

Guattari's on Facebook?! affects, refrains and the digital cloud

Alex Monea

Bowling Green State University
United States
amonea@bgsu.edu

Abstract

There are two fundamental questions about the digital cloud: What forces are behind it (i.e. what is its ontology)? And, how does it function? I argue that the force behind the digital cloud and all of its changes to institutions, discourses, power, and social norms is an affective 'cloud-ness'. This force is folded into the actual world through refrains, which work to both capture virtual affects and to catalyze their crystallization into the actual world. In so doing refrains institute myriad (re-)(de-)territorializations which in themselves are heterogeneous to the virtual affect that presupposes them, yet contain traces of affect that help us piece together a more thorough understanding of their ontology and functions. This paper is in large part a tracing of the affective residues in *Facebook*, which is one of the refrains that makes up the digital cloud. While the first sections of this paper will deal in the abstract and work to set up a theoretical framework, the later sections will focus more specifically on *Facebook* and the actual consequences of the (re-)(de-)territorializations that it entails. I will make the case that *Facebook* functions according to cloud logic, working to organize people into social rhizomes with a closeness that constitutes a reworking of tribalism (a *neo-tribalism*), and further that *Facebook* makes possible a becoming-cloud in which identity is spread out into a cloud in the manner of a subjective pluralism. Finally, this paper will close by looking at the ethical and political stakes in this new territory. On the one hand, this territory disrupts grids of normativity by affirming subjective pluralism, short-circuits abjection in favor of potential interconnectedness, and facilitates the founding of communities and coalitions. On the other hand, this territory also creates opportunities for powerful, new forms of biopower.

Keywords

Facebook; affect; digital cloud; becoming-cloud; neo-tribalism

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) argue that, as an assemblage, a text has only itself, and its connections to and relations with other assemblages and bodies without organs. It is unseemly to ask what the semiotic meaning of a text is. Their plan, instead, is as follows:

We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.4)

Later in that same volume they declare that the sole purpose of Schizoanalysis is to make rhizomes and enter into becomings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 251). This task is not one that can be planned for, so it is one that is instead engaged in through trial and error, efforts in multiple directions, and with any luck the seizing of a bit of *kairōs*. This paper is in large part a shot at Schizoanalysis, an attempt to forge a rhizome, or, more accurately, to point out an already existing one.

Taking *Facebook* as a point of departure, this piece attempts to unravel some of the changes that digital social networking has made to analog social networks, and to articulate these changes as part of a larger (re-)(de-)territorialization that is instituted by refrains of an affective ‘cloud-ness’. First, this piece will articulate a basic understanding of affect, paying particular attention to the way in which affects function in the virtual, and are only folded into the actual, and in particular the symbolic, through the work of refrains. Next, it will argue that there is an essential affective ‘cloud-ness’ that looms on the horizon of the internet that is manifested continually in refrains. As evidence of this, I will trace the way in which *Facebook*, a single refrain of that initial event, constitutes a return to tribalism in which each community member receives all of the daily news, from banalities to catastrophes, from every member of her community. This constitutes a *neo*-tribalism though, because digital tribal borders are so dynamic that they’re almost nonexistent. Each member of your digital tribe has an entirely different digital tribe of their own, which creates a web of social connections so thick and complex that it becomes a ‘cloud’. Finally, I will try to map some of the implications of this affective event and its refrains on traditional notions of subalternity and hegemony, particularly focusing on the becoming-cloud that it initiates. While now we can only speculate as to the eventual effects of this (de-)(re-)territorialization, this paper argues that investigations into the new potentialities for biopower opened up by the cloud are called for.

Section 1

Affect has no meaning, per se. In his article *Fashioning a Slave, or Singing Life*, Greg Seigworth (2003) argues that affects are both a-objective and a-subjective, and both a-signifying and a-representational. Affect exists outside of the realm of the symbolic, but is capable of irrupting into that realm. It can flow through objects, subjects, signs, and representations without ever being captured by them. It is for this reason that Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) write about the interminateness or the never-quite-fully-determined-ness of affect in *The Affect Theory Reader*. Seigworth and Gregg distill much of affect theory into the first few pages of their introduction. They note that affect can be an impingement or extrusion, or a sustained and everyday state, as well as the passage of all of these. It is a force or intensity that works alongside, behind, and in between the actual. At its most anthropomorphic, affects are all of those forces outside of both consciousness and unconsciousness that can drive us toward specific movements, thoughts, and extensions, but can also suspend us or overwhelm us. Affect is a body immersed in the world and all of that world's ebbs and flows (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1).

