durkheim, Weber, or Parson, especially after science and technology have massively multiplied the participants to be cooked in the melting pot.
>
> Latour, 2005, p. 260

My main research objective is to study the transformations of Anonymous as a plural digital subjectification platform which culminated in a modality of action that challenges contemporary power relations. That analysis cuts across hybrid structures, both social and technical, that associate technological devices, digital networks and artifacts, and skills associated with cultural and technological experimentalism on the internet. Nevertheless, in addition to the technological elements (I reserve a broader meaning to the term *technical*), I also address the role of symbolism and myth in those digital (sub)cultural practices.

In this chapter, my main goal is to situate the work within the field of social sciences and to provide the analytical and theoretical frameworks for inquiry. It begins with general epistemological and ontological considerations that stem from the sociology of knowledge and moves to address the concepts related to the study of collective behavior. Finally, it connects the insights of other scholars and my own reflections in a

theoretical synthesis about the study of digital cultures, integrating both collective dynamics and subjectification, that will guide this dissertation.

2.2 Sociologies of Knowledge

In their analysis of different research traditions, Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) advance the notion of *inquiry paradigms*: particular configurations of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that guide "legitimate inquiry" and define its limits. The following section is a synthetic reflection on social constructionism and other theoretical traditions and developments. Its goal is to delineate a framework that will inform both the research strategy and posterior empirical analysis.

2.2.1 Social Constructionism and Beyond: Materiality and Semiosis

For social constructionists, realities and objects are constructed (created, known and institutionalized) through social interaction. In *The Social Construction of Reality,* Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) reflect on the processes of institutionalization and the construction of social roles. Those processes, they claim, occur when there is reciprocal typification of frequent acts by particular kinds of actors – the relation between acts and actors is typified. Social reality and the shared life-world (*lebenswelt*) of socialized individuals is thus seen as an intersubjective construction. Action is considered from the perspective of its meaningfulness within the *stock of knowledge*, or the universe of meanings, actors have access to. In that perspective,

processes of typification and institutionalization are the result of routine. Said processes are considered a natural tendency in human behavior since they allow a psychological relief from the need of problematic choices – and even reduce their occurrence. Orientation and specialization of activities prevent, those scholars claim, the tensions resulting from man's undirected drives that, unlike animal instinct, are flexible and thus result in unstable social environments.

To illustrate their point, Berger and Luckmann sketch a hypothetical situation based on two isolated individuals who observe and interpret each other's actions while being aware of this reciprocity. The identification of patterns would allow each individual to mentally assimilate the other's role as a behavioral model, in the face of which he plans his own behavior. *Routine* results from this mutual adaptation, requiring a relatively low level of attention and facilitating the division of labor. The existence of routine actions is also the precondition for the emergence of innovations that require a higher level of attention. Those divisions and innovations form the basis for new habits, expanding the common ground to both individuals. Thus, a social world is constructed. The domains of frequent situations – like work, sexuality and territoriality – are the most typified.

Berger and Luckmann continue their thought experiment by arguing that, for institutionalization to acquire its historical character, a third individual must join the group. The proto-institutions, transparent in their meanings and easily manipulated by the first two individuals, would appear to the newcomer as objective realities, as Durkheimian *facts* – exterior and coercive. They also appear opaque because individuals can no longer introspectively understand the meaningful processes that produced social institutions – said processes are no longer accessible through memory. That historical quality leads to the naturalization of social constructions and their subsequent taken-for-granted status. The social world is thus presented by these scholars as a human product, which acquires an objective character through processes of objectivation.

For constructionists, individuals find the social world as legacy and tradition but they simultaneously act upon it by interpreting it. It is at this interpretative level that the institutional order is legitimated. That order is not necessarily characterized by a perfectly integrated or functional unity since social reality is divided in spheres of activity. For Berger and Luckmann, there is no reason to assume functional integration or logical coherence in different institutionalization processes and behavioral fields. Nevertheless, the meanings associated to them tend to be relatively consistent in time. Such continuity is deemed to result from autobiographical narratives, reflexive processes that adjust the meanings of consecutive moments and articulate past and present experience. Sharing those meanings with others through

common biographical integration accentuates that tendency. The consequence of those articulated narrative processes is a coherent *lebenswelt*. Language is thus the basis for legitimacy and logic of objectified social worlds: the socialized individual "knows" the social world as a coherent unity and acts in conformity to that knowledge. In the work of Berger and Luckmann, objectified *knowledge* is typically presented as universal truth. Thus, deviations from an institutional order seem to be negating reality itself and tend to be labeled as immoral, depravedness, mental illness, or even pure ignorance.

This quick overview of classic social constructionism's major theoretical inspiration was meant to illustrate its potentials and limitations. The concepts of ritual and routine are useful to inform accounts of meaning production and transformation. Nevertheless, its representational perspective is extremely reliant on an interpretative, even linguistic, approach to social relations. That theoretical work was the legacy of a sociological project which started with Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. That project is also identifiable in the systemic views of Talcott Parsons, whose functionalist sociology drew inspiration from the works of those two founders and came to dominate the interpretative sociological traditions, particularly in North America. Parsons jointly translated Weber's *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* to English. In that translation, the focus of sociology is the understanding of social action or behavior that "takes account of the behavior of someone else" (Weber, 1947, 113) by providing "causal explanations of its course and effects" (ibid., p. 88).[10] Action is thus understood in a narrow sense, as the result of motivation and valuation grounded in symbolic relationships. Those notions shape the core concepts of functionalism and its posterior developments.

Nonetheless, the constructionist concerns may be also found in very different theoretical traditions such as the works associated with French post-structuralism. Changing the focus from linguistic interpretation, Foucauldian constructionism focuses on discursive practices as mediators between language and objects. For Foucault, discourse must not be analyzed in the relation between words and things, but in the emergence of rules proper to discursive practices that define the ordering of objects:

> "Words and things" is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not—of no longer treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to

[10]For a more detailed analysis of the role of Talcott Parsons as in introducing the works Weber, see Peter Baehr (2001).

> contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.
>
> Foucault, 1972[2002], p. 54

Another example that also shares many of the constructionist problematics is Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and the theoretical body of work that John Law also referred to as "material semiotics" (Law, 2009). Developed within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), that approach treats "everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located", assuming "that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations" (ibid., p. 141).

According to this perspective, social orders are precariously enacted through the creation of boundaries between order and disorder, or other orders. Objects and subjects are co-created through processes that relate, define, and order them. The notion of material semiotics comes from the encounter between relationality, heterogeneity and materiality. It is also a matter of space and scale, the translation of different and distant actors (ibid.). Michel Callon defines translation as a process of displacement that introduces obligatory passage points, expresses how other actors relate to one another, what they say and want. According to Callon, in the end of a successful translation, only the voices speaking in unison will be heard, united by a discourse of certainty and mutual intelligibility. For the sociologist, translation gives form to social and natural worlds and structures the power relations therein (Callon, 1986).

Law rejects the association between ANT and material semiotics, on one hand, and the metaphor of constructionism – the idea of construction, social or otherwise – because, like Foucault, the former perspectives claim there is no prime constructor: social elements, collectives, or individuals are themselves products, effects, and not causes. An inherent dimension pervades those observations: *power*. Foucault claims power, in general or as a property, is non-existent. His micro-physics of power show that power is not a property of people since it is instantiated only in when put into action to constrain the *field of other possible actions*, from which permanent structures and positions may result. Social relation, whether between different individuals or within the same, cannot be considered separated from power. It is thus an important analytic tool to address subjectification. To exercise power is not to act directly and immediately upon others, but on their actual or possible actions – thus on a field of possibilities. It consists in acting upon acting subjects by virtue and as a function of their own acting or capacity of action. This mode of action is so deeply rooted in sociality that there can be no actual society without power relations

(Foucault, 1982, pp. 788 *et seq.*). It's exercise is distributed throughout all social relations and it cannot be easily controlled from any particular position. For the philosopher, subjects are constituted by power but not in a totalizing way precisely because power is performative and enabling. Instead of limiting agency to humans or resting solely on the hermeneutics of meaning and representation, ANT seeks to "explore and characterize the webs and the practices that carry them", describing "the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, 'nature,' ideas, organizations, inequalities, scale and sizes, and geographical arrangements" (ibid.).

The emergence of such a perspective in STS is not accidental The study of science and technology as institutions requires not only the analysis of their social impacts, but also of their interaction with "nature" through particular methods and measuring devices. Objects are thus a key concept of this approach. Sociologists, Latour claims, typically work with an "object-less" rendering of the social world, neglecting "the constant companionship, the continuous intimacy, the inveterate contiguity, the passionate affairs, the convoluted attachments" that characterize relations between humans and objects (Latour, 2005, pp. 82-3). John Law, commenting on Latour and Woolgar's (1986) *Laboratory Life*, notes:

> *particular realities are constructed by particular inscription devices* and practices. Let me emphasise that: *realities* are being *constructed*. Not by people. But in the practices made possible by networks of elements that make up the inscription device – and the networks of elements within which that inscription device resides. The realities, they are saying, simply don't exist without their matching inscription devices. And, implicitly at least, they are also saying that such inscription devices – and even more so their particular products – are elaborate and networked arrangements that are more or less uncertain, more or less able to hold together, and more or less precarious.
>
> Law, 2004, p. 21, original emphasis

That materialism takes into account that "each artifact has its script, its 'affordance,' its potential to take hold of passerby and force them to play roles in its story" (Latour, 1994, p. 31). Those thinkers are concerned with the analysis of *material culture* beyond the limits of language and consciousness, integrating the interconnections between objects, bodies, materiality and the symbolic. Material conditions for the production of actual objects of knowledge and interpretation, scientific or otherwise, render themselves invisible since, by definition, said production intrinsically links the hybrid network of both human and non-human actors. As Daniel Miller points out:

> objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not "see" them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.
>
> Miller, 2005, p. 5

The study of material culture is not simply the study of *things*, material objects and artifacts. According to Webb Keane, the term "object" in social theory has multiple meanings, referring to different conceptual relations with notions of "subject". Those meanings exceed their strict sense as physical objects, also encompassing the abstract. He provides examples of common conceptions to illustrate that polysemic character: "the patient of an action, the grammatical complement of a transitive verb, the cognized concept, or the phenomenological focus of attention" (Keane, 2006, p. 197). Materialism as conceived by Karl Marx already approaches objects from such a perspective. For the philosopher, sociality itself must not be thought as entirely mental, intersubjective interaction, but rather as *objective activity* on the natural and social world. In his *Theses on Feuerbach,* he claims:

> The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism — but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity.
>
> Marx 1978, p. 143

Considering Marx's argument, it is possible to conceive a philosophical position, which Daniel Miller traces back to Hegel's (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, within which the opposition between subjects and objects does not exist except as "merely appearances that we see emerging in the wake of the process of objectification as it proceeds as a historical process" (Miller, 2005, p. 10). But, as he argues, social scientific research requires the focus of attention to populations – who act and think in terms of the opposition between people and objects – to map this "downward path" (ibid.). That does not mean, however, we should discard the notion that everything in social life, from mundane artifacts to images and institutions, requires objectification.

2.2.2 Objects and Techniques of Subjectification

In order to approach Anonymous in a way that seeks to integrate the agency of humans and non-humans, as well as the material and symbolic structures that structure those forms of sociality and culture, I approach it not as a contemporary *subject* but, first and foremost, as a platform of subjectification. In order to introduce that argument, I will address the conceptualization of the subject put forward by Louis Althusser. Articulating a Marxist perspective with the work of Jacques Lacan, Althusser explores the symbolic and imaginary relation between power and subjectification processes. His focus is the study of ideology, which "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971, p. 162). Those real conditions of existence are, for Marx and Althusser, inscribed within *relations of production* and *class relations* (ibid., pp. 166-7). In his perspective, ideologies, and thus social relations, are reproduced by the continuous production of subjects through interpellation: "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (ibid., p. 170). This process automatically forces individuals to acquire a particular form of subjectivity as they position themselves in relation to social institutions, norms, definitions and categories.

His formulation of ideology is influenced by Lacan's ideas on the three orders or psychical structures: the real (the pre-imaginary and pre-symbolic realm of needs and of that which resist representation), the imaginary (the realm of identification, fantasy and desire), and the symbolic (the realm of language, intersubjectivity, conventions, and ideology). For Lacan, the symbolic is a

> pact which links the subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts. […] By *being of the subject*, we do not mean its psychological properties, but what is hollowed out in the experience of speech.
>
> Lacan, 1991, p. 230, emphasis in original

Althusser claims that ideological interpellation hails individuals as subjects through imaginary identification with the Law and the symbolic order. But this imaginary character is not equivalent to immateriality: the ideas and representations that form ideologies "do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence" since "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (Althusser, 1971, pp. 165-166). He thus distances himself from readings of Marx that confine notions of philosophy and ideology to the status of "pure illusion", "dream",

or as he states, as "the residues of the only full and positive reality" (ibid., pp. 159-160). That idea is extended in Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which included the different churches, schools, family, law, politics, trade-unions, and other cultural institutions.

To extend my approach to subjectification beyond the Althusserian inspired perspectives I will once more turn to objects. Keane (2006) identifies four approaches to the relation between subject and object in social theory. He classifies those approaches in four categories based on their focus: *production*, *representation*, *development*, and *extension* of subjects.

Keane illustrates the focus on production with the works of one of the founders of sociology, Karl Marx. That focus considered non-artifactual objects, such as unmediated natural elements, in a limited conception – they are the raw material for work. Nevertheless, Keane argues that Marx already hints at an implicit semiotic and cognitive dimension of artifacts since subjects realize themselves by being able to *read* traces of human labor and *recognize* themselves in their tools and products.

In Keane's view, the representational focus can be exemplified with the work of other foundational figures: Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Max Weber. Those authors associated objects with the expression of intentional projects or the materialization of abstract entities, producing effects that organize subjects' perceptual experiences and "clarify" their cognitions. Those effects are not assumed to be determined by the "raw" materials of experience – sensory percepts alone, without the help of a cultural force that acts as organizing principle (such as Durkheim's notion of *collective representations*), do not suffice for producing coherent objects of experience.

The focus on the role of objects in subject development is illustrated by Keane with the psychological and psychoanalytic traditions. Those perspectives, he claims, put the development of the subject in close association with his/her separation from, and encounter with, already existing objects that may be handled and show resistance. That opposition is behind the formation of an acting self in the world and its relation with fetishes, seen as "objects of fascination or of obsessive recuperations of loss" (Keane, 2006, p. 199).

Keane considers those three approaches to be based on notions of *object* that do not distinguish between material things and the term's broader meaning: all that towards which an action or consciousness is directed, in a relation that often bears little reference to physical properties. The fourth approach to the relation between object and subject identified by Keane places special emphasis on the materiality of

objects: they are seen to pragmatically extend subjects. Subjects become possessors of object-like qualities and objects integrate attributes associated with human agency through that form of extension. He identifies certain theoretical conceptualizations within social sciences which share that perspective: Alfred Gell's idea of the soldier as composed of person plus weapon or Latour's hybrids, those associations which precede the oppositions between human and object, culture and nature – oppositions which are considered to be the result from a purified-in-practice differentiation of categories.

All those different focuses help in creating an understanding of the relation between subjects and objects. Objects and artifacts are simultaneously a central part of human material production, materialized external forms of representations, sites of encounters for the developmental self and the material substratum of fetishism. Nevertheless, the fourth perspective put forward by Keane is particularly relevant for my conception of subjectification, especially while dealing with the interaction and mutual affection between humans and non-humans that result in materially distributed agency. Those remarks point to an element of my own approach to the production of subjectivities: subjectification is associated with the processes that regulate the actual relations between subjects and objects.

If the relations between a perceiving subject and an object are always mediated by a signifier, a sign which may be mental or not, then the actual configurations of available signs in a representational economy influences these relations. Thus, another connection can be traced: that between cultural objects, imagination, and conduct. In order to understand people's behavior, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz claims, one has to be familiar with the "imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" (Geertz, 1973, p. 13). One important element for analysis of contemporary internet processes is the idea of the *internet meme*, here taken as a (emic) social category rather than a (etic) sociological one. These pertain to a recent mode of signification which has been massively adopted – becoming an identifiable class of "objects-to-think-with":

> Freudian ideas passed into the popular culture because they offered robust objects-to-think-with. The objects were almost-tangible ideas such as dreams and slips of the tongue. People were able to play with such Freudian "objects". They became used to looking for them and manipulating them, both seriously and not so seriously. As they did so, the idea that slips and dreams betray the unconscious started to feel natural.
>
> Turkle, 1997, p. 76

This robustness is thus derived from the tangibility of ideas, to stick with the employed terms which seem to resonate with Keane's notion of felicity of reference. Turkle's use of the social appropriation of Freudian ideas as an example and the familiarization with, or naturalization of, these objects helps me trace a third association: that between imaginary and the self. These conceptual tools participate in the production of naturalized meanings that influence people's own behavior and experiences, thus shaping their relation to themselves. The association between the use of signs and one's own self is further explored by W. Nöth, which analyses these objects-to-think-with – thought-signs in the parlance of Pierce's semiotics:

> Implicit in the medieval distinction between instrumental and formal signs is the assumption that ideas or thought-signs do not serve as instruments of thought. Who should be the agent using these signs, and for which purpose? The only purpose which thoughts serve is the purpose of thinking. Since thinking is nothing but the use of thought, it would be either tautological to say that thoughts are instruments of thought or it would lead to an infinite regress involved in the idea that thoughts are the instruments of thinkers: if all thoughts are the product of a thinker but thinking is constituted by thought, where do the ideas of the thinker come from? Thoughts, in sum, constitute both thinking and the thinker.
>
> Nöth , 2009, pp. 14-5

This connection becomes even more complicated when you consider the wide range of cognitive artifacts that human beings mobizile in their everyday activities. According to Norman, these are artificial devices "designed to maintain, display, or operate upon information in order to serve a representational function (...) that affect human cognitive performance" (Norman, 1991, p. 17). He highlights the fact that these artifacts are behind the possibility of the "modern intellecual world", enhancing human perceptual and cognitive abilities in ways that may make us faster, more powerful, and smarter. The science of human cognition, Norman says, focuses on the unaided mind and not on the information-processing activities that occur when users and artifacts operate together. For him, artifacts may enhance performance in ways that are not limited to simple amplification: "written language and mathematics enable different performance than possible without their use, they (...) change the nature of the task being done" (ibid., p. 20).

In order to understand how subjectification occurs, particularly how it relates to those *object-like* qualities that Keane identifies in the extended subject, I focus on the diagrammatic and programmatic mattering power of objects. Objects of knowledge are not only material things: their forms of construction, representation, usage are also part of them. That observation opens the way to another problem of subjectification: the techniques that mediate the relation between subjects and objects.

Paul Du Gay finds that link in particular kinds of relations between subjects and cultural or discursive objects: the vocabulary, practices, purposes, and techniques of subjectification, without which "you risk losing, for good or ill," the person they constitute or "call into being" (Du Gay, 2007, p. 63). This perspective on subjectivity is inspired by the works of Michel Foucault, mainly his latter historical conception of subjectification. For the Foucault, the question of the subject is related to the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject", a question which he further specifies in his investigations of sexuality: "how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of 'sexuality'" (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). The philosopher clarifies his position when asserting that his interest lies "in problems about techniques of the self" (Foucault, 1983, p. 229).

Techniques and technologies the self, the "arts of existence", are usually associated with programmatic views at the collective and individual level. Said arts constitute, according to Foucault, the "intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, (…) to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault, 1985, pp. 10-11). That focus on the subject is not a turn to the metaphysics found in Cartesian or Kantian conceptions, nor does it imply a substantial "self". There are strong parallels between the Deleuzian notion of individuation and that of subjectification as it is here expressed:

> subjectification has little to do with any subject. It's to do, rather, with an electric or magnetic field, an individuation taking place through intensities (weak as well as strong ones), it's to do with individuated fields, not persons or identities. It's what Foucault, elsewhere, calls "passion."
>
> Deleuze, 1995, p. 93

For Deleuze, subjecitifcation processes are thus connected to individuation, an *intensive mode* rather than a *personal subject* which produces "modes of existence or styles of life" – it is not a subject, "unless it is to discharge the latter from all interiority and even from all identity" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 70). Speaking of Foucault's work on subjectification, Deleuze reinforces this idea, claiming that "there's no subject, but a production of subjectivity: subjectivity has to be produced, when its time arrives, precisely because there is no subject" (Deleuze, 1995, pp. 113-114). Influenced by those conceptions, Nikolas Rose reflects on the question of tracing a "genealogy of subjectification" that accounts for those relations between techniques and self-conduct. He starts by questioning the possibility of a historical and genealogical approach to ethical preoccupations, in particular to the conception of human beings as free autonomous subjects but also bound to national, ethnic, cultural, and territorial identities, as well as to "political programmes, strategies, and techniques" (Rose,

1996, p. 128). For him, this endeavor is "not a history of ideas: its domain of investigation is that of practices and techniques, of thought as it seeks to make itself *technical*" (ibid.). His concern is the modern regime of the self which functions as a regulatory ideal and is conceived as

> a kind of 'irreal' plan of projection, put together somewhat contingently and haphazardly at the intersection of a range of distinct histories – of forms of thought, techniques of regulation, problems of organization and so forth.
>
> Ibid., p. 129

I contend that, while it is possible to identify overarching and institutionalized elements that point to a single and totalizing subjectification process and an all inclusive regime of the self that pertains to modernity, subjectification integrates very diverse sets of processes that result in different modes and forms of subjectivities. Yet, I agree with Rose when he stresses the importance of power regimes, processes and techniques in the production of subjectivities, and how a genealogy of subjectification should focus on the techniques required to bring about a particular kind of person.

What is it, then, the meaning associated with "technology"? Rose uses the term to refer to an assembly structured and governed by practical rationality and more or less conscious goals. Technologies are "hybrid assemblages of knowledges, instruments, persons, systems of judgement, buildings and spaces, underpinned at the programmatic level by certain presuppositions about, and objectives for, human beings" (Rose, 1996, p. 132). Rose mobilizes Deleuze's notion of subject without interior and his conceptualization of the *fold* to think the influence of "modes of subjectification" as "infolding" processes (ibid., p. 143). He notes that the human technologies which Foucault had termed disciplinary – such as the school, the prison, and the asylum – structure space, time, and relations through hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment. Discipline thus operates "through attempts to enfold these judgements into the procedures and judgements which the individual utilizes" (ibid, p. 132) in his conduct – and as he conducts his own conduct. Rose provides the example of the embodiment of techniques such as self-disclosure (confession), exemplarity and discipleship in the pastoral relation. Said techniques are "enfolded into the person through a variety of schemas of self-inspection, self-suspicion, self-disclosure, self-deciphering and self-nurturing" (ibid.). Thus, those non-essentialist concepts of the *self,* put in relation with its own forms of enactment, are dependent on establishing intimacy with objects and techniques. It thus entails enfolded feelings, passions, and tastes – akin to what Raymond Williams (1961) termed *structures of sensibility* . Subjectification is thus seen as the production of particular subjectitivies as a posi-

tioning of the self in the dynamic intersections which exist within the changing fields of discourse, material culture and semiotic networks.

2.3 Collectives in Social Theory

It is time to address the chapter's opening quotation from Latour related to the status of *collectives* in social science. In this section, I will discuss the possibilities and limitations of several theoretical approaches, mostly from the field of sociology, for the study of contemporary collective behavior and organization. While subjectification is an important framework in my research, my research subjects express an ambivalent relation between individuality and collectivity. While Anonymous is seen as a platform for individuals to release themselves from societal constraints, it is also a platform for highly collective dynamics. The section starts with a traditional category of human collectivities which as been applied, in a seemingly unproblematic way, to many different contexts – *community*. I will also address the notions of *crowd* and *public*, which refer to situations of physical co-presence and of mediated communication. Finally, I will discuss the adaptable theoretical conceptions of *networks* and *swarms*.

2.3.1 The Meanings of Community

Anchoring contemporary social life in the familiar concept of community is a frequent and long-standing practice in sociological research. Despite its persistent usage, this concept lacks a satisfying definition (Bell & Newby, 1973, p. 21). Historically ambiguous and polysemic, the term has been used in different ways and to refer to different things (Nelson, Ramsey & Verner, 1960; Poplin, 1972). Its tradi-

tional sense refers to a set of people in geographical proximity, often suggesting other social forces at play such as an underlying social structure, a sense of belonging, and self-containment. This sociological tradition has its roots in the work of Ferdinant Tönnies (1887), namely a book entitled *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Society). The first printed version of the book bore the subtitle: *Treatise on Communism and Socialism as Empirical forms of Culture*. In his conception, *community* opposes *society* in terms of a dichotomy in the possibility for human relationships. Community (*Gemeinschaft*) is associated with an organic will that requires a minimum of reflection and calculation, whereas society (*Gesellschaft*) is based on instrumental reason which, according to Tönnies, hinders the possibility of collective *télos* and of politics altogether:

> as human thought becomes critical and complex, as economic development undermines tradition, and state centralization destroys local autonomy, *Gemeinschaft* is doomed to crumble and give way to *Gesellschaft*. The metropolis, economically powerful but politically impotent, takes the place of the free city. Men withdraw their customary, unthinking allegiance to their city, their friends, and their neighbors and weigh every move in a utilitarian balance. Nothing is done any longer for its own sake; action becomes only a means to an end, and all means are carefully calculated.
>
> Mitzman, 1971, pp. 508

That morally charged notion of community inaugurated by Tönnies was associated with the *good* rural life, standing in opposition to the *bad* city life associated the term society. Those ideas can also be found in utopian projections of an non-alienated life inspired by idealizations regarding the concept of community and their promises of a return to meaningful social interaction. The communitarian views of authors like Amitai Etzioni, for instance, share some of those concerns. For Etzioni, the definition of community is based on two main characteristics:

> first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships), and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity - in short, to a particular culture.
>
> Etzioni, 1998, p. 127

That idea of community commitment and interdependence is stressed by David E. Pearson, who highlights the importance of compliance, moral suasion, and coercion, suggesting that communities need reward and sanction mechanisms (Pearson, 1995, p. 47). Those notions are behind Rheingold's formulation of the *virtual community*,

which he associates with shared identity, interests, and the adherence to a "loose" social contract (Rheingold, 2008[1987], p. 3).

Perspectives like those presented thus far are primarily concerned with social cohesion within communities. Others have used the term community in looser terms, referring to common orientation and a sense of belonging. Benedict Anderson approached the social category of nation as "imagined political community" that is "inherently limited and sovereign", a mental construct uniting individuals through an "image of their communion" in each of their minds (Anderson, 1991[1983], pp. 5-6). For Anderson, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (ibid., p. 6). In this perspective, the imaginaries around nations emerge in connection to forms of mediation and representation such as the printed press and the diffusion of maps.

The notion of "homophily" proposed by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1964) seeks to expand the meaning of the term community to circles of sociability structured around interests and tastes instead of the adhesion to common values. More recently, scholars have pointed out that particular evaluation criteria, tacit knowledge, social bonds and meaning systems tend to develop in situated practices, privileging the analysis of *communities of practice* in the study of contemporary social life (Lave and Wenger, 1991). According to Anne Rawls, communities based on "practice and situated moralities of self are progressively replacing traditional communities and their values in many areas of modern life":

> As the economic system has globalized, producing exchange and production relations across vast spatial and cultural distances, older social forms, which work best in a context of familiarity, are giving way to a more fluid situatedness in which social "skills", have become more important than a commitment to traditional communities of belief and/or culture.
>
> Rawls, 2009, p. 81

Thus, the *trust* that sustains and flows through those interpersonal relations is not related to attitudes towards particular persons or groups. Rather, it derives from "a necessary shared commitment to and competence with practice that is constitutive of sensemaking, identity and objects", and produces forms of reason and morality that are grounded in their practical situatedness (ibid., p. 82-83).

For Amit and Rapport, those developments of the meanings of "community" represent a "hollowing out" from particular empirical realities, "a shift from an emphasis on actual social relations and groupings to symbolically demarcated categories of identity" (Amit and Rapport, 2002, p. 45). If, as Cohen suggests, community is a "relational" idea, a simultaneous expression of "both similarity and difference" –

differentiation, continuity and opposition – then an analysis of the "nature of community" should focus "on the element which embodies this sense of discrimination, namely, the *boundary*." (Cohen, 2008, p. 12).

To close this section, I present a perspective on community that already points to a non-symbolic basis for sociality. Georges Gurvitch, in an article entitled *Mass, Community, Communion* (1941), distinguishes three forms of sociality that range from the lowest to the highest level of partial fusion, or *interpenetration* within a collective. Referring to the "we" that derives from the fusion of minds and behaviors without symbolic mediation, Gurvitch defines *mass* sociality when that fusion only superficial, closed to the domain of the personal. In the other extreme is *communion*, in which union is most intense and open to "the least accessible depths of the 'I'" (p. 487), presupposing states of collective ecstasy. Between these two poles lies *community*, a intermediate level of intimacy where a considerable part of personality and aspirations are integrated in that "we" without reaching the maximum intensity. Such immanent conception was, according to Gurvitch, a way of abandoning the Durkheimian transcendental collective mind.

In my thesis, Anonymous is considered a collective with dynamic boundaries; their material and symbolic displacements, enacted through the production of events, artifacts and other cultural objects, are the focus of my research. I also try to understand how those displacements occur within situated fields of common practice, morality, rationality, orientation and knowledge. Nevertheless, I don't consider the notion of (virtual) community particularly relevant: apart from those observations, this term's familiarity obscures the unstable processes that led to the formation of Anonymous. Furthermore, the term *community* is often related to aprioristic commonality and gregariousness explanatory factors, or the assumption of homogeneity that results from shared territories, values and interests. Hence, I will address other approaches, less charged with said ascriptive tendencies, which seek to more account for spontaneous and self-organized forms of association.

2.3.2 The Fascinating Crowd

The seemingly chaotic mechanisms behind crowds and their activity have been considered by some scholars to have profound social and political significance. Often in negative terms and in association with violence, destructiveness, and barbarianism, crowd participants were traditionally deemed to be under hypnotic contagion. In crowds, the argument claimed, people became particularly susceptible to engage in uncontrolled and irrational behavior. Gustave Le Bon, in his classic work entitled *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), sets himself the task of identifying the psychological processes operating within a crowd that transform otherwise *normal* and *rational* people. Fearful of the events that led to the Paris Commune and the subsequent harsh repression, Le Bon characterized crowd behavior as both pathological and typical to the social dynamics of his time. He saw crowds deeply associated with hypnosis, suggestion, and contagion, characterized by anonymity, individual unaccountability, and the cumulative sensation of collective invincibility. This, in his perspective, resulted in the disappearance of the conscious individual, capable of critical reasoning, and in the surfacing of the unconscious personality and its destructive instincts. The work of Le Bon partially echoes the thought of the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who had written earlier on the topic of crowds with similar overtones:

> When the subject weeps at the bidding of the hypnotist, it is not the ego only, but the whole organism, that obeys. The obedience of crowds and armies to their demagogues and captains is, at times, almost equally strange. And so is their credulity.
>
> Tarde, 1962, p. 81

The crowd in the works of Tarde has "something animal" and is characterized as psychic connections resulting from physical proximity and contact (Tarde, 1969, p. 278). This view is linked with Tarde's theory of the social bond: he considered the "social man" to be in a state of hypnosis, akin to somnambulism, "a dream of command and a dream of action" (1962, p. 77). In his perspective, that man's ideas worked through suggestion while maintaining the illusion of being spontaneous. For Tarde and Le Bon, the crowd tended to be framed from an intellectualist, if not elitist, standpoint. Latter criticism denounced those perspectives, pointing to both their simplification of the crowd and political conservatism. Those works, as we will see, influence the posterior sociological works of Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Herbert Blumer, who see crowd behavior as the manifestation of a kind of psychic

reciprocity that opposes the symbolic forms of institutionalized action and interaction.

2.3.3 Mediated Communication and its Publics

Another relevant dimension for my exploration of collectivities, particularly due to its focus on media, is related to communication and its publics. Tarde had already alluded to publics which he considered to be, unlike crowds, noble and distant forms of association, spiritual or mental in their entirety. In his view, publics are rendered possible by the development of communication infrastructures, forming when individuals are seized by the ideas and passions carried through a given medium (Tarde, 1969). Other authors stress the discursive dimension of publics. According to Michael Warner, a public is a "space of discourse" which "exists *by virtue of being addressed",* and "comes into being" or is instantiated "only in relation to texts and their circulation". Furthermore, the constitution of a public requires little participation, since mere attention is enough for membership. A public is, in his conception, autopoietically organized by discourse itself and, as thus, in ways that are relatively independent of the modern social institutions. For Warner, this opens the door to a reflection on the relation between subjectivity, discourse and autonomy: "speaking, writing, and thinking involve us – actively and immediately – in a public, and thus in the being of the sovereign" (Warner, 2002, pp. 50-53). Althusser gives the example of the policeman who hails someone in the street as an allegory to illustrate his perspective on the workings of ideology and the production of subjects through interpellation:

> the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else).
>
> Althusser, 1971, p. 174

Inspired by Althusser's concept of interpellation and ideological engagements, Warner points to the significance of imaginary identification and subjective prac-

tices of understanding in his analysis of the constitution of publics. Nonetheless, Warner also highlights shortcomings in the concept of interpellation for accounts of public discourse. If, for Althusser, "concrete individuals, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" are formed and addressed by the "rituals of ideological recognition" (Althusser, 1971, pp. 172-173),

> with public speech, by contrast, we might recognize ourselves as addressees, but it is equally important that we remember that the speech was addressed to indefinite others; that in singling us out, it does so not on the basis of our concrete identity, but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone, and therefore in common with strangers.
>
> Warner, 2002, p. 58

In Warner's view, a public is thus a relation between strangers, since the addressees of public discourse are identified through an engagement with discourse itself and, thus, cannot be known in advance. A public, he claims, may be considered as a "stranger-relationality in a pure form" (Warner, 2002, p. 56), since it often lacks the identifying elements on the basis of other forms of organizing strangers – i.e. nation, religion, race, and guild. Such engagement refers to particular forms of activity and discourse, as opposed to categorical classification or social positions. Since publics tend to escape institutional and organizational frames, their maintenance depends on the constant renewal of the attention that instantiated them in the first place. Public discourse solicits attention but do not render its publics passive: "Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension" (ibid., p. 62). Those dynamics of public resonate with the notions of voluntary association in publics, which "can be understood within the conceptual framework of civil society – that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership" (ibid., p. 61).

Despite addressing the participatory possibilities within publics, and tracing connections to civil society and forms of citizenship, that dimension is not the main focus of Warner. The massification of bidirectional electronic communication technologies, particularly the internet, produced qualitative and quantitative changes in the stranger-relationalities of publics. One of the most interesting approaches to the reshaping of the available communicational contexts for public discourse and expression is Christopher Kelty's work. Particularly, his notion of *recursive public*: a sphere of debate and intervention that revolves around imaginaries of the present order of the internet and its future possibilities. For Kelty, this

> social imaginary specific to the Internet draws together technical practices of coding and designing with social and philosophical concepts of publics to highlight specific contemporary ideas of social or moral order that just as often

> take the form of argument-by-technology as they take the form of deliberative spoken or written discussion. When geeks argue, they argue about rights and reasons, but they also argue about the Internet as the technical structure and legal rules that allow them to argue in the first place. Furthermore, not only do they argue about these structures and rules, but they consider sacred the right to change these rules by rewriting and reimplementing the core protocols (the "rules") and core software that give the Internet its structure; they also consider it essential that individuals and groups in society have the right to reimplement privately ordered legal regimes to achieve these ends.
>
> Kelty, 2005, p. 186.

A recursive public is thus a public that actively influences the social and technical conditions for its own existence, a perspective that emphasizes the participatory possibilities of today's stranger-relationalities within and between publics. It is important to acknowledge that these publics address moral and technical orders simultaneously by engaging in debate and the production of discourse, as well as in resorting to the argument-by-technology, as noted by Kelty. Alisson Powell claims this kind of argument was based on a conception of legitimacy through functionality present in discourse about the creation of, and the debate around, the code that underpins the internet (where it can be created and debated).

> This legitimacy stemmed from the ability of participants to create the platforms upon which they engaged. (…) Aligned with cyber-libertarianism, this perspective stresses the exceptional nature of the internet's centreless design, and hence the efficacy of making decisions about it by developing new technical standards.
>
> Powell, 2013, p. 198

This argument-by-technology is also associated with another term from the information systems security lingo: the *proof-of-concept*. In security circles, proof-of-concept usually refers to the code that is released alongside the disclosure of a newly found vulnerability. As an argument-by-technology, the proof-of-concept's strength is twofold: the functionality in successfully exploiting the vulnerability enables its immediate verification by any interested parties but also reinforces the need of securing it through making readily available, or at least easily implementable, the tool to exploit it. Actual availability of exploiting tools for a given technological vulnerability is a very effective form of pressuring the rapid development of solutions. What those trends reflect is the strength of the technological dimension behind disputed areas and the power of those who are skilled enough to produce and modify technological objects. This is the rationale behind Anonymous' readiness (with few exceptions) to use whatever techniques or informations available: accessing systems,

shutting them down, or disclosing private personal information (leaks) works as a kind of proof-of-concept for the frailty of the information systems that sustain contemporary configurations of social organization. It also highlights the technological precariousness of even the most established and powerful social institutions. Those actions constitute the materialization of a critical stance towards certain sets of social relations through the exploitation of their technical underpinnings.

As we have seen, the activity of Anonymous is not simply reduced to information politics or technological production. The greater spectrum of activities entails experimentation with identity, feelings, aesthetics, and subjectification, the audiovisual and multimedia expression, and also of the interplay between morality, transgression, and social boundaries. Those nuances in mediated publics are the main idea behind Zizi Papacharissi's conceptualization of *affective publics*. Borrowing the notion of *structures of feeling* from Raymond Williams (1961), she addresses the question of emerging publics and subsequent forms of civic engagement through an analysis on how those "soft structures form the texture of online expression and connection" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 115). This allows her to understand how facts, opinions and emotions are mixed in a sense that sustains the "affectively sensed and internalized here and now, and the ways in which this is collectively, connectively, and digitally imprinted" (p. 29) – which also results in political readings and positions that are articulated through lived and sensed experiences prior, or instead of, ideologies. Those mediated flows of sensations and perceptions – the soft structures of feeling and lived sense of contemporary connection in digital networks – texture the terms in which participants come together in the constitution of the Anonymous collective from its inception. They come together in the extra-discursive formation of the digital publics that enabled posterior reflection, collective production, forms of representation, and posterior civic and activist engagements.

2.3.4 Adaptable Multimodal Connections: Networks and Swarms

Just like the early sociologists witnessed the crowd as a form of sociality which thrived in urban centers after industrialization, contemporary social thinkers are

now addressing the social formations that are being bolstered by the increasing use of information and communication technologies. One of the ways of describing these formations – one which has already become canonical in social sciences – is the *network*. Castells defines networks as programmed but self-reconfigurable structures, a set of interconnected nodes which can be characterized by unity of purpose and three principal features: *flexibility* to adapt to its environment, *scalability* or the ability to grow and shrink with little disruptive effects, and *survivability* or the capacity to withstand attacks to their "nodes" and "codes". These dynamic structures operate through inclusion and exclusion, following criteria of relevance. In *Communication Power*, he claims that individual nodes may perform different functions, taking the role of *programmers*, constituting networks and (re)programing them by influencing their goals, and *switchers*, connecting different networks and ensuring their cooperation through common goals, combined resources and strategic alliances (Castells, 2009, pp. 45-47).

The notion of network is typically associated with either technical networks, such as the electric grid or communication systems like railways and the internet; or with an informal form of association between human agent. Developed in the framework of STS and Actor-Network Theory, Bruno Latour's concept of network refers to efforts of tracing associations through the lenses of what he terms a "special brand of active and distributed materialism". Latourian networks are comprised of associated human and non-human actors, where every node shapes the interaction dynamics in the network. Thus, nodes "are treated not as intermediaries but as mediators", in the sense that they "may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation" – the networks themselves are the product of traces left behind by the movement of their actors (Latour, 2005, pp. 128-132). Such notions of networks are valuable contributions for my attempt to study Anonymous. The collective was formed as a network of networks: communicating networks, comprising non-overlapping communication infrastructures, iconography, semantic association, and hybrid actors.

Another interesting metaphor for the collective activity of Anonymous is the *swarm*, thought as a kind of emergent coordination deemed to be largely ruled by immediate, non-representational circular affection. Jussi Parikka defines swarms as a concept that refers to relationality, temporal mattering and control without a hierarchical leader or even stable points of prioritized perception (Parikka, 2008, p. 116). It is composed through the circulation of affect, which he characterizes as "something pre-personal and pre-individual, a moment of reaction before thought, bodies communicating nearly automatically, concerting with each other" (ibib., p. 118). The connection between this perspective and the aforementioned theories of affect are clear. Also evident is the connection with Wiedemann's conceptualization of Anony-

mous through the lenses of affective circularity instead of subjectivity and representation.

Cognitive science's insights are helpful to the present endeavor insofar as it is concerned with formalizing the problem of coordination in formations such as the swarm. Moussaid and others analyze situations in which a collective order, organization, or coordination emerge "without any external control. No particular individual supervises the activities or broadcasts relevant information to all the others and no blueprint or schedule is followed" (Moussaid *et al.*, 2009, p. 470). This problem reflects the seemingly paradoxical relation between a robust and coherent macroscopic structure, which tends to enter an efficient relation with its environment, and the limitations of individual participants who lack the "big picture" of the overall structure, having only partial information from available individuals and local environment. For these scholars, this is the problem posed by processes of self-organization. They identify four elements of these processes:

Positive feedback loop: the system responds to a perturbation by reinforcing the perturbation, strengthening the process(es) that caused the response, which may lead to exponential amplification and propagation, even when the initial disturbance is relatively small.

Negative feedback loop: the system responds to a perturbation by reducing the perturbation, weakening the process(es) that caused the response. In self-organizing systems, these counteracting dynamics set in at higher perturbation amplitudes that could lead the system into a destructive state.

