Strategic Interactions of Hacktivism and Contemporary Visual Culture

Theses of DLA dissertation

I. DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF HACKER CULTURE

Hacking can mostly be explored as a loose network of subcultures with a diverse history and an uneven contemporary topography. As part of the history of digital culture, the history of hacker culture unfolds determined by the closely interwoven technical, societal and economic conditions that have given rise to it. The word hacker, when first mentioned in computer history, was used to describe those innovators, who contributed to the development of computer technology on the periphery of the military-industrial complex's computer development plots. These innovation communities, like MIT's Artificial Intelligence Lab, defined the groundwork and directions for the future development of both software and hardware.

Steven Levy defines a list of values as the original hacker ethic based on MIT's AI lab. The six values are direct access, freedom of information, decentralisation, meritocracy, the value of computer engineering ingenuity, and general optimism towards computers. When put into practice, the hacker ethic commits to acts that question authority, not by dialogue, but by overcoming the technical conditions of that given authority. Phreaking, also known as phone freaking, has been a cult forerunner of hacking with the same attitude. Academics of hacker culture put great emphasis on exploring the motivations of hacking, of which the most common ones are joy, a feeling of success, the excitement of border crossing and discovery, the desire for knowledge, curiosity, and the experience of power and control. Hacker culture synthesises controversies like individualism and community, humility and arrogance, liberalism and elitism, and is saturated by the tension between virtual play and experiment versus an outside world limited by laws of physics and state.

JORDAN defines hacker culture according to technological determinism. In his understanding, hacking creates new technological determinations by means of intervention, opposing an existing determination. Hacking is a material practice that produces change or novelty in the system of a computer, network, or communication technology. (JORDAN 2008: 12).

After the release of the first low-cost microchip, the new enterprises unfolding from the hardware hackers' DIY gadget clubs tried to endorse the original hacker ethic in their modus operandi, while trying to capitalize on their knowledge and skills gained in hobbyist culture. By the early eighties, the exponential growth of the computer industry made software as a product fall more and more into the lucrative category of intellectual property. The Free/Liberal Open Source Software movement unfolded in opposition to this progression. F/LOSS carries freedoms that proprietary software does not.

The revolution of the personal computer as a proceeding of the market release of low-cost microchips created a shift of paradigm in the techno-cultural sphere, that was highly influenced by California's counterculture generation of the seventies. This generation tried to elaborate opened, collective and sustainable skills and methods as an alternative to the bureaucratic and mechanical operation mode of the military-industrial complex. (TURNER 2006: 237). The information technology platforms created by the former contributed to the future architecture of the Internet. These models were characterized by flexibility and variability, and by new means of information transfer, that made computers and networked communication a promise of the cultural revolution on one hand, and a profitable economical factor on the other. (TURNER 2006: 238). Personal computers seemed to be the guarantee of information freedom and decentralisation for the counterculture generation. The hacker ethic worked as a very influential set of values for the network culture paradigm.

The innovative open models that thrived in early hacker culture later became an inherent part of the network culture paradigm. As Himanen describes, the hacker ethic expanded into the basic modus operandi of the information society, characterised by flexibility, openness, decentralisation, values freedom and creativity,

and treats professionals as nodes in information technology systems. This expanded hacker ethic is defined by values of passion, freedom, a specific money ethic, community and openness, nethic, activity, and caring. (HIMANEN 2001: 140). For WARK, who Jordan appoints as Krypto-Marxist, the hacker class, struggling for freedom of creativity, is the revolutionary class of the information society.

A feminist account of hacking history and contemporary overview is necessary. In today's hacker culture, as in digital culture in general, gender-based inequality is not as radically visible as before. This is possible not only due to the broad changes in society since the eighties feminist movements but also because of the not-necessarily-gendered characteristics of virtual presence. The number of feminist and LGBTQ projects in hacktivism is significant.

II. TYPOLOGY OF HACKER CULTURE AND DEFINITION OF HACKTIVISM

Jordan defines typologies of hacker culture based on technical and societal factors. He sees the continuity of the hacker ethic in hacktivism as it intervenes into technological and societal determinations at the same time, thus changing technological and societal interactions. He distinguishes between two info-tech endeavours within hacktivism: online demonstration and protection of civil information rights. Though every initiation that opens up and shares technological knowledge with a producers attitude, from within a closed, protected field, opposing consumer society, has to be categorised within hacktivism, independent of its methodology. Therefore, culture jamming, tactical media, hacklabs, hackerspaces, and hacker-conferences should all be considered instances of hacktivism.