In his book *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy*, Manuel DeLanda (2002) attempts to explain the science that Gilles Deleuze somewhat silently put to work in his texts. DeLanda makes the case that affect functions similarly to information in that both effect a pattern or a shift in pattern. When we look at abstract (read: virtual) affects or information, both can be theorized as effecting pattern shifts (or as creating differential relations) without any need to reference a channel or mode of communication. Affect and information both behave strikingly similar to the particles in Einstein's "spooky action at a distance," or in subsequent quantum entanglement schemas (DeLanda, 2002, p. 75-81). This version of affect operates purely in the realm of the virtual. The instituted pattern that arises in the virtual does, however, come to affect the "real" world, but only by altering the trajectories of actualizations. This process of actualization works through refrains (which are, somewhat paradoxically, captured affects and empty husks or crystallizations from which affect has slipped away). Deleuze and Guattari refer to refrains as "essentially territorial, territorializing, or reterritorializing" (1987, p. 300). Refrains fold the virtual changes into the real world, creating new territories at the same time that they deconstruct old ones. It is important to note here, however, that these new territories, and the refrains that institute them, do not necessarily bear any resemblance to the initial virtual affects they attempt to capture.

It is from this virtuality that affect derives its force in the real world. In her essay “Affective Economies,” Sara Ahmed notes that, “it is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies” (2004, p. 128). In other words, it is the virtuality of the digital cloud that affords it the intensity to institute existential, physical, and discursive (de-)(re-)territorializations. This is why Félix Guattari in particular was so interested in affects and refrains. He saw in this radical alterity and intensity the possibility to constitute a new societal/communitarian logic of subjective pluralism. Lone Bertelson and Andrew Murphy (2010) similarly construct the affective event as a “looming-on-the-horizon-ness,” an indeterminate intensity, that works through its refrains to institute changes in the actual world that parallel (heterogeneously) the changes in the virtual.

This whole process is perhaps best described in Lone Bertelson and Andrew Murphie’s article *An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers*, where they argue that affects are unqualified intensities that are at work in us through refrains and modulation, affecting even those who cannot consciously detect their effects (2010, p. 148). In this article, Bertelson and Murphie are reworking the idea of the refrain (or *ritornello*) articulated by Guattari (1996) in *Ritornellos and Existential Affects*. In that article Guattari developed the notion of existential affects looming outside of the actual and the symbolic realm, but affecting that realm as they are reconstituted, looped, revamped, and remixed by their refrains. It is through these refrains that affective (re-)(de-)territorializations¹ are instituted and that new strata and lines of flight are established. It is only through these refrains that information about affective events can be gathered. What this means for our purposes is that investigation into the affects lurking in, around, behind, and in-between the internet must proceed by way of the refrain. We must examine effect to get back to affect.

Section 2

Facebook itself is but a single refrain of the affective event best described as a ‘cloud-ness’. While this affective event slips away when we try to capture it in language, its effects and the refrains it works through contain enough of a trace of that initial, virtual affect for us to glean some information about it. Everything that functions in accord with the new logic of the digital cloud, from ARPAnet to *Facebook*, contains these traces, particularly in their attempts to build rhizomes. As we noted earlier, the actualized version of an affect may bear no direct

¹ And here these (de-)(re-)territorializations can be the construction, deconstruction, or reconstruction of institutions, biopower/grids of normativity, ideologies, discourses, etc.

resemblance to its virtual counterpart, and further, these actualizations may go awry. There is always a large possibility for the diversion and corruption of this actualization process as it folds a new affect into the actual world. For this reason it is important for us to examine the way in which internet sites function, what logics they follow (read: what their trajectories are), and subsequently for us to determine whether they actually function rhizomatically, or instead are false rhizomes, tubers with fascicular roots arranged into faux-rhizomes.

