

**Title:**

Heretical Facial Machines, or the Polyvalence of Faciality in the Politics of Digital Dissent of Anonymous

**Abstract:**

This essay focuses on the problem of the face/mask in Anonymous' hacktivist resistances, attempting to progress the comprehension of digital media dissent within a broader framework that deals with the intensive category of affect. Following in particular the developments proposed by Félix Guattari for the study of psychogenesis, I investigate the processes of facialisation within Anonymous, stressing the relationships with contemporary power formations and the related issue of the production of subjectivity within digital cultures. I argue that the polyvalence of the Anonymous facial machine endeavours to challenge the intensive addressing of individual and collective subjectivations towards ontological homogeneity; and it does by playing on the same plane of facial production, offering a refraining point that stimulates always-novel subversive media actions and practices.

**Keywords:**

Anonymous; Digital Dissent; Faciality; Facial Machines; Hacktivism;

**Author:**

Alberto Micali

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## Introduction

This essay aims to advance the current understanding of digital media and network dissent within a broader framework that engages with affect for the study of media and cultural process,<sup>1</sup> and especially the critical approaches that contrast determinist psychoanalytic models, positing the affective dimension involving psychogenesis in the domain of intensity.<sup>2</sup> I investigate the relationships between ‘becoming Anonymous’ (in the Deleuzian sense) and the resistant employment of a common moniker, signalling the centrality of the visual trigger of the face within its collective processes of subjectivation. Indeed, facialisation seems to be a key process at stake within contemporary hacktivist deployments, and this will be subsequently deepened in relation to micropolitics and a wider machinic context that implies an intensive domain.

## A Genealogy of Collective Subjectivation

Anonymous’ digital resistance is characterised by the multiplicity of the media actions undertaken under the same moniker.<sup>3</sup> However, such a multiplicity, by its very nature, exceeds any taxonomic attempt to analytically arrange and classify its various forms of networked media interventionism—and this even though actions such as so-called Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS), data leaks, web defacements, and the public release of codes to avoid surveillance and circumvent censorship surely have been the most common and widespread weapons within the arsenal of Anonymous’ digital dissent. Networked media actions of resistance—or *hacktions*, as I have called them elsewhere<sup>4</sup>—employ the processuality of the hack within an aesthetic register of de-subjective creativity that reduces the distance between social and technological agency, aiming to produce systematic disruptions as the active resistances—or insurgency—of a media ecological dysfunctionality.<sup>5</sup> A performative reading of digital media and networks typifies these processes of mediation, and does so beyond a limiting representationalism that instead presupposes: (1) media as separated prostheses of the (social) human-animal; and (2) media as the outputs of a symbolic separation that operates on another—epistemological, rationally meaningful, simulated and/or signifying, etc.—plane.<sup>6</sup> Processes of mediation intensively act in the co-constitution of culture (as a sphere that is not strictly signification and antropopoeitic), and Anonymous surfaces as a clear manifestation of the heterogeneity of resistance in digital cultures.<sup>7</sup>

From a representationalist perspective, Anonymous ultimately ends up being treated as *just* a hacktivist network: a distributed community of hackers/geeks and/or activists that take advantage of the pervasive distribution of digital media technologies.<sup>8</sup> Once media technologies are no longer apprehended as a mere extension of social animals (tools to represent social and political dissent), and a plane of ontogenetic co-constitutionality is re-established, digital media and networks become a battlefield in which subjectivation and its involvement in the political sphere are crucially at stake. Indeed, what I call the heterogeneity of resistance in digital cultures points towards a political arena that, in the terms offered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,<sup>9</sup> is fundamentally “micropolitical.”<sup>10</sup> This is a sphere in which the production of subjectivity becomes itself the centre of political conflict. It constitutes a politics of flows of partial subjectivation, and individual and collective processes of individuation that move underneath—but at the same time might shape and exert an

influence on—the macro-politics that are constituted by the practices of institutions, parties, and/or political communities of differing scales.

In the light of the burgeoning presence of digital technologies as co-constituent or partial vectors of human subjectivity, the problem of subjectivation, particularly in relation to the collective employment of ‘improper names’ and (in the specific case of interest here) the Anonymous moniker, has been approached by Marco Deseriis.<sup>11</sup> According to Deseriis, improper names are a varying continuum that conceptually includes its two poles of orientation: the strongly centralised one of collective pseudonyms (which are often characterised by top-down usages), and the decentralised one of multiple-use names (which can instead be indistinctively appropriated by the many). Deseriis investigates the relationships between improper names and subjectivity via the work of Deleuze and Guattari on subjectivation,<sup>12</sup> and connecting this with the problematic of the processes of individuation as investigated by Gilbert Simondon.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari led and progressed the anti-determinist critique to the Freudian/psycho-analytic subject (and its relation to power),<sup>14</sup> in alignment with, and extending the work, of Michel Foucault.<sup>15</sup> Rebutting the idea of subjectivity as being stable and determinable (which can then be studied and known in full, as psychoanalysis pretends to do), the movement to a notion of subjectivation as a process of constant production highlights the possibility for a creation that does not precede this same act of productivity. It is here that, within a broader ecosophical perspective,<sup>16</sup> media can indeed become a differential of subjectivation, entangled with different ecological registers.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Simondonian individuation attempts to oppose the hylomorphic scheme that still rules the core of Western thought by introducing a domain of intensity into the otherwise ontogenetic conception of being.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the problem for ontogenesis comes from a tradition that has always placed the individuated before the process of individuation. This happens, for instance, with hylomorphism, in which form dominates the transformation of matter, causing the fall of ontogenesis into a matter that is already presupposed. Rather, in Simondon’s proposal, individuation—and the influence on Deleuzo-Guattarian ideas is as such evident—never resolves itself without implicating the transition from a phase of intensity (or pre-individuation).