Fluctuations: random fluctuations constitute initial perturbations that may trigger amplification through positive feedback loops. Unpredictability and individual variation in stimulus response can lead to the discovery of different information sources or solutions to a problem, which may give way to positive feedback loops that change the overall system's state, resulting in systemic flexibility.

Multiple and repeated interaction: self-organizing systems rely on continued interaction between individuals that result in higher-level, or aggregate, outcomes. Interaction may have be direct, through signaling or physical contact, or indirect, through modifications of the environment that may be sensed later by others.

These elements account for the possibility of distributed forms of control. This led Thomas J. Fararo and Kent McClelland to claim that, despite the importance of notions of "control" in the mid-XX century sociological traditions of both Talcott Parsons (1977) and Berger and Luckmann (1966), those conceptions do not account for the cybernetic sense of the term: "through processes involving information, com-

munication, and physical action, a state of a system is kept near some reference value" (Fararo and McClelland, 2006, p. 3). They draw on the notion of *negative feedback loop* in Weiner's *Cybernetics* (1948), claiming that this process and its three elements (detector, comparator, and effecter) may help understand both behavioral processes, which comprise multiple acts and subgoals that proceed in a plan of action towards a particular end, and the emergence of larger social order. Contending that William Powers's (1973) *Behavior: The Control of Perception* is the more detailed application of Weiner's control model in behavioral science, they defend his argument that *behavior is the control of perception*:

> In other words, individuals act so as to make their perceptions stay as near as possible to what Powers calls "reference signals." Control is accomplished by a continual process of comparing one's interpretations of perceptual information with one's mental images or expectations.
>
> Fararo and McClelland, 2006, p. 9

In another article, Thacker claims that the swarm has no leader but "something akin to a fully distributed control" (2005, n.pag.). For Thacker, swarms are defined by the lack of stable forms, being able to assume different morphologies. They are also headless and faceless, sensorial and affective multiplicities that are both amorphous and coordinated. Galloway and Thacker (2007) characterize the swarm as dispersed or distributed but in constant communication. Without a front or battle line, a swarm attacks intermittently but consistently from every direction. Swarms and packs are conceived as the inversion of the organism, "instances in which the many pre-exist the One" (Thacker, 2005, n.pag.).

According to Galloway and Thacker, the swarm is stripped of the Deleuzoguattarian "faciality". The work on the face by Deleuze and Guattari in a section of *A Thousand Plateaus* entitled *Year Zero: Faciality*, constitutes an attack to Levinas' notion of ethics as a product of facing the other, or the "face of the other" as the locus of ethics (Levinas, 1983). In their perspective, the Face opposes the (proprioceptive) body, as well as the head itself, being described as "surface-holes" but not "volume-cavity". They claim the Face *overcodes* (forces sense upon) the body. "To the point that if human beings have a destiny", they claim, "it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by quite spiritual and special becomings-animal" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 171). The process of faciality in Deleuze and Guattari does not refer only to the "facing" of the other, but also to pattern recognition. Their concept, as Galloway and Thacker remind us, "leads to a deterritorialization of the familiar face, and to the proliferation of faces, in the snow, on the wall, in the clouds, and in other places (where faces shouldn't

be)" (Galloway and Thacker, 2007, p. 68). This informs their remark that the swarm may indeed, albeit not necessarily, coalesce around faciality as a particular instance of organization.

Anonymous as a swarm seems to intentionally play with faciality, using the mask as an ironic symbol for its voluntary and knowingly misleading facialization. Furthermore, this process can be identified as well in the use of one name and in the recurrent simulation of personified aesthetic and disembodied unity: one mask for a "face", one volition, one cognitive entity which can sense, feel, see, reason, speak, and act. While these are attributes that can fall under the notion of *style*, one may ask whether their character truly differs from the spontaneous and relational condensing and dispersing choreography of faciality in flocks and swarms.

Such a perspective can focus on mechanisms, treating signals as abstract information while modeling agents that require nothing more than some sort of simple information processing capability. This means we can do away with representational processes or self-awareness, thus the problem of subjectivity. Nevertheless, while studying social dynamics, aren't the "reference systems" of cybernetics also involved in the processes of representation? Don't they even tell us something about the affective dynamics behind them in the first place, and won't they affect them afterwards? Isn't that representational level – when properly approach from its material and semiotic enactments – not a site for new connections to be formed? While such concepts are useful to understand the dynamics of how affect, which is pre-personal – always precedes will or consciousness (Massumi, 2002, p. 29) – may circulate within decentralized collectives and swarms, I argue that their constitution within affective fields do not exclude representational processes or intentionality at the individual and collective level, necessary for processes of decision-making and consensus-building. As Thacker claims,

> swarms are based less on exchanging data through channels, than through the continual modification of action, motion, and movement through the affective signals of local states (state of self, state of nearest neighbors, state of environment). Just any large grouping of people does not constitute a swarm. They may be crowds, masses, or mobs, but, as has been outlined above, a swarm is a particular mode of collective organization. While a single person may certainly exist without a swarm, a swarm is dependent upon a particular kind of constitutive power of individuals. Individuals are individuals of a different sort in swarms, combining localized decision-making and movement, local area consensus-building, and an affective capacity (circulation of affects) linking the individual to the swarm as a whole.
>
> Thacker, 2004b, n. pag.

For Eugene Thacker, a swarm is characterized by dispersion, decentralization, and spontaneity in both its emergence and purpose (Thacker, 2004b). The goal-directed dimension of swarms also connects them to the issue of subjectivity. Nevertheless, If the individuals in the swarm only have access to partial information and they have to use this information to make their own decisions, it is thus safe to assume that each of them constructs his own reading of the collective intention. The aggregate outcome of these individual interpretations, their resonance, so to speak, may result in an overall distributed teleology. While reflecting on the possibility of "swarm intelligence", Thacker argues that, if there truly is such thing, it "would surely have to be a frustratingly anonymous, nonanthropomorphic intelligence, the intelligence of 'a life'" (Thacker, 2005, n.pag.). These animalistic, and vitalist conceptions of the faceless swarm lead Galloway and Thacker to pose the following questions:

> what sort of ethics is possible when the other has no "face" and yet is construed as other (as friend or foe)? What is the shape of the ethical encounter when one "faces" the swarm?
>
> Galloway and Thacker, 2007, p. 66

These have no easy answer insofar as they point to the impossibility of addressing the swarm as one moral entity. But their reversal leads to other, maybe more pertinent questions: what sort of ethics is possible when faceless many-as-many are construed as *other* by others? What is the shape of the ethical encounter *within* swarms?

Felix Stalder, who claims Anonymous is "probably the most spectacular case of digital swarming", defines social swarm as "independent individuals who are using simple tools and rules to coordinate themselves horizontally to pursue a collective effort" (Stalder, 2013, p. 40-42). He extends Halpin's previously presented remark that Anonymous does not represent the end of subjectivity, but a new form of collective subjectivity without individual identity, claiming that swarms

> constitute a self-directed, conscious actor, not a manipulated unconscious one. One reason for this is that these new swarms are joined consciously one by one, rather than arising out of preexisting crowds of people, and that they are maintained through explicit acts of horizontal, autonomous communication.
>
> Stalder, 2013, p. 41

My claim is that, while it is true that the prepersonal affect plays an important role in swarms, arguably the most important in characterizing these formations, it is also true that individuals may join or leave them at will, that there are both conscious activities of collective and individual interpretation, reflexivity, and

meritocratic recognition. In fact, participation may sometimes acquire the form of an intentional construction or reflexive reconstitution of the collective in the form of iconic enunciations. Thus, said expressions are both audiovisual and metaphorical representations of the affective circularity and events which characterizes the Anonymous swarm in given moments in time, conveying information to other participants about its overall state, but they are also conscious efforts to influence the movements of the larger collective. While these movements are not directly observable, not even by participants themselves due to the mixture between obscurity and visibility their activities, the *traces* left behind by the mattering of these formed relations help elucidate, by force of illustration, how these processes of collective formation can operate.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that objectification is central to analyses of collective life. But the materialization and production of discourses, objects, and artifacts, which constitute objectification processes, may not be differentiated from a seemingly opposite, yet intrinsically linked, type of process: subjectification. All the processes that constitute the flow of human history are, at some level, dependent on both objectification and subjectification, where material culture and its specific regimes of the person are co-constituted.

Against a simple opposition between cultural norms and institutions, on one hand, and their "subjects", in the other, classic social constructionism already points to how they are different aspects of the same processes. Nevertheless, that perspectiv has several shortcomings. First, a conceptualization based on social action as common and reciprocal orientation under the primacy of social and cultural structures can easily be misunderstood with sociologism – a given model of man, the *homo sociologicus* or what Harold Garfinkel called the "cultural dope": "the man-in-the-sociologist's society who produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with preestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 68). Second, it anchors institutional and biographical stability and integration in language, narratives, and symbols, neglecting

the role of objects, nature, materiality and techniques in the networks of association that participate in the enactment of subjects and their social worlds. Third, it accounts for social reproduction but not transformation, with the exception of linguistic, symbolic, and ideological interventions. Finally, it does not taking into account the multiplicity of rationalities, intentions, and subjectivities in their concrete contexts.

My own approach, roughly sketched in this chapter, also considers the distinction between objects and subjects as two levels of the same historical processes. If objectification and subjectification systems operate together, they can both be approached through the analysis of traces left behind by the movements and flows behind the formation, maintenance, and development of sociotechnical collectives. Those traces can be analyzed in the (dis)continuities of practices, discourses, and artifacts across time and spaces. Nevertheless, those practices are not limited to the production of digital artifacts, integrating objects of knowledge, cultural objects, techniques, iconography, style, rhetoric, and even the word “anonymous”.

Resulting from the awareness that digital artifacts and traces serve surveillance and identification – like personal documents and organizational records – the enactment of Anonymous relies on obfuscation and effacement of “offline” connections for the disruption of digital networks and meaning production processes. This poses a challenge to analyses that privilege the co-production of objects and knowledge. Speaking of “failed”/“successful” translations refers to how intentional strategies work (or not) but obscure how those same processes can be purposively oriented towards disarranging the very possibility of successful translations. The production of objects and events that point to the Anonymous “entity” and act, as we shall see, as material camouflage, allowing the accumulation and free appropriation of symbolic power: they form a generative presence/absence.

My research follows those boundary objects that bridge and separate the invisible world of collective internet anonymity – where public manifestation does not compromise privacy – and the world of institutions and organizations – that of names and faces. What gets “lost” or effaced in translation is the possibility of closure and of assessing contexts, participants and intentions; thus of negotiation or the introduction of obligatory passage points. The result is the material and semiotic enactment of a “zone” of contingency and chaos, a platform, simultaneously producing subjects and objects in patches of stability that integrate constant process of their own transformation and subversion.

In swarms, individuals can interpret and assess information gathered from their peers, and the flux of affect can be instrumentally modulated in order to control the perception of adjacent individuals. That metaphor is particularly relevant for the

study of Anonymous, where distributed perception and cognition are deployed in voluntary, real-time, round the clock interaction. The rapid assessment and response mechanisms that characterized that modality of cooperation are in turn materialized in both communicational infrastructures and interactive dynamics.

If individuals in swarms are informational restrained to their adjacent surroundings, ethical considerations must be integrated in this context. Thus, the ethical stance in swarms is not oriented towards the movements of the whole and its aggregated consequences; rather, it is directed to the application of notions of responsibility and consequence to behavior in face of the accessible affective modulation itself. Ethics are thus circumscribed to assessable peers in the collective and the immediate environment. That condition results in a particular ethos: individual participants in Anonymous share the responsibility of interpreting what is being done under the collective banner. They may endorse actions and causes by supporting or joining them, or they may oppose them through simple non-participation, dissuasion, or denouncement.

Chapter 3. Affect, Semiosis and the Sociopolitical

3.1 Introduction

In this section, I will present another important element for my theoretical approach to Anonymous, its *affective* dimension. I am not original in this association; it was the underlying assumption in Weidemann's main argument – that Anonymous is formed by practices and actions, or *movements*, within affective fields mostly instantiated in digital networks. However, Weidemann's assumption tends to obscure the role of other elements which are central to my understanding of Anonymous.

3.2 Affect

The notion of affect was developed in Spinoza's work and, despite being often equated to *emotion* in subsequent appropriations, the term has a broader meaning for the philosopher. In the Definition 3 of Part III of *The Ethics*, he defines affect as the

> affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections (…) The human body can be affected in many ways in which its power of acting is increased or diminished, and also in others which render its power of acting neither greater nor less
>
> EIII, Def.3; EIII, Post. 1, in Spinoza, 1994, p. 154

Affect is a bodily intensity that, for Shouse, always preceedes consciousness and influences it "by amplifying our awareness of our biological state" (Shouse, 2005, n. pag.). He quotes a passage by Tomkins reflecting on the association between affect and consciousness though pain, to illustrate that point:

> The affect mechanism is like the pain mechanism in this respect. If we cut our hand, saw it bleeding, but had no innate pain receptors, we would know we had done something which needed repair, but there would be no urgency to it. Like our automobile which needs a tune-up, we might well let it go until next week when we had more time. But the pain mechanism, like the affect mechanism, so amplifies our awareness of the injury which activates it that we are forced to be concerned, and concerned immediately.
>
> Tomkins, 1995, p. 88, cited in Shuse, 2005

The immediate and relational qualities of affect make it simultaneously transpersonal and pre-individual (Venn, 2010; Ash, 2012). Such notion is also present in Serres' thought when he considers affective material exchange as the condition for the subject. A quasi-object, Serres claims, "is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject". The *marking*, according to Serres, is a precondition to both individual and collective subjects. While the quasi-object "moves", or is in a fluid state, it "makes the collective", when it stops, "it makes the individual" (Serres, 2007, p. 225). Thus, "this network of passes" of quasi-objects that mark subjects is a "constructer of intersubjectivity" (p. 227). Serres uses the ball in a game as the example of an object with no meaning, function, or value except that of being handled by players.

Analyzing the emergence of the artifacts, objects, and statement-events in which Anonymous is instantiated through following the traces left by these processes, would enable a partial reconstruction of the collective's formation. If the objects and artifacts which mark subjects demand an open and innovative way of appropriation, like in the case of Anonymous, the analysis of their trajectory renders partially visi-

ble the processes behind the formation of the fuzzy and dynamic set of relations which form the loosely-connected collective.

The game metaphor is useful to appreciate these dynamics. Brian Massumi unfolds the event in football into a relation between two elements: the *event-space*, the empirical space where "substantial terms in play physically intermix", and the *event-dimension*, the play, or the thing "through which the substantial elements interrelate" (Massumi, 2002, pp. 75-76). These two elements of the event are interdependent: the play, or event-dimension "is nothing" without the substantial elements in event-space, while elements of the later "are inert and disconnected without it [the event-dimension], a collection of mere things" (ibid.). Like Serres, Massumi uses ball games to illustrate his view on the problematic distinction between subjects and objects:

> If the goalposts, ground, and presence of human bodies on the field induce the play, the ball catalyzes it. The ball is the focus of every player and the object of every gesture. Superficially, when a player kicks the ball, the player is the subject of the movement, and the ball is the object. But if by subject we mean the point of unfolding of a tendential movement, then it is clear that the player is not the subject of the play. The ball is. The tendential movements in play are collective, they are team movements, and their point of application is the ball. The ball arrays the teams around itself. Where and how it bounces differentially potentializes and depotencializes the entire field, intensifying and deintensifying the exertions of the players and the movements of the team. *The ball is the subject of the play*. To be more precise, the subject of the play is the displacements of the ball and the continual modifications of the field of potential those displacements effect. The ball, as a thing, is the object-marker of the subject: its sign. Like the goal and the ground, the ball as a substantial term doubles the subject of the play, which itself is invisible and nonsubstantial, the catalysis-point of a force-field, a charge-point of potential.
>
> Massumi, 2002, p. 73

It is now obvious that the event-dimension and event-space are not independent from each other, intrinsically linked in the development of the event itself. Following Serres' argument, individuals (or players) may be conceived as connected through a field. For Kathleen Stewart, that dynamic force field, or atmosphere, of circular affective responses that results from "an attunement of senses, of labors, and imaginaries" is what can push "a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event" (Stewart, 2011, p. 452). Margaret Meran Trail, in her study of Australian football, extends and develops Massumi's observations. As she notes, Massumi's argument focuses excessively on the polarization between the goals, possibly because he is more familiar with soccer than with the "more porous"

boundary of Australian football, in which there is a history of the crowd surging onto the field, leading even to the creation of a specific rule for nullifying the spectator crowd's interference in play. Thus, for Trail, "the crowd plays too" (Trail, 2009, p. 198). What Trail's insightful remark uncovers is that, in the game of circular affection, only active and effective exclusion differentiates a collective from its others, the players from the audience or passersby. That conceptualization of affect has, according to Caroline Williams, inherent political dimensions:

> It signals the enmeshing of the political with the corporeal and points to a dynamic process of production and circulation of forces and powers that create and mobilise political subjectivity. As such, the concept of affect can enrich the study of political processes by theorising the ways in which political forms and ideas themselves presuppose – and often nurture and incite – certain forms of affective relationship within and between individuals and collectives. (…) Affect is also de-subjectifying in an important respect as for Spinoza it is also a kind of force or power that courses through and beyond subjects. Thus, it cannot easily be inscribed within the borders of subjectivity.
>
> Williams, 2010, p. 246

This perspective resonates with notions of political subjectivities that are born out of the reaction and responsiveness of the "affected". Inscribing the political within the affective is to make the body a privileged site of politics. Political consciousness, in turn, does not exist at the onset of a process that results in the construction of a political subject, as if it was the result of a spontaneous interpretation of one's *real conditions*, but is the product of bodily affections, of collectively affected bodies coming together. Furthermore, affect is also de-subjectifying in the sense that it can also disturb and reconfigure subjectivities. That stance focuses on the political subject as bodily relations, both with itself and with other bodies, thus expanding the field of politics beyond the coming together of acting and conscious human subjects, their representations and their identities.

Thus, to understand the formation of collectives it is important not only to take into account the *traces* left behind by their choreographed movements, but also to highlight the substantiation and representational practices of the choreography itself. In the case of Anonymous, due to its technical, social, and symbolic distributed nature, this is only possible, I argue, through the deployment of (digital) artifacts that serve as markers and vehicles, operating as *quasi-objects*. It is through those artifacts that Anonymous is enacted, rendering itself present. The Anonymous collective orbits objects and events that are the substantive elements of circular affection (such as the field, the ball, or a score, in a game). But here we encounter yet another limitation of the ball game metaphor: as a creative and relatively unbound collective, Anonymous

may integrate new objects, transform them, and even create new ones. This creation may take the form of iconic enunciations with high affective intensity.

Thinking about politics beyond representations and discourses is important to get a sense of how the micro dynamics of power are materialized. Tracing connections to techniques and objects is, as I argued, a key for more comprehensive understandings of subjectification. An important question, however, seems to emerge from these observations: is it impossible to integrate the different meanings of "representation" with perspectives based on objects, techniques, and the circulation of affect? Must we reject notions of representation and meaning in order to approach sociability and culture from those perspectives? And if so, what is the place of the institutions and actors that integrate the more familiar frameworks for politics in our societies? Isn't the dimension of collective action and deliberation, political or otherwise, closely related to identity and processes of representation? To do away with representation altogether is to neglect Gadamer's observation about the impacts of representational processes when pointing to the "increase in being that something acquires by being represented" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 37). To address those issues, I will start by presenting Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism to highlight the importance of representation for the formation of the political itself.

3.3 The Politics of Signifiers

Laclau defines *populism* in opposition to the current, deprecatory usage of the term in politics. This usage is the product, he claims, from what he termed the "denigration of the masses", along with the "repudiation of the undifferentiated milieu which is the 'crowd' or the 'people' in the name of social structuration and institutionalization" (Laclau, 2005a, p. 63).

He addresses two elements behind the pejorative notion of populism. First, while populism is deemed to be vague and indeterminate in terms audiences, discourse itself, and in its political postulates, Laclau considers that these "are not shortcomings of a discourse *about* social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such". Second, Laclau claims that populism has been wrongly associated with mere rhetoric, arguing that "rethoric is not epiphenomenal

vis-à-vis a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices". In his account, populism is central for "understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (Laclau, 2005a, p. 67).

In his works, populism is not considered an ontic category but an ontological one, in the sense that "its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political or ideological contents" (Laclau, 2005b, p. 34). His concern is with the constitution of the subject of modern politics, "of a 'people'", which he considers to be "the political operation par excellence" (Laclau, 2005a, p. 153). The emphasis on the construction of this basic democratic category, the *demos* or the people, does not exclude its theoretical approach from political subjectification processes in different types of political regimes. A theoretical approach that links subjectification in the field of discourse to popular political articulations is extremely useful to reconstruct the processes that enabled Anonymous to emerge as a political actor.

Laclau considers social demands to be the minimal unit for the analysis of populism, which can be intra- or anti-systemic. Intra-systemic demands are called "democratic demands" and can be satisfied by their accommodation within the existing order. Unsatisfied (or unsatisfiable) demands are termed "popular demands" and may join equivalence or solidarity relationships. Thus, there is a break resulting from "the experience of a *lack*, a gap which has emerged in the harmonious continuity of the social", a lack of wholeness, or "fullness", resulting from a divide of the political community. This lack is, for Laclau, decisive for oppositional political subjectification systems to emerge:

> the construction of the 'people' will be the attempt to give a name to that absent fullness. Without this initial breakdown of something in the social order – however minimal that something could initially be – there is no possibility of antagonism, frontier, or, ultimately, 'people'. (…) This involves bringing into the picture the power which has not met the demand. A demand is always addressed to somebody. So from the very beginning we are confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other. Here we begin to see why the *plebs* sees itself as the *populus*, the part as the whole: since the fullness of the community is merely the imaginary reverse of a situation lived as *deficient being*, those who are responsible for this cannot be a legitimate part of the community; the chasm between them is irretrievable.
>
> Laclau, 2005a, pp. 85-86

For Laclau, these processes require the coalescing of demands around common signifiers, symbols that may be mobilized in interpellation and popular identification processes: "any popular identity needs to be condensed around some signifiers (words, images) which refer to the equivalential chain as a totality" (ibid, pp. 95-96). This equivalential chain is motivated by a common opposition between the political regime and the different demands specific to various sectors of society. Without this "dichotomic frontier", it is not possible for one of the demands to become the signifier – "a tendentially empty signifier" – of such a chain since "the equivalential relation would collapse and the identity of each demand would be exhausted in its differential particularity" (ibid., pp. 130-131). He calls these *empty signifiers* since popular identities develop *extensionally* to accommodate growing chains of demands, but also become *intensionally* poorer as they dispose of particularities. This is how he accounts for the formation of a "people" as a collective actor in opposition to the established order when political frontiers are a stable dichotomy. In order to accommodate for multiple frontiers, as well as their displacement, Laclau integrates the notion of *floating signifiers*. When "the *same* democratic demands receive the structural pressure of rival hegemonic projects" they do not become independent of equivalential articulations but their "meaning is indeterminate between alternative equivalential frontiers" (ibid., p. 131): the fixation of their meaning is dependent of a struggle for hegemony.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony is central for Laclau's theory of populism. According to Simon Critchley, hegemony partakes in the process of political identity formation and must be thought of as *hegemonic articulation*: "identities, cultural meanings, practices, are what they are through processes of articulation which are hegemonic and therefore ultimately political" (Critchley, 2003, p. 64). But the political is not necessarily hegemonic, since hegemony is an historically situated notion, or as Lawrence Grossberg claims, it should be conceived as "conjunctural politics opened up by the conditions of advanced capitalism, mass communication and culture" rather than a "universally present struggle" (Grossberg, 1996, p. 162). For him, hegemony is also present in the forms of articulation that support populist politics, involving "the mobilization of popular support, by a particular social bloc, for the broad range of its social projects", constituting "a struggle over 'the popular'" (ibid., p. 163).

Hence, the "floating" element of signifiers becomes a more prominent field of contestation in times of organic crisis and rearticulation of the symbolic system, translating the logic of the displacements of political frontiers. Those signs constitute "rhetorical tools (…) which can be put to the most disparate ideological uses" (ibid., p. 191). According to Laclau, the formation of a *people* is not limited to nationalist, regional, or ethnic rallying points. It occurs when three conditions are met:

> equivalential relations hegemonically represented through empty signifiers; displacement of the internal frontiers through the production of floating signifiers; and a constitutive heterogeneity which makes dialectical retrievals impossible and gives its true centrality to political articulation.
>
> Laclau, 2005a, p. 156

The notion of empty signifier enables us to understand how particular subjects and demands come to enter equivalential relations. It does not, however, say much about how these signifiers are produced and come to represent such relations. For that, it is important to insert them in the field of sociality, inscription devices and signification practices.

3.3.1 Memes or Signs

While Anonymous can be compared to the digital templates known as internet memes, and thus, as in the work of Jarvis (2014), studied through the lenses of meme theory or *memetics*, I claim that it is better understood through the joint analysis of dynamic affective fields, material inscription, and processes of signification and interpretation (semiosis). These connections are present in the stream of scholar production which are inspired in the works of Charles S. Peirce. Webb Keane (2003) considers Peirce's processual model of the sign to be of sociological relevance since "it can be taken to entail sociability, struggle, historicity, and contingency" (p. 413). Furthermore, memetics fail to address one of the key issues of Peircean semiotics: the relations "not only between signifier (sign) and signified (interpretant) but between both of those and (possible) objects of signification" (ibid.). Kilpinen explains this limitation:

> memetics, with its notion of universal replication, recognizes only one of those dimensions that constitute signs, according to the general theory. It is aware of the interpretive dimension, but has little if anything to say about the representative dimension. Or, to make the point in Peirce's terms, memetics recognizes the relation between sign and its interpretant(s), but keeps silent about sign and its object.
>
> Kilpinen, 2008, p. 221

I argue that this dimension hides a heuristic potential which is not negligible, particularly in the study of a fuzzy collective like Anonymous, in which the communicative, aesthetic and political dimensions of representation are central. This potential may be identified in one of the most basic and transversal distinction in semiotics and the works it inspired, which is related to modalities of the relation between sign and object:

> A sign represents its object to its interpretant symbolically, indexically, or iconically according to whether it does so (1) by being associated with its object by a conventional rule used by the interpretant (as in the case of 'red'); (2) by being in existential relation with its object (as in the case of the act of pointing); or (3) by exhibiting its object (as in the case of the diagram). (…) The word 'red' is a symbol because it stands for the quality red to an interpretant who interprets it in virtue of the conventional linguistic rule of English (…) Consider next the act of pointing. Its object is whatever is pointed to, that is, whatever is in a certain physical relation to the sign (…) The diagram is an icon because it represents the structure of the machine by exemplifying or exhibiting the same structure in some respects.
>
> Burks, 1949, p. 674

It is important to stress that, since these representative dimensions are not mutually exclusive, the same sign can be associated with an object in more than one way. If this is true, what could be said of a sign that is associated with objects in more than one way? That would enable the sign to trigger further associations, expanding its interpretative flexibility and resulting in varied forms of affect mobilization and catalysis. Lets take, for instance, the signs commonly associated with Anonymous: the mask, the headless suit, or their mantra "we are anonymous, we do not forgive, we do not forget, expect us". They seem to be able to integrate iconicity in the sense that they partially reproduce the dynamics of the Anonymous collective, pointing to anonymity, status marks related to technological, liberal and creative professions, and their way of operating as a reactive anonymous crowd that should be expected since it can be mobilized around whatever weaknesses are encountered by those pursuing their causes in this way. They also integrate indexicality as they are deployed with every action as marks of attribution, marking the difference between unattributed anonymous actions, such as hacking, leaking, or generating discourses, and the operations carried under the Anonymous banner. Finally, they carry symbolism since they reached the status of recognizable conventions in public discourse.

3.4 Sign and Object

To better understand the tripartite connections between objects, signifiers, and interpretants, and how those connections may help to understand Anonymous, I will start by the most familiar category of signs identified by Pierce, the symbol. Symbols have a very important standing in sociology, namely in one of its most prominent contemporary schools of thought known as *symbolic interactionism*. To introduce that topic, I will first address the work of one of the founding figures of the discipline: Émile Durkheim. In his late work entitled *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim claimed that scientific thought at the time was dominated by the principle of identity; however, he insisted that there are vasts systems of representation that do not rely on identity: "the mythologies, from the grossest up to the most reasonable". In his view, it is in these systems that experience meets "beings which have the most contradictory attributes simultaneously, who are at the same time one and many, material and spiritual, who can divide themselves up indefinitely without losing anything of their constitution" (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 12-13). This mythological character is behind, for instance, the conflation of particular individuals and historical events, a flag, and an ideal of nation; or a particular kangaroo, the animal-totem, and the kangaroo people. The excessive intensity of symbolic affections is present both in parts as in the whole. According to Durkheim, these are the product of physical contact and concentration, which produces a "sort of electricity" that transports participants "to an extraordinary degree of exaltation". His formulation is extremely similar to the idea of contagious crowd behavior:

> Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. (…) And since a collective sentiment cannot express itself collectively except on the condition of observing a certain order permitting co-operation and movements in unison, these gestures and cries naturally tend to become rhythmic and regular; hence come songs and dances. (…) Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of an external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer. (…) It seems to him that he has become a new being: the decorations he puts on and the masks that cover his face figure materially in this interior transformation, and to a still greater extent, they aid in determining its nature.
>
> Durkheim, 1915, pp. 215-218

The emphasis on mutual affection and temporal patterns present in this passage seems to address what in the work of Parikka is described as the mechanisms behind swarms. Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence and affective contagion is integrated within his theoretical framework that tries to give an account of the constitution of culture (Arppe, 2014, p. 83). Furthermore, Durkheim does not focus in the crowd or the mob and the ways it transforms an individual, as Le Bon did, but rather in the social outcomes of gatherings or assemblies in which people with shared purposes or identity unite (Pickering, 2009[1984], pp. 398-400). In his view, the collective effervescence transports its participants to a "special world" which is not that of their everyday lives, where they are transformed by intense forces. This leads to the conviction of the existence of "two heterogeneous and mutually incomparable worlds", those of the profane and the sacred. Thus, for Durkheim, "it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born" (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 218-219).

Particularly relevant for this argument is that Durkheim believed that the connection to the sacred objects (such as a god) through religious ritual and collective effervescence is an activity that reinvigorates the values and ideas of society, unifying individuals. This collective vital energy is then projected onto a symbol. It is only through objectification and representation that the collective may be *collectively conscious* of itself. What Durkheim is concerned with here is the intermixing of the material symbol that stands for some object and the affections those things (symbol and object) bring about. His concern is thus, according to Arppe, the constitution of the *symbolic*:

> the indispensable instance needed for the affective contagion ever to be able to constitute anything that we might call "culture". The distinguishing feature of the Durkheimian "contagion" is precisely the symbolic *fixation* it involves. In order for the individual affects (sentiments) to become socially relevant, they first must be materialized in the form of common, meaningful *symbols*. In other words, the flow of affective contagion must be stopped, fixed, and concentrated in a material form. It is this *material form* which then starts to act as a symbol of the collective turmoil and which, in turn enables the birth of a sui generis type of collective affectivity, a social sentiment not reducible to its constituent (individual) parts. (…) in Durkheim's scheme the inter-subjective relationship is never immediate; it is always mediated by a transcendental (symbolic) instance, namely the social.
>
> Arppe, 2014, pp. 83-84

In order to introduce and expand that reflection in a way that goes beyond the domain of the symbol and collective representations into that of affect and circular reaction, opening the possibilities for a non-representational approach and material

semiotics, I turn to the work of the Chicago School of sociology (George H. Mead, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, Herbert Blumer) and Georges Gurvitch.

3.4.1 Gestures

In *Mind, Self and Society,* Mead (1934) distinguished what he called the "conversation of gestures" – unconscious communication through non-significant gestures and symbols, without the awareness of the elicited immediate responses or of the standpoint of others – from significant gestures and symbols that trigger functionally identical responses in others – the domain of language and conscious, significant communication. Language gestures, according to Mead, presuppose possible specific reactions; in the case of a mismatch between anticipated and actual response, the subject adjusts that gesturing in order to achieve the desired communicative end (Mead, 1934, p. 46).

Other sociologists tried to understand said kind of behavior at the collective level. Some of that work was highly influenced by the 19th century crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon. One example is the seminal book *Introduction to the Science of Society*, by Park and Burgess (1921), in which that perspective is developed. The sociologists establish a continuum between social forms along the axis of its complexity: social unrest, the crowd, the gang, the public, the political party, the social movement, and the state (Park & Burgess, 1921, p. 123). Less complex forms, the sociologists claimed, were characterized by *circular reaction* – what Park had termed *psychic reciprocity* in his doctoral dissertation (*cf.* McPhail, 1989). That idea can also be found in the works of Blumer, who opposes said circular and mutually affective dynamics to symbolic interaction, prevalent in other social formations. For Blumer, those formulations help to understand "the way in which the elementary and spontaneous forms [of sociality] develop into organized forms" (Blumer, 1946, p. 168). He associates that emergence with more complex forms of organization and social change, claiming that

> the appearance of elementary collective groups is indicative of a process of social change. They have the dual character of implying the disintegration of the

> old and the appearance of the new. They play an important part in the development of new collective behavior and of new forms of social life.
>
> Blumer, 1946, p. 196

Gurvitch, who alludes to an agreement with Blumer in the work where the following passage can be found, also shared Durkheim's preoccupation with the nature of the social bond and intersubjectivity, or the non symbolic quality of *we* relations:

> No one will deny the importance of language for *rapprochement* among minds as well as among behaviors and for their inner unification (…) But in order that the signs of language itself may come into being, it must be based on a prior union of minds, on a pre-existent "we." Language is not the basis of the partial fusion of the "we," because language presupposes it. On the contrary, in the case of connection by simple communication between me, you, him, they, this connection is impossible without words, gestures, declarations, external marks, decisive behavior (such as in contractual relations). In these connections where the interested parties delimit their spheres, symbols are the instruments of the connection itself and of the criteria of delimitation. It is exclusively with the "we," the basis of which is not symbolic, that I shall be concerned with here.
>
> Gurvitch, 1963, p. 487

To understand how interaction can occur beyond signification and representation, to integrate the extra-linguistic dimensions, I will address the other categories of signs identified by Peirce.

3.5 Material Semiotics and Representation

First, I introduce the indexical dimension of communication and performance from a political perspective, which allows me to approach the *conditions* for representation. Derrida, following Heidegger, argues that representation is rendering present, it has the "power-to-bringing-back-to-presence" which, for the philosopher, is "the power of the subject": to "bring back to presence and make present, make something present to itself, indeed, just make itself present" (Derrida, 2007, pp. 105-106). For Derrida,

> it is only the putting at the disposal of the human subject that gives rise to representation, and this putting at one's disposal is the very thing that constitutes the subject as a subject. The subject is what can or believes it can offer itself representations, disposing them and disposing of them.
>
> Derrida, 2007, p. 107

Representation, claims the philosopher, is a repetition, restitution and substitution that is central to ideas (their *objective reality*), aesthetics (e.g. poetic, visual), and politics. If we extend that perspective, the subject's power becomes the possibility to enunciate and materialize itself and other artifacts, to objectify itself through discourse, technique, and performance. Emphasizing that performative dimension of subjectification, Inger Sjørslev (2012) conceptualizes political subjects through materiality and self-objectivation. *Contra* an emphasis on understanding subjective experience in its emotional and verbal articulations, her notion of *material subject* is conceptualized "from the public observer's position rather than the interlocutor's" (Sjørslev, 2012, p. 210). Her stance is influenced by performance theory after Goffman and its insights related to the co-performance between performer and audience:

> In Goffman's understanding, the subjective self was located back-stage and actors defended their selves in performative action. The subject was formed once and for all, independently of ongoing social action. (...) A theoretical position that does not set out analytically from the subject, but aims to analyse cultural models of subjectivity, would see Goffman's ideas about the dramatizing subject as founded in a western cultural model, which sees the self as a separate entity, relatively isolated from the social relations and the socio-cultural world of which it is a part.
>
> Sjørslev, 2012, p. 212

Inspired by the work of Sabah Mahmood on the veil, namely her remark that the veil is the means of being as well as becoming a certain kind of person (Mahmood, 2001, p. 215, cited in Sjørslev, 2012) Sjørslev highlights its capability of *revelation*, by performing the indexical act of *pointing*:

> *Homo performans* is characterized by being reflexive about its own performance; in performing he reveals himself to himself. The performatively constituted material subject is the one who, by pointing to itself in a kind of staged self-awareness, at the same time makes others more aware of themselves. (…) Material subjects are thus subjects that point to an issue of collective significance by way of pointing to themselves. Their materiality lies in making themselves signs, not in the classical referential way, but by being and pointing at the same time.
>
> Sjørslev, 2012, p. 213

This is the base for her conception of the always political *material subject* as an analytical tool for the "understanding of effects of a broader category of public manifestations" (Sjørslev, 2012, p. 214). Due to the diversity of factors involved, and the complexity of their interrelation, these effects are never fully the outcome of intention and program. The political is thus complexified and enlarged in this perspective since it assumes that the *mattering* of subjects, their expressions and manifestations, are deemed necessarily political: "a political subject is constituted through the materiality of such performative events, whether the intentions are regarded as explicitly political or not" (ibid.).

The symbol and the index are, as I've argued, concepts that help understand the material and semiotic construction of Anonymous. Nevertheless, due to the considerable weight and strength of this collective's iconography – which led Jarvis to associate Anonymous with a meme complex based on those audiovisual signs usually referred to as internet memes – the iconic dimension of the sign is also the focus of my research. Following Freud , Jeffrey C. Alexander (2008) defines icons as symbolic condensations. For him, the deceptive relation between surface and depth in iconic materiality is key for understanding typification and types in social and artistic life. He claims artists use surfaces as a device for producing depth immersion through both iconic meaning and emotionality. When successful, the specificities of a particular object and the processes through which it was produced are no longer important since it becomes a symbol: a collective representation, an ideal-type of object, person, or situation.

In a later work, Alexander highlights the rooting of social meaning in the surface of iconic material forms, in which morality becomes subsumed in aesthetics. The contact with this (under)coded meaning is the origin of what he terms "iconic consciousness": an experience which is not conscious of itself since it is imposed by the "evidence of the senses". For Alexander:

> the surface, or form, of a material object is a magnet, a vacuum cleaner that sucks the feeling viewer into meaning. (...) With icons, the signifier (an idea) is made material (a thing). The signified is no longer only in the mind, something thought of, but something experienced, something felt, in the heart and the body. The idea becomes an object in time and space, a thing. More precisely, it seems to be a thing. For, as aesthetic shapes, things are the middles of semiotic process. Insofar as the thing becomes invested with social meaning, it becomes archtypical. As something, it is transformed into a signifier, setting off a semiosis that subsumes every thing into meaning and every meaning into thing.
>
> Alexander, 2008, p. 783

According to Alexander and Bartmański, icons concentrate both material force and symbolic power, triggering cognitive and moral assessments alongside a sensual aesthetic dimension. Iconicity obscures the processes of icon formation but provides the possibility of experiencing and making use of material-semiotic forces and enabling meaningful collective life. Through icons, individuals experience and control something fundamental whose meaning they cannot fully understand. Icons are, in this perspective, aesthetic "concrete materiality points" that represent, or are the signifiers of, "the ideationally and affectively intuited signified", pointing "to the elusive but very real domains of feeling and thought" (Alexander and Bartmański, 2012, pp. 1-2).

3.5.1 Icon as Metaphor

Symbolic condensation may result in iconography that seeks to represent the circulation of affects within affective fields. In those iconic enunciations, affect passes from a state of free flowing interchange to a condensed state: an icon such as a score or the figure of a scorer in a ball game. Through these moments of expression, the burst of temporarily excessive intensity of affect is contained within a singular condensed form, thus restoring the original free flowing state. The relation between free flowing and crystallized affect is not linear since these bursts are the very cause of the affective circularity, and since these crystallized forms have the ability to trigger affective motion: what these icons represent is precisely what was circulating in a diffuse form. If affect is a "communicative contagion", a *bodily touch* which alters the touching bodies and their subsequent responses, iconic enunciations representing the circulation of affect are the crystallization of this *choreography*, but should not be considered separate from it, since the resulting icons carry affective power and thus enter a co-constitutive relation with the field which they express. In Alexander's perspective, icons are distinct in the sense that they are expressively textured: they are experienced in a tactile way, felt in our unconscious minds, and trigger multiple associations. Iconicity is not limited to the field of artistic and aesthetic production, having profound implications in other spheres of social life:

> it is immersion into an aesthetic object that makes it into an icon. In this same manner, non-aesthetic social things become iconic too. Immersion is a

> dual process, a dialectic between 'subjectification' and 'materialization'. By subjectification I mean the drawing of the object, seemingly external, into oneself. In this movement from object to subject, a thing becomes alive, or seems to take on life. Becoming us, it loses its objectness. One no longer sees the object, but oneself, one's projections, one's own convictions and beliefs. By materialization, I mean to suggest the opposite experience, the process by which the subject falls into the object and loses oneself. One becomes the thing, existing inside it. One lives and breathes the object, looking outside to the world from inside of it. Its texture is your texture.
>
> Alexander, 2008, pp. 6-7

Keane, who also reflects on iconicity, considers that objects emerge as opposed to a subject only insofar as they resist his gestures. That leads him to conclude that iconicity instigates to action regardless of conscious awareness (Keane, 2003) – icons carry affect. Nevertheless, they also point to a mode of reasoning which is particular to icons. In his approach, which is based on a kind of philosophical realism, Keane (2003, 2006) expresses the relevance of Peirce's argument that people make suppositions about objects through *abductions* from experience. For Peirce, abduction or hypothesis is a mode of inference through likeness (the iconic dimension) that opposes induction (inference through an index, a sign by connection) and deduction (inference through a symbol, a sign by interpretative habit) (Peirce, 1992[1866], p. 485). According to Keane, "abduction is the logical process of postulating that which must, or is most likely to be, the case such that what we actually *do* perceive has the character that it does" (Keane, 2006, p. 201). Peirce argues that the openness of the icon – which resembles nothing in particular but possible objects – to different forms and materials in its actual and virtual instantiations allows the discovery of "new aspects of supposed states of things" (Peirce, 1955, pp. 106-107, cited in Keane, 2003).