As a refrain, *Facebook* works to institute a (de-)(re-)territorialization of social space along the lines of Marshall McLuhan's notion of a 'Global Village', but only in some senses. It would serve us better to think of *Facebook* as instituting a social rhizome, a decentralized system of social connections in which every heterogeneous point is potentially connected to every other. And in fact, this is exactly how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) describe rhizomes in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*. They further note that rhizomes have no beginnings or ends, only middles or milieus from which they overflow and grow by "variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (1987, p. 21). Any investigation into the rapid expansion of *Facebook*, its pandemic spread between bodies, its spilling across all boundaries, its capturing of public attention, market shares, bandwidth, and its offshoots into other websites, 10,000 of which integrate with *Facebook* every day (*Facebook.com*), will demonstrate *Facebook's* rhizomatic social structuring and its virulent agency. However, in recognizing these constant fluctuations, these ebbs and flows, one must also accept that *Facebook* is in a continual state of mutation that may violently and rapidly obsolesce any scholarship based on it.

The complexity of *Facebook*, particularly the virtual affect whose trace can be found in it, always slips away at the very same moment that it crystallizes into language. A better picture is still available to us though. Deleuze and Guattari also argue that the rhizome is made of lines, lines of segmentarity and stratification of its dimensions, and also lines of flight along which the multiplicity changes in nature and which can be followed in becomings (1987, p. 21). What then are the stratifications in a social rhizome like *Facebook*? Although every point or port in such a social rhizome is *potentially* connected, the actualization of these relationships occurs in stratifications that I would like to term neo-tribes. A *Facebook* user is constantly and directly plugged into the daily banalities and idle thoughts of every one in her friend-base. This is much akin to village life as imagined by Marshall McLuhan (1992), where an intimacy is forged between community members by this knowledge of banalities and a new form of public accountability ensues. But *Facebook* institutes a neo-tribalism because the boundaries of this tribe are infinitely dynamic. Each member of a user's neo-tribe has an entirely different neo-

tribe of their own, thus in potentiality every point is connected to every other, and in actuality every point is connected to every other by at most a few degrees of separation.

Facebook is but a single refrain of what I have labeled the affective event of the digital cloud. I have selected *Facebook* because it is indubitably the most proliferant, expansive, and penetrating iteration of the digital cloud. As I write, *Facebook* has over 500 million active users, half of whom log in daily, and collectively spend 700 billion minutes each month on *Facebook*. The average user is connected to 130 people, 80 community pages, groups, and/or events, and creates more than 90 pieces of content each month. Also, as illustrated in Homer Gil de Zúñiga and Sebastián Valenzuela's (2010) table in "Who Uses *Facebook* and Why" users are rather evenly spread across income brackets, education levels, gender, and race/ethnicity. The largest fluctuations occur between age levels, but even 11% of 65+-year-olds are active on *Facebook*. These authors further note that *Facebook* is the second most accessed site on the Internet, second only to Google (Zúñiga and Sebastián, 2010, p. xxxiii).

All of this demonstrates rather clearly that any argument that falls under the penumbra of internet studies generally must take *Facebook* into account. And, particularly in the case of postcolonial and subaltern studies, this relatively even distribution of use and access to *Facebook* (and more generally the Internet) warrants investigation into which forms of biopower, both top-down (à la Michel Foucault) and bottom-up (à la Michael Hardt) are rendered obsolete and which are just coming into being. However, a full investigation of the political implications of the digital cloud falls outside the purview of this paper.

Section 3

Deleuze and Guattari often argue that all affects are becomings (1987, p. 256; 1994, p. 169). The affective 'cloud-ness' that gets reworked and remixed in refrains, at the very same time that it is folded into the world, creates becomings: becomings-cloud, becomings-tribal. This becoming-cloud is yet another trace of the virtual, affective cloudness in the realm of the actual.

A becoming-cloud is always a becoming-multiple, a dispersion of self outside the skin, intermingling, always, with what in the previous territorialization was Other². In *Parables for*

² It is important to note here that Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between negative or false deterritorializations and absolute deterritorializations. There may be two types of becoming-cloud, a negative and an absolute. Here I am speaking about an absolute version. Later I point out that a

the Virtual, Brian Massumi (2002) argues that the body, and specifically the skin, is radically open to the world through affect, and in fact, the body is the primary source of our interaction with the world. Both conscious and unconscious awareness comes only after the body has interacted with the world, and linearity and causality are retroactively inscribed upon events to conceal this fact (Massumi, 2002, p. 28-29). For Massumi ‘every body’ is a body without organs, a subjective pluralism exploding out from the skin, forming a subjective ‘cloud’. A becoming-cloud or a becoming-tribal can challenge the traditional discursive practices founded on binaries like self/other, public/private, insider/outsider, and absence/presence. Further, as Massumi argues in his essay *Realer Than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari*, each and every becoming constitutes a line of flight, an escape from a singular position on the grid of normativity. As such, each subversive becoming-other is a step towards the destruction of the grid of normativity itself (1987, p. 95-97).