Hacktivism is the creation of new technological determinations, where these new determinations define interaction with technology in new and unexpected ways. Furthermore, hacktivism implements the values of the hacker ethic, and its modus operandi and goal are both collective and opened. The determinations reformed by hacktivists are not only of technological nature but of cultural, economic and communal character as well. The attitude of hacktivism is non-conform in its use of technology and its relation to culture, questioning and discerning of technical, institutional, legal or social authority.

III. AVANT-GARDE AS THE FORERUNNER OF HACKER CULTURE - HACKER CULTURE AS THE AVANT-GARDE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

The historical avant-garde of the 20th century can be attributed as a main intellectual precondition of hacktivism. Historical avant-garde was the first revolution in the history of art to attack, crack, and question the status and traditional genres of institutionalised art in bourgeois society. We may find and analyse numerous analogies in the way avant-garde and hacktivism operates, like their program of activism, their border violation practices, their performance and hacking instructions to be reconstructed by peers, their relations to tradition and invention, their questioning of individual authorship, and lastly, their provocative behaviour towards mainstream society. The existing theoretical framework available to analyse the traditions of avant-garde art can provide valuable new aspects to understand hacktivism. The way historical avant-garde did not destruct the institution of art as a whole, nor did it erase traditional genres of art, but carried out interventions that changed the tradition of art itself, is comparable to how hacker culture and hacktivism contributes to the information society.

We may analyse hacktivist interventions along the process-oriented typology of avant-garde artists described by KAPPANYOS. We may as well dissect avant-garde processes by JORDAN's novelty- complexity- and process-oriented hacking-typology. Both avant-garde and hacker culture refuse existing structures of the past in favour of an idealized future utopia. Just as the artists of the avant-garde, hacker culture contributors also feel personally addressed to destruct borders and barriers that stand in the way of realizing their own autonomous ethic.

Hacking may be examined as the overcoming of the semantical determinations of a certain programming language or network regulation. We may analyse hacking as an intervention that hijacks meaning (function) of text (progamming language). We have to remember that even a hijack has to operate within the sintax of that particular language in order to function. We may find yet another analogy with avant-garde art and its sceptical, deconstructive attitude towards traditions of language and forms of literature as parts of institutinalised status quo.

Anarchism is an idea unworthily discredited by post-socialist academic culture, being a structured and historically established ideology. Its cornerstones are autonomy and decentralisation, distributing power within members of a community based on affinity, instead of power being excercised by an external hierarchy. When observing the architecture of the World Wide Web, we may discover the same features: a decentralised mesh of nodes working without any external top-to-bottom hierarchy, creating a dinamic network. The use of the World Wide Web is a primary condition of almost any activist group in the developed world, defining how activists cooperate.

Anonymous is an exceptional example not only of the Internet at its best but of an operating structure mirroring anarchism. In Anonymous, there is no top-to-bottom approach, workgroups are connected and lacking solid borders and orders, making shifting from one into the other, or even the transformation of groups a fluid, consent-based process. The shared, common identity of Anonymous may be enacted by anyone who agrees to their Principia. Critical Arts Ensemble, a group of anti-mainstream artists, defines art-making as cultural activism that is meant to create disturbances where the challenge is that the medium where disturbances would be created is very hard to define. (CAE 1994: 12). Heath Bunting operates with a similar, but more radically critical and independent attitude.

My dissertation is dedicated to the experiment of trying to define hacker culture and hacktivism through its diverse history and contemporary topography. I tried to highlight the analogies between historical avant-garde's revolutionary ethics and those of hacktivism, which might even override the ontological relation of contemporary institutionalised art to historical avant-garde. I tried to draft the info-technological categories of the contemporary hacktivist scene. I drew analogies between code and language, and anarchism and online activism. Studying hacker culture reveals an impalpably wide techno-cultural horizon, where countless projects and groups operate day to day, and where technological innovation is way faster than academical research or legal justice. Writing this text, I marked directions of possible future research. Nonconform information technologies are probably the most inspiring layer of contemporary culture to study, that have way more effect on shaping this culture than what one would think at first sight. The immediacy, innovation, subversion and operation methodology that is present in these phenomena, is something that the institutionalised art of the contemporary might only wish for.