Conjugating these two traditions of understanding subjectivation and individuation, Deseriis recognises Anonymous as a “multiple-use name.”<sup>19</sup> This is defined as a “decentralized and possibly uncoordinated use of an alias.”<sup>20</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari, collective enunciation implies both pragmatic and symbolic expressive formations (that is, both the performativity and representational functioning of language).<sup>21</sup> This means that a distributive independence of these two lines exists, since they both operate on the same plane (which in Deleuze and Guattari’s proposition is always an immanent one). Improper names, then, do not represent, and these collective forms of enunciation are not simply the result of, a collective process of subjectivation. On the contrary, subjective processes—both individual and collective—continually relate to the name, possibly individuating and activating a wide set of actions (thus the domain of intensity is involved). The improper name is a collective configuration of enunciation that is able to articulate semiotic and pragmatic systems. However, as Deseriis argues, individuals relate to it—and either produce their subjectivation, or they are produced as subjects—in a conflicting yet resolute way: firstly, as a process of individuation that subtracts certain features from the production of the self, but also as a “positive contribution to the assemblage.”<sup>22</sup> This indicates that, under the Anonymous

moniker, subjects actively contribute to shaping such a form of collective enunciation, albeit by renouncing part of their individual self-constitution: addition and subtraction meet by shaping the outcome of such an encounter and the name intensively functions in the production of novel individuated forms.

Furthermore, Deseriis strongly underlines the distinction between collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names.<sup>23</sup> Whilst these are both improper names and, as previously stated, form part of the same continuum (that is, they both are radical collective forms of subjectivity), it is only multiple-use names that allow minor processes of subjectivation. Multiple-use names guarantee the continual proliferation of differences; they permit—it is possible to further argue—heterogeneity on an ontogenetic level of individuation. Therefore, Anonymous is a multiple-use, improper name, employed by a large number of individuals *and* (that is, in conjunction with) digital technologies of mediation in order to deploy a wide range of media actions of network resistance, whilst—and this is the main focus of this essay—also implicating other ‘machines’, other degrees of intensity that do relate and overlap with multiple-naming ones, enabling a zone for a potentially different production of subjectivity.<sup>24</sup>

These are different machines that function via their autonomous operations, offering a key site for political resistance through digital media and networks. However, before delving into such machines and exploring their relationships to the face as a privileged site for subject formation, it is necessary to maintain the focus on the resistant use of multiple names in order to imply key issues about contemporary power. Indeed, the actual historical phase is a decisive conjuncture in which the logic of control is reaching an unpredictable climax. This is a movement of depletion of life forms and perpetual data-matter extraction by means of an ‘ecologisation’ of power apparatuses: the distribution of technologies (such as sensors or cameras) that do not simply ‘record’ but continually capture data and extract new patterns via ever-evolving statistical models in order to self-balance, govern, and address the outputs of existing systems.<sup>25</sup> The becoming-environmental of power—following the stage of bodily internalisation through the disciplines of modernity—was already glimpsed and approached by Foucault in his lectures,<sup>26</sup> and Deleuze’s reading of them.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the facets of this latter stage of control have been analysed via theoretical proposals such as algorithmic governmentality,<sup>28</sup> pre-emption,<sup>29</sup> or machinic enslavement.<sup>30</sup> Now more than ever, the Deleuzian indication that we should look at “the basis of the ‘struggles’ of each age, and the style of these struggles” in order to comprehend the diagrams of contemporary power becomes of vital importance.<sup>31</sup>

The facial machines of Anonymous are a style of their own, which emerged within such a conjuncture and continue a genealogy of past struggles that have made of collective processes of subjectivation and enunciation a key trait of distinction.<sup>32</sup> Recognising the banality of the fact that anybody can be Anonymous is a truism that unintentionally seems to imply the transversality of processes of subjectivation and the intensive force of those of individuation. *‘Encyclopedia Dramatica’* (ED), a satirical wiki that is a direct expression of contemporary digital cultures, proposes an interesting definition of Anonymous. The micropolitical dimension introduced above seems to underpin this encyclopaedic-like, wiki-entry description of Anonymous, which offers some preliminary clues via which to grasp the hacktivist resistant forces shaping its becomings. The encyclopaedia states:

Anonymous is NOT a group, or an organization, or coherent collective of any sort. Anonymous is more like... an idea, a concept. Technically everyone and anyone is Anonymous. It’s simply the name given to any collective action carried out virally by a

large mass of people. Its ranks, goals, intentions and ideals are completely fluid, changing as easily as the wind. It's a kind of social ocean that occasionally builds itself up into a massive tsunami of sheer social willpower.<sup>33</sup>

This definition underlines the fluidity of the forces moving within Anonymous. These forces horizontally parallel those of abiotic phenomena (wind, streams), often erupting in tornados and floods—as may occur when specific media actions such as digital swarms or gigantic data leaks are deployed and/or exposed as a massive form of digital media interventionism.<sup>34</sup> As such, a movement contrasting an external attribution that imposes a representationalist take from the outside is at stake in the entry. However, this movement is not fully grasped, even though a micropolitics of flows as partial vectors of subjectivation, and the glimpsing of a non-human category of intensity, is indirectly hinted at.

