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*PLEASE OBSERVE: THIS IS A SKETCH…*

# HACKING as DIALOGUE – *tech, fiction and design*

>*A sketch on how to approach the activity of hacking through the concept of dialogue, "through language", aiming to understand some of the meaning creation processes of design. I try to argue that hacking is an interactive practice to add "life" and transparency into a dead and opaque object or structure, reforming and appropriating it beyond its original intentions – but still in dialogue with them.*

>*Hacking is usually applied to discussions on code, software and computing mainly because of the technology in computing is "natural" for a practice of hacking. I let it juxtapose the culture of fanzine production – hacking of meaning and myth in narratives through post-production.*

>*Between hack and fan fiction – a zone of activity.*
*The hack is a mapping of flows through a system, manipulation of energies by reverse engineering. Modifying channels and flows to re-structure the function of a tool to inhabit it for change. To make it one's own.*
*Fan fiction is the appropriation of narrative, taking back the concepts – redesigning the meaning in a system and remaking it to fit the will of ones own. It is a hack on a conceptual narrative basis. A re-negotiation of tools for storytelling and a broadening of publics imagination by enriching the unknown life of the characters in a scene or movie.*

>*The dialogue will be a journey through these examples ending in fashion.*

DIALOGUE
In his book *Strukturer och livsformer* (structures and life forms) Jose Luis Ramirez is outlining a design theory starting very thoroughly with the design of concepts as the basis for our perception and understanding of the world. This concept design is a very active process that we need to understand better to be able to see the full implications and potential of design. As a consequence his theory of design has more a (practice-based) philosophical emphasis and starts "earlier" in the design process, before most of us even think we are in a process we call design.

One of the concepts Ramirez is bringing up is the "dia-logue" (dia-logos) – "through language", meaning the process of meaning creating through language (not by fixed structures in language but by the activity of handling language). The meaning is

thus created in the process, the practice of handling the tools of communication and thought – words and concepts. In a meeting between two persons (or with the world) we create concepts, sharpening them under constant negotiation and flows of intentional meaning. The concepts could thus be seen as temporarily inhabited constructions that we agree on (with "reasonable disagreement"?).

These conceptual constructions we use are structures that in themselves are shells, dead frames into which we fill our meaning but at the same time in constant flows along vectors and channels paved by previous discussions and historical discourse. They are already informed by relation to other concepts. The flows "energizing" them are the common debates and discursive battles raging along their fronts with different meanings crashing into the same shells, fighting over dominance and power to inhabit them – framing their meaning in connection to other concepts taken over in earlier battles.

If we try to analyze the flows and processes creating turbulence in these clashes and not focusing on the concepts themselves we might find other viewpoints more fruitful than the object based ones. (For example – if we look at fashion in the flows and processes, vectors and turbulences instead of specific garments or styles we might create another understanding of that specific field of tension – not only a discourse of aestheticized garments/objects).

Long ago we could see that culture was created by constant retellings and dialogues. Before the written word the means for maintaining culture was by continuously retelling and exchanging stories and narratives, and thus constantly reediting them. It was a culture for the masses, even if professionals would appear and even have a quite cosmopolitan living as traveling bards and storytellers. The same archetypes would reappear in a constant flow of narratives with infinite versions of the classics. When the written word started to materialize these dialogues they came into form of stories, songs and dialogues – the oral epic of Homer's Odyssey or the philosophic dialogues of Plato. They still had the fluidity of the oral word, the negotiating character of the dialogue.

With print the materialization tendencies of the word became emphasized and culture became manifested into objects and nouns and our culture came to cherish the measurable tangibility of the object which could also be included into a monetary economy. These characteristics became even more dominant on the last century when speech and moving pictures became tangible media and objectified (into the radio or TV-set as controlled one-way communication lines) and this view on culture became legalized (into intellectual property and such).

This objectified view on the practices of culture is inhabited in its greatest temple – the museum. There we are to witness the stability and enshrined objects of high culture, historical or aesthetical, saturated by meaning. These are our most valuable cultural treasures that should be kept away from aging and distortion by use and be saved for eternity.

But it is also at the museum the absurdity of the material object as cultural bearer becomes obvious, that it has lost its channels for use and dialogue. Especially apparent it becomes when exhibiting fashion. These dead skins that once were called "me" are in the exhibitions turned into contradictory manifestations of history – they give a feeling that the *wrong* culture is preserved and reveals a deep misconception on what fashion is.