That perspective opens the analytical framework to other forms of material contingency. Objects mediate actions, situations and subjects, Keane claims, containing properties that exceed interpretation and usage – the autonomy of objects "allow subjects to make real discoveries about themselves" and "form the grounds for subsequent modes of action whose limits, if any, are in principle unknowable" (Keane, 2006, p. 201, emphasis added). Most of the fluxes that constitute Anonymous purposively obfuscated and invisible. That gives place to imagination and fascination with the unknown, an aura of mystery and magic which is extremely related to the representations of the collective. Gell claims that "magical thought is seduced by the images it makes of something that by definition cannot be represented" (Gell, 1974, p. 26). Regardless of the non-representability of magic objects, ritual acts integrate efforts to represent them anyway. In a similar way, for Gell the art object draws on

complexity and virtuosity to create "a certain cognitive indecipherability" (ibid, p. 95). Incomprehensibility and opacity regarding the processes through which an object came into being result in captivation by its image. For Gell, captivation results from "the demoralisation produced by the spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity" (ibid., p. 71).

The covered approaches hint at an affective and semiotic theory of subjectification. Furthermore, they suggest that the representation of "non-aesthetic social things", like swarming dynamics, can be thought of as the precursor for a particular form of collective subjectification. As magic and art, the captivating seduction of Anonymous as a modality of action and subjectification partially lies in its powerful iconography. That iconography instantly creates both affective and semiotic connections through a productive absence and its evocation of the imaginary.

To close the reflection on the role of signification for Anonymous, I will address how the already problematic differentiation between the possible relations between signs and their objects – on the basis of the index, sign, and symbol categories – is itself dependent on the contingency of social and material factors. For Keane, there is a deep semiotic dimension to power and the constitution of subjects that regulates his concept of *representational economy*: "the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation" (2003, p. 410). That regulation is, according to the anthropologist, operated through basic assumptions about signs, what they are and how they function – what Keane terms *semiotic ideologies.* Those ideologies predetermine certain semiotic processes by shaping the role of intention, the possible and plausible subjects with agency and acted-upon objects in acts of signification, and determine whether the relation between sign and object is arbitrary or necessary. If, as Peirce notes, icons and indexes in themselves assert nothing (1955) and are open to a wide variety of forms and materials, their constitution as signs depends on something else. Through processes such as naturalization, what would otherwise constitute an indexcial may be taken as iconic of some essential character and what would be a convention taken as indexical (Gell, 1998; Keane, 2003).

> Connoisseurship or, at the other end of the class spectrum, the embodied 'taste for the necessary,' transform indexicality into iconism — certain kinds of food and the bodies they help shape, give substance to the social abstractions of class. But such things as taste can only effect such transformations by virtue of the mediation of ideologies of class — that there is something subject to iconism and indexicality in the first place — or else there would be no signs to read.
>
> Keane, 2003, p. 417

For Keane, these ideologies are not total systems of meaning and the "openness of things to further consequences" makes them perpetually unstable (Keane, 2003, p. 419). Ritual and verbal poetic performance also stabilize and give concreteness to objects, so that when texts change, so do the material relations they presuppose, but the "felicity of reference" requires objectual concordance of denoted qualities. Furthermore, ontological claims supported by ritual speech and other practices may transform dominant semiotic ideologies (ibid., pp. 421-422).

Keane refers to Nancy Munn's (1986) usage of the Peircean concept of qualisign as a sensuous quality of objects that has a privileged role within a larger system of value. For Keane, a qualisign is "a Peircean First, and thus, merely a potential component of an as yet unrealized sign", which denotes the idea that "significance is borne by certain qualities beyond their particular manifestations" (Keane, 2003, p. 414). The collective embodiment of qualisigns in particular manifestations means qualisigns "are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities" (p. 414). The co-presence, or *bundling*, as Kean calls it, of qualities in objects "points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality:" a quality "cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life" (Keane, 2003, p. 414). The relation between material qualities, with their indexicality function, means that qualisigns partake in causal relations – not only conventional or logical ones – such as the aesthetic valuation of "lightness" in Munn's analysis is associated with a casual relation between building lasting social relations through giving away food and the shape of the body (Keane, 2003, p. 415).

This means that semiotic ideologies are also materially constrained to the felicity of its webs of reference and material practice which have to support the ontological claims and definitions of both objects and subjects of signification. Those considerations – along with those about the power of subjects, such as Derrida's, and their formation, such as Laclau's – also shape my conceptualization of subjectification as they further open its analysis to other forms of material contingency.

3.6 Mediation, Perception and Intersubjectivity

The interplay between material relations and communication media has been one of the focuses of critical theory from its inception. For Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, media are "means of mental production" controlled by "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal" (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 64). This basic premise is a central point in other seminal works in this theoretical tradition. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno develop a critical approach to the ways in which the development of new media impacts on society. Media and mass culture are produced, in their view, under monopoly conditions within the cultural industry. Concerned about media production, they claim

> films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but businesses is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce.
>
> Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 95

For these authors, technological accounts of the cultural industry are often aligned with a defense of standardization justified by the needs of a large number of dispersed participants. They identify a system of domination underlying technical rationality that is only sustained by manipulation. Thus, mediated cultural forms would tend to conform to the specific interests of the technical media apparatus and their personnel, rather than those of its publics.

Nonetheless, Horkheimer and Adorno also point to the liberating potentialities of some technologies. The telephone is an example of a communication technology which they consider to have "liberally permitted the participant to play the role of the subject", in sharp opposition to industry controlled communication technologies like the radio, which "democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations". These unidirectional public technologies are deemed to lack "mechanisms of reply" and private transmissions are confined to the amateur sphere, which is still organized from above (ibid., pp. 95-96). In media culture, the spontaneity of audiences is, ultimately, steered and integrated into selected specializations, according to the scholars.

For Althusser, the media of his time (press, radio, and television) were part of the plural and heterogeneous Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). In his perspective,

they differ from what he termed the (single) Repressive State Apparatus. Another contrast between these two types was the fact that most ISA operated within the private sector. Nevetheless, Althusser follows Gramsci by claiming that the *State*, "which is the state of the ruling class", is above the distinction between public and private domains, a distinction that is internal to bourgeois law and valid only where this law exerts its authority (Althusser, 1971, p. 144).

Critical theory thus situates media in their relation to capitalist power structures, ideology and how it relates to processes of subjectification. Subjectification here takes the form of subjection or liberation from the "ruling class". The major difference between these two degrees of autonomy in the field of possibilities associated with media seems to depend on who controls the fluxes and on the cultural hegemony over this production. This tradition's preoccupation with subjective transformation through the presence, or lack of thereof, of autonomous voices, aesthetic experience, and political potential in the field of media and popular culture also inspired my approach to Anonymous.

The previously mentioned perspectives highlight the important link between media operation and content with the corporate and state structures exerting power and control over communication. Despite Althusser's assertion that "no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses" (Althusser, 1971, p. 146), his perspective neglects the processes through which these apparatuses are conceived and implemented, or how certain forms of control are achieved and effectively maintained. As Stuart Hall notices, there are "important problems in the field of ideology and culture which the formulation, 'ideological state apparatuses,' encourages us to evade" (Hall, 1985, p. 101). Furthermore, structural analyses also tend to neglect the possibility of intervention at the level of ideologies and the symbolic. In order to tackle these issues, the relation between communication and culture should also be analyzed in greater detail, in ways that exceed the traditional categories of critical theory.

Those conceptions remind us that digital media does not exist in a historical void, thus participating in relation to other social processes. According to Castells, the new networked based social structure, what he terms the network society, is the result of three late twentieth century processes:

> the needs of the economy for management flexibility and for the globalization of capital, production and trade; the demands of society in which the values of individual freedom and open communication became paramount; and the extraordinary advances in computing and telecommunications made possible by the micro-electronics revolution.

Castells, 2001, p. 2

Nevertheless, digital media must also be understood in connection with the processes of electronic inscription – digitalization – of an ever growing part of human culture. This led some analysts like Lev Manovich (2001) to claim we are living a new media revolution, the result of the contemporary synthesis between digital computers and media technologies at the level of text, sound, and image.

The most notable example of the importance of digital networks in today's social world is the internet. Despite the existence of central nodes (such as servers) and data routes (backbones), the internet and its protocols operate according to horizontal and decentralized principles. According to Andrew Feenberg, the internet has five functional layers: a non-hierarchical structure without central control which enabled internationalization and experimentation; anonymity at the interactive and technical levels; data and record storage that allow for unprecedented depth in surveillance, as well as for the preservation of individual and collective online histories; cheap and quick broadcasting to large audiences; and support for new forms of sociability, debate, and deliberation (Feenberg, 2014, pp. 115-6). Thus, and although online individual expression occurs in settings that are often dominated by digital service providing companies and state regulation, the characteristics of the internet have implications for projects of personal and collective autonomy. Some of those implications are highly negative, such as the techniques of surveillance and control by companies for extracting profit through attention grabbing but also, increasingly, behavioral manipulation[11]. States and specialized contractors and security consulting firms also try to make use of the internet for mass surveillance, often targeting both terrorists and activists. In addition, the conflation of real-time communication, memory and storage creates the possibility of constructing sociability platforms, forms of expression and identity.

The creation of interlinked personal spaces of expression and the ease of information and multimedia content exchange associated with the increase in broadband internet access gave rise to what are known as Web 2.0 and *social media*. These terms are commonly used to characterize a very diverse set of web based technologies which allow formally structured and standardized social interaction and information sharing through sites such as blogs and microblogs, social networking sites, wikis, and video sharing platforms. In opposition to the one directional structure of traditional mass media, shaped by institutional media spaces within which powerful business and state organizations set the parameters, Castells develops the notion of

[11] By manipulation, I refer to the increasing connection between business and revenue strategies based on rational choice theory and choice models.

mass self-communication to give an account of the use of widely horizontal digital networks such as those built around the internet. In his words, "any post in the Internet, regardless of the intention of its author, becomes a bottle drifting in the ocean of global communication, a message susceptible of being received and reprocessed in unexpected ways" (Castells, 2007, p. 247).

But the internet is composed by many small streams rather than a true "ocean", forming complex media ecological systems of flows that integrate conflict, cooperation, exclusion, cooptation, contact, isolation, positive and negative feedbacks loops, and other dynamics which may only be observed in situated online practices. For the "internet" to become something akin to an ocean, massive but highly distributed processes have to occur that allow for such complex forms of synchronization and augmentation. This interpretation guides my own research, since said processes are also those that shaped the formation of Anonymous.

3.6.1 Vision and Memory in Mediated Lifeworlds

In the phenomenological perspective of Alfred Schutz's (1964), intersubjectivity arises when individuals share a temporally situated common orientation. This is deemed necessary for every situational emerging "we" relation: the synchronization of internal streams of consciousness. Synchronization requires interlocking both at the level of temporality/duration and that of shared orientation towards an exterior object or event which is commonly grasped by the participants in a given interaction. To illustrate his point, Schutz gives the example of two people observing a bird's flight: "since we are growing older together during the flight of the bird, and since I have evidence, in my own observations, that you were paying attention to the same event, I may say that we saw a bird in flight" (Schutz, 1964, p. 25). These forms of intersubjectivity constitute themselves within phenomenal fields of practice, which need to be developed, sustained, and reproduced. These are the fields where affect circulates.

Drawing on phenomenological social science, in particular on the work by Schutz and Berger and Luckmann, Zhao speaks of the mediated "there and now" zone, which stands in opposition to the "here and now" of face-to-face interaction, which

alters the spatiotemporal structure of everyday life realities (Zhao, 2006, p. 460). Individuals can render themselves present at a distance through media technology acting as scopic systems, entering situations of telecopresence as Cetina calls it. The resulting phenomenal field becomes partially determined by the properties of the used channels. The anonymous internet in itself is one of those fields, where different forms of intersubjectivity are produced. While these "we relations" may emerge from such familiar situations, they may also form under very different conditions. In fact, it is possible to think of a continuum in which we relations are formed: one of its extremes being situations of complete recognition, in which the relation is forged between people fully acknowledging all other participants; and the other being a complete stranger relation, when participants are only aware that others may exist, lacking any other information about them – such as the notion of publics advanced before. Those extremes can only be taken as ideal-typical concepts; they are implausible, at best, and actual cases will fall in between. The anonymous internet is no exception, since individuals can infer at least some abstract characteristics of other participants – e.g. digital media literacy – but typically nothing else. As a phenomenal field of practice, anonymous internet settings are deeply shaped by that characteristic.

Depending on design features, those channels may enable direct asynchronous or synchronous communication, thus actual situations of telecopresence necessary for intersubjectivity and we relations. In the case of interaction in the internet, the screen functions as a scopic system and, when dealing with global social phenomena, it supports global reflexive systems. Knorr Cetina pointed to the importance of these systems:

> Social scientists tend to think in terms of mechanisms of coordination, which is what the network notion stands for; a network is an arrangement of nodes tied together by relationships which serve as conduits of communication, resources and other coordinating instances that hold the arrangement together by passing between the nodes. But we should also think in terms of reflexive mechanisms of observation and projection, which the relational vocabulary does not capture. Like an array of crystals acting as lenses that collect light, focusing it on one point, such mechanisms collect and focus activities, interests and events, and project them in identical fashion to dispersed audiences. (…) The audience may start to react to the features of the reflected, presented reality rather than to the embodied, pre-reflexive occurrences. The scopic system acts as a centering and mediating device through which things become assembled and from which they are projected forward.
>
> Cetina, 2005, pp. 220-221

The internet-connected computer screens may display multiple windows and communication channels. Facing these screens, individuals manage their attention to different communicational spheres, effectively bridging them together in real-time. There is thus a "split in orientation in the interaction order" (Cetina & Brugger, 2002, pp. 923) made possible by the screen.

While we relations may emerge from such situations, they may form under different conditions. In fact, it is possible to think of a continuum in which we relations are formed: one of its extremes being situational of complete recognition, in which the relation is forged between people fully acknowledging all other participants; and the other being a complete stranger relation, such as the notion of publics advanced before, when participants in this relation cannot be aware of others' presence.

In order to analyze the situations in which participants are linked by information technologies, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002) assert "that the screen brings that which is geographically distant and invisible near to participants, thus rendering it interactionally present – in other words, response present" (ibid., p. 909). Accordingly, response-presence-based situations, such as the 'face-to-screen situation' (ibid., p. 923), are the microsociological settings in which global social forms are instantiated. The authors analyzed the Foreign Exchange Market (FOREX), concluding that traders "provide for the market's existence and process continuity through the intensity of their communication with one another", i.e., "the markets studied take the form of a large, globally distributed conversation" (ibid., p. 914). When the interaction is technologically mediated, the phenomenal field becomes partially determined by the properties of the used channels but individuals can still render themselves present at a distance through scopic systems. These systems enable asynchronous and synchronous communication, instantiating actual situations of telecopresence. In the case of internet interaction, the screen functions as a scopic system and, when dealing with global social phenomena, it supports global reflexive systems. Knorr Cetina pointed to the importance of these systems:

> Social scientists tend to think in terms of mechanisms of coordination, which is what the network notion stands for; a network is an arrangement of nodes tied together by relationships which serve as conduits of communication, resources and other coordinating instances that hold the arrangement together by passing between the nodes. But we should also think in terms of reflexive mechanisms of observation and projection, which the relational vocabulary does not capture. Like an array of crystals acting as lenses that collect light, focusing it on one point, such mechanisms collect and focus activities, interests and events, and project them in identical fashion to dispersed audiences. (…) The audience may start to react to the features of the reflected, presented reality rather than to the embodied, pre-reflexive occurrences. The scopic sys-

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The internet-connected computer's screen may display multiple windows and communication channels. Facing these screens, individuals manage their attention to different communicational spheres, effectively bridging them together in real-time. There is thus a "split in orientation in the interaction order" (Cetina & Brugger, 2002, pp. 923) when the traders studies by these scholars articulate their attention and responses between the trading floor and the global market in the screen. Anonymous requires a complex articulation in interaction order splits since participants orient themselves towards multiple spheres: their biographies and life projects, political and economic contexts, the public instantiations and the inner spheres of Anonymous – the mediated interactive contexts within which participants come in contact with each other and organize – and to its outside, the world at large. Today, all these spheres are, at least partially, represented on screens. The elements on the screen may manifest themselves in identical mode (through public news media, web pages, social network sites, and other online information streams, as well as the Anonymous public communication channels, e.g. the chans, dedicated IRC channels and networks) or overlapping mode (the immediate circles of sociability, knowledge and which surround a particular action, cell, or participant).

Intersubjectivity, microintegration, or collective intentionality (Searle, 2006, p. 16) at a global level are enabled by global reflex systems (GRS) that assemble and project the reality of these global forms (Knorr Cetina, 2007).

> In the financial markets studied, the reflexive mechanism and "projection plane" is the computer screen; with the screen come software and hardware systems that provide a vast range of observation, presentation, and interaction capabilities sustained by information and service provider firms. Given these affordances, the prereflexive reality is cut off and replaced; some of the mechanisms that we take for granted in a lifeworld, for example, its performative possibilities, have been integrated into the systems, and others have been replaced by specialized processes that feed the screen. The technical systems gather up a lifeworld while simultaneously projecting it.
>
> Cetina, 2005, p. 123.

Like FOREX, Anonymous can be thought of as being instantiated through a particular form of technologically-enabled globally distributed conversation. It is important to understand how these worlds are gathered and projected through technical systems.

The complex dynamics of mediated sociality entail notions of "public" and "circulation" that are associated with degrees of fixation, accessibility, intensity, periodicity, scope, linguistic and cultural codes in mediated practices, knowledge, memory and storage. They shape the material substrata of the symbols, cultural processing and discursive sedimentation, thus producing what the philosopher Michel Foucault called the archive. The invention of computers and the development and adoption of multimedia digital information systems are behind another, more recent transformation in media technology, spawning what is commonly known as new media: a confusing term – every technological media was new at some point of its history – which is closely associated with the advent of digital information systems.

To study digital culture it is important to draw connections between language, communication, sociability and media. For the sociologist John B. Thompson (1995), communication, i.e. the production, storage, transmission, reception, and circulation of information and symbolic content are central to all forms of human sociality. However, he claims, these processes have been transformed due to the "development of a range of media institutions from the late fifteen century to the present day" (p. 10). Technical media is seen from the perspective of "the material substratum of symbolic forms", having different degrees of *fixation* depending on the durability of the medium and the possibilities of alteration or revision (pp. 18-9). Mass communication here refers to the "institutionalized production and generalized diffusion of symbolic goods", which entail technical and institutional means, commodification, a structured break between production and reception, temporal and spatial extension, and public circulation (p. 26).

Communication always entail externalization processes and the production of objects. According to Derrida, without the objectivation of writing (a form of inscription) there could be no "traditionalization", since this allows for the "ideal Objectivity" of objects, that is, "the purity of its relation to a universal transcendental subjectivity" by "emancipating sense from its actually present evidence for a real subject and from its present circulation within a determined community". Through writing, language is freed from the actual intentionality of individual subjects or of communities of subjects. Thus, "by absolutely virtualizing dialogue writing creates a kind of autonomous transcendental field from which every present subject can be absent" (Derrida, 1978, p. 87). Virtualization through inscription thus affect the fields within which subjectification may occur. The impact of inscription for subjectification may be applied to all sorts of representation systems through material inscription and signification processes. The digital (hyper)media multimedia or multimodal inscription systems offer different possibilities from those engendered in dialogue, writing, or traditional mass media.

Bernard Stiegler follows and expands Derrida's reasoning by asserting that culture is always dependent on technics since it requires *mnemotechnics*, the technics for sustaining memory (Stiegler, 2016). According to his perspective, technics, symbolization, and memory are intrinsically connected: "technical evolution already supposes the externalization of memory – in the tool itself, but also in full-fledged anticipation" (Stiegler, 1998, p. 173). For Stiegler, externalization processes are both related to artifacts that aid memory and to collective memories within speaking communities. Drawing on Husserl's work on time and consciousness, Stiegler defines three forms of memory/retention. *Primary retention* refers to the present perception, the "immediate and primordial retention" of experience in the conscious (Stiegler, 2010: pp. 8-9). *Secondary retention* is recollection from past experience, the interconnected which we usually refer to as memory. Combined, these two forms of retention enable *protention*, the ability to anticipate and to project into the future. Finally, he speaks of *tertiary retention*, which is of a special kind since it is transmitted through time and space, and across generations, requiring exteriorization through material inscription or circuits of oral lore. Primary, secondary and tertiary retentions have historically configured interfaces, which make them intrinsically interconnected. Furthermore, the connection between the forms of memory and retention, particularly in the sense that they enable protention, is important to understand subjectification techniques as they integrate programmatic elements. These elements articulate past and present actual or virtual states of affairs, as well as situate a subjective projections of plane within given narratives about historical processes, assuring the compatibility with biographic projects.

The particularities of subjectification in contemporary digital subjectification systems like Anonymous are closely related to the technical specificities of networked digital technology. Bernard Stiegler claims that the spaces of technical reproducibility enabled by digital media and the internet allows for both the "control" of flows and the formation of "very long circuits of transindividuation", or collective individuation, within which the teleological "domain of ends" may operate (Stiegler, 2009, p. 40), and may support enlarged process of collective subjectification. Digital communication technology, Stiegler argues, creates a new type of *associated milieu*, where flows or processes such as those from which Anonymous emerges cut across three domains of association and individuation: psychical, technical, and symbolic.

Stiegler focuses on the mediated forms of relation with oneself and one's life, equating the *life of language* with interlocution. He claims that mass media short-circuit and destroy interlocution in industrial symbolic milieus, and thus also language itself and the possibility of transindividuation. In his account, mass media produces dissociated milieus in which individuals are addressees without being addressors, being short-circuited through exclusion from active participation in collective indi-

viduation processes (Stiegler, 2009, p. 38). Nevertheless, Stiegler recognizes that there exists a "battle for intelligence" (Stiegler, 2010, p. 17) between industries and consumers, which takes the form of a battle for attention. Inspired by Gilbert Simondon's ideas about psychic and collective individuation, Stiegler sees attention as a "kind of *interface*" between the two (Stiegler, 2012, p. 1).

For this reason, Stiegler advances the notion of a *retentional economy* to address the dynamics involved in externalization of memory into objects, which influences the environment of knowledge transfer, experience and action. These ideas can lead us to the notion of "technical milieus", in the words of Stiegler, where collective individuation, or transindividuation[12], occurs:

> my ego, besides being always associated with a psychical mnesic milieu, is always also associated with a symbolic milieu, for example, that of the words of the tribe, yet henceforth, it is more and more often, always and everywhere, equally associated with a technical milieu. With this development, a symbolic milieu of a new kind emerges, namely a symbolic milieu which is not only hypertextualized (and therefore digitally grammatized) but also hypermediatized.
>
> Stiegler, 2009, p. 41

This is due to the way objectual signs operate and circulate in these milieus. This is the converging point of the present chapter: as Keane argues, "the materiality of signification is not just a factor for the sign interpreter but gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity." (Keane, 2003, p. 413).

If the major impact of ICTs is the emergence and expansion of interconnected realms of communication, Stiegler's battle for intelligence may be conceived, first and foremost, as a battle for attention. Following Stiegler, Jonathan Beller claims that attention is not only the new source of value production in present day capitalism, but operates currently under a "cinematic organization" which constitutes the "necessary cybernetic relation to the socius – the totality of the social" (Beller, 2006, p. 4). This claim, despite being insightful, may need to be revised: increasingly, the new media mode of organizing attention – particularly as it relates to social media, videogames, and a globalized digital culture – is maybe surpassing the cinematic mode. Contemporary global and local media channels participate in that form of organizing of attention which entails a considerable departure from cinema,

[12]"Transindividuation is what results from the co-individuation of psychic individuals, that is to say, as the result of what constitutes collective individuation in the form of the conjunction of psychical individuals, in the course of which significations inscribed and constituted in ways of life are produced, become meta-stable and are transformed" (Stiegler, 2009, p. 39).

particularly in terms of speed. That particular form of signification is privileged by the industries that participate in the production of global media culture. Mediated attention is thus distributed along diverse channels, turning networked screens into a heterogeneous landscape that display social media activity of personal connections, global and political events, sport and the lives of celebrities, TV shows, films and videogames.

That landscape is also the context in which social actors make efforts to control their own public image. The far reaching communication channels – mass and social media, mostly driven by market forces and hedonistic consumption – project the framing of social actors and organizations through the temporalities and mediated spaces of visual clips, soundbytes and "internet memes". Media forms and genres produce and engage their own affective publics. To harness that capability, the production of those media contents relies on techniques that fall under what Ash terms *affective design* – the attempt of generating particular affects or responses "through the material and aesthetic design of products in order to capture and hold users' attention" (Ash, 2012, p. 4). Those same assessments and techniques are tacitly by political parties, social movements, and distributed action networks – in the context of informational capitalism, attention has simultaneously became a new site for value production and political struggle.

3.7 Conclusion

In the present chapter, I argued for the importance to take into account the dynamics of temporalities, projections and reflections, intersubjectivity and non-symbolic elements in the study of sociality. If there is a deep co-constitutive connection between subjects and objects, and between signs, thought, and thinker, what are then the connections between subjectification and different digital sign systems, circulation of affect and attention economies? In 4chan, the complex template-based digital communication structure known as the internet meme is the vehicle for social, cultural and political criticism, personal statements, expression of bodily elements or states of mind, feelings and emotions, jokes, etc. In a way, it could be said that it fulfills the same function on the internet as oral lore and popular sayings in word-of-

mouth communication networks. Myth and collective memories are associated with such forms of discursive, visual, and technical sedimentation of material culture. Those are objects to think and feel with, texturing social relations and opening them to aesthetic intervention. This enables opening the notion of mediated subjectification systems to the realms of sensation and the bodily.

Blumer's conceptualization of circular reaction indicates that waves of social unrest, protest, as well as the exercise of repressive authority, can be related to processes of institutional disintegration. It also seems to be a development of George Herbert Mead's claims about how societal processes that shake the moral orders of society can lead to a loss of coherence in reflective thought and to the disintegration of the self – which can be reconstructed through moral repositioning only after a new situation is realized and accepted (Mead, 1913). Whereas Mead integrates the problem of social change in morality, thus framing it within the realm of his most important theoretical construct, the self, Blumer extends this problem to the emergence of a particular form of interaction that is not symbolic or institutionalized. A critical engagement with this debate is relevant for my present research. Blumer's hypothesis about the importance of non-representational circularity in the constitution of elementary forms of sociality should not exclude taking into account Mead's valuable insight about the symbolic and hermeneutic frames of these processes, as well as pointing to their moral and interpretative outcome. A useful synthesis of those views would point to the relation between "elementary" and circular non-symbolic processes, on one hand, and symbols and moralities, on the other. The task of understanding those relations is precisely what my research design strategy and analytical framework intend to achieve.

Finally, Anonymous is not only defined by objects to collectively think or feel with, but more importantly, by the production, circulation, and use of what I claim to be a different kind of objects: objects-to-hide-with, i.e. attribution objects that tend to be hard to trace back to those who produce and/or mobilize them. My research shares Sjørslev's focus on public manifestations, privileging the performance through which subjects make themselves present, or are enacted through indexicality, or pointing at themselves. That claim points to one of the central arguments of my thesis: in the creation of artifacts and events, similar performances simultaneously produce an indexical presence, Anonymous, and the generative absences of participants. That performance is associated with particular knowledges, digital tools and techniques, as well as forms of dissimulation and other technologies of the self – subjectification in Anonymous is achieved through a form of production of events and digital artifacts which always entails material obfuscation and semiotic substitution. In fact, this displacement necessarily occurs in every act within Anonymous and the collective as a whole can be also conceived as a scapegoat object, whose mobilization

equals a removal of oneself from the front stage, so to speak. “Putting on a mask” is an icon and a metaphor that stands for the collective endeavors supported by the possibility of technical anonymity in the internet, the use of Anonymous branded networks, its tools, iconography and genre. It also means either to become associated with past or present causes or to engage the collective and its publics in the direction of new ones. That tactic is particularly useful in situations where someone would be subject to incrimination. This private retreat has another consequence, which has been codified in an ethos of brutal “truth”, or *parrhesia*, regardless of cynical forms. This aspect will be dealt with greater detail in another section.

In *The Making of Law*, Latour considers that a heterogeneous collective assemblage of enunciation, which is constructed through chains of obligations, is required to speak in the name of the law. It is from the legal enunciation that a special kind of subject is constituted, the *Law*, which functions as a subject of enunciation: “as semioticians would put it, the Law with a capital ‘L’ is the unquestionable *addresser* of all speech acts” (Latour, 2010, p. 254). All institutions are related to modes of subjectification, but rather rather than constituting autonomous subjects in the way of Descartes, they condense these modes while operating as a mouthpiece for the collective assemblage (McGee, 2014, p. 146). In a similar way, Anonymous is constituted as a semiotic subject, and its technical and human paraphernalia of communication and agitation are what gives the collective its voice. But a functionalist emphasis obscures the active processes that participate in the production of contemporary life and *modes of existence* (Latour, 2013). This is why I focus on subjectification systems rather than subjectivities, and on the vocabularies, styles, practices, and discourses with which one marks his own enunciation. Agency is thus conceived as that which immediately integrates and rearticulates the adjacent material-semiotic affective fields of spaces, networks, objects, practices and discourses.

There are clear connections between those remarks and the previously presented themes of ideological interpellation, materiality, technique, and signifying. Political subjects exteriorize and materialize themselves, entering material and semiotic networks as opposed to a *tout court* imaginary hailing around ideological and discursive contents. Hailing and pointing are one and the same – if the elements pertaining to a particular form of subjectification are objectified in performance, the material and discursive networks of enactment that produce the subject and its indexical signifiers are also its signified object. This second-order representation, as I argued in this chapter, requires the consideration of another category of signs: icons.

This chapter’s aim was to provide the analytical framework for the study of Anonymous. The themes were presented to make an argument for the necessity of taking into account not only the complex forms of associations that comprise human collec-

tivities, but also how both techniques and the production and circulation of signs and artifacts participate in the formation of subjectivities produced by particular sociotechnical assemblages. What was here exposed under the term subjectification is an attempt to propose a theoretical basis that addresses collectives and collective formation in technical, material, discursive and semiotic terms.

The previous connections between the general processess of signification and collective dynamics are also articulated in terms of its consequences for the analysis of power. Power is enacted through techniques applied to the everyday life of individuals, regulating categories, markings, and identity attachment mechanisms, imposing a law of truth which they must recognize and which has to be recognized in them by others (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). This opens the possibility of struggle. For Foucault, power and resistance is thus inseparable, since a power relationship is always provoqued by the "recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom" (ibid., p. 790). He identifies three forms of struggle which do not exclude each other, occurring simultaneously. Nevertheless, he claims that one of these forms tends to prevail in a given historical moment. They can be against ethnic, social, and religious *domination* (prevalent in feudal societies); against the *exploitation* that separates individuals from their production (nineteenth century); and finally against *subjection*, the submission of subjectivity or, in his words, "that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way" (Ibid, p. 781) - the struggles of his time. He identifies the struggles against the authority of men, psychiatrists, and physicians, among others, as examples of the latter. They are characterized by being geographically and politically transversal, by aiming at power effects over people's bodies and lives, and by being immediate in targeting close opponents without dreams of peaceful futures after liberation or revolutions. But two other aspects make them unique for Foucault. First, how they question the status of the individual by both asserting the right to individual difference and attacking the forces that constrain the individual to his own identity (they oppose the "government of individualization" rather than the individual). Secondly, they also oppose the privilege of knowledge and authority, imposed secrecy, deformation, or mystifying representations - how knowledge circulates and functions in relation to power.

What has changed since these conceptualizations is the articulations of power and control with the proliferation of *sensors* that act as both inscription and monitoring devices, particularly digital technologies. For Foucault, power relies on procesual mechanisms rather than rigid structures, to study it, the philosopher claims, we should decipher the web of relations which ties together particular "dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings, (...) constantly in tension, in activity (...) [in] perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the

conquest of a territory" (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Deleuze refers to these mechanisms as the *diagram*, or the *abstract machine*, which is

> the map of relations between forces, a map of destiny, or intensity (…) [acting] as a non-unifying immanent cause which is coextensive with the whole social field. The abstract machine is like the cause of the concrete assemblages that execute its relations; and these relations take place 'not above' but within the very tissue of the assemblages they produce.
>
> Deleuze, 1998, p. 37

Massumi, in his reading of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizofrenia*, defines this abstract machine as "interpretation" or "the meaning process, from the point of view of a given expression" (Massumi, 1992, p. 17). As argued before, one of the key elements of Anonymous is its diagrammatic forms. In abstract, it could be said that its functioning is similar to that of iconicity and of Deleuze's abstract machine operations, since they are *like* the cause of the concrete assemblages that execute the relations that constitute them. As Deleuze and Guattari state, "the diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 142). This is why Anonymous can be also analyzed from the perspective of both a self-assembling public and signs that stand for themselves: as human, material, and symbolic assemblage, it is the diagrammatic enactment of itself that gives it existence and purpose.

The resistance to secrecy and authority that Foucault identified can be found in contemporary contentious and social movements related to the internet. Thus, when the retaliatory activity against internet censorship is considered, Anonymous can be seen, similarly to *Free and open-source software* (FOSS), as a "public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence", in the sense that it is "a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives" (Kelty, 2008, p. 3). But unlike FOSS, participation in Anonymous is not structured by rules or procedures, entails a more diverse set of activities, and "does not actually require extensive technical skill" (Coleman, 2011, p. 516) in the areas of computer programming and networking. This is certainly the case for the production of audiovisual objects which now can be made through available, user-friendly multimedia production software, as well as for the setting up of accounts on openly available and massively used online social media platforms as a way for reaching new audiences, disseminate information about causes, and gather support for Anonymous.

In doing so, participants effectively build upon and enlarge Anonymous by providing it with yet another objectified instance through processes of translation and inscription, enacting, performing, or instantiating Anonymous through the production and circulation of signs, media artifacts and statements. Such enlargements not only amplify resilience and redundancy of the material and semiotic networks that sustain the collective, but also sediment in signs, discourse, and technological production, ascribing it with both greater symbolic power and means for agency. They also serve heterogeneously mattering purposes as markers, quasi-objects that may be mobilized again in the future. These artifacts articulate tactics, tools, knowledge, and demands with the realm of the historical narratives, representational economies and networks of power relations.

The relation in which Anonymous is identified with its publics, such as those born out of the contact with messages containing the motto "you are Anonymous" or a similar one, are directly aimed to the publicity that pertains to the subjectivities that are associated with modern institutions and the use of digital technologies. Thus, it is important to point out the relation between Anonymous and its publics. Through a mechanism akin to interpellation, as Warner suggests, the media artifacts which carry the symbolic weight of particular statements put its audience, or public, enters a relation with the particular sphere of information politics that regulates the formation of publics. This point reveals the particular relevance of the channels where Anonymous takes the form of a particular position, from which discourses and actions originate, instantiated as statements, a mask and a voice that inhabit screens and speakers. As enunciative elements, they contain a sort of sensuality, a hidden invitation, or interpellation, to become part of something grater than oneself, evoking the possibility of collective transgressive and subversive online action without the risks of self-exposure.

To conclude this chapter, I will once again engage with the insightful work of Weidemann. Her conceptualization of Anonymous is informed by Tarde's distinction between crowds and publics, as well as by Urs Stéiheli, who draws on the works of Freud, Tarde, and Le Bon. For Stéiheli (2011), the figure of the heroic leader in a crowd does not work as the source of control or power but as medium of self-organization and facilitator of affective forces. As she rightfully claims: "the infrastructure within Anonymous replaces the former crowd leader with a swarm facilitator whose function is to spark imitation of a new practice or idea" (Weidemann, 2014, p. 320). Her inspiration from theoretical frameworks based on circuits of affect and imitation leads her to the conclusion that

> for both of them, the crowd as well as the public, it is a circulation of affects that constitutes the collectivity. Neither the crowd, nor the public, nor Anonymous is constituted through shared identities, myths, or narratives.

Weidemann, 2014, p. 314

I have some objections to this remark. First, due to the material power of imagination and representational processes, the figures of hero and leader survive their disembodiment. Even in the most seemingly spontaneous formations such as crowds one can still feel the weight of myths, both old and new, and symbols – be it in their affirmation, negation, or subversion. Furthermore, the *idea* of collective affective circularity is necessarily related, albeit in no obvious form, to the field of discourse and biographical narratives.

If affect turns our attention to a bodily state, affective circularity calls us to ponder the collective states of coordination of perceptual-cognitive faculties, an idea which is already present, albeit in embrionary form, in Schutz's notion of intersubjectivity. Not defending the existence at the ontological level of a collective intelligence, group consciousness, or the further mystifying notion of hive mind, I argue that there is a distributed flow that sustains activity resembling the faculties which are usually associated with the individual person. Nevertheless, the precondition for this is the emergence of de-subjectifying trends in the aforementioned coordination of perceptual-cognitive faculties. That displacement entails a shift in the very mechanisms of proprioception, thus in the relations participants maintain with themselves.

My emphasis on the struggles around various forms of subjectification results from the impression that this is precisely the main, and most defining element of Anonymous. The building up of infrastructures, acting as a collective voice, experiments with identity and self-disclosure, or tacit sharing of knowledge, all seem to address people in their ability to act and in their subjection to social constrains. It is thus a manifest, programmatic and objective engagement with power relations. This simultaneously technological and technical of anonymity – the techniques of the self, or of the conduct of one's own conduct, that make the technological tools efficient – are developed in order to reinforce each other in the mediation of one's relation to others and to oneself.

The Anonymous collective is enacted in objects and events that are the substantive elements of affect circuits, analogous to a field, ball, or scores in a game. But here we encounter the previously mentioned limitation of the ball game metaphor: as a creative and relatively unbound collective, Anonymous is not restricted to fixed rules or spaces, integrating new objects and entering different domains, transforming them, and even creating new ones. That creation often takes the form of iconic enunciations charged with high intensity of affect. Said intensities are the result of the around the clock semiotic cultural critique through identity experimentation and audiovisual expression in digital format that occur in environments like 4chan and the

Anonymous branded communication infrastructures. Anons' resourcefulness and creativity for that aesthetic forms of production is hard to match, even by dedicated teams in branding and corporate communication agencies.

Those expressions are central for participants themselves, who rely on these iconic renditions for grasping the cohesiveness of Anonymous and to identify its main lines of activity, overall momentum, position, and direction. The collective's openness, as will later be discussed, means that its cycles of augmentation, particularly when resulting from exterior interventions, usually come with a very significant reinforcement in terms of typifications and the number of participants. Its dynamism and responsiveness make iconic enunciations from both within Anonymous and from its exterior result in complex collective responses. Those dynamics may be comparable to the effects of a numeric variation in score count, or a chant of support for a team in the context of a game, and have similarly unpredictable outcomes.

Foucault's analytic proposal, the "historical ontology of ourselves", enables to operate a philosophical "critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing" (Foucault, 1984, p. 45) that does not require an *a priori* construct of the subject such as Descartes' knowing subject (*cogito*), Kant's transcendental subject, or Lacan's subject to castration and the Law of the father. For Foucault, this entails

> that criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method.
>
> Ibid., pp. 45-46

Taking Foucault's challenge seriously, I named the method devised in the following chapter "internet archaeology". The rationale behind this choice is to understand the workings of subjectification processes that take place in the internet and gave rise to the collective now commonly known as Anonymous.

Chapter 4. The Internet Archaeological Method

4.1 Introduction

My thesis' object of inquiry, the Anonymous collective, integrates a set of social, cultural and political developments that, despite having been the focus of some researchers, are still far from being understood. Thus, using a research approach that may be deemed as exploratory is justified in this case. Exploratory research starts from a position of "agnosticism" regarding the research object, avoids making assumptions previous to the observational perior. Such an approach is advantageous in the present case for two reasons. First, the emergent and dynamic character of Anonymous calls for a more integrative perspective that does not hastily enclose the object of study. The processes which constituted Anonymous are still ongoing, taking unstable forms. Its capacity for rapid metamorphosis implies that any perspective that quickly crystallizes Anonymous will, at best, be limited and biased. Second, because a significant part of those practices are explicitly oriented towards defining and framing of what Anonymous *is* – that debate is in fact a recurring themes in the statements made on behalf of Anonymous. Finally, participants engage in intensive discursive and audiovisual production which is particularly responsive to any effort of external frames and definitions. As we will see, such external interventions have deeply transformative consequences.

Arguably, privileging a narrower frame could allow for a better understanding of a single case study, or event. It would nevertheless also neglect how different and often conflicting categorization processes co-exist in the fragile metastability of

Anonymous as a social formation. In addition, the complexity of this collective itself would largely remain outside such a constricting scope. My analysis will follow cultural, technical and semiotic dimensions that shape Anonymous. Their surrounding contexts, I argue alongside Jarvis, must not be taken as a static background. On the contrary, this collective is enacted and anchored in interstitial spaces: the cross-sections or margins of the different structures that constitute the material realities of digital networks. Social institutions, organizations and also informal networks of sociality intersect on those digital spaces. As a collective whose activity is mostly centered around the axis of information networks, Anonymous reflects and further enlarges the contradictions and ambiguities surrounding those technologies. The relation between the collective and those contradictions is so strong that a particular encounter with information politics associated with the internet resulted in the emergence of the Anonymous activist branch. That branch, in turn, suffered intense transformations, namely an enlargement in both its scope of action and geographical presence, to the point where it has had profound impacts on the global landscape of direct action and social struggles.

Those considerations imply a big challenge for research design and methodological strategies: how to study a collective which is constantly negotiating everything about its own ontological status except its anchoring in digital technologies, anonymity, and – more importantly – its openness to appropriation and transformation? The theoretical synthesis presented before is the result of an attempt to avoid hasty ontologizing, assuming fixed categorizations such as groups, symbols, memes, social movements, or swarms. It's place in the beginning of the thesis obscures the fact that it was not established before the moment of observation but resulted from contrasting between my own readings and empirical findings. Keeping such a broad perspective meant sacrificing the comfort of limiting oneself to specialized literature and established disciplinary traditions, along with their preferred strategies, methods and techniques of inquiry.