Tatiana Bazzichelli offers a decisive step forward: an additional and helpful effort to read Anonymous that equally points towards the forces traversing and shaping its active resistances.<sup>35</sup> To introduce the hybrid subjectivations of Anonymous, Bazzichelli brings us to a field of dandelions: “A dandelion seed head enables wind-aided dispersal over long distances. When the wind blows, the seeds leave their original location and drift off; they dissolve into the air and re-emerge somewhere else”.<sup>36</sup> These two attempts to define Anonymous, offered by ED and Bazzichelli, move on a similar non-metaphorical plane. They do not work analogically, whilst seeking to grasp the various forces that led to the set of relations that might have actualised, and still actualise, Anonymous' individuations and collective processes of subjectivation—as improper multiple-names do. However, it is only the latter that does not presuppose and assign an exterior attribution to the Anonymous, and—at the same time—equally emphasises contagious diagrams and the central position of vectors within them. Flower seeds, wind, streams of water, and/or non-human animals such as birds can be vectors; in the cultural phenomenon of Anonymous, digital networks are the main vectors of partial subjectivation, and the possibility of approaching such subjective processes does not elevate itself through a hierarchical movement to the outside, but follows the same deployment of the multiple-naming machines—their self-organising movement, their machinic autopoiesis.<sup>37</sup>

Following this 'internal' line of argumentation, Bazzichelli links Anonymous to other cultural expressions that she, in a similar way to its internetworked and distributed hacktivism, defines as “networked disruption”.<sup>38</sup> In particular, she connects Anonymous to various practices of employing a collective moniker to de-mystify the bourgeois cultural logic of immutable identities and subjectivities. This is a subversive line of practice that, once investigated, allows Bazzichelli to associate the case of the Neoist movement, or that of Luther Blissett, with Anonymous' hacktivism.<sup>39</sup> Both Neoism and Blissett, express the importance that collective monikers have in the field of art, implicating an ambit that is aesthetic. Here, authorship and originality are central mechanisms for the commodification of the artwork, channelling art 'pieces' to enter into (amongst others) commercial practices of exhibition, promotion, global, and national trade. In the cases of collective monikers, in accordance with the Deleuzian reading of Nietzsche, the question shifts from the possible individual understanding of 'who' is behind the name (and the artwork), to a de-individualised 'who' (which is again the problem of the forces that underpin the emergence of such forms); a question that attempts to challenge ruling mechanisms, such as that of authorship.<sup>40</sup> From this viewpoint, the question concerning Anonymous becomes one about a dandelion-like 'event': an ongoing process that, by continuously recurring, is capable of relating to the forces that

populate and traverse it, intensively involving those lines that have yet to come (individuation is, in fact, always metastable, to employ again the Simondonian proposal). In addition, the aesthetic field is implied as a privileged ambit for the constitutionality of such relations—for the encounter of the various resistant forces—thanks to the doorway that perception offers to the intensive order.<sup>41</sup> Rather than a representationalist referent that externally defines Anonymous processes of subjectivation, Bazzichelli attempts to map a movement that comes from the same unfolding of the active resistances at stake, following a genealogical line of descent or, further, its phylogeny.

The *Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerilla* (Handbook of Guerrilla-Communication) is a collective book by the autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe, Luther Blissett, and Sonja Brünzels.<sup>42</sup> It provides a map/collection of various “tactics of joyful agitation and playful resistance to oppression” (according to its subtitle). In the text—which anticipates the lines of investigation that have been developed by Deseriis<sup>43</sup> and Bazzichelli<sup>44</sup>—one section is dedicated to the ‘magic’ of collective names, which works by nullifying the space between the individual and the collective. These previously introduced nominal forms thus run as mythic machines: signs without signifiers—or, conversely, full of the infinite chain of the possible meanings that can be attributed to them.<sup>45</sup> Collective names are the implosion of any binary, as well as external attribution under infinite referents; through them, the allure of the name is reinforced as a mythic character by each singular gesture, action, or narration, whilst simultaneously, individuals gain strength by sharing the collective dimension.<sup>46</sup>

According to the collective authors, the praxis of employing a multiple name by the many traces its lineage via a complex descent of active dissent. In 1514, in Württemberg (a region of southwest Germany, at the time Duchy of Swabia), a peasant revolt was conducted under the collective name of Konrad. Peasants rebelled against a harsh taxation imposed on them to solve the debt crisis of the Duchy and, although they were defeated, the collective effort led to the peasant war of 1524-1525.<sup>47</sup>

The line of descent moves to the beginning of the nineteenth century, this time in England, where General Ludd became the imaginary leader of the uprisings against the mechanisation of the textile production process. Ludd was the inspirational character collectively employed to resist the beginning of industrial capitalism. The general was not a commandant, but a concatenation of the desiring forces and actions of resistance against a new form of fixed capital. Ludd did not represent an organised movement. The fiction of political representation occurred later, when the separation between collective and individual action in the work process was institutionalised by the liberal state: a political separation to legally manage the refusal of exploitation under the guise of salaried work.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, another multiple-mythic machine was collectively activated in Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos was a spokesperson for the people of the Chiapas region, but no one seems to have ever seen his/her face. ‘It’ became a name/face, additionally adopted outside the Mexican region, to oppose neoliberal flows of capital invested worldwide thanks to the burgeoning position of information and communication technologies, thereby connecting a wide network of local struggles. Marcos was more than a multiple name: a collective visage fostering a multitude, refusing hierarchical binarisations and the abstraction of identity-making processes.<sup>49</sup>