The extension of the body beyond the organism and the dispersion of univalent identity in favor of a cloud of multiple subjectivities also creates a radical new potential for the mass use of biopower. This is the type of power that Michael Hardt (1999) refers to as ‘bottom-up biopower’ in his essay *Affective Labor*, and as biopolitics in his later work with Antonio Negri. By facilitating vast social connections unbound by space and capital, the possibility for counter- and a-hegemonic communities grows; by creating potential social connections between any two points the logic of abjection can be short-circuited. As these identity clouds blur into one another, and multiplicities are affirmed (both subjective and objective), perhaps it also becomes easier to form the affinity-based cyborg coalitions that Donna Haraway (2000) calls for in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*. Maybe becoming-cloud *is* to open oneself up to myriad affinities, to potential affinities with any and every other subjective pluralism in existence. These ideas are all underdeveloped, and perhaps they always will be, but further investigations are again called for.

On the obverse end, this becoming-cloud also engenders a certain vulnerability to a Foucauldian type of biopower. Tiziana Terranova (2004) uses the term pointcasting to describe the most likely form that this new biopower will take. Becoming-cloud, and *Facebook* in particular, allows for the targeting not just the individual, but of sub-individual units. The elements that make up a subjective pluralism are susceptible to being targeted, isolated, decomposed and recomposed, formed into patterns, and integrated and disintegrated by

becoming-cloud may be initiated by advertisers, which itself might be the model of a negative becoming-cloud.

marketing models employing complex algorithms. Terranova writes that “the postmodern segmentation of the mass audiences is pursued to the point where it becomes a mobile, multiple and discontinuous microsegmentation” (2004, p. 34). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that every multiplicity has an anomaly, every pack has a leader, even though the occupant of that position, or the seat of leadership itself, may always be changing. It is with this anomaly that one must form a devil’s pact in order to initiate a becoming and chase a line of flight (1987, p. 245-246). What pointcasting posits is a stray to every pack, a weakling, an infirm, a newborn. Every pack has a weak link that can be targeted by power structures and exploited, and as subjective pluralism it is impossible to escape this weakness of the multiplicity. This radical potentiality for affinity, coalition, and friendship is at the same time and necessarily a radical vulnerability to manipulation, biopower, and (re-)subsumption under capital. Again, this issue bears further investigation, particularly into the efficacy of algorithmic targeting of microsegments of subjective pluralisms.

Section 4

In closing I would like to articulate one final concern, and that is the potentiality what Gareth Williams (2002) has described as *whitewashing*. The transitioning between temporal contours, between territorialities – existential, physical, and particularly socio-political – engenders a potentiality for the whitewashing or erasing of the atrocities and suffering created by the previous regimes, institutions, discursive frameworks, etc. In such a case, Williams articulates a particular form of affective haunting. He writes:

The residues of past suffering emerge as little more than anxious and, perhaps, frustrated signifiers of negative languages, part-narratives, fragmentary responses, affective residues, and fissured experiences that exceed, and that remain extraneous to, not just the managed transparency and consensual positivity of the current order, but also the historical and epistemological limits of critical reason itself. (Williams, 2002, p. 285)

We must keep in mind that these sorts of whitewashings are common occurrences across the globe; they are easy traps to fall into because they ease the burden of a heavy-laden conscience. If the future lies in a (de-)(re-)territorialization by cloud logic, in which the potential for both affinities/coalitions and biopower are amplified, we must remain apprised of the traumas of old modes of power (particularly the traumas of those previously on the losing end of hegemonic binaries). We must, as Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience*, remain in a

dialogue with our collective wounds and continue to listen to the stories that they tell us (1996, p. 3-4). Keeping our eyes open towards the future, and the opportunities for biopower in the future is not enough. Our eyes must remain pried open, gazing both forward and backwards, ever-vigilant.

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