The delineation of the research object is never neutral, and, particularly in this case, has ethical and political implications that go beyond the scope of epistemological considerations. The opacity that characterizes the operative modes of Anonymous makes it impossible to assess thoroughly any aspects of totality and unity, even to those who partake in these activities. My decision was to attempt to integrate the most important events and conventions that are shared by different and often opposing sectors of Anonymous. This is, in my opinion, the only way to do justice to a heterogeneous collective whose own self-definition is itself a site of (cuasi-political) contention. Despite said attempt, the obvious limitations of such an individual research result in the privileging of specific elements and the omission of other possible associations. Furthermore, privileging analytical dimensions and making

choices regarding empirical materials will inevitably lead to particular paths. Three main concerns guide the different stages and procedures of my research strategy:

> *Definition*: Rather than coming up with yet another theoretical definition of Anonymous that would place the research object within a more specialized disciplinary domain (e.g. social movement, networked structure, swarm, meme complex, etc.), I enter entails a critical engagement with those conceptual attempts. I also survey the past attempts to define Anonymous from both direct participants and outsiders, assessing how those definitions have impacted its development and transformations.
>
> *Description and interpretation*: My attempt at understanding the different trajectories of this collective starts with the analysis of what unites it: a particular position that sees the internet as a tool that has the potential for enhancing both projects of autonomy and evade forms of domination and social control. I anchor those positions in the digital social and moral orders, where cooperation and competition occur in complex and indirect ways. Finally, I will address how those orders are expressed in the iconography and the symbolic universe which have come to be associated with Anonymous.
>
> *Theory*: Contemporary social collectives, I claim, force us to rethink disciplinary traditions and boundaries. My research seeks to contribute to broader discussions about the intersections of digital technology, culture and politics in social theory. The goal is to show how the interplay between power, representation, temporality and dromology in digitally mediated contexts shape the meanings of sociality, agency, and discourse – with broad implications both at the macro and micro level of analysis.

To understand the communicative and political practices that are behind Anonymous, I claim it is important to tackle its changing interconnections and creative – often self directed – interventions at the level of discourse, subjectivity, objects, knowledge, and imaginaries. I chose to follow the construction of Anonymous via diachronic analysis to understand its different configurations, stronger or weaker definitions and associated meanings over time. My main concern is to trace the historical development of this collective, with an emphasis on both cultural practices and digital media.

4.2 Notes on Method

Before considering which research methods should be mobilized, John Law claims, one needs to question whether they are well adapted to a world which includes and knows itself as "tide, flux, and general unpredictability" (Law, 2004, p. 7). Acknowledging those qualities leads him conclude that methods typically reduce the world in overdeterministic ways. In his view, it is necessary to broaden method: to subvert and remake it, freeing it from hygienic and moralist notions. He is particularly concerned with subverting those limitations associated with what Law calls the "singularity" of reality. Against this limitation, Law and Mol oppose the principle of multiplicity of the real (Law, 2002, 2004; Mol, 2002). Methods, then, are always assemblages that "detect, resonate with, and amplify particular patterns of relations in the excessive and overwhelming fluxes of the real" (Law, 2004, p. 14). Those considerations, Mol maintains, entail a "shift" from an epistemological to a "praxiographic appreciation of reality", one that does not bracket the "practicalities involved in enacting reality" (Mol, 2002, pp. 53-54). In her study of Atherosclerosis, she provides a clear example of the multiple character of reality in practice:

> Ontology in medical practice is bound to a specific site and situation. In a single medical building there *are* multiple atherosclerosis. (…) It is one of the great miracles of hospital life: there are many atherosclerosis in the hospital but despite the differences between them they are connected. Atherosclerosis enacted is more than one – but less than many. *The body multiple* is not fragmented. Even if it is multiple, it also hangs together. The question to be asked, then, is how is this achieved.
>
> Mol, 2002, p. 55

My research's main concern is also the production of a *body multiple* that "hangs together", Anonymous, whose practical enactment also results in that "more than one – but less than many" quality. This, however, is not to say that there can be no objectivity, or to deny causal or logical relations, or that realities only exist as referenced, or perceptions. As John Law puts it, "the presupposition of singularity not only hides the practices that enact it, but also conceals the possibility that different constellations of practice and their hinterlands might make it possible to enact realities in different ways" (Law, 2004, p. 66). His conception of multiplicity in realities and objects is useful for understanding how different "versions", objects which may interfere and overlap often in unpredictable ways, possibly cohere into individualized forms (Law, 2002, pp. 2-3; 2004, p. 162). For the sociologist, subjects and

objects are both singularities and pluralities, assembled through fractional coherence – their analysis requires "drawing things together without centering them" (Law, 2002, p. 2).

To study internet sociality, I emphasize the role of media objects and digital artifacts. The field of STS is rich in conceptual and analytical tools to approach the production of such objects. For Akrich, designers or innovators inscribe within the technical content of the new object their visions and assumptions. Through inscription, they articulate "actors with specific tastes, competencies, motives, aspirations, political prejudices" alongside predictions "that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways" (Akrich, 1992, p. 208). Those actual objectification and materialization processes behind the formation of Anonymous – the media platforms, networks, and contents circulating therein – are also material for my historical analysis.

Technical objects such as digital media tend to have given scripts but those design features are not fully deterministic of usage. Taken as traces or inscriptions, digital objects result from translation, or the materialization of interest (Callon, 1990, p. 143) – in other words, they are often constituted as chains of equivalence between the social and the technological. Every process of translation and inscription *creates* something which wasn't there. Furthermore, it is important to note how there is no one-way direction in these relationships. The convoluted dynamics of this collective do not stop at the inscription of intentions and projects in technical objects. Lucy Suchman, drawing on the work of Garfinkel and Sacks (1970), talks about the "vagueness of scripts", arguing that "lived practice inevitably exceeds the enframing moves of its own procedures of order production" (Suchman, 2007, p. 193). Since the dynamic relation between objects and meanings tends to coalesce around lived practice and shared interpretative articulations, new strategic principles may emerge. In the development of Anonymous, such principles were codified through design strategies of the constantly changing code that sustains internet media or online interaction platforms. The highly unstable visible boundary is enacted, or instantiated, in the production of digital artifacts, making their technical affordances extremely important for Anonymous.

Even though I employed the term "trajectory" before to justify a diachronic analysis, "the degree of resemblance" in distributed networks, Latour writes, "has to be taken as an index on an association chain" (Latour, 1990, p. 114). It is at this semiotic level that some sense of unity may be ascribed to Anonymous, which is why I focus on the *making* of the name, the referent against which continuities and discontinuities in time and space are possible to identify. Said index can also be the target of symbolic condensation that refers to the distributed networked dynamics, becoming particu-

lar signs that are the basis for practices of *naming*. For Latour and others, actors are networks themselves, whose attributes are summarized and may be "grasped as an '*envelope*", a "fully specific proper name" which "encapsulates" actors in "shorthand notation" (Latour *et al.*, 2012, p. 593). The above mentioned events are examples of some of several processes of sedimentation and abstraction which enabled the constitution of Anonymous as a subject, its transformation from an adjective to a name, an *envelope*. Since the meanings associated with the name are thoroughly relational while also pointing to invisibility and obfuscation, its reproduction triggers strange and disparate associations. Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker had already claimed something similar when mentioning that a name, and especially the name of a network, is "both referential (presupposing an already-existing thing to which a name corresponds) as well as evocative (articulating a foreground and a background where one did not previously exist)" (Galloway and Thacker, 2007, p. 12). Thus, the name of a network evokes its dynamics and forms of association rather than fixed substances. This perspective is influenced by the work of Deleuze and Guattari and their conceptualization of the proper name. In *Anti-Oedipus* they write:

> Whence the role of names, with a magic all their own: there is no ego that identifies with races, peoples, and persons in a theater of representation, but proper names that identify races, peoples, and persons with regions, thresholds, or effects in a production of intensive quantities. The theory of proper names should not be conceived of in terms of representation; it refers instead to the class of "effects": effects that are not a mere dependence on causes, but the occupation of a domain, and the operation of a system of signs.
>
> Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 86

Following those indexial connections, in this case signs, tropes, strategies and tactics, I try to reconstruct the trajectory of this modality of action, those networked inscriptions and translations. Said material and semiotic operations are the result of particular practices, the collective enactment of digital subjectivities which relies on techniques – social and technological – for effacing indexial connections to participants and contexts – the *generative absence* I mention in the previous chapter. Those collective self-effacing practices result, purposively or otherwise, in the simulation of a unified or homogeneous source of action and observations, assessments, and commentary. The relative anonymity in the internet associated with anonymous technological platforms results from a displacement that is not solely operated at the level of the protocols spoken between machines but also at the level of meaningful interaction. Said autonomy results from complex articulations between *anonymizing digital tools* – such as the use of anonymous digital media, Tor, virtual

private networks (VPN) and proxy servers[13] – and *technologies of the self*, the practices of conducting one's own conduct. This behavioral aspect of anonymity is central: even the most effective digital anonymizing tools or strategies are worthless when the user's behavior reveals identifying elements.

I prefer the term "mediated" to "disembodied" collectives and social processes since we are dealing with social practice and subjectification, which are always related to forms of embodiment. The broadest (emic) definition, which is most readily accepted within the different sectors of Anonymous, states that Anonymous is an "idea" and nothing more, something that can be appropriated by anyone. In a close relation to this conception are the recurrent claims from participants that, *in potentia*, Anonymous is, literally, everyone. That view is based on the electronic empowerment of the often idealized anonymous public "subject", modeled after liberal notions of universal citizenry, individual sovereignty, and the internet as a public sphere. I seriously consider the strategic – and clearly hyperbolic – hollowing of Anonymous without taking it at face value to analyze its status as an empty signifier, what Laclau deemed to be necessary for the constitution of popular political subjectivities. By employing particular discursive genres and the colletive's symbolic universe, an individual or a group can effectively put up a smokescreen that is hardly distinguishable from others – enables both a form of subjectification and the dissociation from particular identities and social positions. There are thus social and technological slips and gaps that sustain those displacements of meaning. Those material gaps in circuits of information and the slips anons generate between them are intrinsic to the processes through which this diffuse collective articulates a series of demands and forms of popular resistance. For that reason, external representations, namely the effects of mainstream media coverage, are also important elements of analysis.

Unlike the ethnographic approach of Coleman, which tries to unveils the particular actors and their motivations – getting *inside* the collective – I am concerned its production as a category of knowledge, both the subject and the object of action and discourse. My choice for the title, "making a name for Anonymous", results from my research's specificity: an historical account of the digital practices behind the mediated collective's performative constitution.

The choice of the term internet archaeology is also inspired by Ernst's media archeology. According to Huhtamo and Parikka, media archaeology is an interdisciplinary field which "rummages textual, visual, and auditory archives as well as collections of

[13] Tor is a free software project and a network that enables anonymity and privacy in communication. A VPN links a computer to a private network, which may also be used for communicative anonymity and privacy. Proxy servers act as intermediaries between the origin and the target of the data connection, also providing anonymity.

artifacts, emphasizing both the discursive and the material manifestations of culture" (Huhtamo and Parikka, 2001, p. 3). The term media archaeology has been used in works that try to account for media culture and its political and social implications – with an emphasis on the technological and industrial development of media, their material affordances and associated practices and representations. That interdisciplinary field is highly connected to Foucault's archaeological method. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault presents his central notion of the *statement* as an "enunciative function": statements relate units of discourse "to a field of objects" instead of giving them meanings, to "possible subjective positions" instead of attributing them to a particular subject, to a particular position in the "domain of coordination and coexistence" instead of defining their limits, and finally placing them in a space of usage and repetition "instead of determining their identity" (Foucault, 2002[1972], p. 119). Thus, enunciation is, for the philosopher, the underpinning of the relations between discourse, objects, and subjects. It does not enact those relations through simple identification and delimitation: it is performative, projected in planes of coexistence and of lived, practical usage. For Foucault, the subject is associated with his notion of "enunciative modality", which that ties a body of diverse statements to "the place from which they come", which is to say, to subject positions. In this sense, the analysis of the subject should start by identifying what are the criteria for having the right status, "juridically defined or spontaneously accepted", to use a particular sort of language. Subject positions also involve a system of differentiation and the enactment relations to other individual or group statuses and to other sections of society. Said positions are usually embedded in institutions, which also tend to be the point of application for the discourse produced by these subjects. Furthermore, one should take into account the perceptual situation of a subject position, namely in information networks, in relation to various domains or groups of objects (Foucault, 2002[1972], pp. 55-58).

Subject positions, Foucault argues, are formed within and through discursive and enunciative practices, which connects those positions to the conditions of enunciative and discursive practices. Enunciations are thus the focus of his archaeological analysis and the enunciative function of statements is deemed to be governed by the *archive*. Foucault describes the archive as

> the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events (…) it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability* (…) that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning* (…) which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration. Between the language (*langue*) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the corpus that passively collects the words that are spoken, the

> archive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated. It does not have the weight of tradition; and it does not constitute the library of all libraries, outside time and place; nor is it the welcoming oblivion that opens up to all new speech the operational field of its freedom; between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*.
>
> Foucault, 2002[1972], pp. 145-146, emphasis in the original

That "general system" between language and discourse is not detached from the situated level of practice. Its analysis demands finding a "privileged region", since it consists of "the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us" (ibid. p. 148). This archive is not to be confused with an archival system. For Ernst, influenced by Kittler's "media materialist" strand of media archeology (Parikka, 2011, p. 54), the archive is a material space, a hardware configuration. His media archaeology focuses on the technological addressability of memory, a materialist approach whose goal is to discover the "archival stratum in cultural memory sedimentation which is neither purely human nor purely technological, but literally in between: symbolic operations which analyse the phantasms of cultural memory as memory machine" (Ernst, 2004, p. 47). His conceptualization of the archive is further developed in the following passage:

> Equally close to disciplines that analyze material (hardware) culture and to the Foucauldean notion of the 'archive' as the set of rules governing the range of what can be verbally, audiovisually, or alphanumerically expressed at all, media archeology is both a method and aesthetics of practicing media criticism, a kind of epistemological reverse engineering, and an awareness of moments when media themselves, not exclusively humans any more, become active 'archeologists' of knowledge.
>
> Ernst, 2011, p. 239

As Ernst claims, knowledge of history depends on the archive and the media of its transmission since those are the "mechanisms that regulate entry into the discourse of history or exclusion from cultural memory" (Ernst, 2012, p. 42). It is "not a metaphorical body of memories" because the reality of archives is not narrative and discourse, but non-discursive practices operating "under a given set of rules – thus somewhat analogous to the transfer protocols in the Internet" (Ernst, 2004, p. 47).

If Foucauldian archaeology's procedure was to find the conditions for the present by analyzing discursive traces of the past "as practices specified in the element of the

archive" (Foucault, 2002[1972], p. 148), internet archaeology sees the internet *as* a particular kind of archive. Inspired by Ernst, Laermans and Gielen call the internet a digital "an-archive", a non-archived archive which

> *is* and *is not* an archive in the traditional sense of the word. It is, for it actualises the storage function that is usually associated with the notion of the archive; it is not, for the digital an-archive is synonymous with an ever expanding and constantly renewed mass of information of which no representation at all can be made.
>
> Laermans and Gielen, 2007, n. pag.

The analysis of a-representational elements of digital networks should consider mechanisms that regulate a domain of flows and memories. The temporality of the digital is also a source of displacements that trigger imaginary connections. Wendy Chun argues that digital media brings about a conflation between memory and storage that is associated with what she calls *enduring ephemerals*:

> Memory, with its constant degeneration, does not equal storage; although artificial memory has historically combined the transitory with the permanent, the passing with the stable, digital media complicate this relationship by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral, creating unforeseen degenerative links between humans and machines (…) this conflation of memory with storage is not due to some inherent technological feature, but rather due to how everyday usage and parlance arrest memory and its degenerative possibilities in order to support dreams of superhuman digital programmability (…) these dreams create, rather than solve, archival nightmares. They proliferate nonsimultaneous enduring ephemerals.
>
> Chun, 2008, pp. 148-9

Thus, the concept of subject position can be extended from the Foucauldian conception of a *function of discourse* to *a function of material-semiotic enactments in practice*. The autonomy of a statement identified by Foucault has to be radicalized if one wishes to adapt it to the particular performativity of digital objects and statements. Furthermore, digitalization enables processes of "transarchivization" (Ernst, 2004, p. 51). As Ernst points out, archive activity is "not meant for historical or cultural but for organizational memory" (ibid., p. 47). Such a vital function means technical memory addressability is a major concern for power relations. The significance of these points are shown, for instance, in the importance of leaks and their revelations, which illustrates how organizational memory transarchivization may have profound impacts. That same operation may also be identified in the possibilities for technical and cultural processing that occurs when political communication and cultural products are digitized, shared and reworked. They become digital arti-

facts that may function like statements. As such, they are open to particular media circuits, produce multiple interpretations and allow for interventions, which may in turn materialize in other translations – digital remixes and appropriations that themselves become new enunciations. The main motivation behind this incursion in media archaeological concept of the archive is to make explicit how changes in the technical forms that sustain mediated practice and enunciation may create ghosts in the archive. I claim that Anonymous as a platform of subjectification that can generate discourse and events is founded upon in this possibility, in the imaginaries generated about the unintelligible, non-representational character of digital technologies.

My claim is that Anonymous may be very well considered to be born precisely out of the possibility of the emergence of these phantasms of cultural memory enabled by digital media. The term *enduring ephemerals* illustrates how digital media affect temporality, conflating live, real-time production and memory. Cultural memory in Anonymous is based on the whimsical lived sociality behind that conflation. In anonymous boards, the collective memory results from digital artifacts that carry with them enough affective power. The constant, fast paced and ephemeral publications of a mixture between original, repeated, and remixed content means that only the contents that capture prolonged attention and motivate their iterative reuse (republication and remix) escapes being dissolved into the medium's audiovisual background noise. The recurrently emerging material becomes the stuff of myth for participants, material evidence of mysterious, obfuscated practices and invisible connections. This mythic dimension of Anonymous is continuously constructed and surrounds the collective with a special aura, one that is – albeit often ironically – the basis for metaphysical considerations about humans, history, collective intelligence and desindividuation. Archiving and preserving practices are themselves up to the participants who collect and curate those artifacts. The passionate archiving and collecting practices of participants in the anonymous internet cultures is also an inspiration for the term internet archaeology. I would even claim that those collectors are the world's leading internet archaeologists – infinitely more capable than me – and their work was fundamental for the present research.

4.3 *Internet Archaeology*

A detailed analysis of social practice that grasps the historicity of subjects and objects benefits from a situated focus on material and semiotic processes. The term "internet archaeology" is meant to express the uncovering of digital traces that may reveal important aspects of the formation of an internet collective: Anonymous. Archaeology may be defined as the scientific analysis of humans, their activities, and cultures, through material remains. With the use of dating methods, archaeologists may approach the problem of historical cultural change. Laying the foundations for a cyber-archaeology, Jones (1997, n.p.) argues that the notion of community is not always useful. Its acritical application to the analysis of online environments often neglects the necessary distinction between "cyber-place" or "*virtual settlement*" (emphasis in the original) and their inhabitants. Virtual settlements, he argues, must meet a minimum set of conditions:

- *Minimum level of interactivity,* the condition for "long-term meaning discussions/conversations".
- *Variety of communicators* – more than two – enabling group-CMC (computer mediated communication).
- *Common-public-space where a significant portion of a community's interactive group-CMC occurs*, differentiating "a virtual settlement from private communication where postings go directly from one individual to another with no common virtual-place". This criterion also distances virtual settlements from online media: the latter may comprise more than one individual settlements (e.g. newsgroups in Usenet, channels in IRC servers, groups on Facebook).
- *A minimum level of sustained membership* for the possibility of stable contact. That level varies according to interaction rate: higher temporal density would lower the sustained membership requirement.

The notion of internet places or settlements thus adds layers of complexity and contingency to the relationship between digital media and collectives. The latter may engage in nomadism, diaspora, and deterritorialization. For nomadic collectives such as Anonymous, digital communication media are often less of a settlement and more like a *camp*, *outpost*, or even *battlefield*.

The research is also inspired by Boellstroff's (2008) ethnographic study of the virtual worlds of *Second Life.* Considered "in their own terms", his research focuses on

"their activities and words as legitimate data about culture in a virtual world" (p. 61). He claims that the demand for grounding internet research on the offline to contextualize "presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts". Furthermore, said grounding renders "inaccessible" to the researcher the practical impossibility for other participants to determine each other's offline connections and identities. He summarizes his position regarding research on digital interaction, characterized by a lack knowledge about other participants, in the following statement: "for my ethnographic purposes it was important that I not know either" (ibid.). I share the same position in relation to the inaccessibility of knowledge about the offline connections of anons.

Interested in the consequences of virtual worlds "for culture and the human", Boellstroff claims that the referential relationship between virtual worlds and the actual world is oversimplified when the significance of the virtual "hinges on continuity with the actual", since "with the emergence of virtual worlds, the virtual world itself becomes a particular social, economic, and political context "(p. 62). According to his perspective,

> virtual worlds are not just recreations or simulations of actual-world selfhoods and communities. Selfhood, community, even notions of human nature are being remade in them. Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it. Events and identities in such worlds may reference ideas from the actual world (from landscape to gender) and may index actual-world issues (from economics to political campaigns), but this referencing and indexing takes place within the virtual world.
>
> Boellstroff, 2008, p. 63

I also claim that virtual worlds should be understood in their own terms if that means considering how they are the site of developments that differ in character from those things we are familiar with in the world of face-to-face interaction. Also, as the anthropologist suggests, their mediated nature means the very anchoring of the "actual" world as "virtual" indexes is itself shaped by the affordances of digital media contexts. Those connections are mediated through digitization and subsequent interaction forms, enabling a relative autonomy of online worlds that must not be neglected. But said autonomy also depends on other factors, being constructed in different ways. Their very establishment as "alternative" worlds that encompass the full consequences of their "internal" activity is deeply connected with the technologies and techniques, in the sense of tactics, through which participants maintain that autonomy. In addition to those demands on conduct, that autonomy

also depends on conceptions and perceptions of rupture or continuity between digital networks and the forms of sociability of the "actual world".

My focus is centered on the domain of online interaction and the digitally mediated "virtual worlds" where Anonymous is enacted. Nevertheless, the open and reactive character those interactive contexts puts the collective in a close connection to the "outside", offline world – to such an extent that they cannot be understood without referencing those connections. Every possible attempt to trace the formation of Anonymous as a social and political force starts with an artificial detachment from the continuous, interdependent flow of associations which constitute its reality. It requires the selection of criteria for discretization and markers of (dis)continuity.

If the collective may be approached from a cultural perspective, it should be one that acknowledges its internal divisions. Those different circuits of sociability, practices, and interests do not simply add up to form something stable. My dissertation highlights the gaps and fault lines that result in the collective's heterogeneity, its different "versions". Nevertheless, it is possible to trace some structuring elements that are the central (even if often contended) axes for practices. Participation in Anonymous may assume many forms but, like in the case of speakers of a language, there seems to be a shared "grammar and vocabulary", a set of "grounding assumptions" that make meaningful coordination and even disagreement possible (Boellstroff, 2008, p. 65).

My first reflection about the data collection process is centered around the conceptualization and definition of Anonymous to understand how its enactment may be observed. The observation strategy was informed by grounded theory's formulation of theoretical sampling. This sampling technique's "purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201). Furthermore, this diffuse collective, which orbited the anonymous imageboards, intervened frequently in other online settings. Thus, my analysis was carried out in various internet sites. Strauss and Corbin identify four initial elements for the development of theoretical sampling:

> 1. A site or group to study must be chosen. This, of course, is directed by the main research question. (…)
> 2. A decision must be made about the types of data to be used. Does the investigator want to use observations, interviews, documents, biographies, audiotapes, videotapes, or combinations of these? The choice should be made on the basis of which data have the greatest potential to capture the types of information desired. (…)
> 3. Another consideration is how long an area should be studied. If an investigator is studying a developmental or an evolving process, he or she might

> want to make some initial decisions about whether to follow the same persons or places over time or follow different persons or places at different points in time.
> 4. Initially, decisions regarding the number of sites and observations and/or interviews depend on access, available resources, research goals, and the researcher's time schedule and energy.
>
> Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 204

According to Christine Hine, to constrict online research to a single interaction platform does not account for "the making of bounded social space and the importance of interaction between differently connected spaces" (Hine, 2000, p. 61). This dispersion was a serious methodological challenge to my research. Anonymous has no single operational site and does not take the form of a single, unified group. There are multiple "versions" of the collective and that differentiation occurs at the geographical, temporal, technological, and ethical levels. That means that the analysis of these displacements had to be followed through different sites and places where digital artifacts are aggregated and archived.

The present inquiry entails some ethical considerations. In the mostly public communication channels used by Anonymous, norms that sanction and prohibit disclosure of personal information are enforced by the collective. Those norms, alongside self-enforced anonymity by participants themselves, make the tracking of individuals practically impossible. Several strategies are used to achieve the goal of of untraceability, such as using different pseudonyms in non-anonymous settings and the voluntary spread of misinformation to avoid identification. In those settings, where (sometimes illegal) subversive actions are organized, there is a sense of ever present surveillance and infiltration – all communication channels are deemed to be compromised and participants mobilize their skills in order to maintain anonymity and privacy. Moreover, since there are no strict access barriers, those settings are, for the most part, considered public and not private. Therefore, anons expect the presence of observers, particularly after some of their actions attracted the attention of law enforcement, intelligence agencies and news reporters. Unlike the typical constant logging in social media of past publications and interactions, which remain on the website and are easily retrievable, much of the mediated places where this collective formed are ephemeral. Since observation was conducted on what is mostly archived material from these settings, it did not breach what Nissenbaum (2004) called the "contextual integrity" of participants' privacy – they never expected privacy in the first place.

Strauss and Corbin stress the importance of efforts to keep all possibilities open for exploration while interviewing, observing, or analyzing documents: "it is advanta-

geous not to structure data gathering too tightly in terms of either timing or type of persons or places, even though one might have some theoretical conceptions in mind, because these might mislead the analyst or foreclose on discovery" (ibid., p. 206). The multimodality of interaction and the diversity in terms of tactics, agents and media result in a wide range of data types. Thus, the research is centered on the different digital records and artifacts scattered though the internet. The joint analysis of visual (moving and still images), discursive (speech and text), and even software and media design features sought to identify the material, symbolic, and practical dimensions of the collective. The reliance on what is mostly archived data means that the temporal scope of the study was not directly related to the duration of observation, allowing me to go back in time. My methodological approach, which I termed internet archaeology, was developed in close relation to a reflection on the possibilities and limitations of studying the traces left behind by the formation of such a collective.

The data collection was thus based on the advice given to those who are uninitiated in imageboard culture or unable to cope with deceit and trolling: "lurk moar". In order to gather empirical material, I relied extensively on search engines queries to search for the digital artifacts that could provide insights on the collective's past activities. Those searches led me to a wide variety of digital documents, from news reports and interviews to documents scattered in places such as internet archives and old website's comment sections. Those digital objects were taken in their technological and semiotic articulations, integrating those connections with their contexts of production and circulation. The importance of the notion of archive in the Foucauldian and media archaeological sense becomes clearer when we understand how the digital and cultural objects of the interconnected contemporary media ecology are regulated at a fundamental level: that of their very enunciation.

The different sources complemented each other in the characterization of past events and allowed validation of information through triangulation. In the next section, I will present the main sources of empirical material. They often contained leads to other contexts and events which could serve as further sources of empirical material – the basis for the iterative theoretical sampling process. Keeping track of the association between the analyzed artifacts, important events and contexts, I analyzed how the different processes and practices that led to different versions of Anonymous were enacted.

4.3.1 Sources

The study will be based on an historically articulated analysis of instantiations, or enactments, of the Anonymous collective in order to trace its genealogy and developments. This is a risky stance, since documentation on the origins of Anonymous is very scarce and mostly maintained by participants. To maintain the opacity of the collective, this documentation is often produced with mischievousness, using different techniques of obfuscation. When existing, documents and artifacts are usually found in internet archives or in specialized wikis that function as encyclopedias of internet culture (e.g. wikis such as *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, *Unencyclopedia*).

Archives

Due to a wide range of reasons, from ephemeral anonymous internet boards, intentional deletion, the use of temporary internet hosting platforms, website and software updates, or simple neglect, some of the internet settings which had previously served as platforms for participation, and thus contained the traces that could be relevant for the reconstruction of the collective's activity, are no longer accessible on the internet. Some tools like the Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine* (http://archive.org/) or *Archive.is* (http://archive.is) take snapshots of a webpage's dynamic states, storing them for future access. These tools have limits: they often do not store all the webpage's functionalities and the stored pages will not be fully represented. Web services and page formatting, for instance, are highly affected by the archive's storage process, which often results in barely readable material.

Specialized archives, focused particularly on the central hubs of the anonymous board culture were also used. Examples of these archives are *4chandata* (http://4chandata.org), *foolz* (http://foolz.us), and *TheDarkCave Archives* (http://archive.thedarkcave.org). Often, through a combination of these resources, it is possible to access archived archives, that is, to access stored states of web archives which are no longer accessible. I used said combination to access *chanarchive*

(http://chanarchive.org – dead address), an archive which is no longer available on the internet but can be partially accessed through the *Wayback Machine*.

User-maintained Encyclopedias and Dictionaries

Another relevant source of information are "wikis" and other user-maintained and openly edited websites. These usually present no barriers to participation: anyone willing to contribute is able to do so. As a source for neglected material on Anonymous, even the popular Wikipedia, namely old page revisions which have been removed, provides insights on its origins and transformations. But perhaps the most rich and underexplored sites consist of board culture related encyclopedia style "wikis", such as Encyclopedia Dramatica, Uncyclopedia, the LurkMore Wiki, and dictionaries like Urban Dictionary which allows users to provide definitions of words or expressions. But this form of memory production does not aim at the construction of rigorous, easily readable accounts of events; rather, it is a mixture between archival and parody, where both the mockery and the aggrandizing of internet events and their participants, in the epic parlance of "internet history". The collectively crafted encyclopedic entries about this history results in strange documents. Their analysis must take into account the explicit different forms of obfuscation thatt are used simultaneously. The information is encoded often using the collective's own cultural tropes and exaggeration is always present. Furthermore, the veracity of the facts is subordinated to the resulting collectively constructed narrative's humorous elements. With the goal of "being funny", participants often add irrelevant information or false claims. The fact that their notions of humor often entail leading people to believe erroneous things, this material must be carefully approached.

Sites like *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, which track board culture's history, are unreadable until you can identify the relevant information. Doing research on these sites entails carefully selecting relevant and reliable information within a sea of in-jokes and cultural tropes. These tropes are often interchangeable with detailed accounts of internet history or may have specific meanings in internet culture. They result from cultural appropriations and referencing with multiple sources, from popular culture

such as TV series with worldwide audiences to amateur drawings published in some obscure website.

Curated Historical Collections

There are also interesting efforts to create intelligible readings of board culture related content and history. The popular *Know Your Meme* website provides contextual information for known "internet memes". Among these are countless anonymous board culture events and tropes. The *Yotsuba Society*, (or *The Society for the Study and Preservation of Yotsuba Channel*) is a collective effort to archive and reflect upon the history of the Western image board culture. *Bibanon* (*Bibliotheca Anonoma* https://github.com/bibanon/bibanon/wiki) is a wiki intended for the collection and documentation of the products and history of internet board culture. Unlike the previously mentioned wikis, that have an encyclopedic inspiration, *Bibanon* is also concerned with preserving the digital documents and artifacts that were produced by the participants in anonymous boards.

Chapter 5. Digital Culture of Transgression

5.1 Introduction

The history of a medium is the history of the material processes of (re)articulation of agents, persons and objects, artifacts, representations, discourses, and infrastructures. This articulation occurs through the material practices that both lead to the development of a communication channel and the sustained streams flowing through it. The development of ICT represented, from a biographical perspective, a steep and deep change in the ways people communicate and organize. In the context of media studies, some perspectives seem to claim for themselves the relevance they grant to particular elements of communication technology and neglect how media processes are anchored and constituted in situated contexts of practice. Against that trend, I assume that mediated processes are determined by infrastructural characteristics of communication media and their particular trajectories of conception and implementation, as much as they are connected to material consequences of associated representations, discourses, imaginaries, ideological structures and power relations.

My claim is not very distant from Heidegger's view of technology and its connections to the realms of knowledge and truth. The philosopher claims that the processes of technological production may, exceptionally, take the form of "revealing" what was concealed, the action of "bringing-forth" or even "challenging-forth" when straining the structures of the physical world. But what exactly does technology reveal? According to Heidegger, it reveals true potentialities of the world: "what the river is now, namely a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 16). In spite of maintaining a critical distance in relation to no-

tions such as “essence”, I concur with the notion that technologies may bring with themselves a process of revealing. That line of reasoning led me to a question that structures this dissertation: what is revealed by the digital and anonymous technologies of the self, communication, and sociality?

5.2 The Origins of the *chans

In this section, I will present the history of 4chan, an imageboard that heavily relies on anonymity. This historical analysis focuses on the articulation between media design and imaginaries in the production of digital settings explicitly created for anonymous, self-governing mediated assemblages. Due to the secretive and explicitly deviant character of the more direct predecessors to the now notorious Anonymous, documentation about the subject is scarce. Most of the information expressed here about the Japanese origins of 4chan draws extensively on the historical analysis developed by Stryker (2011), Okeh (2011), Wu (n.d.), !!WLcTG45dxMc (2011), Anonymous (2015) and also on old revisions of the Anonymous Wikipedia page.

Anonymity on the internet is something that has been sought and fostered since the early days of digital communication networks. By 1988, the alt.sex.bondage Usenet newsgroup had implemented an originally anonymous posting/reply service, also known as an Anonymous Contact Service (ACS). In this and other newsgroups, such as talk.abortion, anonymity was the preferred method of communication. In the ‘90s, the Cypherpunk newsgroup set up anonymous remailers, which included encryption, to provide individuals with anonymous and private forms of communication (Detweiler, 1993, n.p.). The explicit focus of the present analysis is, however, related to the particular anonymous media design developments that resulted in anonymous imageboards and their particular cultures.

The 4chan imageboard is an English-language copy of a Japanese website named *Futaba Channeru* (Double Leaf Channel)[14]. *Futaba*, in turn was created as a refuge

[14] www.2chan.net.

in case *Ni-Chan* (2channel)[15], a Japanese textboard which had frequent downtime due to server problems, went offline. *Ni-Chan* itself in a set of Japanese BBSs which were collectively called *Nanashi Warudo* (nameless world or anonymous world).

Albeit being often considered one of the most technologically advanced countries, Japan lagged behind the US during the early periods of computer networks. According to Aoki (1994), this was due to four reasons. First, he claims that Japanese cultural particularities prevented the early adoption of mediated communication for business purposes. Japan's *high context culture* (Hall, 1976) is highly dependent on bodily social cues (such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture) for meaningful social interaction. This favored situations of co-presence for conducting business. Offices were typically collective, which reduced the need for local area networks (LAN) and email communication between company members. Secondly, the telephone companies charged digital connections in terms of minutes online instead of employing a flat rate, discouraging the use of modems. Thirdly, computer users were negatively stereotyped and pejoratively referred to as "Otaku-zoku" (unsociable home-bound people) in Japan. Lastly, the difficulty of typing Japanese on a keyboard resulted in a resistance from the majority of the population to learning how to use a computer. This may also be the cause for the prevalence of facsimile versus email communication in business. Nonetheless, during the '90s there was a tremendous growth in subscriptions to online service providers, known as *Pasokon tsushin*, which offered access to public BBSs and commercial services to the general population. They were similar to America Online and CompuServe in the US and, in fact, some of the Japanese providers offered free access to those and other US based networks.

The *Nanashi Warudo* set of BBS style internet websites was an anonymous underground meeting place for those familiar with the technicalities of the Japanese early digital networks. *Ayashii Warudo* (which translates to Fishy, Strange or Suspicious World), an extension of the Japanese Usenet networks created by Shiba Masayuki, was the first of those internet websites. It was created in 1996[16], when Shiba got inspired by another BBS called Japan Lolita Complex Graphics, which used free services of the early internet. *Ayashii* was created using such services and a BBS software that allowed anonymous participation. The internet granted greater anonymity compared to *Pasokon tsushin*: its users could be easily identified by site administrators through unique IDs associated with their subscriptions. *Ayashii*'s popularity grew and it became the first big Japanese anonymous board.

[15] www.2ch.net

[16] Shiba had set up an earlier version in 1995 using the Nifty-Serve *Pasokon tsushin* special "Home Party" function, through which users could set up password protected informal meeting places.

Its initial objective was to provide a place where *warez* (pirated content), *lolicon manga* and *anime*[17], and even child pornography were exchanged. Even though *Ayashii* eventually banned this kind of content before it was deemed illegal, the distribution, commercialization and production of child pornography did not have a proper legal framework in Japan until 1999. The possession of such content was only banned in 2014, excluding the drawn forms of *manga* and *anime*. In the end of the year 1996, a website exclusively focused on cracking and hacking called *Chikadou Iriguchi* (A door to the underground) was deactivated. When its users moved to *Ayashii*, hacking themes counterbalanced the previous dominance of geeky and erotic content.

Ayashii was mostly dedicated to "geeky", erotic and illegal issues such as hacking, cracking, *warez* (pirated software), erotic content, general geek culture discussion and text-based art forms – now known as ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange, a character encoding standard) art or SJIS (Shift_JIS or Shift_Japanese Industrial Standard, a superset of ASCII for Japanese) art.

The inflow of participants and their different purposes and motivations led Shiba to divide *Ayashii* in two sub-forums – the 97 board for general topics and popular culture, and the 2000 board for technology, hacking and cracking. Later known as *gesu* (scum) board, the latter specialized in attacks and invasions to other sites, mostly through hacking and spamming. The variety of perceived possibilities (affordances) of this setting brought different people and usages together in an unstable co-existence. The website was appreciated since it offered a technical and cultural safe haven from the heavy regulation and manner-orientation of Japanese social interaction – the possibility of escaping the repercussions of engaging in socially sanctioned behavior through the usage of anonymous communication platforms. *Nanashi* (Nameless or Anonymous) was *Ayashii*'s default username, a design characteristic that was passed onto the multi-site *Nanashi Warudo* internet site ecology and subsequently to 2ch, 2chan, and 4chan.

Giko-neko, maybe the first anonymous board "meme", sprung up from this constellation of websites. It consisted of a cat represented through text characters (SJIS art) and was usually accompanied by the sentence *itte yoshi* (meaning either "please leave" or "please die", a commonly used offensive expression in Japanese, roughly equivalent to "fuck off"). Since it was easy to copy and add new sentences, other users could use giko as a visual companion for their own statements.

[17] The term "*lolicon*" is a portmanteau of "Lolita Complex", the title of a book by Russell Trainer that was translated to Japanese. The term is used in Japan to refer to the attraction to underage girls, a person with such attraction, and *manga* or *anime,* the popular Japanese hand drawn comics and animations, depicting underage female characters in erotic or sexual ways.

As today's popularity of internet memes attests, the usage of digital audiovisual templates that are easy to reproduce and modify adds an extra layer of meaning to the digital sign economies of the internet. One of the ways in which this process operates is through the recognition of some signs as inherent to particular cultures. These social-semiotic anchoring allows participants to enter relations with other individuals and with the collective itself, becoming central elements of "boundary work" and "identity work". Due to the popularity of *Ayashii*, numerous anonymous websites were created. These formed the aforementioned *Nanashi Warudo*, the anonymous Japanese internet with *Ayashii* as its the main, most popular hub.

In 1998, *Ayashii Warudo* is shut down after its owner received serious threats over downtime issues. That year, Mr. Amezou, the alias of a coder whose identity is unknown, created *Amezou*, the first board to implement the distinctive media design features that are characteristic of anonymous boards, turning away from the traditional branched discussions in forums which structured interaction in trees.

The introduced *floating threads* with pushout style structured all the (sub)board's interaction into a single chronological stream. When a thread or discussion was initiated, it would automatically occupy the first position, on top of the board, pushing the existing ones down the stream and deleting ("pushing out") the one in the last position. It was not a sequential and continuous stream of discussions since it relied on user interaction to move them through two other mechanisms: *bumping* makes a thread return to the first position with each reply and *saging* gave users the possibility to reply without "bumping" the thread. Newly initiated or popular threads, which were deemed to be relevant, would thus "float" on top of the older and less popular ones simply by being highly participated. It is common for today's participants in English imageboards to simply write "bump" or "bumping" while replying to threads in order to push it back to the top positions to gather other users' attention and participation.

Those mechanisms gave users the possibility to collectively modulate how the content is displayed of the page. They were designed to make participants cooperate in the real-time modulation of the collective attention in these settings. The simple layout was minimalistic and interaction was ephemeral and immediately responsive, therefore privileging rapid changes in the number of participants in a given thread and in the focus of the overall board interaction.

Amezou shared the fate of *Ayashii*: its popularity resulted in server problems and extended downtime, and the board was also shut down due to threats against the administrator. In 1999, Hiroyuki Nishimura creates the n*i channeru* (2channel) or *2ch* for short, based on the *Amezou* code, with enough server power to handle the

subsequent exponential growth. The growth turned *2ch* into the largest internet bulletin board (textboard). According to Onishi, it is

> the place where disgruntled employees leak information about their companies, journalists include tidbits they cannot get into the mainstream news media and the average salaryman attacks with ferocity and language unacceptable in daily life. It is also the place where gays come out in a society in which they mostly remain in the closet, where users freely broach taboo subjects, or where people go to the heart of the matter and ask, "What's for dinner?"
>
> Onishi, 2004, n.p.