Anonymous can be linked to both Konrad and Marcos, positing its digital resistance on a phylogeny that had actively opposed the emergence of always-new power relations at

decisive historical conjunctures. Nonetheless, the hacktivism of Anonymous must be further considered in the light of the radical changes that occurred with the mass diffusion of digital networks—vectors that are continuously shaping the nature of the apparatuses of power as well as the resistance to them in contemporary internetworked societies. In particular, at the turn of the millennium, the multiple-use name of the Subcomandante signalled the decisive bifurcation to the visual culture that will be: the networking, current degree of saturated circulation reached within the so-called ‘pictorial turn’.<sup>50</sup> Within such a lineage, and particularly after the first visual traces left by Blissett, Marcos has in fact been amongst the first to rely on the global distribution of digital networks, opening a collective space that is not only a name for an international of locally based actions of resistance, but that is crucially entwined with cultural elements that visually shape, constitute, and establish the face as a site of possible global resistance. Whilst the Subcomandante was a symptom of the surfacing of innovative resistant machinations to oppose (at the time new) power relations that were geographically more dispersed and led by novel informational vectors, Anonymous relates to such a resistant lineage by precisely building upon the continuation of this digital-networking, capitalist-led expansion. The hidden face under the balaclava offered a worldwide visual trigger, yet it is with the Anonymous’ face/mask that the phase of culmination of a saturated visual circulation matches the insurgent forces of political resistance. Within Anonymous, the collective face is one of the central sites of struggle for political subjectivation; a micropolitical issue that acts beyond, and in combination with, the strategic practice of the multiple-use name.

Therefore, I propose that the hacktivist becomings of Anonymous equally involve what Deleuze and Guattari defines as machines of facialisation: the possible diagrammatic composition of traits of *visagéité*.<sup>51</sup> Anonymous prolongs a lineage of resistant forms that have made collective processes of subjectivation a distinguishing signature, even though this phylogeny bifurcated when the centrality of the network-circulating image began to dominate the global internetworked imaginary. The mythic machines of collective, plural names—which give and deprive the individual and collective dimensions of the self—are aligned, and in some ways overlapped, by machines that turn to the face as a strong subjective component. In the next section, I will detail the functioning of such machines, attempting to offer novel reflections regarding the correlation between the machines producing visages and the interconnected digital landscape. Such considerations will, in fact, permit me to deepen the issue of relations of power, and the forms of digital media and network dissent that today populate over-developed societies.<sup>52</sup> Anonymous is an identity to be shared, a political collective, an activist/hacking or even a terrorist group, when is approached via the attributing dispositions of social subjection: despotic machines that constantly need a face to separate and define themselves, establishing external points of attribution as the dominant value of reference.<sup>53</sup> *The faces of Anonymous are not many; the face of Anonymous is one.*

### ***The Face is a Politics!***

The problem of the visage, particularly in relation to the production of subjectivity and a broader examination of power and capitalism, occupied part of both the solo and collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>54</sup> Within a broader network of concepts, Guattari developed the one of faciality (*visagéité*), in connection to a more comprehensive critique of signification and its dominant position in the understanding of psychogenetic processes.<sup>55</sup> Deleuze, instead, applied the idea to cinema and painting—and, more specifically, by focussing on cinematic techniques such as the close-up,<sup>56</sup> and Bacon’s portraiture.<sup>57</sup> It is

particularly on the former, Guattarian line of inquiry that I wish to focus my attention, in order to better grasp the relationships between the employment by Anonymous of a well recognised, widely networked, circulating face/mask and its entangled processes of subjectivation. This line of reasoning, led by Guattarian investigations, finds its most comprehensive argumentation in one of the many plateaus of the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.<sup>58</sup> Within the overall aim of understanding the processes entailing the face within Anonymous becomings, I push this argument further, particularly by broadening it towards the internetworked landscape.

To begin with, Guattari frames the problematic of the visage within a critical account of signification and in relation to a broader take on abstraction that aligns the rule of signifying semiotics with capitalistic modes of command.<sup>59</sup> Schematising to the extreme, as capital establishes itself as the measure of economic exchange—an autonomised pole of reference that rules and over-codes the other modes of regulation—signification similarly hierarchises and neutralises semiotic pluralism, transcending the signifier as a reigning value; a pole that subsumes polyphonic enunciation (which for Guattari pertains to the domain of existence and not just the act of speaking). Whereas in Karl Marx’s historical materialist critique of the capitalist regime, capital operates as a general equivalent, autonomising its transcendental position of reference through so-called “exchange value”—which abstracts “use value” and makes of all goods a commodity beyond their intrinsic differences<sup>60</sup>—Guattari reads the same operationality in other processes of neutralisation of, and hierarchisation over, the plurality of the dynamics of existential differentiation.<sup>61</sup> This happens in the case of signification and within the capitalist regime, but the origination of absolute and autonomous poles of reference also involves other spheres of valorisation: it applies (amongst others) to the aesthetic field with the value of beauty, as with the good of moral within ethics, and/or the liberal law of the bourgeois in the sphere of public life.<sup>62</sup>