What we see is an empty media, a dead channel. Like a book without prints, a media without message. The clothes are only bearers of the symbolic serious play we call fashion.

Instead fashion is the activity, the production of myth as a flow. A process and dialogue of cultural production, most often directed from the fashion system (the institutions with the largest influence in the semantic production of meaning – the haute couture houses together with dominant fashion media). Some parts of the consumption of fashion could be said to be interactive (we could react to it, interpret it, recombine it and our outfits), but since punk days an even more interactive practice of co-production in do-it-yourself spirit has been part of some subcultures. Some visual expressions have been adopted by the high fashion – but not the spirit itself. This spirit is a  perception of design as a form of modulation of culture through hacking and dialogue.

But what is this spirit of design and dialogue? One step would be trying to understand design (or in this example hacking) from a very dynamic perspective, applying it on situations of *individuation* (the individual as a process as proposed by French philosopher Gilbert Simondon as an Aristotelian teleology) or object transformation. Hacking as a process is then informing the matter and the flows modulating them through a process of interchange and communication – as a dialogue. Thus this dialogue could be embracing contradictions and paradoxes, spanning unexpected poles of tension, not avoiding fixed concepts and interconnection that at first sight seem to be impossible (as in questions if fashion can be democratic and inclusive, not elitist and exclusive).

But I would like to clarify my view through two main examples of design dialogue. These dialogues I would like to try to apply to two cultures of appropriation – hacking and fan fiction in an attempt to broaden my understanding of my own practice in "subversive fashion" and "sartorial hacking". Let's start with the two examples.

HACKING
Hacking as a culture has always been around but became a broader technological activity with amateur radio and car modding in the 1920s always connected to classic DIY culture but becoming "hacking" first with the introduction of computers.

Defining exact what "hack" means is a hard topic since it involves a lot of various fields of use and also commonly used outside computer contexts. It is usually an activity on making technology work the way one wants by direct interventions into the functional systems and operations of a machine or device; the conscious trickery and manipulation of a system. In this text I want to focus into one side of the term - a process of hacking in the meaning of reclaiming authorship and ownership of a technology by supporting transparency and unanticipated use. It is a critical as well as playful activity circling around a Do-It-Yourself approach to the means for our interaction with the world, circumventing unwanted limitations. A hack can be seen as a deeper intervention of customization.

Hacking in this sense could then be said to center around some topics (which also works well in an image of DIY culture):
- Access to a technology and knowledge about it ("transparency").
- Empowering users.

- Decentralizing control.
- Creating beauty and exceeding limitations.

It is a movement of making ones own world, reclaiming and reforming the environment into a more favorable or freer shape or mode not being forced to adapt a specific way of using technology. In a world where technology becomes more ubiquitous and "disappears" from view the hack is bringing political questions back into the light, subverting functions and uses of networks.

This is a politicized activity ruled by a vague "hacker ethic" of equal sharing and a basic notion that "information wants to be free". But it is also important to mention that the hack is also seen as a prank, a practical joke, a re-setting of an environment or an exploration into a forbidden space, but without harming anything involved. "Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but pictures" as is one of the mottos of Urbex – the subculture of urban exploration – the contemporary answer to Livingstone's journeys into the white spots on the African map by exploring the urban catacombs, sewer systems and deserted subway tunnels hidden in our everyday urban environment. The remaking of the maps to tell us more accurately what is actually going on in our proximity.


FAN FICTION
Creating own systems of design, publishing and distribution has a long history and is a part of the internal struggles within different disciplines such as press, music industry and also fashion. But fanzines I find especially interesting since they are a "hack" in the creation of meaning within popular culture.

The birth of fanzines (magazines made by fans for fans) also showed that this DIY approach was a means for people who wanted to build further on their favorite sci-fi tales and narratives, be it Star Trek or Flash Gordon, as self-published and distributed media. The tool for this movement started with the typewriter and flourished with the photocopy machine. (it is interesting that we haven't seen the death of professional magazines with the photocopy machine or printer, such as now the music industry claims to be "dying" of downloading)

Early the fanzines also started diverting into subgenres like slash fiction, the homoerotic adventures of characters outside the frame such as Kirk/Spock (from Star Trek), Crockett/Tubbs (Miami Vice) or Harry/Draco (in Harry Potter). Most of the stories are written by heterosexual women since the beginning of the phenomena. Another version of the fan culture is the fan cuts of movies where fans re-edit their favorite movies, changing scripts and flows or simply cut away parts they don't like. (the machinima culture can also be associated with fan cuts where popular multiplayer computer games are used as film studios for various dramas, filmed through the "lens" of one game characters eyes/screen.)