The Japanese term "salaryman" (*sararīman*) is a cultural figure that refers to the expectation of (male) workers to fulfill obligations towards society through their work ethic and devotion to their employer companies, job, and colleagues. *2ch*'s popularity is, according to its founder, "related to the Japanese sense of homogeneity" and the "mentality of all being in the middle class", as well as the gap left by the death of its predecessors, the aforesaid anonymous websites (Nishimura, 2003, n.p.). He justifies the preference for anonymity with the consequences associated with the ways using names and pseudonyms while participating in online discussions hinders the strength of the "accurate argument" and prevents information to be "treated equally". Nishimura mentions the risks associated with the disclosure of secret information and the negative effects of reputation, authority and individual exposure to criticism. The cultural production supported by the inscription of such media design principles into the software of *2ch* created interesting forms of resistance through resistance against identification. Nozawa, who wrote an ethnography on anonymity in Japanese virtual communication, calls these strategies "material camouflage", (2012, n.p.) used in a cultural context that is indissociable from the rejection of "hegemonic cultural ideology of fame and success". Anonymity, or better yet the "counter-name", is also a collective celebration of the insignificant and unspectacular:

> the stance of counter–name in Japanese subcultural spheres most saliently articulates the subcultural modality of being–in–society: nobodyness. Not simply the anonymous, but the *insignificant* and the *unspectacular*. Note in this vein that in *Niconico* as well as in 2ch, 'lengthy comments' (*chōbun*), especially those that take autobiographical form, are often interpreted as a sign of self–presentation seeking others' recognition too enthusiastically, and instigate counter–comments that chastise them, as if to say: "Who cares about you?" (*cf., tl;dr* in the anglophone Internet register). (…) we recognize that naming is always interpreted as name–exposing in this ideological stance. An instance of such exposure, careless or intended, invites verbal abuse or is at least

> marked in the computer–mediated sites of Japanese subculture precisely because it invokes the broadcast model of circulation that underlies the mainstream culture of fame and the kind of person that stereotypically participates in it: fame–seeking, name–selling celebrities and moreover celebrity–wannabes.
>
> Nozawa, 2012, n.p.

The name itself, Channel 2, is said to refer to the TV channel commonly used for video game consoles, is telling of such mediated forms of cultural production and reception and how they are an escape from the dominant cultures of reverence and reputation characteristic of Japanese society and mass media. Ironically, despite the attempts to remain insignificant, 2ch became a very special website of the Japanese WWW. Its significance was built through its status as a massively participated information exchange. The website's founder addresses the complicated relation between mass media channels and Channel 2, claiming that mainstream media picks up on stories circulating on Channel 2 based on editorial decisions. In turn, "Channel 2 has a role as an ombudsman, investigating mass media's reports" (Nishimura, 2003, n.p.). In a Wired magazine article, Lisa Katayama claims this website has "more influence on Japanese popular opinion than the prime minister, the emperor and the traditional media combined" (Katayama, 2007).

In August 2001, when *2ch* was experiencing server problems, *Futaba Channeru* is created. This website was not simply a textboard like its predecessors but an imageboard, which gave users the option to upload images, thus extending the visual dimension of the Japanese anonymous cultures. *Futaba*'s popular *Nijiura* boards, the abbreviation for *Nijigen Ura*, are roughly equivalent to 4chan's /*b*/ board: they are the "most aggressive and creative boards", deemed as the most loyal representation of Futaba's philosophy.[18] Created in March 2002, those boards were intended to be used by trolls under a "no rule" policy. The default username *nanashi* was changed to "Toshiaki" after a very high persistence of trolling under that username. Users posting under such name often engaged in irresponsible behavior, while at the same time drawing from it a strong sense of unity and belonging. The ensuing mischief and brutal trolling behavior led the website administration to change the default username to *Munen* (regret). In Futaba, the word "Toshiaki" is associated with a sense of belonging and heavy trolling that is now looked back upon with both nostalgia and shame.

The year of 2003 marked the beginning of English language anonymous boards. On March, 2003, World2ch is created, a textboard like Channel 2. It was a gathering

[18] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/futaba-channel-2chan

place for users who expressed themselves in English and/or Japanese. Yet, 4chan was set up shortly after and quickly outgrew World2chan in popularity, establishing itself as the first massively participated anonymous imageboard for English speaking users. It's founder, 15 year old Christopher Pole (moot) made the following announcement on the website's news section:

> 4chan is meant to be an unofficial sister site to 2chan.net [*Futaba*], an amazing Japanese community that has been around for a long time. (…) Our site is meant to be an equal alternative for non-Japanese speaking persons to interact as they would on 2chan, with an active and diverse community. (…) Everyone is equally welcomed at this website, as long as you keep your drama and warring elsewhere. By trying to start flamewars between 2chan, world2ch, and 4chan, you're just hurting the web-based English anime community. (…) **Edit for the world2ch crew:** Don't worry, there is no plan to put up several inactive sports and political forums. This will be largely image and comedy based, we have no intention of partaking in intelligent discussions concerning foreign affairs. By sister-site, I mean focusing primarily on certain likable aspects of 2chan, not just a mirror. Your territory is safe.[19]

5.3 4chan's Moral Brinkmanship

Participation in online anonymous collectives offers the antithesis of today's individualistic forms of governmentality, whose notions of citizenship associate agency and responsibility with a knowable and controllable singular bodily, mental, and social complex. Thus, unity or at least a strong coherence between all the elements in this complex is often seen as the cornerstone for moral action. Recently, Mark Zuckerberg, who is perhaps the most notable 21st century hero of the global digital economy, justified his website's enforced "real names" policy[20]. He argues against anonymity, pseudonymity, and other forms of identity concealment, declaring:

[19] https://www.4chan.org/4channews.php?all#oldnews.

> You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly.
>
> Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2010

According to the founder of Facebook, deviations from this principle signify "lack of integrity". As founding structures of the integrity of the public subject, the references to "transparency", "authenticity", "union" and "totality" are the main lines of the internet implementation of the regimes of subjectification in neoliberal societies of control. These statements were made while defending "radical transparency" on the internet, a term that is erroneously believed to have been coined by Zuckerberg. Lee Knuttila suggests that these claims are part of a particular "mode of discourse", which

> represents the closest bond between virtual spaces and the physical world outside networks. Many social media sites feature a person's likes, religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation, habits, hobbies, friends, family, finances, health, and even actual physical location. Rather than having no connection or varying degrees of connection through an avatar, this personal turn conflates one's virtual self and real world self. (…) Social media relies on an articulation of a lived social self.
>
> Knuttila, 2011, n. pag.

As a platform of subjectification, Anonymous lies in the gaps between the possibilities of the online world and its relative discontinuity from the offline reality of one's self and body. Incipient forms of radical transparency and the ways media relates to subjectification had already been noted in Baudrillard's analysis of a medium which had been massively adopted before the emergence of social media: television. Inspired by a '70s American reality TV, he claimed that the notion of an uninterrupted, unscripted "'raw' historical document", filmed "as if TV weren't there" that he equates to "as if the viewer were there", constituted a "frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency" (Baudrillard, 1994[1981], pp. 27-28). In a sense, early reality shows already resemble social media

[20] In Facebook's website it is stated: "Facebook is a community where people use their authentic identities. We require people to provide the name they use in real life; that way, you always know who you're connecting with. This helps keep our community safe." Facebook Help section entitled "What names are allowed on Facebook?" (https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576).

in the sense that they hint at different forms of surveillance. In his account, this entails a deviation

> from the panoptic mechanism of surveillance (…) to a system of deterrence, in which the distinction between the passive and the active is abolished. There is no longer any imperative of submission to the model, or to the gaze "YOU are the model!" "YOU are the majority!" Such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality, in which the real is confused with the model (…) Such is the last stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, of ideology, of publicity, etc.) but one of deterrence: !YOU are information, you are the social, you are the event, you are involved, you have the word, etc." An about-face through which it becomes impossible to locate one instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, because you are always already on the other side. No more subject, no more focal point, no more center or periphery: pure flexion or circular inflexion. No more violence or surveillance: only "information," secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion, and simulacra of spaces in which the effect of the real again comes into play.
>
> Baudrillard, 1994[1981], p. 29

Despite obvious and striking differences, it is possible to identify some continuities between social media and reality TV. Facebook, for instance, with its clean interface, striving for invisibility, also aims to a sort of technical subtraction, bringing (other people's) lives to the screen as if both media and observer weren't there. People, their lives and their attention are the currencies in this kind of mediated economies of gazing and self-representation for the purpose of depersonalized collective consumption. Not only do they know they are being watched, they actively trigger this attention through active participation in the social medium. Nevertheless, authenticity and individual singularity are the guiding principle.

The gaze also enters a circular inflexion and the distinction between control and personal public expression become blurred. With the increased possibilities for the production of multimedia content and mobile devices equipped with GPS, internet connection and photographic capabilities, everything – from an important political statement to a picture of someone's latest meal – can be turned into a social media spectacle. Facebook's business model itself depends on the participation and self-disclosure of its users in order to secure the attention from users and the revenue from advertisers. Furthermore, its persistent identity model and "real name policy",[21] coupled with Zuckerberg's foresight of the internet age's needs, turns the social network into a seemingly invisible online mediator for identity management and self produc-

[21]Facebook's Name Policy: https://www.facebook.com/help/292517374180078.

tion. This trend is strengthening, since internet services are increasing outsourcing credential administration functions to Facebook and other companies.

5.3.1 Sociality in Anonymous Imageboards

Anonymity on the internet is in opposition to the personal information sharing and harvesting which takes place in online environments like Facebook. As Coleman argues,

> Anonymous offers a provocative antithesis to the logic of constant self-publication, the desire to attain recognition or fame. The ethos of Anonymous is in opposition to celebrity, with the group configured as e pluribus unum: one from many. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern what or whom lies behind the mask. In a world where we post the majority of our personal data online, and states and corporations wield invasive tools to collect and market the rest, there is something profoundly hopeful in Anonymous's effacement of the self (even if there is something deeply ironic and troubling about doxing and hacking in order to make that point).
>
> Coleman, 2012, n. pag.

Diversity in digital media affordances such as anonymity, which allow for different relations with oneself and with others, seem to be also associated with different moral economies. For Auerbach (2012), the online environments in which Anonymous developed have great impact on the collective's moral standards. In the mostly self-governed anonymous boards such as 4chan, moral codes are almost entirely self-determined, following an amusement-driven moral brinkmanship which rejects mainstream society's dogmas and generalized notions of decency and appropriateness (Elliott, 2009, pp. 97-8). Moral evaluations of content and its producers' intentions will almost inescapably lead to deceit. The strongly visual interaction form often takes the form of turning critiques of hegemonic orders and their moral and cultural codes into provocative collective debate and entertainment. Media is always in relation with particular choices and strategies of designers but also of those individuals who use and voluntarily participate in it. One of the affordances of mass anonymous interaction is its promotion of otherwise socially sanctioned practices of

uncommon self-disclosure. It is common to find expressions of the insignificant, the marginal and the deviant, those without a voice or place in offline social life.

In 4chan's /b/, the massively participated interaction is open to deeply emotional and reflexive, expressing what pertains to the most deep and intimate layers of the self, thus short-circuiting Gurvitch's (1941) distinction between the categories *mass*, *community* and *communion*. These deviant positions are not only commonly expressed in 4chan, but they can find acceptance and validation. The sub-forum thus provides the otherwise marginalized with a sense of belonging, a feeling they are "part of something". The open expression of deviance and the practices of moral brinkmanship make /b/ very different of the easily navigated "vanilla" interface of identity binding social networks like Facebook. The sexual component of the site is thus extremely high, being a place that enables the expression of unconventional sexuality and sexual taboo, alongside blander practices such as the exchange of information seeking about health, computers, movies, songs, or psychological and physiological issues.

The close relation between law and sexuality finds expression, as Foucault notes, in the latter's condition as the "sole substance of universal taboos". He argues that sexuality constitutes a fissure, not an interface or an isolating barrier, between man and animal, marking within us the limits of consciousness, law, and language (Foucault, 1977, p. 30). Furthermore, in his account, the *limit* is defined by a relationship with transgression which "takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust" since it is through the violence of transgression that the limit is retrieved after being pushed against that which it excludes (ibid., p. 34-5). Drawing on Blanchot's principle of contestation, Foucault argues that pushing existences or values beyond their limits means reaching the point where an ontological decision achieves its end, where "being achieves its limit and where the limit defines being" (Foucault, 1977, p. 36).

Anonymous imageboards represent what happens when pushing limits *is* the ontological decision. Integrating cultural criticism, trolling and with extreme forms of shock value, this spiral which cannot be exhaustively explored is the spring that thrusts this collective. Mitchell's psychoanalytical approach builds on the concepts of Nietzschean bad or guilty consciousness and on Buttler's perspectives on subjectivation (which combines the Foucauldian conception of power, Freudian analysis of repression, and Spinoza's reading of social existence). This approach leads him to proposes that "trolls do in fact operate in a manner that is psychoanalytically novel, because although their psychic goals – anonymity or non-subjectivity – cannot be attained, the 'presence' of these libidinal goals results in a different form of

subjectivation that mocks both guilty feelings and the idea of culpability itself" (Mitchell, 2013, n.p.).

Mitchell's identification of a different relation to guilt and culpability can be seen acquiring particular technical and social forms: shame and guilt are recurrent themes, part of the collective memory and encoded in the site's norms, principles, and interactions. These themes often structure different positions within these settings, being vehemently both rejected and adopted by large numbers of participants. As contended elements themselves, shame and guilt become referents in the reflexive self-interpretative processes within these collectives.

As the previously mentioned name change in *Futaba* shows, the anonymous boards administrators tend to deploy mechanisms of control in situations deemed too extreme. By doing so, they do not necessarily mitigate the targeted behaviors, which are often related to the very motivations behind participation in the anonymous site, but they most certainly integrate it in the collective's dynamics and memory. In these mediated environments, reemerging limits are forceful reminders of the forces they contain, and what may lie beyond justifies their constant provocation. The rejection of taken-for-granted value systems and ethical stances tends to meet its own limit when excess acquires such a momentum that it could threat the metastability of the collective assemblage, resulting in it's very disintegration (i.e. people arrested and servers apprehended). From the perspective of self-organized dynamics, negative feedback loops are deployed when positive feedback loops activate the system to a point of destabilization.

This particularly unstable equilibrium is itself the basis for a reflexive perspective from the position of the anonymous participant, in a context where the majority of action and its outcomes is not directly linked to the person behind it. In the ways moral conflicts are framed, their substantial contents tend to become secondary in face of the visibility of the arbitrariness and contingency of the processes through which norms and values are enforced. I develop this argument into a claim that these phenomena are related to forms of experimentation with the meaning of being human.

The anonymous collective subjectification platforms are not only related to transgression, but also to the confessional mode of minimizing its negative effects on the soul. Analyzing confession in the Middle Ages, Foucault notes:

> There is an economy of pain and pleasure: pain of the penitent who does not like to confess his transgressions, his consolation in seeing that the confessor suffers pain in listening to his sins, but who also consoles himself for the pain he thus gives himself by securing through confession solace for the penitent's soul. It is this double investment of pain, pleasure, and solace on the part of

> both penitent and confessor that will ensure a good confession. All this may seem theoretical and subtle. In actual fact, it was crystallized within an institution, or rather within a little object, a small piece of furniture with which you are quite familiar – the confessional: an open, anonymous, and public place within the church where the faithful can present themselves and will always find a priest available who will hear them, remaining close beside them, but from whom they are separated by a small curtain or screen.
>
> Foucault, 2003, p. 181

Foucault's focus on the artifact that operates a split in interaction orders is revealing. This artifact and its *screen* operate as an interface through which the darker, secretive and sinful subjective layers were rendered visible and objective in an anonymous, impersonal relation within the context of institutionalized regimes of subjectification. This device's function seems to be reproduced in /b/, particularly in its "ask X anything" threads, an interaction template in which X usually corresponds to a social or personal situation that may be deemed interesting or exceptional. Those positions range from positions of very high social desirability to health conditions, criminality or social stigma. In order to illustrate this point, I present an example of said situations, taking as an example a thread with the theme: "ask someone who has to register as a sex offender for 15 years anything".

The parallels between this kind of behavior and the practice of confession are striking. In the thread, which was a continuation of a previously deleted one, the OP (original poster) admits to have abused dozens of children, being caught and serving time for the crimes. In the interaction that follows, other 4chan users ask him questions about his victims, procedures, motives and intentions in "telling everyone", engaging in debates that are interrupted by the occasional demonstrations of sympathy or the depictions of the OP and his views as sick and immoral. In this website, there is a suspension of both taboo and of belief – participants have always in mind that these publications may be completely fictional. Deceit (troll baiting) and dissimulation are common practice so such claims are often dismissed as false. Nevertheless, the possibly simulated situation allows for a similar screen mediating a "pain and pleasure economy" to reemerge in a different version: both the perpetrator and its audience are willing to endure the intensive experience for its own sake, collectively, and in interchangeable positions, instead of specializing as confessors or penitent. Ultimately, 4chan users expect this kind of practice for the sake of the possibility of totally open communication and disclosure.

Illustration 1: Self-described sex offender in 4chan's /b/ board

The functions of such "screens" in subjectification platforms are constitutive of regimes of the self. As Fuggle notes, Foucault considers "the obligatory articulation of hidden or repressed desires, emotions, fears and so on" which are the basis of the church's confession and is reproduced in criminal and psychiatric institutions "functions not as a form of absolution, rehabilitation or therapy but, rather, as a means of capturing the individual in a closed circuit of power and knowledge" (Fuggle, 2010, p. 162). It can be said that, in the voluntary self-disclosure practices of 4chan, anonymity prevents such binding form of control and its implications. Participation and experimentation enable individuals to collectively explore and deliberate on sensitive issues from multiple standpoints without being captured in the process.

It is possible to trace other historical parallelisms with early Anonymous, namely with the Cynic tradition in ancient Greece. After his exile from Sinope, Diogenes consulted with an oracle and received the following instruction from Apollo: "deface the coinage" (*paracharattein to nomisma*). This phrase became a motto for the Cynics and referred to a method for decommissioning the "'coinage' of social custom" (Desmond, 2008, p. 20). This goal bears striking resemblance to the early Anonymous' guiding principles. The Cynics turned parrhesia, a political right of Athenian citizens in public assemblies, into a duty to freely speak in all circumstances about any matter, regardless of its public or private nature. This consisted of a form of contesting power and social custom through defiance. But instead of consisting in

straightforward honesty, the Cynics' parrhesiastic rhetoric was also a disdainful assertion of individual freedom and independence (Shea, 2010, pp. 11-13).

The Cynic philosophy was centered on parrhesia, freedom of speech, and commitment to nature. Living according to nature entailed, for the Cynic, three main functions. The first is a method of self-perfection through a commitment to one's animal nature (becoming a dog, *kyon*, from which the word Cynic derives) rather than socially created norms and desires. Thus, the Cynic engaged in harsh physical training in order to minimize needs and achieving self-sufficiency, self-control and a state of indifference to hardship and freedom from the lures of social comforts. Yet, this ascetic tendency is not detached from a pragmatic hedonism, advocating the satisfaction of one's needs "in the simplest and most immediate manner possible" (Shea, 2010, pp. 14-5).

The second function is a method of social critique. Cynics exposed social customs and laws, namely the distinction of public and private acts, by acting in public with animal simplicity, practicing shamelessness and the rejection of the Greek ideals of decency and honor. This could not be separated from the decision to perform the role of a guardian watchdog, using shock to "wake" and complete destitution to instruct through example:

> The two functions of Cynic animality, self-perfection and social criticism, cannot be separated: the latter depends on the former. The Cynic's personal commitment to poverty and simplicity grants him the visibility necessary to communicate his message; the credibility to preach his Cynic gospel (because he has tested his principles on his own flesh); and the license to speak, the license, that is, of the fool and the outsider.
>
> Shea, 2010, p. 16

Finally, the third function consists of questioning what it means to be human and refusing "definitions of man grounded in religion, sociability, respectability, and political allegiance" (ibid.). The Cynic's regime of the self was thus also connected to figures of the fool and the insignificant, elements similar to the Japanese and American imageboards and the mythological figure of the trickster (Coleman, 2015) that has structured the ethos of Anonymous activists. The forms of subjectification offered by anonymous imageboards also express a type of "becoming animal" in which the bodily and the immediate satisfaction of needs are expressed in visual representations of the self and of others which embodiment. Exchange of visual representations and debates around living spaces, personal objects, erotic fantasies or private body parts abound in places like 4chan's /b/ board. Stories about taboo

breaking, hidden desires and further enlarge the embodied dimension of anonymous imageboards.

In addition, the "animal" subjectivity of affective circulation in swarms, as identified by Eugene Thacker, can also be found in imageboard cultural practices. The distributed mutual affection in said practices can be motivated by both visceral hate and heartfelt solidarity. Nevertheless, it is also heterogeneously reflexive through its multiple and contentious sections, memory techniques, self-representations, and the ongoing negotiated interpretations and definitions of itself. Finally, it is also possible to discern an ascetic tendency in the voluntary exposure to a mediated aesthetic environment where minimalist and deconstruction in language and images based on the exposure to shock and obscure subcultural references.

5.4 Conclusion

Shea claims that the first time the word cosmopolitan (*kosmopolitês*) appeared in Greek was in a response given by Diogenes when questioned where he came from, as reported by Diogenes Laertius. This notion of a citizen of the world, a belonging to the whole of mankind, also entailed an antipoliticism, a rejection of the polis. The Cynic thus embodied the stripping of man to its bare essentials in order to test what man is. This meant the discrediting of human dignity and goodness, and even prohibitions of cannibalism and incest or the respect for elders or the dead.

Diogenes and the Cynic philosophy were, according to Shea, adamant as a model for the independent philosopher and true intellectual of the eighteen century. Among the most influencing ideals were the independence from patronage and tyrannical leaders, and a fearless freedom in speech. Yet, in order to fit the politeness and sociability in the literate society of the time, Diogenes had to be disposed of his misanthropy and indecency (Shea, 2010, p. 30). According to Habermas, the public sphere has its roots on this polite Republic of Letters (*Respublica literaria).*

> The "town" was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the TiichgeselLschaften (table societies). The heirs of the human-

> istic-aristocratic society, in their encounter with the bourgeois intellectuals (through sociable discussions that quickly developed into public criticism), built a bridge between the remains of a collapsing form of publicity (the courtly one) and the precursor of a new one: the bourgeois public sphere.
>
> Habermas, 1991, p. 30

In anonymous boards, users engage in a particular form of communicational sphere where the boundaries between what is public (disclosed, openly accessible online) and what is private are blurred – in the sense that expression and disclosure are protected by anonymity. Instantiations of the contingent associations between affective publics, digital communication platforms, media design and individual creative engagement, these collectives commonly share the devotion of radically exploring the possibilities of anonymity on the internet for both individual and collective expression and autonomy.

To conclude this chapter, I argue that the online culture of anonymity surrounding the implementation and use of those media is influenced by the interplay between experiences of transgression and ways of interpreting the outcomes of those endeavors, resulting in particular modes of self-conduct and of relating to oneself and to others. But the subject positions that it instantiates are highly unstable, since the position of anonymity is open to appropriation.

Nevertheless, as a transgressive enunciative modality, or subject position, Anonymous rests on the exploitation of social, symbolic, technical, and organizational dimension of mediated communication. The symbolic dimension is based on simultaneous mobilization and transgression of cultural icons and moral codes. The technical dimension relies mostly on the exploitation of digital information and communication systems, namely both their communicational/representational and information storage functions. All these dimensions are articulated in, and articulate, different types of media, internet connections and data flows. This informs the present conceptualization of Anonymous as platform of subjectification that is highly dependent on materiality and technique, much like the veil (Mahmood, 2001), the act of pointing (Sjørslev , 2012) and camouflage (Nozawa, 2012). This platform is associated with a given position, which is a function of material and discursive practices: a position or plane which is cuts across hybrid, human and non-human networks. Since the material subject has the ability to (de)stabilize these networks through its own objectivation, I chose the cultural objects in their context as privileged points for the analysis of the formation of Anonymous.

Chapter 6. A Secret Society of /b/rothers

6.1 Introduction

The activities in anonymous boards, performed by those who started calling themselves "Anonymous", were in their early days characterized by two levels of secrecy: secret individual participation and association through anonymity, and secrecy through the attempt to make that association itself invisible, concealing its own existence. This initial orientation towards total secrecy may be recognized in the first two of their numbered set of rules entitled "Rules of the Internet". According to a related entry in the Know Your Meme website, these date from at least 2006, when a user added them to the Encyclopedia Dramatica (ED) wiki (Lolrus, 2009). There are several versions of these rules which are, to this day, being constantly enlarged and rewritten[22]. A widely spread draft containing 47 rules is here reproduced.

> Rules of the Internet
> 1. Do not talk about /b/
> 2. Do NOT talk about /b/

The first rules are related to the above mentioned secrecy, the mandatory techniques of concealing the collective's original sites of organization. This illustrates the initial collective's sense of urgency in keeping the board from scrutiny and to keep outsiders from knowing about the site to guarantee its current conditions. They are inspired in the rules of *Fight Club*, a book by Chuck Palahniuk that was adapted as a feature film. The story is about a secret organization of men who seek excitement

[22]See http://www.rulesoftheinternet.com for a list of almost one thousand rules.

and breaking the monotony of their lives by engaging in bare-knuckles fighting. This organization grows in popularity until it has members scattered throughout the country and working in many different organizations. The organization starts by engaging in anti-consumerist pranks, mostly directed against the corporate world. Eventually, some of its most central, most devoted members start 'Project Mayhem', a self-trained army that resorts to sabotage in order to destroy modern civilization.

> Rules of Fight Club (feature film version)
> 1st RULE: You do not talk about FIGHT CLUB.
> 2nd RULE: You DO NOT talk about FIGHT CLUB.
> 3rd RULE: If someone says "stop" or goes limp, taps out the fight is over.
> 4th RULE: Only two guys to a fight.
> 5th RULE: One fight at a time.
> 6th RULE: No shirts, no shoes.
> 7th RULE: Fights will go on as long as they have to.
> 8th RULE: If this is your first night at FIGHT CLUB, you HAVE to fight.

Those artistic depictions of a secret and anonymous popular forms of resistance, which became assimilated in North American popular culture, has highly influenced the self-representation of the anonymous board collective. The repeated rule makes evident the gap between participation in the collective and other spheres of social life. Participation in Anonymous is framed as a relation between isolated individuals and the anonymous collective. Another influence from those works of fiction in the formation of the Anonymous collective can be found in a definition of 4chan that was published in the publicly editable Urban Dictionary website[23], dated from June 1, 2006:

> we are the anonymous army. cross us and you will fail. anonymous is everywhere. you depend on us every day. we bag your groceries, we fix your computers. anonymous sees you before you see him. sitting at desks around the world right now is a nameless, faceless, unforgiving mafia composed of the best of the best.

This seems to have been directly inspired in the following statement from the feature film version of Fight Club. The main character, who expresses a sort of dissociative personality disorder that is materialized in the screen as two different physical persons, played by two different actors and bearing oppositional personality traits, says to a police chief that was captured by his collective:

> Hi, you're gonna call off your rigorous investigation. You're gonna publicly state that there is no underground group, or, these guys are gonna take your balls. They're gonna send one to the New York Times, one to the LA Times, press release style. Look, the people you are after are the people you depend

[23]http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=4chan&defid=2308587.

> on: we cook your meals, we haul your trash, we connect your calls, we drive your ambulances, we guard you while you sleep. Do not fuck with us.

Since these collectively written rules result from a commonly agreed upon representation of the collective, they operate both as a blueprint and a material form of the collective's own form of production.

> 3. We are Anonymous
> 4. Anonymous is legion
> 5. Anonymous never forgives
> 6. Anonymous can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster
> 7. Anonymous is still able to deliver

After stating this prohibition, the rules also provide a definition of Anonymous. The usage of collective self-representation as marks of agency, authorship and audience lets the figure of an affective and recursive public transpire through these statements. The dominant self-representation is that of a collective which is vengeful and frightening, yet its existence is validated for its ability to "deliver", to accomplish.

The myth of "Legion" can be found in the Gospel of Mark, which contains passages (Mark 5: 1-20) depicting the exorcism of the Geranese, a miracle attributed to Jesus. Jesus encountered a "man with an unclean spirit" who "lived among the tombs" and spent his days crying and "bruising himself with stones". People were unable to control the man with unnatural powers since "no one had the strength to subdue him" and he could break free from fetters and chains. When Jesus asked his name, he replied: "My name is Legion; for we are many."

The man, who alternates from singular to plural while speaking of himself, recognizes the presence of Jesus, the "Son of the Highest God". This group of demons proceeds to worship Christ and begs to be spared from torment or exile away of the country. Instead, it asks to be sent to a nearby herd of pigs and Jesus complied with the request. Then, "the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea." By means of the miraculous purification, the Gadarene is restored to sanity and becomes a follower of Christ.

According to Jean Starobinski, despite the obvious reference to the occupying Roman army, this passage can be read as a struggle between the singular and the plural. Although Jesus arrives accompanied to the country, he faces the man alone. The man, in turn, is subject to the inverse process, assuming a singular form at first and only latter revealing his plural condition. The biblical tale also illustrates the connection between individuality and moral action in the Christian myths. The singular – in the form of the lonesome hero and the liberated man's individuation –

represents the possibility of harmony and its restoration through morally guided action, whereas the plural represents powerlessness or wickedness.

> Jesus, permanent hero of the evangelical narrative, is the immutable representative of the singular. The disciples form a group with him only in a precarious and unstable way: a variation in their faith can separate them from him at any time. Jesus, then, is not found connected with others in a relation of faithful belonging together. He cannot be the equal of anyone: his role as master, healer, liberator commits him to a perpetually asymmetrical relation characterized most often by the singular-plural opposition (…) The dramatic face to face encounter of Jesus and the demoniac at first sight gives to the other the appearance of a unique individual; (the other becomes legion) but, on the one hand, we will discover that it is not for long and, on the other hand, it must be added that the absence of the numerical indication of the singular-plural opposition is compensated for by the accentuation of the qualitative indication of the Good-Evil opposition, or Son of God/Demon. The structure of opposition remains undamaged. And one will add that the healing of the Gerasene, his conversion to a disciple of Jesus, his evangelistic mission have the effect of conferring upon him the privilege and danger of singularity, with reference to the teaching which henceforth will be his among all the inhabitants of the Decapolis. The Gerasene (sanctified and purified by his encounter with Jesus) will face alone all his pagan fellow-countrymen as Jesus faces alone all those whom he teaches and heals. One can say, then, that Jesus addresses himself to plurality, to the crowd, but that his efficacious intervention is eminently singularizing, individualizing, for the one whom his intervention reaches.
>
> Starobinski, 1973, p. 341

In this story, Starobinski argues, the hero is sure of his victory, therefore the "interest is (…) on the circumstances of the defeat of an adversary who, for everyone other than Jesus, has been an object of terror, on account of his strength and his wickedness" (ibid, p. 343). This also points to the complementary relationship between the mythical "heroic" character and the routines of everyday life. In the heroic act, the "dense facticity" of the heterogeneous and unsystematized practical knowledge and routines of everyday life is cut by "an ordered life fashioned by fate or will, in which the everyday is viewed as something to be tamed, resisted or denied, something to be subjugated in the pursuit of a higher purpose" (Featherstone, 1992, p. 160). The hero is thus opposed to the ordinary man, living ordinary lives, by its singularity.

The valuation of the singular in relation to plurality found in Christian myths can also be found in the concept of the crowd, in particular the urban crowd. This concept has been the object of social and political commentary and theory. Often depicted as a dangerous, emotion-driven, irrational social actor "urban crowds", An-

drea Mubi Brighenti (2010) observes, "emerged as social actors and, simultaneously, as matter of deep concern in the wake of the French Revolution" (p. 292). Accordingly, imaginaries around the crowd have been the source of both fear and angst, as the following excerpt by Gustave Le Bon, one of the pioneers in the psychological study of the crowd, illustrates:

> Crowds are somewhat like the sphinx of ancient fable: it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.
>
> Le Bon, 1896, p. 102

Going back to the rules:

> 8. There are no real rules about posting
> 9. There are no real rules about moderation either - enjoy your ban
> 10. If you enjoy any rival sites - DON'T

The no-rules principle is explicitly stated, as well as the unstable, evolving and non-standardized character of both user activity and moderation criteria. Furthermore, loyalty to the anonymous board's specific subcultural context is expected since there is fierce competition between rival sites and boards.

> 11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored
> 12. Anything you say can and will be used against you
> 13. Anything you say can be turned into something else - fixed
> 14. Do not argue with trolls - it means that they win
> 15. The harder you try the harder you will fail
> 16. If you fail in epic proportions, it may just become a winning failure
> 17. Every win fails eventually
> 18. Everything that can be labeled can be hated
> 19. The more you hate it the stronger it gets
> 20. Nothing is to be taken seriously

While anonymity is deemed to be the warrant of free speech and unbiased "pure" arguments in these settings, participants also expect disruptive behavior among themselves. This reflects the competitive and misanthropic character of places like 4chan. Trolling, flaming, spam, and subject deviation are constant in 4chan's /b/ board threads. While the collective celebrates itself in both its "wins" and its "fails", the rules also advise against emotional investment and serious efforts while participating in this playful and provocative interaction. Anonymity and escaping labels, as well as a detached attitude that avoids "seriousness", are seen as an effective a protection from "hate".

> 21. Original content is original only for a few seconds before getting old

22. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
23. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
24. Every repost it always a repost of a repost

The rules also state the relation between the production of the valued original content (OC), the content's temporarily – how it "ages" – and the intensive dynamics of repetition and reproduction.

The "content" is the very interaction material, since all exchange revolves around digital objects – such as text, images, audio, or even computer code – that are collectively assessed. Furthermore, the attractiveness and the broad thematic scope of this anonymous form of interaction results in a socially and culturally heterogeneous formation. Digitized bits and pieces of shared popular culture, such as films, TV shows, and books, provided the common ground for cultural practices and meaningful interaction – as the *Fight Club* influence illustrates. In the ephemeral environment of anonymous boards, the collective memory resides in participants' minds and digital objects that are collected and stored in participants' own drives or on the internet. In order for a particular content to become popular, it needs to gather attention through maintained repetition (republication) and remixing. By being part of the shared of lived cultural practice, by their affective dimension, particular discursive or visual elements of popular contents become integrated in the collective's lore and lexicon. Nevertheless, the cultural innovation principles that dominate these settings also state that when such popularity is achieved, it also becomes another fad. There is an implicit connection between value, and valuable content, and the real-time lived experience of collective digital interaction and cultural production. This is how the cultural processor of anonymous boards operates: fast-paced competitive collective content production, consumption and reproduction that seeks to constitute itself as an evolutionary process of collective selection. Those dynamics were inscribed in media design and followed by user practice. The "internet meme" rules over these domains.

25. Relation to the original topic decreases with every single post
26. Any topic can easily be turned into something totally unrelated
27. Always question a person's sexual prefrences without any real reason

The rules reflect, once again, the principles of non-adherence to intelligently structured interaction, the "creative" evolution of threads and the disruptive character of participation in discussions.

28. Always question a person's gender - just in case it's really a man
29. In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents
30. There are no girls on the internet
31. TITS or GTFO - the choice is yours
32. You must have pictures to prove your statements

In a context of anonymity, playfulness and transgression, claims are not to be taken at face-value. In this environment, deception is expected to the point that all statements must be validated to be considered (e.g. through the use of pictures).

33. Lurk more - it's never enough

Due to the secretive character of the boards and its culture, initiation and familiarization is processed through prolonged periods of observation, "lurking". Only through this practice can newcomers, known as "newfags", become acquainted with the subcultural milieu.

34. There is porn of it, no exceptions
35. If no porn is found at the moment, it will be made
36. There will always be even more fucked up shit than what you just saw

The anonymous boards are also a site for libidinal and sexual desire. 4chan's /b/ board often hosts the production and exchange of a wide variety of pornographic and erotic content. Sexualization is so common that "rule 34" is probably more expressed than any other and can be even used as a theme for threads. Participants publish visual, often hand drawn, representations of sexual situations involving human or animal figures. Cartoon characters, due to their association with the innocence of children, are favorite candidates for this kind of representation. Furthermore, the protection of anonymity and ethos of transgression results in sexual expressions that are often deemed to be deviant perversions or even paraphilic disorders.

37. You can not divide by zero (just because the calculator says so)
38. No real limits of any kind apply here - not even the sky
39. CAPSLOCK IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL
40. EVEN WITH CRUISE CONTROL YOU STILL HAVE TO STEER

Digital technology, media and devices aquire a central importance, either in the forms of abstract formulations – such as those coming from mathematical computations – or that of practical usage – the Caps Lock function key for typing in uppercase. These techniques of style in mediated expression are also integral part of the regimes of conduct and mutual recognition that are associated with anonymous board cultures.

41. Desu isn't funny. Seriously guys. It's worse than Chuck Norris jokes.
42. Nothing is Sacred.
43. The more beautiful and pure a thing is - the more satisfying it is to corrupt it
44. Even one positive comment about Japanese things can make you a weaboo
45. When one sees a lion, one must get into the car.
46. There is always furry porn of it.
47. The pool is always closed.

Among deriding remarks related to the Japanese culture fans and other subcultural references, the commitment to transgression is reiterated. It is presented as a principle against dogma and moral conventions, alluding to a "satisfaction" with the corruption of beauty and purity that seems to acquire sacrificial overtones. While the public domain in the liberal capitalist democracies delimited misanthropy and obscenity to discrete anomalies or symbolic forms in ritualized festivities, the communicational context of these boards set the stage for the self to enact of other forms of being in public. The constitution of a fuzzy collective through affective publics and swarming behavior is associated with this particular stance towards public life. This stance of contentious forms of participation and and collective expression support the subjectification in, with, and through Anonymous.

6.2 Autonomy, Diaspora and the /b/day Exodus

Even though there were rules against website invasion (raids) and sexual representations of minors in /b/, 4chan's most active board – known as CP (child pornography) or JB (jailbait) in 4chan's parlance – those rules were often neglected by moderators. This was due to the board's philosophy of openness and transgression, the extremely high rate of content publishing, and the lack of automated procedures for both content removal and user banning. This was especially true for the anti-raid rule, whose enforcement was typically neglected. Yet, there was an escalation of both the organization of invastions and the publication of CP in /b/ during the summer of 2006.

In June of the same year, a small group started a minor flood in the Zelda Guide Forums, leading a few of their members to threaten 4chan with a cyber attack. When this threat reached /b/, the flooding augmented to the point that the forum had to turn to administrator validation of new accounts. This could halt the attack but also crippled the site's ability to recruit new users, a reaction which was acclaimed by anon as an "epic victory" over the enemy. That "victory" was followed by raids on Habbo Hotel and attacks on Zelda Universe in July. Countless other smaller raids took place on those and other websites.

In August 23, 2006, the day that became known as /b/day, the moderators of 4chan's /b/ board started to strictly enforce the previously unenforced rules as a result of the organization of further attacks on the furry fandom community, one of the most represented anonymous board subcultures in 4chan and /b/.[24] The attack started in the early morning of that day, when participants started to flood the Teen Baby Net website (http://teenbabynet.org), a forum for people interested in furry fandom and infantilism. When the administrators locked the forum, which by the time was already unrecognizable, participants in the raid decided to aim for another target. They chose WikiFur (http://wikifur.com), flooding their chat and pages with such intensity that the system operators could not contain the attack. In order to prevent this, the moderators of /b/ decided to counteract and ban everyone who started or participated in threads about raids or JB. The website's founder, moot, issued a "Policy Enforcement" statement:

> Participating in a thread dealing with illegal content will get you globally banned for two weeks (thread starter is indefinitely banned). This means merely replying to it removes you from this site for a minimum of two weeks. This includes JB and any other 'grey area' threads. Posting any piece of personal information or inciting/participating in an invasion of any sort will also get you, and anybody who replied to the thread globally banned. You have the option to either report or ignore (not reply to) threads that break the rules. Thanks! (…) There is literally a 'Ban thread' button now, so it isn't a chore to do. Abide by the rules and your own common sense.

As a reaction, participants started to provoke the moderators by uploading more CP, JB and information related to the attacks on the furry community. As they were being banned by the hundreds, these users realized that /b/ would never be the same, and rules would be effectively enforced thenceforth. Since those "epic" raids were considered by many participants in /b/ to be the most aggregating activity they engaged in, bringing them a sense of unity and of "historical" relevance[25] (according to the /b/day entry in Encyclopedia Dramatica), the move to enforce rules in /b/ led to anger and revolt against 4chan. The term historical here is associated with the concept of "Internet History", the "epic" narratives around raids and other events on the internet that, despite being seemingly insignificant, were central to the trajectory of Anonymous. These kind of historical narratives became part of the myths, tropes and lived experience in anonymous board circles, being the basis for the shared "se-

[24]According to an entry in the AnonIB website at the time (Best Anonymous Image Board, http://anonib.com) from an alleged 4chan /b/ administrator, many of the moderators in /b/ were themselves part of the furry fandom community.

[25]

crets" and knowledge that, by being shared, gave substance to Anonymous as a collective.

They first amassed in AnonIB, where an invasions board was (temporarily) created and some users starting to release instructions for an easy to set up script in batch. This made use of an input image and text that would be automatically posted to 4chan's /b/ board in order to flood it. FLOODING /B/ FOR WINDOWS USERS[26]

> 1 Name: KAWAII 2006-08-26 00:30
> 1. Get curl from http://curl.haxx.se/download/curl-7.15.4-win32-nossl.zip
> 2. Unzip it to a folder
> 3. Copy an image to the curl folder and rename it to 1.jpg
> 4. Create a file post.txt with the text of the post you wish to flood with
> 5. Create a batch file called flood.bat with the following text in:
> echo * >> 1.jpg
> curl http://dat.4chan.org/b/imgboard.php -F "com=<post.txt" -F submit=Submit -F upfile=@1.jpg -F mode=regist -F resto=%1 -A "Mozilla/5.0 (Windows; U; Windows NT 5.1; en-US; rv:1.8.0.6) Gecko/20060728 Firefox/1.5.0.2"
> ping -n 9 127.0.0.1 > nul
> flood %1
> 6.run flood.bat
> 7.??????
> 8.PROFIT!