This critique thus extends towards psychogenesis and the broader problem of subjectivation, and does it by building upon the comparison between the modes of capitalistic general equivalence and the representational pretences of psychoanalysis, which externally attribute signifying—reductionist and intelligible—components to subjectivity. In its early conceptualisation, the facial is described as a machine that captures the plurality of semiotic components, reducing the wide variety that might compose subjectivities—that is, neutralising their heterogeneous becoming by attributing a generalised equivalent. On the side of the intersection between psychoanalytic practice and the rule of capitalist societies, the former imposes its equivalent by reducing subjectivation and the related processes of faciality as a matter of acknowledgeable signifying traits: “The ‘thing’ is identified, located on various abstract coordinates, grasped, prevented from fleeing or escaping the system of significations, and kept from threatening the reigning socio-semiotic order”.<sup>63</sup> As such, Guattari never conceives of visages as representational, even though the broadcast media of his time used to produce factory-like, dominant facial traits.<sup>64</sup> The problem, according to his argument, does not involve the possible alienating identification of selves with such ruling visages—an identity-making mirroring exercised by the ruling faces of his time.<sup>65</sup> Rather, the core problematic is the way in which the heterogeneous components of desire, the partial vectors of subjectivation, or—to broaden the scope again—the polyvocality of all the expressive components that might potentially offer an *ouverture* to the subjectivations of the world, and their possible becoming-other thanks to the encounter with multiple existential territories are reduced to standard, intelligible points (dominant faces) that catch and flatten



them to a standardised value and, moreover, can only be understood via subjugating signification traits.

In *A Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari progress early reflections on faciality, detailing and offering some of the most interesting remarks on the concept.<sup>66</sup> Amongst these, I want to touch upon a line of reasoning that seem to offer the most productive path via which to address the micropolitical problem of the common visage within Anonymous. This thread engages with the relationships between the face and the landscape, permitting a re-evaluation of processes in which the former is entailed within the networked informational paradigm. Visages are, indeed, bound tightly to the production of the self: the face allows subjectivity to emerge, coming from an abstract machine that combines the white wall (on which signification projects signs) and the black hole of subjectivation (in which selves constitute via intensive energies).<sup>67</sup> A system of surfaces and holes hence shapes visages, which are explicitly described as never pertaining to an individual domain of the self, but rather to “zones of frequencies or probability” in which redundant traits tend to capture the real (again, in its differential becoming) and preliminarily conform it to dominant significations.<sup>68</sup>

Key correlations exist between the surfacing of the face as one of the leading sites for the production of human subjectivity and the landscape: the relationships between faciality and landscapity (*paysag    *)<sup>69</sup>. The face, indeed, does not fully correspond to the head, but is the result of a movement that projects the latter towards the surrounding milieu, thanks to an intrinsic relation with this space, the landscape. The face must always be considered in connection to a landscape, which allows it to become the dominant chart as introduced above. Here, the perspective is (again) an intensive one that reads bodies beyond their strict circumscription to human ones, and— above all—beyond a possible organicistic and static comprehension. Rather, bodies are the result of a stratifying movement of the material axis and the intensive merging of affective forces.<sup>70</sup> Again, via Simondon, bodies are a metastable, temporary result of intensive processes of individuation,<sup>71</sup> and the face represents the culmination of their historical sedimentation, since the head is taken in an absolute movement with the milieu that surrounds and orients it.<sup>72</sup> Since evolution is an always-relational process of differentiation, the face materialises as a leading zone from which human subjectivity can emerge when the head of homo, abandoning for the first time the milieu of the forest, encounters the flat horizon of the steppe.<sup>73</sup> Such a co-relation with the open horizon of the steppe allowed the head to extend, transforming and historically stratifying that which is the visage, which is then, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the outcome of an absolute movement: “an absolute deterritorialisation . . . no longer relative because it removes the head from the stratum of the organism, human or animal, and connects it to other strata, such as those of significance or subjectivation”.<sup>74</sup>

Yet what happens when the face is further projected towards a new horizon? How is faciality reoriented within the landscape of digital networks, a hyper-technological milieu that, accessible by screens and led by increasingly complexified algorithms and ever-expanding databases, additionally abstracts existential territories, throwing the face towards an interconnected horizon that runs via a 24/7 market-oriented, capitalist platformism?<sup>75</sup> Indeed, that which entangles the Anonymous face is a transformed landscape in comparison to the steppe and, we can argue, the evolutionary leap activated by it equally adapted and evolved. The capitalist circulation of visages across networked platforms, and in particular the burgeoning visuocentrism of human cultures, further pushes the conjunctive and co-constituting relationality that exists between the face and the landscape.<sup>76</sup> The landscape into

which contemporary processes of faciality are taken, is no longer that of urbanised modernity, but is rather the highly pixel-defined and interconnected range of experiences in the 'cyberspace'—an entangled sphere of human individuation, a postmodern realm of continual colonisation, the always-expanding frontier of capitalist dominion over the subjectivations of the world. This is, in the words of McKenzie Wark, the milieu of the vector that, "indifferent of the qualities or meaning of what it transmits," configures a "terrain of addressable spaces . . . in which data and commands can be routed in principle between any addressable" point,<sup>77</sup> tending to the continual extraction and drive of all life forms that were, are, and potentially will be.

Within the already introduced conjuncture of the ecologisation of control, the digital networked landscape stratifies novel faces, which are taken in a movement that captures, re-arranges, and matches them in order to reinforce contemporary power machinisms. Today, Deleuze and Guattari's remark that "the face is a politics" has never seemed so clear-cut.<sup>78</sup> It is a politics because, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, relevant matters of power involve the face, in particular its arrangement, and its possible, active dismantling. In archaic societies there was no need for faces; masks were often able to bestow a body with its collective belonging. The polyvocality of subjective components traversing the social collectives could find actualisation in different relational forms; masks were often central in rituals, coalescing in their traits the intensities that were vitally moving in-between social relationships. In contrast, in highly hierarchised societies, power relations are in continual need of visages and, in over-developed ones, this necessity goes far beyond the two modes of functioning of the facial machine described by the French thinkers: (1) selecting to separate; as a central order that produces the unity of a visage in order to dualistically oppose to alterities (i.e., teacher and student); (2) forming intermediate categories in order to homogenise deviances; as a grade of tolerance that does not immediately separate, but gradually tends to integrate and comply with dominant traits, creating zones of segregation (i.e., ghettos or Christianisation).<sup>79</sup> Within the postmodern ambit, facial machines meet the culminating phase of control, offering unprecedented possibilities for its anticipatory and predatory logics in the domain of individuation, and the intensive triggering of dominant (human, white, masculine, heterosexual, urbanised, capitalist, etc.) processes of subjectivation.