Another individual replied with another version of the script, containing a minor change and the URL address for the invasions board in AnonIB[27]. Finally, yet another version of the script emerged and was distributed via the Rapidshare file sharing site. This version was configured to flood 4chan's /n/ board with images of the 7chan logo accompanied by the Declaration of /b/ Independence:

> Declaration of /b/ Independence
>
> When in the course of /b/tard events, it becomes necessary for anonymous to break free from the shackles of oppression set forth by the Furfag mods of 4chan.org.
> They have plundered our posts, and deprived us of our jailbait.
> They have forced upon us their twisted idealogy of 'Furry Fandom.'
> They have deprived us of our ability to fight our enemies, forcing us to submit to the wishes of the Furfag overlords.
> In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by re-

[26]This was retrieved from a thread posted 3 days later on the Foreign Languages text board of 4chan http://dis.4chan.org/read/lang/1156565930.

[27]The URL was http://www.anonib.com/invasions/index.php.

> peated bans from our homeland. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free anonymous.
> We, therefore, the Representatives of the Anonymous States of /b/, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good Anonymous of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That /b/ is, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the 4chan Crown, and that all political connection between /b/ and the State of 4chan, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.
> We are Anonymous. We are /b/. Our home is no longer on 4chan. In these times of unrest, we have formed the State of 7chan.org as our new sovereign nation on the World Wide Internet.
> Signed, Anonymous

Using such scripts, they were able to overload the servers that hosted /b/ and other 4chan boards, bringing down 4chan.[28] A couple of days later, 4chan came back online. In the following weeks, rule enforcement in 4chan's /b/ became more loose but the /i/nsurgency, as the rebellious force became known, had already a new place to call home, 7chan's /i/ (invasions) board. Eventually, 420chan also opened such a board, so the two sites were used as redundancy mirrors for the expected moments of downtime.

This event is representative of the process through which the Anonymous collective separated from the heterogeneous /b/ anonymous user base, growing beyond its birthplace medium, 4chan. The highly transgressive "separatists" were, like the Japanese *nanashi*, committed to radical ideals of disruption that would surely going to cause problems to whatever website hosting their activities. As a result, the collective developed sense of autonomy that became and integral part of the relation between the contentious anonymous collective and its sites of gathering, which is easily identified in the /i/ slogan: "Anon gets the credit, *chan gets the blame".

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[28] http://www.lurkmore.com/wiki//b/day.

[29] http://www.lurkmore.com/wiki//b/day.

the /i/nsurgency, as the rebellious force became known, had already a new place to call home, 7chan's /i/ (invasions) board. Eventually, 420chan also opened such a board, so the two sites were used as redundancy mirrors for the expected moments of downtime.

This event is representative of the process through which the Anonymous collective separated from the heterogeneous /b/ anonymous user base, growing beyond its birthplace medium, 4chan. The transgressive "separatists" were, like some of the users of the Japanese *nanashi warudo*, committed to radical ideals of disruption that would surely going to cause problems to whatever website hosting their activities. As a result, the collective developed sense of autonomy that became and integral part of the relation between the contentious anonymous collective and its sites of gathering, which is easily identified in the /i/ slogan: "Anon gets the credit, *chan gets the blame".

6.3 Converging Media: MySpace Raids and Fox

In the end of 2006, some of those who called themselves Anonymous engaged in a raid against Myspace, the world's largest social networking website at the time. According to Encyclopedia Dramatica, this event started when one anon installed a keystroke recording software on a school computer that was used for general internet access. This enabled the collection of a large number of Myspace login credentials. The credentials were published in 4chan and rapidly spread throughout the collective's internet hangouts, leading to a wave of profile vandalism: publishing shocking images, fake confessions, insulting Myspace contacts, and other forms of disruptive interventions. It also marked the beginning of a massive phishing operation. Phishing is the attempt to collect private and sensitive information, like website login credentials and credit card numbers, through electronic means by masquerading a known or trustworthy entity. Anons made use of the appropriated accounts to spread the attack to each profile's network of Myspace contacts. Several techniques were employed, such as flash redirection mechanisms and fake email messages with manipulated links, leading to fake pages that simulated the Myspace login screen. Those who fell for the trick and inserted their usernames and pass-

words in the fake login pages had their credentials stolen. Some of these techniques were described in the /i/nsurgency wiki[30], enabling other anons to reproduce the attacks, leading to the vandalizing of more profiles and further dissemination of the fake login screen.

Those cooperative efforts resulted in the capture of thousands of passwords. In order to take full advantage of the acquired login information, and to augment the possibility of its exploitation by promoting participation, the MySpace credentials were repeatedly published on the internet. Furthermore, the obtained passwords were then used in other internet services and accounts such as Internet Service Providers (ISP) and emails, exploiting the common security mistake of using the same password across multiple accounts and services. The attack thus exceeded Myspace profiles and reached other aspects of their user's online lives.

The list, according to an ED article, had over 40,000 credentials. A comment from in another website from the same month,[31] however, mentioned just over 4,000 login credentials and that the majority of profiles belonged to students from the author's school. This second source validates ED's claims about the origin of the data but also illustrates the kind of information obfuscation and exaggeration that is typical of this wiki. The comment also reproduces a bulletin published in Myspace by Thomas Anderson, the co-founder and president of the social network. In this bulletin, "Tom" warns those who noticed suspicious activity – such as the publications and private messages on their behalf – that their account has been stolen and urges them to change their passwords.

In the summer of 2007, the KKTV Californian TV channel, also known as Fox 11, property of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – the company that also owned MySpace – broadcasts a sensationalist piece on Anonymous, depicting them as "hackers on steroids", "domestic terrorists", and the "internet hate machine". In order to stress the menace these "hackers" constituted to society, the piece contained a video clip of an exploding van with a caption reading "demonstration". It also presented the testimony of one of the victims, identified only as "David". Ironically, that depiction of Anonymous was reinforcing. The sensational tone was considered to be hilarious by many participants and became the target of parody. The terms "hackers on steroids" and "internet hate machine" were promptly adopted as self-referential in-jokes, terms that were used interchangeably with Anonymous as names for the contentious collective. The name "David" also became a trope, entering the collective lexicon as the real name of every anonymous board participant.

[30] http://web.archive.org/web/20090322020649/http://partyvan.info/wiki/Myspace_phishing.

[31] Source: http://images.edgeofnowhere.cc/viewtopic.php?f=52&t=332990 .

Illustration 2: Alexa's daily reach for 4chan.org, posted in Encyclopedia Dramatica.

Furthermore, the news coverage that exposed, without directly naming it, the secret chaos loving hackers hangout which hosted activities related to creating havoc resulted in a much greater user affluence to 4chan as shown in Illustration 2 by the growth of Alexa's reach metric around the middle (summer) of 2007.

In the end of that year, the raid was repeated. The following text about the events of the previous year and the subsequent Fox News coverage was put in circulation[32]:

> Hey Anonymous.
> I'll be brief. You know how Anonymous was in the news, hackers on steroids, Internet Hate Machine? Want to keep the legend alive? The Internet Hate Machine has been fired up, and is producing much lulz, but we need more dataforce. MySpace raids are now commencing, on over 70,000 MySpaces. This is news material here, even national, but we need every Anon to make this a day that MySpace and their owner Fox News, will NEVAR FORGET."

The message contained links to the compiled login information for those Myspace accounts, as well as to the partyvan IRC network. It also contained guidelines on how

[32]Reproduced in http://pastebin.ca/751905.

to enact the raid: participants were encouraged to change the accounts' passwords (to secure access and exclude their rightful owners from changing account settings and reverting the changes made to the profile page) and set the profile's privacy to publicly visible. The message instructed anons to publish gore images on the profile page (providing the link to a collection of such images), to forge fake confessions, and to "be creative". Another suggestion was to try the Myspace password to access users' accounts in other web service providers such as Hotmail, Yahoo, and Google. The text advised anons to claim 4chan's rival website and archenemy *eBaums World* was behind the hack, in order to divert the possible reactions. Finally, there was an invitation for all anons to join IRC before 4chan moderators delete the forbidden raid thread. Another message[33] spread a link for downloading an offline webpage that could be used in a normal browser and contained a function which randomly delivered one pair of login credentials from about 20,000 phished accounts, in order to reduce repeated efforts and thus maximizing the scope of the attack through the number of affected profiles.

The Myspace events, albeit being morally questionable, were central to the shaping of transgressive forms of anonymous subjectivities, forged in the interstitial places of media and communication networks. This episode illustrates the collective's contingency and reactivity in relation to representations and cultural objects from its exterior, signs which stand for things in, or interpretations about, states of the world. The relative autonomy of the digital is itself a collective construction, performative, and dynamic. An analysis of Anonymous as a modality of action makes visible the required technological and behavioral work put into the production of the said autonomous character of digital settings – sustained by a hyperactive digital culture based on secrecy and anonymity in the case imageboards. That particularity, and the reliance on secrecy, means such autonomy can break down once other social actors acknowledge and react upon it. If a large-scale raid on Myspace was already a source of thrills and *lulz* for participants, the reaction by a news media outlet was seen as a bonus. Coverage by media outlets, as Phillips suggests, brands and frames Anonymous, providing participants with a "behavioral blueprint, along with the promise of further coverage for similar behaviors" (Phillips, 2012, pp, 7-8). Furthermore, for many anons this meant that, ultimately, the news organization had also fallen victim of their massive trolling campaigns. All in all, it was another epic win for Anonymous.

Anonymous'_sustained enactment as a collective results from the constant appropriation and re-signifying of cultural objects into a shared digital audiovisual lexicon that feeds the ongoing, real-time and ephemeral conversations that take place on

[33]Reproduced in http://pastebin.ca/751251.

anonymous imageboards and the surrounding media ecology. Those interpretations, markings and signs were appropriated into imageboard culture's set of self-referential tropes. Giddens calls this process *slippage*: when concepts are "appropriated by those whose conduct they were originally coined to analyze, and hence (...) become integral features of that conduct" (Giddens, 1976, p. 162). The process of assimilation of those cultural objects occurs at the level of collective memory and digital (re)mixing circuits: they simultaneously become both mental representations and "virtual" indexes in digital media[34] that mark the interference of "actual" world events. Through the integration of said events and their associated webs of meaning as cultural tropes, anons encode collective memory and constant reminders of their epic wins in the lexicon mobilized in their interactions. When they explicitly refer the collective's disruptive activity, they become a source of meaning outside the playful, self-disruptive, ironic 24/7 conversations in anonymous imageboards. The emphasis on real-time interaction based on individual creativity, a fragmented ecology of digital media with variable user bases, and techniques of invisibility, obfuscation and deceit justifies the collective's distrust of authority and hierarchy in the organization of activities or in the production of discourses and representations about itself. Those external influences thus become central elements for the production and stabilization of meanings around the collective itself: grounded in objective external references while, internally, submitted to the same critical aesthetic and semiotic appreciations.

6.4 One Nation Under *Lulz*: Anonymous and Territoriality

In its early stages, the collective mostly orbited the *chans and associated channels on preexisting IRC networks. Barriers in visibility and knowledge circles, which are the very conditions for the existence of this secretive anonymous collective, depend heavily on media (dis)articulation practices. */b/ day* is a clear example of differentiating, separatist or centrifugal movements, as are the tactics of secrecy, obfuscation,

[34]Digital media is here understood in many forms, such as online platforms and archives, or individual's storage devices.

aggressiveness and a lexicon based on obscure tropes. The exodus of */b/ day* resulted in the expansion of an ecology of internet sites devoted to collective forms of anonymous transgression. This separatist faction of anonymous became associated with the */i/* (invasions) sub-boards in other *chans, such as 7chan, 711chan, and 420chan. Collectively, this movement became known as the */i/nsurgency*, or */i/ntifada*, while individual participants were called */i/nsurgents* or */i/nfidels*. According to the article about Anonymous on ED[35], their favorite pastime was trolling: "the /i/nsurgent has one purpose: to cause as much grief as possible".

The centrifugal movement initiated with */b/day* depended on the construction of alternative communication channels, such as the aforementioned 7chan and IRC networks such as lulznet and partyvan. In the last section, I presented an example of the symbolic and technical efforts made by a particular sector of Anonymous towards relative autonomy from any given medium. The communicational infrastructure that was built to serve the self-determined and sovereign Anonymous was produced in accordance to the media design principles that accompanied the collective from its inception: to be openly accessible and typically without barriers such as the need for user registration, account validation through email, etc. Those responsible for setting up and administrating the services sought to provide the /i/nsurgency with as much resources as possible. By the end of 2007 the "sticky note" (a post that "sticks" to the top of the first board page) in 711chan's /i/[36] board contained the following message:

> If you wish to discuss /i/ on IRC, join #/i/ on irc.711chan.org, or #insurgency on irc.raidchan.org. IRC helps to organize successful raids and keep /i/nsurgents in contact with one another should any important developments occur. Be sure to use these resources to their utmost potential.

The 4chan exodus movement, which was based in moral and symbolic reasons, was also accompanied by changes in infrastructure and repertoire. Other media that used pseudonyms and provided better organizational possibilities, like wikis and IRC, started to gain relevance. While the emphasis was still related to amusement driven activity, some of the separatists started to focus on effective forms of anonymous collective action and not solely on humorous digital communication. The ability to move around different mediated settings provided the collective greater autonomy from from individual site moderation, downtime, and the consequences of their mischief which sometimes led to the forced shutdown of anonymous boards. Nevertheless, while the diversity of internet sites around which the anonymous imageboard culture revolved allowed subcultural and organizational specialization, it

[35] Source: https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Anonymous.

[36] http://web.archive.org/web/20071204153824/http://711chan.org/i/res/184.html.

also made communication between the different sectors harder to accomplish. Since the efficacy of the /i/nsurgency and its tactics usually depended on the number of participants, it often relied on the massive user base of 4chan and its sister websites in order to gather more participants.

Striving for greater numbers through centralized communication, sections of the /i/nsurgency worked to reunite the users of different anonymous boards. The aim was to create a platform where a united Anonymous front would thrive, guided by notions of deindividualization and cooperation. Around October 2007, after some of the *chans and other sites decided to make the Lulznet IRC network their official chat hangout, those who pushed for this unification decided that 4chan, the biggest of the *chans and the central hub of the anonymous boards internet ecology, should join as well. One anon affiliated with Lulznet tried to convince 4chan's founder *moot* to migrate the official 4chan IRC channel from Rizon's public and multipurpose IRC server to Lulznet. The following passages found in ED's Lulznet article[37] are an excerpt of an IRC conversation between one anon, who assumes the role of Lulznet's spokesman and moot, 4chan's founder.

> <Locutus_of_Lulz> We are Locutus of Anonymous
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> You will respond to our questions.
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> Your use of a public IRC network is less efficient for Anonymous and to you.
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> We have established a large and stable network, just for Anonymous
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> Lulznet.
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> irc.lulz.net
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> aka irc.partyvan.org aka irc.lulzhost.net
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> It is the combined servers of many chans.
> […]
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> Great things are afoot.
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> We will await your return
> <Locutus_of_Lulz> But we know that moving #4chan onto the central node is most efficient for all parties.
> <moots> not happening
> <moots> irc is stupid
> <moots> go away

Inspired by Star Trek, the anon chose the nickname Locutus of Lulz and mimicked the obnoxious expressions of an alien race of the science fiction saga: the Borg. In

[37]Source: https://encyclopediadramatica.es/Lulznet.

episode 26 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Locutus of Borg was the name given to the Captain of the starship Enterprise Jean Luc Picard, one of the main heroes of the saga, after being assimilated by the Borg. The Borg were a hybrid cyborg alien lifeform that, through a process called "assimilation" – operating through the injection of microscopic nanoprobes – could integrate other species' physical bodies, knowledge, technology and culture into its own. Once that happened, the assimilated would function as drones, which were constantly connected to, and directed by, a collective *hive mind*. The name Locutus – Latin for "having spoken" or "he who has spoken" – derives from the Borg's intent to use Enterprise's Captain as a spokesman for the Human race in order to facilitate the assimilation of planet Earth.

It is possible to identify, once again, the remarkable presence of popular culture in directing the collective's aesthetics, style, and even forms of self-representation. In addition, the particular choice of the Borg is a strong reminder of the interconnected nature of subjects and objects, in this case the digital machines. The deindividuation that results from the Borg "assimilation" process turns all members into drones, devoid of autonomous thought and behavior. They become devoid of free will, entirely subdued to the imperatives of both the Queen and the hive as a whole. That reference from popular culture was seen as adequate to illustrate the possibilities of anonymous internet crowds. Said drones are highly cooperative and collectively portrayed as seemingly unstoppable swarms. It is a clear example of what Keane (2006) identifies as one of the ways in which subjects are extended through objects, in this case both cultural and technological, involving the mutual transmission of agential qualities: the subjective integration of object-like qualities and the integration of human qualities into objects. Elements pertaining to those conceptions of machinic subjectivities are an important presence in the rhetoric of the insurgent sections of anonymous. The rational, instrumental, and goal-oriented conduct and rhetoric of those fictional hybrid organisms, unmoved by emotions or moral considerations, was considered adequate to translate the ethos that was forged within anonymous imageboards. As radical explorations of the anonymous internet's technical and social possibilities, the collective's practices and discourses rhetorically express the connections between the cold circuitry of electronic communication media and a ethos of moral insensibility and transgression.

In response to moots non-compliance to the request, those trying to make Lulznet the central hub for Anonymous IRC communication decided to engage in a denial of service attack (DDoS) against 4chan. They contact moot again after starting the attack, trying to force him to change his mind:

> <Locutus_of_Loli> We do not wish to hinder the progress of 4chan

> <Locutus_of_Loli> But we must sadly attack until /b/ conforms to the will of Anonymous.
> <Locutus_of_Loli> We shall double the dataforce.
> <moots> uh okay
> <moots> I am going to go make soup now

The attacks resulted in a downtime period which came to be known as "The Caturday Nap". The name comes from 4chan's weekly thematic days, since it prevented the usual exchange of cat pictures that happened every Saturday ("Caturday").

As discussed in Chapter 2, Derrida (2007) claimed the subject has the power of making presence, making himself present, through representation. The invisible, fuzzy, and heterogeneous Anonymous collective make itself present through reflexive performance, in which pointing (indexing) both to an issue and to himself that the material subject is revealed to himself and to others, effectively making themselves signs by being and pointing at the same time (Sjørslev, 2012, p. 213). The above mentioned episodes illustrate important developments in the collective efforts by those wanting to "make internet history". Like every other event that was deemed to be of special relevance to the anonymous collective, it acquired a sort of mythical status, being subsequently codified in the "brb, soup" trope that is here reproduced.

The digital artifact makes use of a known visual template – like many of the now familiar forms of communication known as internet memes. In this case, the Pokemon-inspired Slowpoke reaction image, which was recurrently used to troll other channers, was reused for producing a humorous visual representation of the collective's disdainful stance towards all authority, even, or especially, the administrative hierarchy of the website in which Anonymous emerged. It defiantly challenges 4chan's power structure by mocking the website's founder, here depicted as a mootles. By its objective material social life as a (re)produced digital artifact, the image here reproduced is an example of creative forms of audiovisual production representing events and particular interpretations in ways that enable ease of recognition, storage and transmission. The technical and semiotic possibilities of the collective digital production and consumption of signs, as well as the construction of meanings, are explored in the processes of integration in the collective's cultural lexicon, memory, and behavioral blueprints. Through the depiction and embodiment of Anonymous as an acting material subject through this performative digital production, content creators enable the recognition of the invisible collective as the content's source and author.

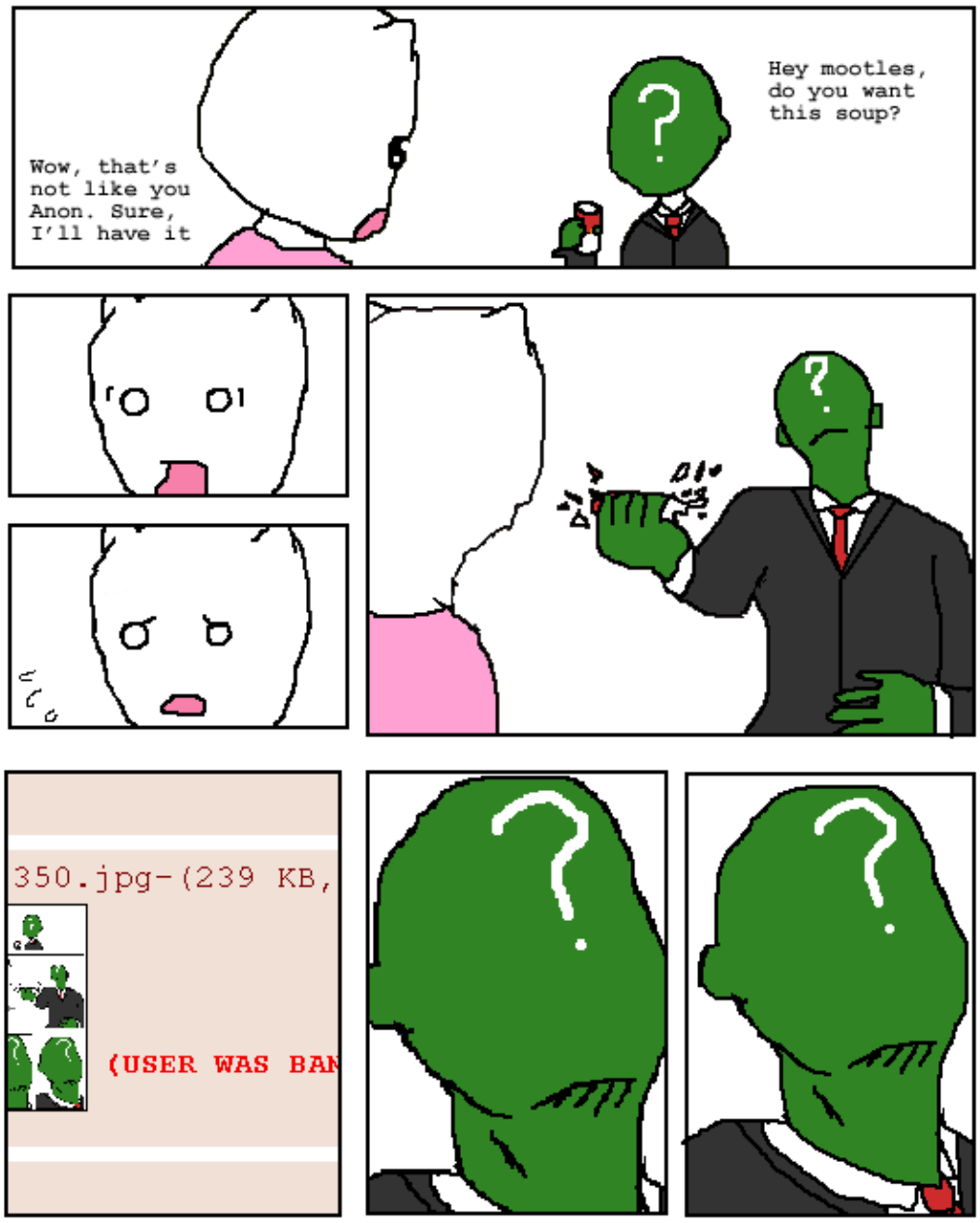

Illustration 3: "Old Anon" and slow moot. Source: Know Your Meme

The representational enactment of the Anonymous collective and its ethos also conveys information related to particular interpretations and positions in digital networks of power and communication. It simultaneously grants historicity to the collective and ascribes it to its specific programmes that will become part of the collective memory. The production and publication of this digital object brings a configuration of the addresser, the image's producer, the one who (re)publishes it, the website's founder, and its addressees in one evocation. Since forms of collective (self-)awareness, interpretation and assessment rely on this particular form of rep-

resentational processes and circulation, the actual existence of the imagined collectivity which constitutes Anonymous derives from forms of digital production like this. In the image it is possible to identify the interconnections between the materiality of machine agency through the internet forms of identification (e.g. IP addresses), the "ban" function and the collective subject portrayed in the image. The green depiction of Anonymous – one that represents what eventually came to be known as *Old Anon*, the early instantiations of the collective – is also associated with the banned subject, an association which became already clear in the events of */b/day*.

Anonymity is a central part of the collective self-representations, and to participate in anonymous means effectively effacing or obfuscating the indexical connections between activity and the individual participant's identity. The lack of identity cues means that, at any given point in time, it is practically impossible to assess how many people are interacting and what are the intentions behind manifest behavior. The heterogeneous invisible assemblage is thus not immediately perceived as such, but as an indiscernible and schizophrenic collective where the very relation between the self and the *other* is intervened and disrupted at the level of practice and interpretation. Depersonalized interaction triggers deep ontological reflexions about the relationship between the collectivity and individual anons. Thus, in these digital interactive contexts there is a (re)articulation and a blurring of the taken for granted distinctions between individual and collective, singularity and multiplicity, self and other, identity and alterity. Through digital semiotic brinkmanship, other conflations take place, affecting seemingly distant categories such as the material and the symbolic, or communication media and self-expression. The anthropomorphic representations are easily recognizable forms of both representing the collective and acknowledging the recursive relationships between the individual participant, a particular faction or subgroup, and the whole collective.

Furthermore, reflexive performances integrate both the semiotic logics of indexicality (pointing) and iconicity (diagram) through which *abduction* occurs, allowing the acting subjects, as well as their audiences, to discover things about themselves and states of things (Pierce, 1955; Keane, 2003, 2006). Hence, by condensing a set of knowledges and techniques, discursive styles, ethical stances and particular aesthetic sensibilities, Anonymous is portrayed as a platform for transgressive acts and expressive forms of subjectification. The affective bonds between the whole imagined collective and individual participants, resulting from the iconic and affective power of such forms of expression, is guaranteed by importance of recognition by the anonymous mass of viewers, who validate or reject it in accordance to their own ideals of legitimacy and authenticity, perceptions of humorous value, concordance with lived experience, and factual and aesthetic adequacy. They strengthen the con-

nection between content circulation flows, particular representations or interpretations of events, aesthetics and structures of sensibility, and the experienced forms of togetherness. Those self-validation mechanisms operate in a distributed and semi-conscious manner, since these processes are spread across a variety of channels, people, devices, screens, places and times.

Their depersonalized, distributed, and partly unconscious qualities mean those collective dynamics far exceed the individual participant's possibility of perception, discernment and intentional control. They intensify the reification of the different anonymous social orders, since the intersubjective elements, interiorized by the socialized anon, acquire a "natural", or "spontaneous" character. The result are audiovisual imaginaries that, through iconicity, condense the technical and symbolic attractors around which the heterogeneous anonymous collective orbits.

6.5 Oprah Winfrey and the 9000 Pedophiles

The way Anonymous was able to troll The Oprah Winfrey Show[38]and her audience also illustrates the role of media in its mode of operation. The show was the highest-rated program of its kind in history. It was an intimate and confessional tabloid talk show, where ideas about self-improvement and spirituality were debated between the host and her guests in very personal and emotional ways. In September of 2008, a user by the name of josefritzl submitted a text to the official Oprah message board. Its content was taken as a literal confession from an pedophile network member, and was read out loud by the popular TV show host to illustrate the hidden threat posed by organized pedophiles who use the internet to hurt children. The original comment can be seen below. The user name of the poster, josefritzl, is a reference to the Austrian man who abused and imprisoned his daughter, and the user name of the following poster, lordxenu, refers to Xenu, the evil galactic overlord that is a central element of the Church of Scientology's doctrine. For someone socialized within the chan culture, and particularly after Chanology, these posts were obvious jokes.

[38]Oprah Winfrey is a highly influential public personality. Best known for the talk show she hosts, named after her, she combines that role with those of media proprietor, actress, producer and philanthropist.

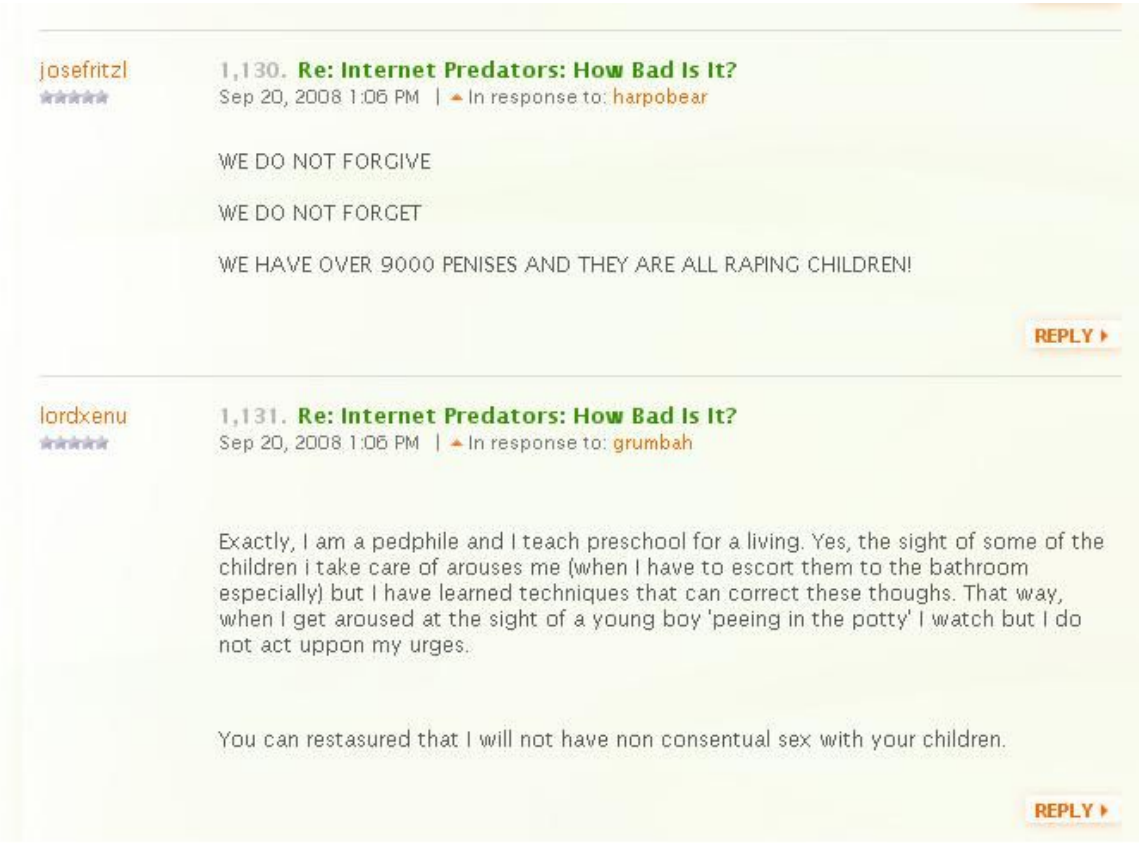

Illustration 4: Trolling Oprah's Forums. Source: Know Your Meme

The public which was brought about by this post was not homogeneous and was, surely, impossible to determine by the time of its publication. Oprah, albeit being oblivious of this, was a central actor in its formation. Phillips analyzed this event and termed the publication's content a "subcultural Trojan horse" (2012, p. 11). As Dick Hebdige (2002 [1979]) argues, transgressive spectacular subcultures have the signifying power of creating *noise* as they deploy mechanisms of *semantic disorder* which cripple the *system of representation* by exposing the arbitrary element in discursive codes. While doing so, he maintains, they enact "profane articulations", the expression of "forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.)" (ibid. pp. 90-2).

The humorous value of the joke itself depended not only on its shock element, but also on a clearly divided audience and the very mechanisms that lie beneath this division. As Bergson notes, laughter has a social signification and its own circuits, integrating inclusion and exclusion functions:

> However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theater, the more uncontrollable the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group!
>
> Bergson, 2005[1911], p. 11

This double fact about laughter is noticeable in the event described above. The joke was aimed at other channers who could recognize the lore, but its humoristic value, or the potential to create "lulz", was in fact a function of its reception by Oprah and its broadcast on national television to millions of viewers. This event illustrates how the transgressive actions of Anonymous may be seen as acts of inscription and indirect, complex processes of translation, often involvng the manipulation of actors, both human and non-human, which organize these actors in circuits of retransmission and augmentation. Moreover, this also illustrates how affect circulates through very disparate technical and symbolic means, as this event required bringing together emotional responses such as disgust and laughter, mass and social media, and obscure internet circles and national broadcasting publics. This model of action, which short-circuits institutional gatekeepers for different circuits of enunciation, both through communication of symbolic contents and through the technical transmission of bits and information packets, as well as the instrumentalization of human and non-human agents, is probably the most particular characteristic of Anonymous.

The following text, also contained in the definition of 4chan quoted above, helps us better understand what could be interpreted as hateful positions on such a sensitive issue as child sexual abuse:

> you have just entered the very heart, soul, and life force of the internet. this is a place beyond sanity, wild and untamed. there is nothing new here. 'new' content on 4chan is not found; it is created from old material. every interesting, offensive, shocking, or debate inspiring topic youve seen elsewhere has been posted here ad infinitum. […] we are 4channers. the people devoid of any type of soul or conscience. products of cynicism and apathy, spreading those very sentiments daily. anonymous is the hardened war veteran of the internet. he does not forgive or forget. we have seen things that defy explantions. heard stories that would make any god-fearing, law abiding citzen empty their stomach where they stand. we have experienced them multiple times and eagerly await their return.

The excerpt points to the real motivations behind the practices of moral brinkmanship. The heart and soul of the internet, its "essence", is its possibilities for communication. To realize these possibilities to their fullest extent, to celebrate them for their own sake as channers do in their frenetic communicative practices around places like 4chan, is also to translate them into ethical and aesthetic domains. In her analysis of what she calls "network culture", Tiziana Terranova refers to a statement by John Gilmore, one of the founders of Electronic Frontier Foundation who claimed that "the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it". She claims that this culture is grounded by technical features of the internet and a socio-technical culture that emphasizes autonomy and distributed organization (Terranova, 2004, p. 120). This is visible in the celebration of the amateurish or naïve artwork which is produced and disseminated within the image board environment. It is also present in the pushing of moral norms against their limits. But the ultimate transgression is the one which transgresses the limits of the environment itself, spilling over across technical, institutional and cultural barriers which limit discursive practices.

The Myspace raids consisted mostly of technical exploitation of a digital and online identity system, while the Oprah incident is closer to an exploitation of moral cultural norms and articulated communication channels. Nonetheless, they share the same elements of testing and provocation, in ways that tend to force people to expose their moral stances and enforce their morally based sanctions in situations where these should not apply. This element, which is important in order to get *lulzy* reactions, also evidences the arbitrariness that pervades moral judgment.

6.6 Conclusion

The materials covered in this chapter seem to point that digital formations such as Anonymous are able to whimsically (re)activate themselves through exploiting and bridging mediated circuits of knowledge and visibility. The activation tends to be prior to tacit agreements upon definitions of situations, forms of organization, courses of action and decisions about usage of the available digital information and communication technologies. It is the anonymous internet crowds that make those

decisions, acting both as recursive and affective publics relying on techniques of camouflage (Nozawa, 2012) and deceit, media literacy and skills in programming, networks and computer systems. Often relying on large numbers and fragmented media ecologies that allow semi-autonomous organizational platforms, those actions presented a multiplicity of ad hoc connections and organizational principles. Openness to participants and forms of participation means that, overall, that activity is the result of those mosaic or kaleidoscopic positions, integrating collective negotiation and autonomous individual action, Anonymous exhibits what has been termed swarming behavior in its exploration of targets, strategies, and the technological means to achieve them. This factor explains the highly reflexive quality of the forms of action that gave birth to Anonymous, which also characterizes its latter developments: the collective enactment of events occurs in situations where there is little possibility of knowledge about . This is also at the base of certain ethical postulates that are also central to my analysis.

As moot stated in his website, 4chan was not intended for serious discussions but for *anime* fans. The website's founder also disliked the conflictive developments and raids that some of the users engaged in. During Otakon 2007, moot is asked whether he planned on renting foreign servers so he could run an /i/ board. He replies:

> I think invasions are stupid, personally. (…) They are not funny. (…) If you post those threads you need to die. Seriously. You are the cancer killing /b/.[39]

Albeit facing resistance from moderators, the transgressive acts that came to be associated with the central ethos of Anonymous developed and expanded beyond their original birthplace. Having produced the conditions of its own autonomy, Anonymous acquired the status of an affective recursive public that was free to denounce, from the position of an "outsider critic", the mainstream internet cultures and practices. The Myspace raids, which may be perceived as forms of juvenile delinquency and vandalism, were also experiments with the practices of swarming, allowing participants to see the results of their collective action while highlighting and denouncing the social network as a reputation system by exploiting its social and technological frailties. Also interesting is how the collective addressed the tight relation between mainstream media conglomerates, forms of control, and the semi-public online spaces that are used for self-construction and disclosure.

The events detailed here show how the fuzzy and dynamic relations which constituted Anonymous sediment symbolically and technically through the articulation of different media and the circulation of cultural objects. This occurred within communication networks cutting across very different domains of social life. The present

[39] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lC4hYaoJJA

account of mediated gestures is precisely a reconstruction of those networks. If Anonymous is a transgressive enunciative modality within material and discursive practices, a subject position within mediated communication, its existence and meaning depend directly upon its communicative enactment: Anonymous acquires meaning and is directly instantiated only in the actions undertaken under this pseudo-identity. That process requires the mobilization of symbolic and technical objects that, in turn, stimulate the production of other objects. Anonymous, then, is represented by a very special type of symbol: one which brings into being, or instantiates, the very thing it represents.

The enactment of Anonymous is thus dependent on cycles of amplification, integrating different media, circles of knowledge, tactics of deception, and surfaces of emergence with very different scopes and sizes. It is a paradigmatic example of how a broad diversity of human and technical networks is articulated in the construction of contemporary social phenomena. That diversity is explicitly present at the level of communicational infrastructures, organizational settings, visibility, and knowledge circles. Furthermore, and maybe more importantly, heterogeneity and discontinuity are also the condition for the properties of such assemblages, enabling radical scale and context shifting through translations, augmentation, and condensation.

Anons exploit the infrastructures set by these sociotechnical media assemblages which often integrate mass and social media, as illustrated by the MySpace/Fox events. The gaps and bridges between different media and networks can be seen as key components of Anonymous. Nevertheless, as I tried to emphasize, those forms of exploitation are not limited to the technical dimension of communication networks, seeking to disrupt conventional social norms and cultural codes. For participants in these raids, the juvenile transgressions served to affirm their collective capabilities, thus confirming the elusive collective's status as an internet force. There is a kind of "magical" overtone to participation in an invisible collective, to be able to closely watch the materialization of an insivible collective in the consequences resulting from its activity – the representations of its highly affective and performative form of enactment through experiments with self-presentation and the ability to cause reactions.

This was also an important step to the formation of Anonymous as activist and civil disobedience networks that are increasingly gaining relevance in today's political sphere. The split and the resentment against the furries is echoed in a 2011 message from LulzSec, a hacking group closely tied to Anonymous and whose members participated in several Anonymous operations. It illustrates how it is recognized within Anonymous that 4chan is no longer home to capable insurgent collectives. After be-

ing criticized by 4chan users, the collective twitter account issued the following statement:[40]

> We are the concentrated success of 2005 /b/, being 'hunted' by the 2011 furry horde. Challenge accepted, losers. :D

Another process triggered by these events was the exposure of the /b/'s cultural lexicon to other internet places and communities during the belligerent raids, spamming, and flooding. The massive migration of anons to more popular internet websites also further exposed this culture, making 4chan one of the internet popular culture's centers.[41] When objectification practices and discourse production related to Anonymous occur, the resulting objects and events enlarge the collective as further layers of cultural and technological sedimentation, providing a second form of commonality through shared memory. They acquire the status of folklore, traditions that result from creative interaction and are codified as cultural tropes within practical and discursive formations.

Participants in anonymous boards are active constructors of their mediated historicity through archival and narrative practices. Since they collective is invisible, its contingent mediated representations are the only ones available and, as such, become extremely important in its historical meaning and the mythological and "epic" narratives about the collective. These narratives, alongside lived experience and the techniques of the self related to internet anonymity, are in the basis of a particular form of ideology and its "hailing" capacity that sustain Anonymous as a subjectification platform.

The development and adoption of digital communication technologies, in particular those known as social media, has changed the role played by objectification in the formation of social and cultural structures. According to Anderson, an externalization system like the printing press was a crucial condition of the cognitive structure required for the imagination and conceptualization of an abstraction such as the *nation*. I argue that the notions of community and territoriality present in the *declaration of /b/ independence* are indicative of the similarities between the imaginary community of the nation and the imaginary transgressive community of anonymous board participants. The global circuits of cultural production and information networks are now giving rise to different forms of imaginary belonging and digital territories. The cognitive, scopic, and representational structures resulting

[40]The original tweet can be found here: https://twitter.com/LulzSec/status/80736065178189824.

[41]https://github.com/bibanon/bibanon/blob/master/Books/4chan-History/Sources/4chan-History-Timeline.md.

from lived experience in digital media ecologies were necessary for the imagination of the invisible Anonymous collective and its practical forms of enactment.

It is through multisite participation and rendition on individual screens that the communication channels used by anons become interconnected. Those sociality networks heavily rely on distributed cognition and assessment, which regulate and pattern the multimodal communication and interaction that occurs between the participants in anonymous internet settings: the interface, in this case what is visually rendered on the screen, is part of a complex scopic system. Said systems are fundamental for the constitution of mediated publics and of a subjective sense of togetherness.

In their analysis of FOREX markets, Cetina and Brugger highlight the microsociological anchoring of global social forms. Focusing on brokers, they identify the split between the currency market as represented on screens and the physical co-presence space of the trading floor. Such splits can also be identified in the activities of Anonymous: different moral and social orders are sustained by a double split in interaction orders, along axes that also demarcate private from public life: one occurring within the screen, in the different windows, tabs, panes; and the other between the physical spaces of intimacy - the house, the bedroom - and those of bodily publicity. Those boundaries are thus not simply inscribed in the communication infrastructure but also in intersubjective orders and differentiated behaviors that effectively separate the collective's activity from its outside – a separation that occurs between material practices and circuits, but also within participants lifeworlds.