Visages become harvested maps for large businesses and security apparatuses from which facial traits can be inferred and recomposed to self-maintain the systems, and the machines they are, or might be part of.<sup>80</sup> Faces cease to be simply dualist others separated in order to define dominant traits, and/or marginalised frequencies ready to be homogenised. The intensities that constitute visages as zones of indeterminacy are increasingly anticipated by acts of capture and the interpolation of patterns, which address the virtuality of the same processes of subjectivation, reducing the degrees of such an indeterminacy and functioning as inputs within increasingly complexified machines of faciality. Following the neoliberalist logic and the extreme self-entrepreneurial push towards a sort of dividual hyper-individuality, the de-regulation of facial traits enters the landscape of the ecologisation of control, fleshing out its securitising apparatuses and their increasing widespread distribution.

### **Concluding Remarks: On the Polyvalence of the Anonymous Face/Mask**

In the first part of the essay, I introduced relevant studies investigating the relationship between processes of subjectivation and individuation, and the active resistances that have made use of multiple-use names as a distinctive form of opposition and rebellion to ever-evolving power formations. Anonymous continues a phylogeny of practices, but faces the

challenge launched by the global circulation and saturation of visual imaginary through the means of digital media and networking technologies. Facial machines, as sites of micropolitical conflict, are maps of subjective production that reduce, capture, and address actual and virtual processes of individual and collective subjectivation, functioning as one of the key apparatuses of contemporary power.

Nonetheless, the Guy Fawkes mask has become one of the most used and recognised marks in the repertoire of Anonymous, allowing it to frame its amorphous activities in what can be seen as a refrain of collective individuation. The aesthetics of the mask – implying the production of subjectivity at multiple semiotic registers—and consequently Anonymous' micropolitics of media dissent, is surely not simply a visual matter. It is a stratagematic attempt to actively resist despotic facial machines, whilst stimulating novel individual and collective forms of subversive media action and practice, which means—as well—keeping the field open to virtual possibilities for differential individuation on the domain of existence. The stratagem of the mask works as a refrain by crystallising the active forces that may find 'form' in the indexing processes of faciality. The visual is deeply involved, since the mask is recognisable mostly through signifying semiotics—the white wall. However, as also suggested by Guattari, who explicitly makes reference to the refrain in relation to faciality,<sup>81</sup> the face/mask is a refraining point that can catalyse and mobilise the forces traversing Anonymous-becomings—the black holes of subjectivation—the active resistances constituting the subjective processes of Anonymous. Refrains emerge, in fact, from chaos and as such are a way of stabilising the multiple emergence of disordering tendencies. In these terms, the refraining of the mask opens Anonymous to collective processes of subjectivation, acting on the contingent 'eventfulness' of the social and correspondingly guaranteeing anchor points within the chaotic and multiple becomings of its active resistances—and of the many expressions and practices of digital media interventionism involved.

When initially reflecting on the functioning of Anonymous facial machines, I had been thinking of a clear ambivalence between the need to resist a despotic facialisation, and the possibility of actualising such a resistance by implying the same operability of the face. However, the facial machines of Anonymous only partially overlap with the modes of operation of those that constitute multiple-names—that is, oscillating between a dialectic resolution of individual subtraction and collective addition. Instead, the intensive politics of the digital dissent of Anonymous implements a heretical stratagem that has been taking advantage of the contingent conditions of its emergence, activating a white facial machine with the black moustache that serves as a catalyst; an existential refrain that is able to index various resistant dispositions.<sup>82</sup>

The Anonymous-becomings that are still unfolding worldwide are processes of subjectivation partially and actively triggered by the same abstract machine of faciality.<sup>83</sup> The resistant forces shaping such becomings find their encounter within a visual chart that is the face/mask; a refrain that is thus capable of activating subjects differently and seems to favour the formation of novel processes of individuation through the relations occurring with digital media and networks. As such, rather than ambivalence, the visage of Anonymous seems polyvalent, since at a molecular level, it exhibits more than simply a dualist state of valence. Indeed, in the field of chemistry valence expresses the combinatory power (power to or *potentia*) of atoms to relate to one another.<sup>84</sup> It is a sort of relational degree of elemental components that might (or equally might not) intensively enable the constitution of novel individual and collective productions of the self. The molecular, following the Guattarian line

of reasoning, is a field of mutation, the terrain upon which the micropolitical conflict over subjectivation will always be open.

The Anonymous stratagem of the heretical facial machine allows facial traits to escape by forming dense ranks of connections wearing a mask. If facial machines are machines of command—redundancies that binarise and make of language an order capable of separating and defining alterities to exclude these, capitalising on this separation and configuring dominant subjectivities—then there is no longer time for non-facial machines. In internetworked, over-developed societies, the despotism of the face is the rule, not the exception.<sup>85</sup> The nostalgic time of a past without visages, of tribes and societies without language and state, only offers new reactionary faces, such as those sought both by fundamentalisms and nationalisms. Today, it is not possible to escape from the commanding capabilities of facial machines. The aesthetics of the mask of Anonymous implies a facial machine that does not look back, yet challenges the abstract configurations constituting itself. It does so through subjectivations and enunciations that are themselves plural: a sort of collective call to arms, which is directed towards active forces of resistance.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> (Clough and Halley 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010).

<sup>2</sup> (Deleuze 2001; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Guattari 1990, 1995; Massumi 2002, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Anonymous' hacktivism see Coleman (2014).

<sup>4</sup> (Micali 2017).

<sup>5</sup> I developed this concept of hacktions as digital media actions of resistance in order to processually recharge the power-to of abstraction of the hack beyond its subjective and objective-centred operationality. In particular, I wanted to offer a movement against a dualist perspective of resistance, addressing it through a critical post-humanist framework that is capable of stressing the ontological heterogeneity of digital media and network interventionism. For details, see Micali (2017).

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of representation in contemporary cultural and social theory, see Barad (2007) and Thrift (2007).

<sup>7</sup> (Micali 2016).

<sup>8</sup> In particular, it seems "social software" takes centre stage of the mass distribution of digital media and networks. For details, see Manovich (2013). Similarly, the growing academic interest in design and interfaces seems to be one of the most productive ways to address the relationships between the human-animal and technological mediation.

<sup>9</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> For a groundbreaking introduction to the micropolitics of contemporary digital cultures, see Terranova (2004).

<sup>11</sup> (Deseriis 2012, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> (*esp.* Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> (Simondon 1958, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987; Guattari 1995, 2011, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> (*esp.* Foucault 1995, 2002, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> (Guattari 1995, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> (Fuller 2005). Guattari developed schizo-analysis as a pragmatic approach precisely to contrast the power-enmeshed and positivist determinism of psychoanalytic practice. As he details in the glossary of schizo-analysis, this "refuses to fold desire over onto personological systems; and challenges the efficiency of transfer and interpretation" (Guattari 2006, 421). For an overview of the evolution of Guattarian schizo-analytic metamodelisation, see Watson (2009).

<sup>18</sup> (Simondon 1958, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> (Deseriis 2012, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> (Deseriis 2012, 141).

<sup>21</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>22</sup> (Deseriis 2012, 155; *see also* Deseriis 2015).

<sup>23</sup> (Deseriis 2012, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> There is not here the space to fully deal with the concept of the machine and a broader machinic ontology in Deleuze and Guattari's work. For details see Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1986, 1987; Guattari 1995).

<sup>25</sup> For a recent analysis of the neoliberal rationality that rules such systems, and a key understanding of the subjectivations that are produced within them, see Dardot and Laval (2013).

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- <sup>26</sup> (Foucault, 2009, 2010, 2014).
- <sup>27</sup> (Deleuze 1988, 1995, 2018).
- <sup>28</sup> (Rouvroy and Berns 2010, 2013).
- <sup>29</sup> (Elmer and Opel 2006, 2008; Grusin 2010; Massumi 2007, 2009; then, *ontopower*, Massumi 2015).
- <sup>30</sup> (Lazzarato 2014).
- <sup>31</sup> (Deleuze 1988, 44).
- <sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the cultural logic of digitality in relation to control, *see* Franklin (2015). For a discussion of the emergence of control as a leading paradigm of contemporary societies, *see* Beniger (1986). For a recent development in relation to ecological thought and the ecologisation of power, *see* Hörl (2017). Tiqqun (2001, esp. 40-83) deeply inspired my discussion and understanding of the relationships between cybernetics and control.
- <sup>33</sup> (Encyclopedia Dramatica n.d.).
- <sup>34</sup> (Micali 2018a, 2018b).
- <sup>35</sup> (Bazzichelli 2013).
- <sup>36</sup> (Bazzichelli 2013, 138).
- <sup>37</sup> (Guattari 1995).
- <sup>38</sup> (Bazzichelli 2013, 135-47).
- <sup>39</sup> The Neoist movement was one of the first examples of a multiple name in the arts. It was founded by Monty Cantsin (another collective alias) in 1979, before quickly spreading from Canada to Europe and Australia. The Luther Blissett Project (LBP) began in 1994, based on the principle that anyone could be Luther Blissett, simply by using the name. In Italy, the project developed around the underground context in Bologna before spreading in the rest of the country and Europe. For details *see* Bazzichelli (2013), and Deseriis (2015).
- <sup>40</sup> (Deleuze 1983).
- <sup>41</sup> There is not here the space to fully deal with a question of aesthetics; Deleuze and Guattari (1994) offer a bridge to the intensive domain of affect via the conceptualisation of ‘percepts’. Similarly, Guattari (1995) focuses on the aesthetic ambit as a site for positive subjective openings, offering his ethico-aesthetic paradigm. As such, I always imply the aesthetic of the mask as a question of intensive formation, of machinic triggering, and not as a simple issue of visibility and signification.
- <sup>42</sup> (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. 1997).
- <sup>43</sup> (Deseriis 2015).
- <sup>44</sup> (Bazzichelli 2013).
- <sup>45</sup> Speculatively, it is possible to claim that such machines are a low theory that already implies post-structuralist critiques of representationalism. In this sense, they are a sort of ethico-aesthetic praxis of anti-separateness.
- <sup>46</sup> (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. 1997).
- <sup>47</sup> (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. 1997).
- <sup>48</sup> (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. 1997; *see also* Deseriis 2015).
- <sup>49</sup> (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. 1997).
- <sup>50</sup> (Boehm and Mitchell 2009).
- <sup>51</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
- <sup>52</sup> I employ the adjective ‘over-developed’ to describe contemporary capitalist society in order to align with the critique offered by the Situationist International.
- <sup>53</sup> Since I began my research on Anonymous one of my main objectives has precisely been to avoid the external attribution of social categories to the subjects involved in its becomings. Indeed, inspired by Maurizio Lazzarato’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari, I attempted not to mimic social subjection, which precisely operates by attributing individual subjectivities that are functional to the division of labour. For details, *see* all Lazzarato’s works and in particular Lazzarato (2014).
- <sup>54</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Deleuze 1986, 2003; Guattari 2011).
- <sup>55</sup> (Guattari 2011).
- <sup>56</sup> (Deleuze 1986).
- <sup>57</sup> (Deleuze 2003).
- <sup>58</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
- <sup>59</sup> (Guattari 2011).
- <sup>60</sup> (Marx 1996).
- <sup>61</sup> (Guattari 2011).
- <sup>62</sup> As such this essay implicitly deals with the (ethico)-aesthetics of the face in the context of Anonymous, attributing to it a peculiar position in the triggering of certain processes and relations. For details, *see* especially Guattari (1995).
- <sup>63</sup> (Guattari 2011, 77).
- <sup>64</sup> (Guattari 2011).