It is the distributed production of objects and events that sustains the existence of the fuzzy connections of the anonymous mass of participants moving within digital networks, for both other anons and the "real" institutional and organizational world, where people have names, roles, and faces. The digital objects and signs, by virtue of their production, circulation, and appropriation, become the material-semiotic structure behind this transgressive collective, enabling it to become the source of discourse and practices that reorganize the vast mediated networks of the internet. I conceptualize material subjects and their respective subjectification platforms as functions of material and discursive practices, generating and occupying given positions that can be thought of as a sort of plane which cuts across hybrid, human and non-human networks of exchange, communication and meaning production. When cultural objects are produced and disseminated – such as digital objects and techniques like phishing tools, flooding scripts, online anonymity strategies and the textual and audiovisual interventions on user profiles – they become new elements of the collective that (re)organize and (de)stabilize hybrid, human and non-human networks. Thus, successful participation is related to the production and dissemina-

tion of signs, events, and other cultural objects. Since it exists as an invisible mass of anonymous participants at the margins of social institutions and their online settings, the collective's very existence as a social actor is heavily dependent on the ability to trigger outsider responses.

The global currency market is, according to by Cetina and Brugger, instantiated in a conversation within the frame of an intersubjective field that allows traders to engage in their activity. FOREX is based on an shared reference, the visible renditions on a screen of currency trading market dynamics for different currencies. Elements presented on interconnected screens may manifest themselves in identical mode – the case of market indicators, public news media, web pages, social network sites, and other online information streams that reach large audiences. Anonymous is less structured global reflex system when compared with FOREX: it inhabits a broader spectrum – a continuously changing field, coalescing around highly contingent and fragmented mediated affective circuits, which articulates and manipulates very different objects, actors and networks of today's interconnected media ecology. The diverse ecology of Anonymous public communication channels – chans, dedicated IRC channels and networks – allow for very different modes of presentation, where overlapping and heterogeneous factors that depend on immediate circles of sociability and knowledge associated with a particular action, section, or participant. The openness of Anonymous to participants, organizational forms and communication media results in its dependency on largely non-identical forms of presentation. The centrifugal movement and the resulting dispersion means that, in fact, there are almost no single identical references except those that carry enough affective power and that are generalizable to the point of being recognized as relevant by all different subsections of the collective. Feelings of immersion and disorientation result from the explicit semiotic exploitation of often obscure cultural references with the goal of triggering affective responses from an audience. The dark character of the website is not restricted to the moral sense – the celebration of vice or the outbursts of violence and aggression. It also operates as a strange cultural processor, a kind of black hole of digital culture, a vortex that can devour everything, particularly that which can trigger the most immediate reactions. Due to that, it works as distorted mirror that changes itself constantly, providing a real-time interaction setting where re-mediated realities are projected within a fast-moving representational landscape. That explains both the centrality of external influences and the ways in which they are themselves appropriated and re-signified.

Anons orient themselves towards organizational inner spheres, the mediated interactive contexts within which participants come in contact with each other; to other online settings and perceived communities; to the world at large (which is also rendered visible through mediated representations and interpretations of current

affairs and events, the domain of journalism but also of individuals engaged with various forms of textual and audiovisual social media); and finally to their own social life, whose digital components are also represented on the screen. Multisite participation is key for both boundary work and bridging and the strength of this collective rests considerably in the gaps that separate different media, circles of knowledge and sociability, and moral and interaction orders. Those gaps, which are constructed by the digital nomads via ruptures through continuous movement, deceit, secrecy and anonymity, also result in the isolation of different sections of the Anonymous fuzzy collective from each other. They also allow anons to preserve the protection of privacy through anonymity in order to become semi-public, to act publicly and as a public. At the same time, this construction is performed through a set of techniques that operate at the subjective level, relying on knowledge, expression, skills, and self-control. Said techniques are necessary for the isolating different aspects of one's own self and to experimenting with anonymous forms of self presentation.

That heterogeneity and plurality of moral orders and interactive dynamics leads to a constant process of (re)articulation of the phenomenal fields in which interaction occurs. According to Anne Rawls, those fields tend to impose themselves immediately upon the participants' attention, yet interpretation plays a central role:

> Developing phenomenal fields require a full focus of attention, as oriented objects must continually be recognizably constituted for others. Turn by turn, participants must manage a sequence of moves for and with one another that display/create, without ambiguity, a shared orientation toward a particular developing social object. Because of the complexity involved, differences in orientation also manifest themselves turn by turn, moment by moment, and misunderstandings are quickly evident, and just as quickly repaired. There is no time for interpretation to occur as a planning element in directing practices. Where interpretation does occur, generally at points where turns are unexpected or unclear, interaction is temporarily turned from its ongoing course back onto itself. The process of producing an interpretation is itself a practice, also involving a developing phenomenal field, and its production cannot be explained as simply involving another act of interpretation without invoking an infinite regress.
>
> Rawls, 2009, pp. 84-85

In the interaction settings where Anonymous was forged, the inward interpretative orientation becomes particularly problematic: the lack of identity cues and the ever-present threats of trolling, infiltration, and compromise means the collapse of interactive references for relationships of trust into an amorphous mass of anonymous participants. Thus, the interactive mechanisms of control within Anonymous are ex-

tremely precarious. Nonetheless, they exist as a generalized process of interpretation that takes place at all times, and the responsibility of judgment is actively pushed unto the relationships between each participant and discrete contents or activities. In the inherently reflexive and plastic phenomenal field inhabited by the collective, interpretative ambiguity and conflict may result in the reorganization or expansion of the field itself, marking differentiation in subsections or subcultures, or to the technical and moral development of other, relatively autonomous fields. Boundary work and reflexive interpretation conflate in the discursive and audiovisual digital production that mark these developments and ruptures. In the previous case, the prevailing interpretation offered was related to the sovereignty of Anon, a capricious entity that defies, outsmarts and surpasses the creator of its homeland. The constant and radical interpretative movement that results from the contingent nature of Anonymous has been codified into one of the most important component of the collective's ideology and rhetoric.

Real-time and ephemeral anonymous mediated interaction and forms of collective transgression were central for the development of a particular sense of being and acting together, in opposition to identifying social networks. This sense was also shaped by a culture of vibrant digital aesthetic production, reproduction, and remixing, allowing for concrete distributed forms of collective memory, reflexivity, interpretation, and deliberation. The preferred cultural method was epitomized in the figure of the “meme”, which is theoretically mobilized to express both the agency of representations (material and mental) and their affective power, the ways in which they can constitute and move audiences or publics. Nevertheless, the notion of meme tends to hide the collective work of people, algorithms, networks, and digital artifacts that come together to sustain these material practices, as well as the connections they establish with the dimensions of myth and culture. Another important omission of this theoretical concept is, as discussed before, the semiotic relation between representations and objects represented. Finally, the recognition of an otherwise opaque heterogeneous assemblage as a reflexive collective as such depends on semiotic, cultural, and lived sociability interventions and displacements, and resulted from cultural practices of experimentation with digital forms of collective self-representation. Those representational elements are central to the collective’s dynamics since they allow the anchoring of meaning, communication and forms of cooperation in the data objects that circulate digital networks.

Chapter 7. Unsettling Boundaries: Anonymous Activism

7.1 Introduction

The humorous transgressive spirit of the anonymous internet boards developed into an activist formation through defiant engagement with information politics. In 2008, when the Chruch of Scientology (hereafter CoS)[42] tried to suppress the online publication of a leaked video using intellectual property claims, anons responded with Project Chanology, a global street demonstration against Scientology. In 2010, when peer-to-peer file sharing sites that did not respond to takedown notices were brought down via a distributed denial-of-service attack, internet piracy activists retaliated using the same means to attack the websites of pro-copyright and anti-piracy organizations. This action became known as *Operation Payback*. A couple of months later, when some corporations such as Amazon, PayPal, MasterCard, and Visa stoped allowing donations to Wikileaks due to political pressures, the already set up activist network retaliated and engaged in *Operation Avenge Assange*, attacking several of those commercial and financial services' websites. Those events marked the beginning of today's global hacktivism network that uses the name Anonymous. The transgressive and misanthropic ethos forged in anonymous imageboards was mobilized for practices of liberation, becoming associated with a digital political and activist subjectification platform that was disobedient and reactive.

[42]The Church of Scientology is a network of corporate entities associated with the Scientology religious movement. This movement is accused of being a cult and commercial enterprise based on pseudoscience.

The Anonymous activist movement is the result of developments in the practices, discourses, tactics and meanings that were characteristic of the spaces where anonymous internet cultures flourished, the digital ecology centered on anonymous imageboards. Jessica L. Beyer (2014), who conducted an ethnography on four different communities[43], points to this fact when she identifies three features that influence the possibilities of their political mobilization: (1) high levels of anonymity, (2) low levels of formal regulation and (3) minimal possibility for small-group interaction. The relation between anonymous commentary, spaces of satire, and political power can be traced back historically. In 16th Century Rome, statues in public spaces served as Renaissance bulletin boards for anonymous criticism and satire about the pope and the government. The first of the so called talking statues of Rome was known as the statue of Pasquino. It remained the leader of that group of statues, also known as the Congregation of Wits, which would even enter dialogues between themselves. Together, they worked as mouthpieces for anticlerical satirical poems. Standing on a busy intersection in central area of the city, frequented by the literate urban dwellers, the statue was, at least from 1508 but probably earlier, the site of poetic inventiveness (Reynolds, 1985, p. 185). A Roman printer collected and published annually the satiric poems, which became known throughout Europe. These texts were important sources of political information and gossip since they often reflected the knowledge of those close to the power centers of Rome.

Anonymous came to stand for a wide set of activist practices taking place on the internet. While there are some particularities to these practices which, as I will explain, are closely related to its origins, they can be characterized as a form of transnational online activist movement. The study of social movements has a long tradition; Marx and Engels, concerned with politicizing the working class, were among the first to use the term "movement" in reference to collective power dynamics. They considered the proletarian movement as "the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority", compared with earlier "historical movements" led by minorities, or conducted in their interest (Marx & Engels, 1948, p. 20). That concept, albeit in different forms, is still present in contemporary social science. According to Charles Tilly (2004), there is an implicit consensus around social movements as a particular form of "political complex", one with a given history. For Tilly,

> a distinctive way of pursuing public politics began to take shape in Western countries during the later eighteenth century, acquired widespread recognition in Western Europe and North America by the early nineteenth century, consolidated into a durable ensemble of elements by the middle of the same

[43]Among them the 4chan imageboard.

> century, altered more slowly and incrementally after that point, spread widely through the Western world, and came to be called a social movement.
>
> Tilly, 2004, p. 8

Tacitly sharing this cultural and historical complex, different approaches and perspectives may be found in academic literature about social mobilizations. Some authors, such as McCarty and Zald, focus on shared meanings, the "opinions and beliefs" related to change in the social and/or distributive structures (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, pp. 1217-1218). Another focus revolves around the notion of informal networks. The work of Porta and Diani is centered on those shared beliefs and solidarity based networks which unite individuals and organizations around conflictive issues, often resulting in collective action and forms of protest (Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 16). Starting from understanding movements as "networks of informal relationships", Diani latter stresses the importance of a distinct collective identity and resource mobilization strategies for engaging with social conflict (Diani, 2000, p. 387). A third way of approaching social movements is through the lens of intentional social action directed towards power structures and institutional arrangements. For McAdam, movements are "rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means" (McAdam, 1982, p. 20). Castells defines social movements as "purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society" (Castells, 1997, p. 3). The diversity in perspectives results from different aspects which can be identified in social movements and in Anonymous: meanings, informal association networks, and forms of action are effectively articulated and brought together by the activity of those contentious social formations.

This chapter seeks to highlight the connection between the previously exposed dynamics and their posterior activist developments. One of the continuities is the humorous ethos that Coleman associated with the spirit of the *lulz* and the trickster archetype, which as I previously argued could equally be inserted in the framework of the Ancient Greece's Cynic philosophical and living practices. It is necessary to address how the previously analyzed dimensions have deep political consequences to understand the politics and the politicization of Anonymous. This chapter starts with an exposition about the protest staged by anons and that marked the beginning of the transformation within the anonymous internet humor-driven self-effacing collective, particularly the /i/nsurgency, and Anonymous as an activist project. The rest of the chapter consists of an approximation to public statements made by activist anons and the discursive construction of a digital global subjectification platform

that directly defies power relations. That discursive construction will also be connected with central elements of social movements literature.

7.2 Chanology

On January 15, 2008, an image of the Church of Scientology (CoS) logo was published in 4chan's /b/, along with a message denouncing the organization. The message was published just after[44] a video for CoS members, taken on the occasion of famous actor and Scientology figurehead Tom Cruise's acceptance of the Church's Freedom Medal of Valor, was leaked and uploaded to YouTube and other online platforms. In the video, a wild-eyed Tom Cruise urges other scientologists to further commit to the organization. In his cryptic and exaggerated discourse about the powers of Scientology, the organization is portrayed as the leading authority on the study of the mind and addiction treatment. He also claims they are able to "bring peace and unite cultures" and that they are the only ones "who can really help" in the case of a car accident.

Stating that the organization behind the Church made no sense, the message claimed it was "time for /b/ to do something big", in line with some anons' favorite pastime, *drama*[45] triggering and making internet history. While the mythical and "epic" character of /b/'s past accomplishments was stressed, the post also contained an exceptional appeal: it invited anons to use their collective resources towards the common good and fight for something believed to be "right". That fight was presented as an imperative: in OP's words, it "must be done". In the message, OP suggests "hacking" or "taking down" the organization's official website. This marked the beginning of Project Chanology, the name given to the mobilization against the CoS by Anontmous. The CoS pressured the online media platforms that hosted the video to remove it, which only angered anons even more. The move was seen as a

[44] http://web.archive.org/web/20080324233413/http://www.radarmagazine.com/from-the-magazine/2008/03/scientology_anonymous_protests_tom_cruise_01.php.

[45] The term "drama" is used to refer to emotional reactions.

threat to free speech and, maybe even more importantly, to the *lulz*, or the mocking laughs that the video's public accessibility on the internet would enable.

That conflict was not the first war between Scientology and the internet. For the emerging internet culture of the '90s, Scientology was already associated with corporate greed, financial exploitation, pseudo-scientific irrational belief and, above all, internet censorship. On December, 1994, the first message exposing the "Advanced Technology" secret Scientology documents was published in Usenet newsgroup alt.religion.scientology (a.r.s). Messages in Usenet may be canceled through the "cancel message" function, a special control message which requests the deletion of articles from the system. After the leaks, cancel messages forged by anonymous pro-scientology forces were targeting the contents related with the Advanced Technology revelations, deleting it from the system. The forging of such message constituted a crime under the U.S. federal law.

The unprecedented large scale canceling in a.r.s attracted the attention of computer experts and administrators who had no previous interest in the CoS. While denying the connection with the cancel messages incidents, the organization officially took action against a.r.s. One attorney used the "remove group" control message in an attempt to take the whole newsgroup off the system and sent individual warnings of legal action against users who had published related content. The official Scientology actions against a.r.s contained charges of copyright and trade-secret violations (Prendergast, 1995). A series of lawsuits followed these events. Some of those accused of publishing CoS copyrighted material in the newsgroup had their houses raided by police and their computers and files seized. In those raids, authorities were often accompanied by Scientology lawyers.

Another strategy employed by the organization was to offer its followers web hosting and a CD containing the means for creating their own websites. The aim was to populate the web with sites promoting the CoS, making it unlikely for search engines to retrieve critical positions.[46] Furthermore, the "Web starter kit" also installed a modified version of the Cybersitter software that blocked access to certain websites and even the display of particular words that the Church considered dangerous.[47] All of this was accompanied by putting heavy pressure on television networks, radio stations and newspapers to avoid negative coverage of the CoS.[48]

[46] http://archive.is/hdV6n.

[47] http://archive.is/hdV6n.

[48] http://www.xenu.net/archive/personal_story/tory/20010927-newtimesla.html

The clash revealed a deep conflict between two opposite views on the role of the internet: those of the advocates of an internet based on the principle of free communication and of the defenders of corporate private interests. It became clear that powerful organizations such as the CoS could pressure authorities and media organizations to cooperate in stifling dissent and prevent negative coverage.[49] And maybe more importantly, they revealed how these organizations were able to influence and even hire people to control the internet. Those episodes were considered by many to be a mobilization of intellectual property law – such as trademarks, copyright and trade secrets – to attack fundamental rights.

7.2.1 The Internet Strikes Back

In 2008, the Church of Scientology saw itself once again at odds with the internet. Like before, that conflict was anything but conventional. On January 21, a video entitled "Message to Scientology" appeared on YouTube. In it, a synthetic voice introduces itself as a plural entity by stating “we are Anonymous”. The message addressed the “leaders of Scientology” and contained threats of destroying their organization:

> Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation; your suppression of dissent; your litigious nature, all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind and for our own enjoyment, we shall proceed expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form. We recognize you as serious opponents, and do not expect our campaign to be completed in a short time-frame. However, you will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic.

[49] http://web.archive.org/web/20080302010452/http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1998/07/15feature.html.

The video was part of Project Chanology, the campaign anons started after the online dissemination of the Scientology video. The following excerpt was not uttered by the synthetic voice, yet it can be found in the description of the video:

> You cannot hide; we are everywhere. We cannot die; we are forever. We're getting bigger every day – and solely by the force of our ideas, malicious and hostile as they often are. If you want another name for your opponent, then call us Legion, for we are many.

The continuities with the previously exposed anonymous board ethos and its identifications with both notions of an invisible but ubiquitous collective and the demonic figure of Legion, are striking. Another video, entitled "Call to Action" was uploaded to YouTube in the end of January. If the first video was a declaration of war, this one consisted of instructions about how the war would be waged. After denouncing human rights violations by the CoS, the synthetic voice lists a number of names and terms which "they", Anonymous, want people to know about. That enumeration was related to religious secrets, victims of the organization, and other things the CoS kept hidden from the public. The message's last section is reproduced in the following excerpt:

> We want you to know about all of these things that have been swept under the rug for far too long. The information is out there. It is yours for the taking. Arm yourself with knowledge. Be very wary of the 10th of February. Anonymous invites you to join us in an act of solidarity. Anonymous invites you to take up the banner of free speech, of human rights, of family and freedom. Join us in protest outside of Scientology centers worldwide. We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. We will be heard. Expect us.

From the beginning, anons deployed their usual arsenal of trickery: placing large amounts of pizzas orders to Scientology headquarters, spamming their fax machines with ironic and offensive material, prank calls and DDoS attacks on their website (Olson, 2012; Coleman, 2012).

Furthermore, the street protests amassed around 6.000 anons in front of CoS centers in over 142 cities in North America, Europe, New Zealand and Australia, being also the first massive protests to wear V's Guy Fawkes Mask (Coleman, 2011). Those events marked a deep change in the collective. Until then, the collective was mostly invisible, unknown and associated with internet trolling. From that moment onwards, Anonymous' intentionally spectacular forms of direct action caught media and public attention.

7.3 What is in a Name? Power and Discursive Positioning

As I argued before, intersubjective senses of shared "we-ness" may emerge in situated phenomenal fields. Nevertheless, when those senses sediment and crystallize into symbols, collective memories and, particularly, collective identities or similar functions, they become more stable, scalable, and make acting together less problematic in terms of mutual recognition among cooperating actors. That sort of reasoning led some theorists to privilege identity in their analysis of activism and social movements. Klandermans claims that the development of a collective identity may be more or less successful and that failure to do so prevents collective action altogether (1992, p. 81). In a more cautious argument, Polleta and Jaspers argue that collective identity is as an important factor for the individual's adherence to particular protests (2001, p. 284). Social structural elements, such as roles, networks, and groups, also play an important role in the construction of collective identities (Gould, 1995). The relations between individual identity, collective identity, and movement activism have been conceived as deeply connected to a collective search for identity which may be associated with personal dispositions (Klapp, 1969) and stigmatized (*spoiled*) identities or quests for identity validation (Kaplan & Liu, 2000; Pinel & Swann, 2000). Identity is how movements and organizations thus position themselves along temporal, spatial, and social dimensions. Diani and Pilati stress this character in their conceptualization of "organizational identity", defined as "broader representations of actors' position in relation to other actors and to broader representations of social life than those associated with issue agendas" (Diani and Pilati, 2011, p. 266).

When trying to understand Anonymous and the processes that concur in the formation of a symbol with a global reach that stands for various forms and networks of online activism, the application of concepts such as collective identity or social base is problematic. In addition to the importance of collective identity formation, the literature about social movements also stresses the importance of a successful articulation between the shared elements of collective identities and the particularities of personal identities. Gamson formulates this problem as the processes through which "the personal identities of a constituency" enlarge in order "to include the relevant collective identity as part of their definition of the self" (1992, p. 60).

In order to establish a meaningful link between the joint activism, personal biographies, historical readings and positions in discursive and power relations, this

function is accompanied by narrative constructions, classification and demarcation work. The importance of this kind of work has also been the focus of social movement analysts when approaching the joint construction, maintenance, negotiation, and interpretative work regarding collective identities (Hunt & Benford, 1994; Hunt, Benford & Snow, 1994; Melucci, 1989). This requires what has been termed *identity work processes,* individual and group efforts that produce symbolic resources and give meaning to participants or to other at the group and subcultural levels. According to Snow and McAdam (2000, p. 49), these are processes of identity construction which are necessary "in all cases in which there is an absence of correspondence between personal identities and movement collective identities". Since there is an explicit rejection of identity in Anonymous, individual or collective, the term *demarcation work* will be employed to the production of self-referential discourses and symbolic resources. The relation between participation in Anonymous and definitions of the self is complex: they seem to be, for individual participants, both intimately aligned and rigidly separated. In addition, the collective's depersonalizing dimension requires a critical and reflexive stance towards anons' individual identities and their own selves.

The collective's simultaneous interpretative and structural flexibility, as well as its heterogeneity and distinct modes of action, are condensed and adapted into discursive and iconic devices, forming a both stylistic and rhetorical form. The most abstract of these forms is summarized in a communication with the title "*5 Postulates: An Anonymous Manifesto*": "Anonymous is everyone. Anonymous is no one. Anonymous exists only as an idea. You also can be Anonymous. *Becoming Anonymous is simple. Just take action*" (emphasis in the original). There is thus a clear emphasis on action, but this emphasis is not framed in the traditional conceptual forms of collective action since there is no explicit hierarchical structures, common organization of resources, goals, programs, targets, and action repertoires. Furthermore, an invitation to engage in uncoordinated individual action is also present in the statement.

In a response to a popular documentary film about the Anonymous activist movement, members of Anonymous NYC issued a statement[50] that anchored interpretations about the collective in the situatedness of particular acts:

> From a philosophical standpoint, there have been a gigantic range of answers to the question "What is Anonymous?" We have posed answers in the past, such as the idea that it's a collection of anonymous internet citizens, or that it is a movement for freedom of speech, or that it is an anti-establishment counter culture, or that it is a Scientology hate group, or a collection of hack-

[50] http://motherfuckery.org/wearelegionresponse/.

> ers. The list goes on and on, and every answer is equally right and equally wrong. Only in the context of the projects, a clear sub-culture of greater Anonymous, can these be addressed. They are able to validate an individual's Anonymous membership, the criterion strongly varying between incidences.

Anonymous openness to participants, causes and methods, as well as its emphasis on abstract and universally aspiring concepts of publics and citizenry, turns it into a non-stable social formation to which traditional notions of collective identity are hard to ascribe. Despite that, the activist collective does have an associated collective form of identification. By being open to all individual and collective identities, while simultaneously rejecting its association with particular ones, participation in Anonymous is mediated by an identifying function rather than actual identities. For this reason, it is useful to turn to Marco Deseriis's notions of "multiple-use name" and of "improper name", which point to a different signifying function that consists on an "open reputation system" designed to be freely appropriated (Deseriis, 2012). Participants in distributed actions under the banner of such names are endowed with anonymity while maintaining the ability of mutual recognition and the accumulation of symbolic power outside of an institutional framework. Due to the deep association between identification, social control and power relations, those improper names also entail processes of collective subjectification understood as both forms of subjection and projects of autonomy. Despite negating a particular individual or collective identity, that open reputation system became associated with a notion of technologically empowered citizen-subjects associated with free speech and forms of direct action.

7.3.1 (De)personalized Politics and Action

The dynamic and complex quality of power relations seem to suggest it is important to move beyond categories and actors that are traditionally associated with politics and action. Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010), drawing on Maffesoli's (1996) neo-tribal theory, analyzed "political participation as an 'everyday politics' that is conceptualized through the lenses of sociality, hedonism and sovereignty over one's own existence" (Riley, Griffin and Morey, 2010, p. 346). Everyday politics is an alternative to other kinds of expansion of the political: the living out one's own aesthetic

ethics[51] in the spaces where said politics takes place (ibid., p. 349). Those remarks aptly describe the political possibilities of the digital communication ecologies and fragmented collectives orbiting around the anonymous boards. The extreme forms of aesthetic moral and semiotic brinkmanship or the subversion of cultural codes structure hedonistic forms of sociality through which sovereignty over one's own conduct is affirmed. Furthermore, this notion resonates with what research on youth reveals to be a frequent belief: that aloofness towards institutions is a resistance to endorse and subordinate oneself to them. In this sense, the political dimension in the creation of "one's own spaces in which to live out alternative values, shifting political participation to the 'everyday' individual or informal group level" (ibid., p. 347) becomes clearer. This shift, the authors argue, "makes particular sense within the current context of neo-liberalism and decreases in the efficacy of democratic representation" (ibid.).

The discontinuities between networks of political action that rely heavily on ICTs like Anonymous and the more familiar forms of 20th century social movements have been the focus of Bennett and Segerberg (2012), who identify the emergence of alternative logics to those of collective action. They argue that collective action is associated with high levels of organizational resource demand and rely on collective identity formation. What they call the logics of *connective action*, on the other hand, enabled through personalized content sharing across networked media, are based on (1) easily personalized ideas and frames that require little persuasion and reframing to bridge differences in terms of personal positions regarding a common problem; (2) communication technologies that enable content to flow through digital connections (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 744-5). ICTs, the authors claim, enable the "coordination of action by organizations and individuals using digital media to create networks, structure activities, and communicate their views directly to the world" (ibid., p. 749). The result of this association is the emergence of political action networks that can rapidly scale up without requiring organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united collective identity. Participation is considered to be motivated by personal expression and recognition or self-validation within relationships of trust. Individualization is associated with a fragmentation of the political and shapes the "engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743). Thus, the neo-liberal subject, detached from traditional collectivities and institutional politics, engages with what has been termed by some scholars as *personalized politics*. In the context of their analyses, the term "personalized" does not refer to the centering of political debate around the personal traits of candidates but to

[51]Ethics governed by aesthetics.

> the organization of individual action in terms of meanings assigned to lifestyle elements (e.g. brands, leisure pursuits, and friend networks) [that] results in the personalization of issues such as climate change (e.g. in relation to personal carbon footprints), labour standards (e.g. in relation to fashion choices), or consumption of food (e.g. associated with fair trade practices or the slow living movement).
>
> Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p 771

Personalized politics also entail that formal membership might be replaced by participation in selected actions (Bimber et al. 2005; Flanagin et al. 2006) and collective solidarity loses strength in face of public experiences of the self (McDonald, 2002) as a motive for taking action. Against critics that associate this self-referential political stance with disengaged consumerism, Lichterman (1996) suggests that "personalism", which equates activism to practices of self-development, provides a collective action platform for individuals who are distant from political movements and organizations. Thus, while formal organizations still work as important aggregation points for individuals in this type of activism, "commitment is highly portable; it can be carried from group to group, in concert with other activists and imagined communities of activists who validate personalized politics" (Lichterman, 1996, p. 34). Bennett and Segerberg oppose contemporary forms of personalized distributed political networks and action formations to the notion of social movements:

> In personalized action formations, the nominal issues may resemble older movement or party concerns in terms of topics (environment, rights, women's equality, and trade fairness) but the ideas and mechanisms for organizing action become more personalized than in cases where action is organized on the basis of social group identity, membership, or ideology. (…) People may still join actions in large numbers, but the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression rather than through common group or ideological identification.
>
> Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 744

In their account, the social movement category is not helpful to describe how, in our times, individualized populations can still coordinate actions and protest networks which expand throughout the globe. The logics of connective action are put in association with both late modern postindustrial democracies and authoritarian regimes, in which individualized populations outside of sanctioned civil society organizations have access to communication technologies.

The most salient goals of public communication by activist anons are related to providing information about operations, objectives and tactics. Sometimes, public

communication is part of organized direct action in the form of "public relations" activities to gather support, manifests of solidarity to activists and causes, calls to action, or even direct provocative engagement with individuals and organizations in the private and public sectors. As we have seen, the formation of Anonymous as a fuzzy collective was an intrinsically reflexive process that integrates its heterogenous qualities, particularly focused on the material possibilities of digital information technologies for communication, sociality and action. That self-reflexive effort is often neglected by most institutional accounts on Anonymous, such as those produced by public authorities and news media channels, who tend to reduce Anonymous to a few visible traits such as hacking or internet activism. Since institutional actors do not take into account the heterogeneity of the collective, those narratives are perceived by anons as superficial and erroneous. Perceptions like this are translated in a sense of urgency in providing the public with alternative views. The result is that a significant portion of public communication is a reiteration of anons' positions and interpretations regarding their own conceptualizations of Anonymous.

While communications vary greatly in terms of content, which is usually anchored in the different "operations" anons engage in, there is an identifiable structure of communication that can be almost considered a communicational template in itself. This template was already present in what is arguably the first message associated with activist anons, the already mentioned *Message to Scientology*. Typically, every communication issued under the political Anonymous brand is marked with a salutation that already discloses both the addresser, the *discursive subject*, and the addressee(s), its audience. Anonymous' public statements often address the general public at large, without any discriminating factor. Beginning with formulations such as "Greetings citizens of the world", "Hello world", and "Brothers and sisters", such messages are intended for public circulation and address the mass subjectivity behind public the domain and its constitutive publics.

When messages are associated with issues that concern the interests of specific individuals, such as a given country's population (e.g. Canadians), or particular sets of individuals (e.g. users of *Facebook*), the message often addresses them in the regular salutation. Sometimes these messages have specific institutional and organizational targets and may address them in the greeting. They may range from abstract entities such as established authorities (e.g. "to the powers that be", "greetings authority") or specific political (e.g. the UK government) and private sector (e.g. Facebook) organizations. Salutations in public forms of communication are also used for the expression of solidarity or cooperation. which can be directed towards activists and concerned citizens, regardless of their actual participation in Anonymous (e.g. "Dear Anonymous", "Greetings to all Anon and concerned Citizens of the World").

In the aforementioned typical discursive structure of public communication, the salutation is followed by an attribution of authorship using easily identifiable expressions such as "We are Anonymous" or "This is a message from Anonymous." When communications are integrated in a given *operation*, the authorship markings can also be directly associated with them (e.g. "This is Op Global Freedom"). Sometimes, that signature mark is associated with a combination of multiple entities (e.g. "We are the citizens of the world. We are Anonymous. We are Occupy. We are the Victims").

Ernesto Laclau's work on populism and the importance of the construction of the "people", the *demos* or the political subject of modern politics, which he considers the most fundamental political operation, is particularly helpful in my analysis. Demarcation work in Anonymous can be conceived as analogous to what Laclau would consider the construction of empty signifiers, the signifiers without fixed referent or signified. Such signs, he claims, are developed both extensively in order to accommodate ever increasing chains of demands, and intensively as they reject positive particularities. In the following extract of *An Open Letter To Broadcast Music, Inc.*, the negation of positive traits is evident: "We are not pirates, we are not loner hackers in our mother's basement, we are your neighbors, your co-workers, your family and your friends; we are omnipresent". These bidirectional dynamic may be clearly identified in the demarcation work of Anonymous in radical and quite sophisticated forms. An example of such work within Anonymous may be found in *A Message to the People of Tunisia:*

> Anonymous is a banner under which any Citizen can fly. It is a banner that accentuates the bold and loud manner we as Citizens must act by, when needed. Most importantly Anonymous unites us all, regardless of sex, race, or place of birth. It unites us and calls us Citizens of the Free World. A world where we, as Citizens, can stand up and make our mark in history. (…) When we stand together we have strength! Join the battle for freedom worldwide!

This excerpt illustrates the discursive construction of Anonymous as a form of activism that represents a global citizenry. Another text, entitled *Operation Watchtower*, further develops this conceptualization:

> Today, we looked into the mirror and realized something. Though we have no face and no identity, we realized that we are human. All of us come from different parts of the globe and share the same charismatic ideals, but we are truly the same. We are human beings. (…) We are one, multiplied by infinity and divided by zero. We are impossible and we are inevitable. And yet, we are human. Still, humans sometimes forget they are breakable in more aspects than one.

In that sense, Anonymous differs from other contemporary reactive movements that seem to privilege ethno-nationalistic, authoritarian, exclusionary, protectionist and conservative projects, often drawing support from openly racist and fascist political organizations. Also constituting struggles for hegemony over the popular (Grossberg, 1996) as a rhetorical device, those movements circumscribe the meanings associated with "population" and "people" in terms of perceived geographical origins and ethnicity traits. At the time of writing, recent examples are the victory of the *Leave* campaign in UK's EU membership referendum, Donald Trump in the US presidential elections. They tend to be critical of certain perceived threats: democratic and institutional corruption, consequences of the increased mobility of people and capital, as well as individualistic ethical stances and non-traditional lifestyles. Those movements share certain elements with Anonymous activist collective, as well as other anti-authoritarian and egalitarian movements such as *Occupy*, particularly the perception of corruption and globalized capital as serious risks to democracy. Nevertheless, as forms of popular mobilization, their exclusionary populism is in direct opposition to the inclusive and negative demarcation work of Anonymous and the aforementioned inclusive movements that draw support from a solidarity based global citizenry.

Discursively, anons often position themselves in close alignment with other popular movements that share the anti-authoritarian and democratic process transparency ideals. The way Anonymous presents itself, through the aforementioned inclusive demarcation work, is open to claims of contiguity (e.g. when anons present themselves as "we are Occupy"). But that demarcation work is also expressed in forms of direct action and support of other popular struggles, as well as in the resulting consequences, such as forms of acknowledgment by media channels and institutions. By entering relations of solidarity with other forms of civic engagement, this form of activism seeks to this make the circularity of digital contentious (counter)publics go beyond its discursive dimension and become grounded in cooperating forms of action. Furthermore, the association with the increasingly expanding digital communication media and the lack of particular positive identity defining traits or causes make this form of activism particularly apt to be adopted by other contentious actors in varied social and cultural contexts.

7.3.2 The Internet Superconsciousness

Digital social formations like Anonymous are deeply related to the developments of digital networks and internet services behind what Manuel Castells calls mass self-communication. For the sociologist, mass self-communication co-exists with interpersonal and mass communication, depending on software and networks for the creation and circulation of self-generated messages which can reach a big global audience (e.g. YouTube videos, blog publications and messages to e-mail lists). That form of communication is, according to Castells, characterised by the possibility of

> the articulation of all forms of communication into a composite, interactive, digital hypertext that includes, mixes, and recombines in their diversity the whole range of cultural expressions conveyed by human interaction.
>
> Castells, 2009, p. 55

This tendency of public individual contribution that expands organized action, particularly its reliance on visual aesthetic elements, can be compared to cultural dynamics like those of fandom:

> Like the producers of fictional transmedia narratives, protest organizers may choose to offer various points of entry into the protest space that speak to different publics. (…) As with fictional "fan edits", however, user contributions not only help constitute the organizational protest space but also expand it (e.g. through weblinks) and may end up diluting or contradicting the organization's messages about itself and its cause.
>
> Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, pp. 773-4

This form of communication is not only a condition for the formation of Anonymous but also a central part of its functioning. The connection between those technologies, in particular its abilities to connect people and the formation of publics is also worth mentioning. In order to get support and recognition, anons tacitly take advantage of the circular quality of publics by stripping both addresser and addressed from all positive and identifying traits in an effort to engage with mass subjectivity. This is rendered possible by the interchangeability or circularity between sender and receiver that characterizes publics, and which is especially evident in the recursive publics of the internet. This circularity of publics, particularly recursive and affective publics of digital communication, is central to emerging modes of organization:

> The growing demand for personalized relations with causes and organizations makes digital technologies increasingly central to the organization and conduct of collective action. Communication technologies aimed at personalizing engagement with causes facilitate organizational communication and coordination at the same time as they enable flexibility in how, when, where, and with whom individuals may affiliate and act.
>
> Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 771

During the Arab Spring, Anonymous launched several operations in support of the uprisings, first by attacking government websites and then by "acting more like a human rights advocacy group, enabling citizens to circumvent censors and evade electronic surveillance and sending care packages with advice and security tools" (Coleman, 2012). An Anonymous social media account (@AnonymousRx on *Twitter*) issued a public communication entitled "*18 Ways to Circumvent the Egyptians Governments' Internet Block*".[52] This communication was issued on January 28th, 2011, three days after the Egyptian government started to block communication channels – internet sites and mobile services (January 25th-26th), shutting down all national internet access except one ISP (January 27th). It contained information on possible strategies to avoid internet censorship in the country, along with an invitation to join the Anonymous IRC network channel #OpEgypt. It included dial-up numbers of working DSL and analog voiceband modem internet providers working inside and outside the country, the IP addresses of Twitter and Facebook social media sites to bypass DNS blocking, a free VPN server, the link to the I2P anonymous network layer, the address of a working TOR bridge, links to online amateur radio software and stations, and an SMS service which enabled people to send tweets from their phones.

In the summer of 2011 several anons were arrested in the UK, Scotland, and the US, charged with high-profile attacks. Those events, according to Coleman, led to increase protection through greater discretion and obscurity in posterior actions. On the other hand, their public side became more visible, especially after Anonymous engaged with the Occupy movement, acting both as technological enablers and as "a crucial, though informal, public-relations wing for Occupy Wall Street in the fall, generating videos and images and circulating information supporting the movement's aims" (ibid.).

The connection between activism under Anonymous and mediated information and communication systems, particularly the internet, is not limited to the latter's status of privileged contexts for communication, interaction and intervention. The

[52] http://pastebin.com/gcxa1aR8.

affordances and limitations of technological communication networks also influence its rhetorical and ideological components, which are highly associated to views on technology as a tool for empowerment and liberation. The increasingly closer relation between interconnected digital technologies and politics in general, as well as contemporary social conflict in particular, has been the focus of recent scholarly work. Sandor Vegh (2003) offers a useful classification scheme for activism on the internet. He defines online activism as politically motivated movement relying on the Internet. "Activists" he claims, "now take advantage of the technologies and the techniques offered by the Internet to achieve their traditional goals" (Vegh, 2003, p. 71). Furthermore, he distinguishes between internet-enhanced or internet based strategies for action, relating those strategies with three types of online activism: awareness and advocacy, organization and mobilization, and action and reaction (ibid. p, 72). His typology seems to derive from the main traditions in academic approaches to social movements identified earlier in this chapter, defining movements as meanings and opinions, networks of actors, and forms of action.

Scholars also paid attention to the geographical scope of activist movements, particularly their transnational formations. In *The New Transnational Activism*, Sidney Tarrow claims that despite the existence of historical predecessors, there are particularities associated with contemporary wave of transnational activism which cannot be reduced to quantitative aspects – more instances, greater social diversity, wider range of international and domestic issues. Instead, its specificity lies in "both its connection to the current wave of globalization and its relation to the changing structure of international politics" (Tarrow, 2005, p. 5). In addition to what usually fits under the category of "politics", the broader connections between digital networks and power structures are fundamental for understanding the relations between contemporary activism and social context. According to Castells (2009, pp. 42-47, 419-420), there are four main domains of power in the network society:

> Networking power (*gatekeeping*): inclusion or exclusion of actors and organizations;
> Network power: imposition of rules, standards, or protocols that govern networked interaction;
> Networked power (*agenda-setting*): editorial decision-making;
> Network making power: setting up, programming, and reprogramming networks, as well as connecting and forming alliances.

Those domains and their exploitation are the conscious focus of anons, whose activities result in statements, events and infrastructures connecting diverse forms of struggle and pushing issues to the editorial agendas. In this sense, activist sections of Anonymous may be considered a paradigmatic case of internet based transnational activism, originating on the internet and taking up causes often directly

related to the information politics that regulate this communication medium. The vast majority of its activities are either fully internet based or aim at enhancing other social conflict processes by making use of the internet, encompassing the three dimensions traditionally associated with social movements and condensed in Sandor Vegh's three types of online activism. Finally, its concerns may be local, national, transnational, or global.

The abstract rhetorical function defining Anonymous as simply an idea and action frame, or modality, is further developed in *A Statement from Anonymous*, from December 2010. Here, another component is added, stressing the advent of a global internet enabled *consciousness*, which is presented as both the source and the vehicle for this idea.

> We, the people, are ANONYMOUS and this is our declaration of existence. We are you, and you are us. We are the masses, and the masses are us. But now … the masses – just as the world itself – have become globalized. ANONYMOUS is the physical entity of the hivemind. It is a global consciousness, based on common sense and the belief that people actually are able to make decisions about their own life. (…)
> WE ARE ANONYMOUS
> ANONYMOUS DOES NOT EXIST
> YOU ARE ANONYMOUS
> NOW ACT

In a similar way, in a text entitled *Operation WakeUp*, anons highlight the importance of digital technologies for the development of said consciousness by claiming: "the consciousness that is Anonymous understands the power of technology and the ability it can have in harnessing the potential for mankind's future". Those examples explicitly articulate the central relevance of technology for Anonymous, both for its activist tactics and ideological components. In order to complement an identity based approach to activist mobilization, the ideologies which occupy these spaces must also be considered since ideology itself is involved in the social production of subjectivities. Ideology can thus have a similar function to identity, since, according to Callinicos:

> ideology is the way in which men and women are formed in order to participate in a process of which they are not the makers, and ideology performs this function by giving them the illusion that history was made for them.
>
> Callinicos, 1976, p. 70

Another common formula of these messages, coming after the greeting, is a declaration of the motives that triggered the communication and, if existent, associated

operations. Those often reflect the reactive character of Anonymous and offer interpretative frames about particular states of affairs deem to be unfair. A common template for those formulations starts with a reference to generalized perceptions: "It has come to our attention that…" The templates for communication are not only discursive but also visual – the mask, the logo, the computer generated voice are examples of digital content that is recurrently used in audiovisual public communication. Those formulas also translate and reproduce the typical operational and performative processes through which a loosely connected network of activists makes use of digital tools and networks to gather online, organize around particular issues considered relevant, create discursive and audiovisual material, and make it publicly available. Finally, the templates not only simplify the production of those audiovisual statements, but also mark the final product with the traits that enable the identification of the mentioned process as its origin, enabling the recognition of the loose collective as the author of a given communication.

In those communication templates, Anonymous presents itself as an action oriented nameless mass of individuals with common orientation vectors. Anons see the internet as intrinsically associated with new forms of global and collective consciousness, distributed forms of perception and cognition, knowledge, debate, deliberation, and even action. The notion of collective consciousness is very strong in anon's self-representations. This notion, deeply related to coordinated configurations of mind states, translates actual dynamics of the collective but also allows for forms of mystification and metaphysical speculation that anons themselves entertain in their rhetoric. For Marx and Engels, "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process" (1970, p. 47). They claim that one should acknowledge consciousness only after asserting four primary historical relations of the "actual" processes of life: (1) individuals must be able to produce the means to satisfy their basic needs, "the production of material life itself"; (2) both satisfying and the acquired instruments of satisfaction lead to new needs; (3) reproduction of men (the family); and (4) social intercourse (ibid., pp. 47-49).

This was an effort to point to the need of considering individuals, their actions, and the materiality of their lives, against the background of Hegel's influence in German thought which privileged Mind, or Spirit, over matter. For Hegel, history was the Mind's movement through individuals towards grasping itself. The kind of consciousness that Marx and Engels envisioned could not be further removed from its Hegelian counterpart:

> Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of the primary historical relationships, do we find that man also possesses "consciousness", but, even so, not inherent, not "pure" consciousness. From the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here

> makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. (…) Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.
>
> ibid., p. 50-1

In Marxist terms, men create false representations about what they are and ought to be – ideologies are these false representations, or false consciousness, when they hide the contradictions of the ruling class's interests, thus enabling social domination. Karl Mannheim (1936), who initiated the sociology of knowledge sub-discipline, detached ideology from its Marxist underpinnings by arguing that ideologies are ways of thinking which come from experience and worldviews. For the sociologist, like for Marx and Engels, the ideas expressed by a subject should be understood as a function of existence. Thus, opinions, statements, propositions, and systems of ideas and beliefs are not taken at face value but should be inserted in the particular situations of those expressing them.

Thus, the sociology of knowledge is not the search for absolute truth but for the historical truths, norms, and thought modalities. Teun A. von Dijk, stressing the sociocognitive function of ideology, defines it as a shared "ideas" and "belief systems", separated from the social structures that arise from them, which are relatively stable and "fundamental" since "they control and organize other socially shared beliefs" (von Dijk, 2006, p. 116). These structures, which "are not logical systems, but socio-psychological", are open to heterogeneity and incoherence (p. 118). Those principles lead von Dijk to root discourse and social practice in ideology.

As socialized and experienced dwellers of the mediated lifeworlds, anons bestow Anonymous with the title of "internet superconsciousness" to highlight the importance of collective awareness and interpretation supported by available public digital scopic and reflex systems. The political struggle of Anonymous is fluid, making use of their advantage over bureaucratic social organizations. Coleman's interpretation of De Certeau's writings about the weapons of the weak, the constant acts of resistance that turn events and alien forces into opportunities that work in their favor, leads her to a conclusion:

> This approach could easily devolve into unfocused operations that dissipate the group's collective strength. But acting "on the wing" leverages Anonymous's fluid structure, giving Anons an advantage, however temporary, over traditional institutions — corporations, states, political parties — that func-

> tion according to unified plans. (…) Because anyone can take the name — as many different, seemingly unrelated affiliations have done — operations can be intensified quickly after a weakness on the part of the target is discovered, or shut down immediately if trouble or internal controversy arises.
>
> Coleman, 2012, n.p.

The temporalities of Anonymous are key for understanding their organizational and operational form. Working and cooperating mostly real-time, but not always, participants use technologies that support orientation interlocking and the synchronization of what Schutz called the "streams of consciousness", leading to phenomenal fields and intersubjective dynamics that are heterogeneous in their temporalities. Temporal dimensions themselves, as Knorr Cetina points out, can regulate forms of coordination, taking the place of other

> functions Weber associated with rational authority structures. In other words, the theoretical argument here is that time-structuring affords a form of coordination that can take the place of institutional control and social authority structures.
>
> Knorr Cetina, 2005, p. 220

The possibilities for self-organization and the creation of democratic and sovereign territories are also stressed in anons' public communications. In a rhetorical twist, the geographical dispersion of digital publics conflates the "citizens of the internet" with notions of a global citizenry. The symbolism, iconography and rhetoric of Anonymous draws its qualities from digital technologies and the anonymous affective and recursive publics of the internet, which are associated with technologically empowered self-organization and a particular public mass subjectivity. In this way, by taking the digital stage and addressing their publics as a global citizenry, the "citizens of the world", doing so from a position that seeks to represent that citizenry and its demands, an assertive global political subject is discursively constructed.

7.3.4 Anonymity, Transparency and Self-regulation

From its beginning, when anons engaged in the dissemination of havoc and disruption through the digital channels of digital sociability, Anonymous was already associated with a strongly anti-individualistic ethos. In a statement entitled *Why anonymity is important for ANONYMOUS?*,[53] issued in early February, 2011, the affordances of anonymous interaction of the internet are linked to processes of mediated scopic perception, distributed cognition and collective knowledge production within Anonymous. According to its authors, anonymity subordinates the "necessarily biased and single-minded individual" to the "nameless collective and the processes by which it is governed." Yet, paradoxically, the collective acknowledges its heavy dependence on, and celebrates the possibilities of, individual contributions. In the same text, anons celebrate the democratic and inclusive possibilities of open and anonymous interaction granted by the internet as a public sphere:

> the individual's ability to contribute to this communal process of the production of knowledge has never been greater before. It no longer matters what colour your skin is, what religion you adhere to, where you were born, whether you are male or female, or how much money you make – anyone can contribute just as much as he or she wants and will be peer-reviewed on an equal footing, taking into account nothing else but the information he or she conveys. (…) It is not surprising, that all these features and characteristics can also be found within ANONYMOUS – an idea and movement which was truly born out of these new technologies, these new principles of organizing things, these radical new ways of thinking.

The idea of discursive and informational self-organization based on peer-produced equilibria is associated with complex interactional mechanisms which prevent individuals from manipulating the Anonymous mass. In the anonymous imageboards, a cultural norm forbids requests for action that would not result in something profitable for the whole collective such as the precious *lulz*. Any attempt of mobilization and manipulation for private individual motives were deterred and labeled as "personal army requests". To thwart these forms of manipulation, such requests were commonly met with the "not your personal army" reply. That norm was so strong that said personal army requests targeting someone sometimes resulted in "backraids" directed at the requester: anons reach to the person who was targeted by the request in order to gather information about who is possibly targeting them, turning

[53] http://anonops.webs.com/Open-Letter-from-ANONYMOUS_02-02-2011.pdf.

the raid on the culprits of the request instead. Those mechanisms were effective but not completely failproof, since more elaborated strategies to overcome the aversion to being a personal army were deployed. Among them is the "double backraid",which is the term employed for the situation when someone makes an intentionally ostensible personal army request by posting personal information and then, when inquired by anons, plays the role of the victim and points the anonymous mass to the person they actually wanted to target in the first place. But even the ingenious double backraid strategic request was also often foreseen, particularly through the explicit "personal army" character of the request, thus nullified.

As it turned onto other, more ambitious attacks, with highly political stakes, and its social relevance became greater, Anonymous maintained an openly accessible character in its internet-based communication platforms, without the need for formal credentials of any sort for participation. Particular interactional mechanisms, dependent on the digital communications and infrastrucures produced by the collective, are the sole safeguard for the validity of statements and actions made on behalf of Anonymous. In the *Why anonymity is important for ANONYMOUS?* statement, anons describe the processes of collective regulation within these anonymous interactive settings. In this message, anonymity is seen as a condition for participation in Anonymous, which enables the constitution of an anonymous mass of participants. Presented as being devoid of any identifiable positive qualities, this mass is associated with Anonymous' lack of formal barriers for participation and contribution, as well as with cultural norms and infrastructure design options that seek to hinder the emergence of leadership and personal cult. The communication highlights how these things combined enable Anonymous' "mesmerizing spark of mystery that enables it to capture the minds and imagination of large and diversified audiences worldwide."

The statement also stresses how anonymity and a low threshold for participation entail the possibility of abusing the banner, claiming that these issues are always associated with the "personal responsibility" of participants to "counter these actions with more (constructive) action". Furthermore, it recognizes how these same features facilitate the work of "purported 'destructive elements' like 'Agent Provocateurs', 'moles' and 'spies' who want to infiltrate and destabilize ANONYMOUS". This acknowledgement is related to the ever present memory of Sabu, who co-founded LulzSec, an Anonymous spinoff group involved in several high-profile attacks on law enforcement agencies, *News Corporation* and the global intelligence company *Stratfor*. Sabu turned into an FBI informant after his arrest, enabling the detainment of other hackers associated with Anonymous. Nevertheless, the message continues, openness and anonymity are necessary for transparency, which is not taken as a disadvantage but as a principle:

> ANONYMOUS is exactly designed to be completely transparent. Anybody can join and look at what we are doing, contribute, or get involved to the extent which he or she chooses. This in fact makes it impossible to 'infiltrate' us - either you are or you are not ANONYMOUS, there just is no real third option. (…) And last but not least: the fact that ANONYMOUS has nothing to hide proves that there is no real contradiction between privacy and transparency. Anonymity may be a prerequisite for ANONYMOUS to function, but this doesn't interfere in any way with the radical degree of transparency and freedom of information that ANONYMOUS not only strives for, but also sets as a standard for its own behaviour. And remember: YOU ARE ANONYMOUS !

In this sense, the activist collective seems to tacitly embrace the principle that Bennett and Segerberg identified with the logics of connective action. Those logics, according to their proponents, enable the engagement of dispersed individuals while avoiding both the growth in costs of resource mobilization and the minimization of its returns. This is one of the main distinctions of connective action, the tacit acceptance that organizing free riding prevention and collective identity construction "is not necessarily the most successful or effective logic for organizing collective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 751-2).

7.3.5 Wargames

A symbolic conflation, between Anonymous as potential and "you", which here stands for the publics that are formed around these communications, is thus operated. The rhetoric expressed in these communications shares some elements with popular discourses that formed along with the development of the commercial internet, incorporating libertarianism and techno-utopian visions, which Barbrook and Cameron (1995) labeled the Californian ideology. Those positive notions of entrepreneurship, free market, and decentralized computing technology combine in a techno-deterministic version of neoliberalism that updated the fantasy of the American dream, associating it to the workforce's skillful enthusiasm in the context of the digital economy's constant technological innovation (Bazzichelli, 2011, p. 41-2).

According to Halpin, the idea of individuals empowered by digital networks is "celebrated both by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and by popular interpretations of Tahrir

Square", but does not have such a direct translation in reality (Halpin, 2012, p. 21). Instead, he claims, the association of individualism and communication technologies result in a "hypertrophy of individuality, where your every movement becomes part of a constant marketing machine that purports to stabilize and market your identity, while in reality constraining social life and leading to its alienation, exploitation and domination" (ibid.).

Unlike the corporate discourses about the internet as a frictionless environment for people and organizations, anons also highlight its quality of a contentious field in which rights are not automatically granted, but need to be asserted or conquered. In the words of Coleman,

> Anonymous has worked to expose the collection and mining of personal information by governments and corporations—and in doing so deflated the notion that such a thing as "private information" exists, as opposed to information in the public sphere. This distinction is one of the foundations of the neoliberal state, the very means by which individuality is constituted—and tracked. (…) Anonymous has revealed that the protection of information (which helps guarantee that difference) by a benevolent security apparatus is a myth. At the same time, Anonymous has put forward its own model — the practice of anonymity — for maintaining that very distinction, suggesting that citizens must be the guardians of their own individuality, or determine for themselves how and when it is reduced into data packets.
>
> Coleman, 2012, n.p.

Castells contends that networks, as he defines then, pose specific challenges to the ways in which power operates. Since "there is no unified power elite capable of keeping the programming and switching operations of all important networks under its control", he claims, "more subtle, complex and negotiated systems of power enforcement must be established" (Castells, 2009, p. 47). This relates to what Galloway and Thacker define as the specificity of contemporary politics:

> This is why contemporary political dynamics are decidedly different from those in previous decades: there exists today a fearful new symmetry of networks fighting networks. One must understand how networks act politically, both as rogue swarms and as mainframe grids.
>
> Galloway & Thacker, 2007,p. 15

In another public communication issued under the Anonymous banner, with the title *A Declaration of Digital Rights*[54], a set of "inalienable rights" of the "citizens of the Internet" is presented. One of these is the right to "digital arms":

> All people have a right to bear digital arms, of all kinds, for all purposes, with the exception of theft. Examples of Digital Arms would be Metasploit, the Low Orbit Ion Cannon, the High Orbit Ion Cannon, and Live Discs.[55]

The connections with the traditional right to keep and bear arms, which is codified in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, are clear. Similarly to firearms, "digital arms" can be used for self-protection – such as live discs that are focused on anonymity and privacy. Furthermore, those claims are comparable to libertarian inspired discourses that advocate for the rights to bear arms such as assault weapons, claiming that the state often fails to provide protection and individuals become responsible for their own safety.

While operating at the margin of institutions, anons directly and defiantly engage with them. This may be done through institutional framing, as seen before, but also through direct engagement with organizations and institutions. In January 25, 2013, *Operation Last Resort* was deployed as a response to the harsh persecution against internet activists, among them the notable hacker Aaron Swartz who took his own life[56], and several participants in Anonymous. The US Sentencing Commission (USSC) website (http://www.ussc.gov) was defaced and used as way of distributing the manifesto for this operation and an encrypted file allegedly containing sensitive information about the United States Department of Justice. The manifesto contained a direct threat:

> Two weeks ago today, Aaron Swartz was killed. Killed because he faced an impossible choice. Killed because he was forced into playing a game he could not win — a twisted and distorted perversion of justice — a game where the only winning move was not to play. Anonymous immediately convened an emergency council to discuss our response to this tragedy. After much heavy-

[54] https://web.archive.org/web/20130123230341/http://anonnews.org/press/item/2054.

[55] The Metasploit Framework is an open-source tool for developing and executing code which takes advantages of information systems' vulnerabilities. The Low and High Orbit Ion Canon are DDoS tools which are commonly employed by Anonymous to take down web services. Finally, live discs are bootable computer installations that allow users to run operating systems which load from an external storage system (such as a CD, DVD, or USB drive), enabling its use without necessarily making any changes to, or leaving any traces in, the computer's configuration.

[56] His suicide was associated to being subjected to this persecution style: the activist, co-founder of *Reddit* and co-creator of RSS feeds had released academic articles from the JSTOR database and was facing a possible prison sentence of over 50 years and a $4 million fine.

> hearted discussion, the decision was upheld to engage the United States Department of Justice and its associated executive branches in a game of a similar nature, a game in which the only winning move is not to play. (…) We have not taken this action lightly, nor without consideration of the possible consequences. Should we be forced to reveal the trigger-key to this warhead, we understand that there will be collateral damage. (…) It is our hope that this warhead need never be detonated.

Several files were simultaneously released which were named after each member of the US Supreme Court. These were mirrored and were made available in *ThePirateBay*, where other users could download, host and serve the files through the peer-to-peer file sharing BitTorrent protocol. This "fissile material", or "warhead" as the statement referred to it, was meant to work in the same way of nuclear deterrence military strategies. On January 27, *@OpLastResourt Twitter* account released a combination of keys that, when pressed on the USSC's restored website, would turn the page into a video game. When it became unreachable again, that same account released the following message, asserting the control of other governmental websites by Anonymous:

> ussc.gov can't seem to handle the traffic (or excitement) so here's a backup #konamicode miep.uscourts.gov site #opLastResort

Controversies arose regarding the authenticity and veracity of the claims. Some Anonymous "cells" denounced the whole operation after being unable to confirm its origins. Some even said it consisted of a covert operation by entities interested in highlighting the potential threats of Anonymous in order to justify harsher measures against participants. In addition, keys were released for decrypting the files were released, but they turned out to be a prank. Instead of decryption keys, what was released was a messaged encoded in Base64 which read:

> L33TH4X3NZBRUH
> G00DLUCKPH4GG0T
> YOUWONTBEABLETOCRACKTHIS
> BECAUSEYOUREADUMBBITCH
> HAVEFUNTHOUGHBECAUSEITWASFUNFORME
> TH3R31ZN0SP00N
> 1337HAXENZFTW

As a classic case of trolling, the message ended with links to shocking images and videos. Nevertheless, asserting true origins and intentions of a given message or action undertaken under the Anonymous banner is always hard and sometimes impossible, even for other anons. Regardless of all the uncertainty involved, this action was widely recognized as a major Anonymous operation, an intervention at the

level of the power struggle equilibrium between activists and law enforcement agencies.

7.4 Conclusion

Since their beginning, anonymous internet collectives were inherently connected to recent developments in communication, mobility, security, business and bureaucracy, which made identification regimes permanent, ubiquitous, and invisible. Digital technologies enabled the proliferation of personal information databases and the terminals to feed and access them. The analysis of contemporary surveillance and control reveals qualities in the relationship between state and citizens, but also between commerce and personalized consumption. However, identification regimes are always met with adjustments, negotiations, and resistance (About, Brown and Lonergan, 2013). Those issues which seemed associated with free internet advocates are increasingly becoming widespread social concerns. The increasing amount of surveillance done by intelligence and cyber-security contracting industries, as well as other less clear partnerships between organizations in both sectors, are considered by many to be a threat not only to democracy and transparency but also to the separation between political and economic power.

Knowledge about individuals produced by state and private organizations, that partially redefines the ways in which they operate, is the basis for a form of mass surveillance through which intimate objects like personal phones and computers conspire against its owner. But to understand the “hacker politics”, as Coleman (2011, 2016) calls it, it is important to understand that those digital objects and networks that form the internet are also a contentious field where power relations are re-enacted. Activist anons are guided by that notion, putting it in sharp contrast with conceptions of the political as something exclusive of the sphere of state institutions and parties. Its typical mode of operation is to use digital networks for generating awareness around its causes and activities, creating disruption and exposing individuals and organizations, defiantly engaging with social organizations and institutions, often through acts of disobedience. Activism under the Anonymous moniker, an open identification function without membership control and clearly de-

fined ideologies, shares many concerns with other movements and formations. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a preponderance of what can be called information politics, with a special focus on the free flow of information, on one hand, and the control over personal information records held by public and private entities, on the other.

The attempts to control criticism of powerful pseudo-scientific religious organizations, copyright infringing file sharing, and whistleblowing on the internet triggered reactions from the secretive subculture of the anonymous internet which would mark the beginning of its activist developments. Those transformations spurred a transnational activist modality, a method which resulted in distributed forms of direct action and the visual and discursive construction of a contentious political subject. Notions of disembodied global consciousness and a complete rejection of positive identity traits are metaphors for the lived self-organized complex forms of sociability in anonymous digital interaction contexts without formal barriers to voluntary participation. The effacements that support the metaphoric displacement operate at both technical and semiotic levels, resulting from self-effacement practices through the use of collective signs. Said metaphors become central rhetorical elements. Anons know that their activist project as reactive action for justice is dependent on the construction of an empty signifier, a demos, the people of the internet, the citizens of the world. That global demos, posited as the source of the popular demands which Anonymous addresses, is also the source of legitimation of the collective. That construction is the result of digital production, performance and discourse, and its conflation with Anonymous reflects the acknowledgement of the circularity of recursive and affective digital publics.

Developments within this activist form and in its relations of solidarity has expanded its focus to other concerns, from fighting government tyranny, censorship, and corruption, to denouncing inequality and exploration, exposing corporate malpractices, and protecting the environment. Nevertheless, defiance and disobedience anonymously organized on the internet are structural elements of its workings. The affirmative, often illegal form of dissent is a remainder of the activist collective's connection to the anonymous imageboard cultures and their emphasis on self-willed autonomy (Auerbach, 2012, Coleman, 2012).

Some claim that the ethics and respect has a necessary relation to identification and recognition. The activist developments of Anonymous show that anonymity is not necessarily linked to unethical behavior. Despite all the vileness hosted in anonymous internet boards, those settings also harbored forms of cooperation and solidarity that triggered that transition. These experiments were foundational for

the construction of Anonymous as a political subject. In an interview months before Foucault's death, the philosopher said:

> I don't think there's actually a sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject that one could find everywhere. (…) I think on the contrary that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, (…) of liberation, of freedom, (…) starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in the culture.
>
> Foucault, 1989, p. 312-3

The experimentation practices in anonymous boards provided the source of those cultural conventions and symbols in both their abstract and in their material operationalized forms. Foucault also sees subjectification as something which is itself the product of power relations. Considering that the system of differentiation that allows individuality is also that through which power operates, the philosopher points to a challenge that seems foundational for the reflexive processes in Anonymous:

> Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political "double bind," which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.
>
> Foucault, 1982, p. 785

The similarities between this observation and the cultural projects of anonymous imageboards are impressive. It makes clear the strength of the latter's political project that rejects individualization while maintaining the personal capacity of irreverence, subversion, creativity and affirmation, embracing affective forms of collectivism and deindividuation. As a collective project, it is an intervention in the relations between individual expression and one's relation to oneself and to others, and the objective form subjection to structures of power and control currently takes. It is, as Halpin would claim, a form of subjectivity without identity.

In conclusion, this chapter sought to illustrate how sociological perspectives on social movements, activism, collective (or connective) action, and personalized everyday politics aptly describe the general morphological lines of Anonymous activism. Some of those lines are shared with many other forms of action, which have

been extensively analysed by academics who tried to conceptualize the dynamic trends in contentious action, particularly how they relate to social and technological change. But it also points to an equally important aspect: these perspectives by themselves do not provide the tools for a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that concurred in the formation of this collective.

It is the constructed empty quality of the signifiers that comprise the audiovisual iconography and discursive rhetoric of Anonymous that spread around the world, with continued effects ever since this contentious form of action rose to prominence in the repertoire of present in the mosaic of global activism focused on both international and local issues. The Anonymous activist method consists of diverse internet based campaigns, protests, and direct action, laying between the logics of activism, social movements, digital publics and popular fandom cultures. That logic of *connective action* emphasizes the role of communication, flexible personalized expression, beliefs, and biographies, aptly describing the collective's insertion in today's political landscape. However, that same logic obscures the processes through which those diffuse elements "aggregated" and formed metastable cooperation networks, or how new media is articulated into semi-organizational forms. In the case of Anonymous, it does not account for the history of iterative collective experiences behind the actual discursive, visual and infrastructural construction of the many faces of the collective.

Conclusion

In this final chapter I revisit and summarize the major results of the research underlying this dissertation. With a focus on the results, I will also engage in a broader dialogue with the existing literature on the Anonymous collective and surrounding problematics. To do so, I start by recapitulating the main themes found in other works and present the influence they had on my own research framework, questions and strategies. Moreover, I will take this opportunity to illustrate how I was able to go beyond the state of the art through my strategy of tracing the genealogy and early development of this collective.

My research heavily relied on and was shaped by my personal trajectory as I searched and gathered the scattered available empirical material. This dissertation was not meant to provide a final or complete picture on this subject through a thoroughly defined analytical model or theoretical object. It is my belief that drawing such a picture is not possible, even for those participating in the most secretive circles within Anonymous. To illustrate this point, Gabriella Coleman offered what I find to be a very illustrative metaphor for the dynamic and labyrinthine character of Anonymous: “an infinite machine operating a tight recursive loop wherein mazes generated maze-generating mazes” (Coleman, 2015, p. 9). As soon as one starts to scratch the surface, or tries to see beyond the mask, one quickly realizes that the enactment of Anonymous brings together (in)visibility and secrecy, heterogeneous extensions, scopes, and time frames, making its sociological analysis extremely complex. Throughout the dissertation I sought to offer a situated perspective, identifying the elements that can contribute for a better understanding of contemporary mediated social dynamics.

To study Anonymous I focused on the intrinsic forms of diffuse cooperation that was required for the sustained activities of collective production. I argue that my position does not simply derive from an apologetic or legitimizing strategy: the collective search for *lulz* often took sinister forms, in what amounted to very aggressive and often sadistic acts. That spirit is still alive, present in usage of terms such as “white

knights" and "social justice warriors" (SJW) with a derogatory connotation. I argue that too much emphasis has been placed in the aggressive and conflictive character of anonymous imageboards users – often the term seems to be interchangeable with "trolls" or "cyberbullies". Today, some factions of Anonymous still share that despise for SJW's ideals, whereas for others such ideals became the most prominent set of goals. Countering oversimplifying exaggerations found in most commentaries about anonymity in general, and imageboard cultures in particular, I tried to render (partially) visible the complexity and heterogeneity of Anonymous.

Nevertheless, most of the activity that could be associated with Anonymous did not fit into those two poles – it mostly consisted of aesthetic and semiotic play, having little to do with heavy forms of trolling, fighting for social justice or breaking into informational systems. Gabriella Coleman was pointing precisely to this plurality when claiming that, despite the frequent distortion of the collective's sociology by commentators that label Anonymous as an evasive group of hackers, many anons are not hackers or even hard to find (Coleman, 2013, p. 12). Those observations explain my decision of trying to understand Anonymous' different developments and associations. The employed methodological apparatus, which I termed "internet archeology", focuses on the analysis of traces left by the formation of Anonymous: forgotten or neglected digital documents that can be found in old or archived versions of websites. Due to the high levels of expressiveness in the gathered material, the research strategy was able to give an account of the subjective dynamics and intimate elements that are often only accessible through close ethnographic work or in-depth interviews.

The sign and attention economies created by the circulation and exchange of these digital artifacts enable forms of collective reflexivity, attention gathering and engagement. The new media mode of attention organization privileges this fast-paced, distributed audiovisual cultural processing. The once distinctive character of multimedia communication in 4chan's /b/ board, particularly in its most common form of static images templates with optional accompanying text, is now pervasive to digital media platforms and became associated with all sorts of social dynamics. Those familiar communicative objects and media act as powerful mechanisms. They constitute a scopic reflex system that operates through distributed digital inscription and symbolic condensation processes, enabling rapid coordination and reaction. Anonymous is enacted within the "disembodied" social and phenomenal fields of digital networks, which are anchored on situated, micro-sociological, intersubjective settings. In such settings, social orders result from the aggregated distributed interventions in and modulation of the overall communicational exchange. It thus can be approached by Knorr-Cetina concepts of *global microstructures* and *global reflex systems* – the mediated and scopic ways of simultaneously representing, patterning,

and enacting social relations with a global reach. As such, those infrastructures constitute what Stiegler termed technical, symbolic, and psychic *milieus,* affective fields in the sense that they are themselves enablers and generators of movement and connections. The forms of mobilization enabled by digital networks have by now become a resource everyone wants to generate and control, having become fundamental for communicational strategies in many different contexts: from party politics to contentious activist movements and marketing campaigns.

My dissertation is mostly focused on the sign economies inhabited by Anonymous and its iconography because different usages and (dis)continuities in practices and discourses are themselves revealing of how those forms of sociality restructure themselves, often in surprising ways. To analyze the traces left by the distributed social dynamics behind the formation of this collective it is important to put them in the context of their production, circulation and consumption. The source material – the digital artifacts that are scattered through a vast number of mediated settings – was not taken as simple, unproblematically *given* digital data. Contextualization meant to understand their role in the enactment of the very networks in which they originated, granting them the status of performative artifacts, mediating agents in their own right. I emphasize the interplay between *gaps* – in information circuits, agency, discourse, meaning and practices – and the bridging role of agency and signification processes. Paying attention to the material and semiotic dimensions of these digital artifacts, it is possible to study the hidden mediated processes that generated them. In my study of sociality I sought to avoid its reduction either to material, bodily, and affective dimensions – a tendency in some materialist perspectives directly or indirectly inspired by Deleuze and Actor-Network Theory – or to the social processes of production and circulation of symbols and meanings – like most of interpretative sociological research.

Anonymous Media and Social Control

The relative protection of anonymity makes it a privileged position for acts of transgression and subversion. As I showed in the literature review chapter, there is a generalized consensus among researchers and commentators that Anonymous has

its roots on the 4chan image board, in particular the website's *random* sub-board, also known as /b/. However, little attention has been given to the imageboard medium and its development. In chapter five, I tried to give an historical account of the social dynamics generated around that medium's technological predecessors. The affordances of anonymous media are historically and culturally situated; nevertheless, there are also striking similarities that indicate the existence of powerful transversal elements to the effects of anonymity in communication. Ancient and recent history does not lack examples of situations in which mediation, secrecy and anonymity enabled individuals to circumvent all sorts of normalizing and control apparatuses. The political criticism of Ancient Rome's talking statues, the Cato letters during USA's independence process, and the prohibition era's cheesebox (telefone redirection device) are examples of the intrinsic relation between social control and anonymity.

Anonymity on the internet is also related to various forms of transgression of normative orders. My historical perspective shows how tools for anonymous communication created places where socially sanctioned behavior is protected, provide relative freedom from the consequences associated with violating laws, norms and taboos. The fifth chapter of this text analyses how those platforms' technical distinctiveness is associated from the very beginning with forms of highly synchronized, massively participated transgressive behavior. That material power of anonymity explains the shared enthusiasm of both cyberpunks and people with non-conventional sexual interests for ways to communicate anonymously in Usenet newsgroups. The Japanese *nanashi*, the more direct predecessors of the socio-cultural dynamics of English language anonymous boards, provide a useful case for comparison. The emergency of the *nanashi warudo* media ecology was associated with the creation of common spaces for anonymous real-time communication with different goals. These included debate in an arena free from dogma and taboo, the gratification of unconventional erotic desires such as those of *lolicon* lovers, and the exchange of files and hacking tools. They also protected individual expression from Japanese society's strong normalizing behavioral control and sanctioning, which was particularly harsh towards computers and *manga*/*anime* enthusiasts – reserving the derogatory term *otaku* for those individuals which seem to exhibit unusual and asocial behaviors.

Intimate Strangers and Privacy in Public

Secrecy and anonymity in online spaces protected a collective movement of transgression and brinkmanship, where experimentation and resignification processess occurred that integrated direct interventions on the boundaries that separate privateness and intimacy from public concerns. Appeals for anonymity, as incipiently expressed in the practices and discourses of both users and designers of anonymous boards, invited to a (re)structuring and bracketing of social relations. Such (temporary and circumscribed) repositioning sets the stage for forms of experimentation with otherness, togetherness, and selfhood.

Those design and interactive principles that were forged in the Japanese anonymous boards were also transposed to 4chan. The resulting affective publics in massively participated anonymous media are not like the ones we're familiar with in the social networking sites of the Web 2.0. Despite most interaction in 4chan being framed by North American popular culture, its openness to the marginal, the forbidden and the hidden fosters the revelation of the uncanny elements of otherwise familiar elements. The explicit aim anonymity is to prevent self-censoring in expression, thus to allow encounters with the otherness within. Through critical detachment from social conventions such as politeness, guilt and shame, participants set the stage for extremely contingent forms of encounters with otherness, where the other is also the neighbors who are revealed as truly other by expressing their unfamiliar and uncanny elements. The valuation of said encounters results in (often simulated) practices of self-disclosure by "cultural monsters" (e.g. "Ask me anything" threads by pedophiles or rapists).

Simmel's idea of intimacy through collective memory building in secret oral traditions is worth revisiting. Secrecy in such forms of belonging entails a radical separation within knowledges, discourse and practice. The commonalities that arise from collective existence are thus a result of this separation. As a special and veiled bond, they become also constitutive of those who participate in it, a kind of vital surplus – a communitarian "vital fluid" in Simmel's (1906) terms – that connects members. From the anonymous *pharresia*, non-capturing confessions and the occasional moments of *communion* (Gurvitch, 1941) result forms of communicative politics that foster the disclosure of intimate, typically unrevealed elements that do not have a place in public.

An analysis of transgressive anonymous internet collectives that oppose technological and moral orders allows identifying how those very tensions concur in the

configuration of social and physical spaces in which individuals circulate in their everyday lives. Spatiality is thus another central aspect of my research, particularly in the way it shapes all kinds of social relations: labor, leisure, family, play, but also the less visible realms of sexual expression, transgression and deviance. Much of the activity described in my thesis takes place within the realm of internet boards and forums. Those mediated spaces of telecopresence, however, are anchored in physical settings. The intimacy of the home, desks, personal objects and devices, is as much a condition for those forms of communication as the technical and design features that provide anonymity. Hence, to understand Anonymous it is important to take into account the materiality of bodies and places, as well as how digital technologies interconnect domestic and intimate spaces. Those elements were not directly accessible to me but were inherently present in interaction, often displayed in pictures. The visual depictions of personal spaces – such as the pictures of desks and computers frequently exchanged in the themed *Battlestation* threads of 4chan – as well as intimate body parts were used as forms of self-disclosure. Those publications formed a very particular kind of affective public, in which the elements of intimate everyday life was the target of aesthetic interventions and critical debate. They are a place for affirmation of the otherwise undisclosed.

Undifferentiated Heterogeneity, Generative Absences and Faciality

The seduction of imageboards attracted many different sorts of individuals interested in participating in massive anonymous interaction without the full weight of social norms and sanction. That diversity turned those digital settings into ecclesiastic gatherings, home to very different "factions". However, a technical and semiotic conflation results from the replacement of identity cues with the "Anonymous" default username. The depersonalized interaction environment ascribes uniformity to the heterogeneous collective, whose expressions seem to merge into a schizophrenic undifferentiated entity. Such fusion points to an form of individuation which contains and expresses multiplicity, allowing faciality of the collective. The way in

which swarms may acquire *faciality* is not only strategic but also, like Galloway and Thacker remind us, a trigger for imaginary connections and symbolism.

Anonymous faciality reflects an universally aspiring, totalizing fragmented image of man and human activity. It is both totalizing and fragmented in the sense that it is projected against the imaginary background of the neoliberal data subject of cognitive capitalism; it is partial because it is not constructed as an alternative but as a complement that depends on autonomous data *doubles.* Participation in collective anonymous settings require the enactment of a particular form of digital *personae*, which in turn reveals the performative nature of material subjects. The production of *generative absences*, using objects-to-hide-with, counts as the generation of such doubles.

Bernard Stiegler writes about the role of *mnemotechnics* in sustaining processes of *transindividuation* across devices and networks – across what he terms technical, symbolic, and psychic *milieus*. In such situations of collective anonymity, those processes may as well be understood as *amnemotechnics*, or the techniques to avoid the generation of memories, sustaining *transdeindividuation*, or collective deindividuation processes. As such, they are able to produce the ambiguous temporalities and presences that Wendy Chun called archival nightmares: the phantasmal images of enduring ephemerals, created by exploiting the digital archive, resulting in glitches on processes through which social memory is inscribed in storage devices.

The temporalities, rhythms and other patterns of mediated forms of communication and interaction – algorithmic mechanisms, excessive intensities, and surpluses in the affective fields where Anonymous took shape – are also the object of representational practices and iconography production. The aforesaid glitches are particularly important to the collective since they present the machine answer to the enactment of digital transgressions. The aesthetic and representational elements in icons make them a reservoir of both experience and meaning, transmitting concepts and interpretations. In order to explore the power of icons, I base myself in Charles S. Peirce's concept of *abduction* or hypothetical inference, as opposed to induction or deduction. In the work of Peirce, abduction and hypothesis operate through a relationship of *likeness*, something they share with icons, resembling the consequences of a generalization such as law, concept, or theory. Iconic abduction is like the metaphor – it is diagrammatic and seeks a theory, an explanation: its *interpretant* is a conclusion, a generalization. Thus, iconography not only evokes aesthetic sensations, feelings and emotions, but also invites reflection and association of ideas, serving as the base for reflexivity and the production of critical discourses.

The collective celebration of such autonomy often led participants to try to extend those methods to external digital media ecologies – the epic and mythical character of Anonymous referred its capacity for disruption, redirection and appropriation. Thus, raids, flooding and spamming were seen as victories of the anonymous hordes against the ordered worlds of internet sociality. Those connection between digital imaginaries, symbols and narratives can be seen, for instance, in the appropriation of the Christian myth of Legion – the demonic multiplicity that named itself Legion is mobilized as a metaphor for that *body multiple* and, in turn, becomes an individuated form of its representation. Weidemann's exclusion of the dimensions of symbols, myths and narratives from her conceptualization of Anonymous illustrates the importance of non-symbolic interaction but neglects how the *faciality* of swarms also relies on symbolism: in Anonymous, affect and symbolism are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing dynamics. Furthermore, the workings of representation and signification are not restricted to the domain of the symbolic.

Disruption and Nomadism: the Resilient Precariousness of Anonymous

Despite the common attachment to largely unregulated expression and exchange, the transgressive and self-disruptive ethos was both an ever-present threat to the metastability of anonymous board cultures, as well as the engine for their development and transformation. Those settings are contested territory claimed by different, and often conflictive interests. The practical ineffectiveness of forms of control meant situations would escalate frequently into irrational and destructive behavior. The consequences were often ironic: the Japanese website shutdown by its owner – due to the numerous and serious threats by users who were unhappy over server downtime – or the attacks on 4chan – to gain the support of the site's administrator – are particularly revealing examples of the self-disruptive activities of those collectives.

The most bellicose of the 4chan subcultures – those who called themselves */i/nsurgents* – were devoted to spreading chaos on the internet. That disruptive behavior did not solely target other websites, but also 4chan, through an openly defiant atti-

tude towards website moderation. The escalation of coordinated mischief by this subsection culminated in the events of /b/-day, the sudden enforcement of rules and subsequent "exodus" to 7chan and, at a later time, 420chan. Those events show how those collectives embraced a sense of autonomy which would not allow moderation nor deterrence, even when their activities resulted in the complete shut down of individual subboards (like the closing down of the /i/ board in serveral *chans) or even whole websites.

That self-disruptive character meant that, paradoxically, its stability could only be sustained by constant nomadism, transformation, and the creation of new spaces. Alongside the chans, there were parallel and layered forms of communication and organization structures built by the participants in this culture. Not surprisingly, the */i/nsurgency* was one of the most productive factions, being behind the creation of several internet services for better organization. Among these are IRC servers, used for real-time chatting and more structured exchange, and the partyvan wiki, which hosted user-generated guides and tools for trolling, spamming, and hacking. The heterogeneous communicational infrastructure served the purpose of facilitating coordinated acts of mischief during the collective's early days. That nomadic quality resulted in dispersal, specialization and more sophisticated forms of action, allowing quick changes in terms of scale and scope. While those services often integrated pseudonymous handles, the culture of anonymity continued to express itself through through non-disclosure of personal information and the usage of non-relatable, non-differentiatable and disposable pseudonyms. Project Chanology, the attacks against the Church of Scientology that marked the beginning of the Anonymous activist branch, were initially organized in the */i/nsurgency* digital media ecology.

Subjects and Power

The marginality and technological challenges associated with anonymity tools for projects of autonomy confirms the pervasiveness of power and control. Michel Foucault (1982) had rightfully warned us to the fact that power is constitutive of the

relationships we establish with others and with ourselves. Thus, it is only logical to ground an analysis of the power and control evading practices under such protections in relation to the normative orders they oppose. In my dissertation I explain why contemporary digital subject formation processes may be understood as the materialization of diffuse social projects and behavioral blueprints, connecting ideologies, ethic and aesthetic sensibilities, bodies of knowledge, tactical repertoires and broader strategies. Anonymous is here associated with positions within the contemporary networks of discourse and practice that both enable and constrain action. From those positions, the complex relationships that weave together meanings, cultural objects and technical artifacts – i.e. sustain the phenomenological lifeworld – are acted upon in acts of transgression and resistance to social control. That positioning is in direct opposition to the subjectivities that are spawn by identification mechanisms, creating sites of resistance to information generating and controlling apparatuses operated by the state and private companies in their efforts to control individuals as political citizens and as consumers. Nevertheless, the formation of the collective is, as we have seen, also associated with efforts to counter widespread forms of social normalization, control and horizontal surveillance based on social, cultural, and moral norms.

Andrew Chadwick (2007) recognized the importance of sedimentary digital networks for contemporary social movements: the tools that are set up for communication and organization, which may be reactivated or redirected in the future. In the case of Anonymous, it is impossible to detach "movement" from networks. That interdependence is the result of another important element: the production of discourses, artifacts, and events through which objects of knowledge sediment in the memories of individuals, collectives and devices. Those digitally sedimentary structures are codified through iterative processes of inscription that make use of iconic representations and metaphors. They condense ethical principles, systems of knowledge, strategies and tactics through aesthetic production, creating simultaneously the communicational materials and the imaginary substrata of this socio-cultural formation.

The durability of such networks and expressions is a function of their capacity to be facilitators of collective assessments and rapid communication, responding to current events and imprinting movement. They are thus catalysts of what is could be called *everyday personalized politics*, self-motivated, aesthetic, and focused on individual autonomy. That form of politics is not centered on what Foucault called "the great instruments of the state, as institutions of power", but operate in a dimension of power that developed alongside those institutions:

> the rudiments of anatomo- and biopolitics, created in the eighteenth century as techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies).
>
> Foucault, 1978, pp. 140-141

This tells us something about the distributed action networks that Bennett and Segerberg associated with the term "connective action". As I argued, such an organizational perspective abstracts from analysis the particular contexts in which those networks come together. The focus on the trajectories of networks allows identifying how those organizational features come to be, how they are enacted in situated practices. One aspect seems to be shared by many of those formations: no authority is recognized to expressions that seek to crystallize those collectives into a fixed form, or try to ascribe particular identities, projects, or symbols. This explains the resistance of those networks to traditional categorizations of social actors and to political ideologies – they will never identify with social and exterior meanings that do not result from the deliberative dynamics that enacted those networks in the first place. Furthermore, those two distinct orders are worlds apart. The distributed deliberative networks are also the product of very distinct technical and algorithmic mechanisms. For Anonymous, this is surely the case: its central elements are associated with the practical opposition to the non-symbolic and a-representational mechanisms that regulate, record and classify user activity on the internet. Those elements have an infinitely greater influence on the collective than discursive articulations between the state and market, or dialectical formulations of the struggle between capitalists and workers.

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