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<sup>65</sup> In this sense, Guattari's proposal strongly distances itself from the tradition led by Max Weber's concept of "charismatic authority," which works via identification with a leader. Traits of such a mirroring that lead to the formation and identification of the self can be equally found in Gustave Le Bon's and Sigmund Freud's theoretical proposals, respectively, of the collective (crowd) and the individual (ego). Instead, Guattari aligns more to Gabriel Tarde's microsociology of beliefs and desire. For details, see Weber (2019), Le Bon (2002), Freud (1960), and Tarde (1903).

<sup>66</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>67</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 225) summarise the research conducted by American psychology on the relationship between the mother and the child with a particular emphasis on the *visage*. Moreover, in his research on affect, Guattari (1990) prolongs the research on attunement conducted by Stern (1998), particularly on the preverbal subjective formation of the infant via her/his pre-rational activation through the vitality affects relating to the mother. The recent developments of the research on mirror neurons might be seen as a continuation of such a line of inquiry, even though the implicit reference to 'reflection' fosters a psychogenetic boundary more than an opening towards a vital and contagious imitation.

<sup>68</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 168).

<sup>69</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>70</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>71</sup> (Simondon 1989).

<sup>72</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>73</sup> The term 'homo' is generically employed here to critically address the range of species that compose the human-animal constellation, contrasting the reductionist position that equates human-animals only with the sapiens species and instead acknowledging the coeval existence of different species, their hybridisation, and the involvement of non-human alterities in anthropopoietic processes.

<sup>74</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 172; *transl. modified*).

<sup>75</sup> For details on the never-sleeping routines of late capitalism, see Crary (2014); for a discussion of platformism, see Srnicek (2017).

<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of circulation in relation to the neoliberal logic, see Dean (2009).

<sup>77</sup> (Wark 2012, 205-208).

<sup>78</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 181).

<sup>79</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

<sup>80</sup> An interesting instance that I was approaching during the writing of this essay is the dataset *Diversity in Faces* (DiF), which was released by IBM researchers at the beginning of 2019 (IBM 2019). The dataset is composed of one million annotated human facial images and, despite the scope of advancing research in the field of facial recognition, signals the further movement into which faces—and the related processes of extraction of facial traits—are being taken in contemporary societies. The dataset is based on faces sampled from another publicly available dataset of one hundred million images (YFCC-100M), which were harvested in 2013 from photo-sharing platforms such as Flickr, taking advantage of Creative Commons licences and raising public concerns—particularly from those people whose faces were captured and crunched (Metz 2019; Thomee et al. 2016).

<sup>81</sup> (Guattari 2011).

<sup>82</sup> During the first Anonymous street demonstrations in 2008, participants began to make themselves both recognisable and unrecognisable through the widespread use of Guy Fawkes masks. The first Anonymous street masquerade was organised as a precise response to the fear of reprisal from Scientology. According to the video released by Anonymous at the time to prompt and organise the protest, covering the face was one amongst many rules on how to manage participation to street demonstrations. Therefore, the face/mask as a facial machine emerged as a precise stratagem to resist the eventual retaliation from the Church, even though the Guy Fawkes imaginary was already part of the meme culture of the '/b/ random' image board on 4chan since 2006. On the relationships between stratagems and emergence see Fuller and Goffey (2012).

<sup>83</sup> An example that I was investigating while writing this essay is the launch in the night of October 28, 2018 of 'Operation Black Week' (#OpBlackWeek) by Anonymous Italia (together with the affiliated hacktivist networks of 'LulzSecIta' and 'AntiSecIta'). The operation consisted in seven days of different media actions—such as web defacements, data dumps, and leaks—against many public and private servers of Italian institutions and organisations (Anonymous 2018a, 2018b). The operation had the objective of exposing the fallacy of national cyber-security systems, as well as triggering participation in the Italian Million Mask March march, which took place in Milan at the end of the same week.

<sup>84</sup> For a theoretical and historical overview of valence bond theory, and particularly its resurgence as an experimental method within quantum chemistry, see Shaik and Hiberty (2008).

<sup>85</sup> According to the 2018 data of the World Bank, more than half of the world population has, nowadays, access to the internet.