With the punk culture started a massive upsurge of zines combining the subculture genre of punk (music and lifestyle) with political activism and anarchism. Maintaining an anti-establishment aesthetic has since been a deep influence in zine culture to explore the possibilities of rough black/white styles and heavily rasterized images as well as including tips on how to manipulate/hack copy machines at Kinko's (big chain of copy shops in US).

The reason for punk/DIY self-publishing can be all from narrow interest or anti-commercial to illegal or subversive content (like anarchist cookbook). But mostly it is a way to bypass the bureaucracy of the publishing system and using the media as an unfiltered and unedited channel to the audience. Much of this scene has now been taken over by the blogs and other internet publishing tools (such as easily printed pocket books from diffraction.co.uk or lifestyle magazines like Fab) but are still working with the same mentality as the zines.

What we see in these two examples of hacking and fan fiction is a misuse of intended scenarios, breaking the structure of how the system of meaning creation was designed (from the top, as part of a "spectacle"). The scenarios are the big narratives of consumer culture and dominant structures of "how-we-should-live" (which also stretches into how we use tools, objects, and concepts). They are not actors in the play anymore but reclaiming a position as co-authors of their own scenario.

These processes are thus challenging two dominant aspects of the consumer culture scenario – interpassivity and radical mediocrity. Interpassivity is the rituals where we distribute activity to our media, letting the canned laughter in TV laugh instead of us or let prayer wheels pray and purify us while we think sinful thoughts. Radical Mediocrity is the contemporary process of middling, moving to the middle of intermediality (mediocrity) – becoming the inter itself, becoming omnipotent but losing will to the media. The democratizing of cooking by readymade sauces also withdraws our potential of learning how to cook.

DIALOGUE PROCESS
The dialogic structure of the hacking working process is breaking the idea of authorship as a closed situation with a sole *auteur* as the clearly definable sender of a message and with strict borders surrounding the work. Traditionally a work was closed either in space (by the format of the book with the author name on the spine) or in time (with the beginning name of a film and the ending titles and production crew in falling dignity). The dream was that the author was an isolated entity processing life into tangible form – or at least into a commodity shape that could be distributed by the gatekeeper/publisher.

This image of the author has never been true of course since even the most original author usually was a frequent guest at libraries and studied the technique of other writers thoroughly, often reflecting or replicating expressions and narratives.

The dialogic form of hacking is instead emphasizing the dynamic and open discussion in creation. Every speaker is an autonomous actor but the act happens *between* the two entities – in a clash of creative flows that constantly refer to earlier statements, continually influencing each other. It is a process of constant altering the existing work and previous statements and thus pulling an idea and story further between two actors. As such dialogic creativity cannot be used up or finally consumed but instead multiply with use, modifications and re-edits. The function of dialogue is to facilitate collaboration with a model of openness and a modular structure of creativity allowing the same rights to expression to both speakers.

It is quite apparent that both the hacking and fan fiction is using an already existing infrastructure and basis for production which they re-form through a process where some parts are kept or amplified and others tuned down or neglected. Some flows are re-injected through a new approach jamming some functions while at other hand creating new dynamics (manifestos on sharing or finding new meanings in film quotes). This is a dialogue in a simple sense where expressions and meanings are shifting through the process, celebrating the dynamics and flux of use and meaning.

But hacking is also a process and a practice handling flows of information and will. A dialogue with the material/media at hand, a process of negotiations between two actors channeling different flows (as author and reader/re-author).

Every discussion, reading, or situation of use is conformed of small mistakes in communication. We never read a book as we were intended to by the author (who is "dead") and thus every use and reading is an act of micropirating, an act of post-production.

The actors in this dialogue are practical negotiators, remaking the concepts they are using to better inhabit the tools and flows they surf upon. In his book *Postproduction* Nicholas Bourriaud calls the actors of this space "semionauts" – producing own pathways through sign systems.

The semionauts in this process are working with already defined concepts and signs but transforming them through re-linking and cross-over-formations, inventing new protocols of use transgressing modes of representation and formal structures. "The prefix 'post' does not signal any negation or surpassing; it refers to a zone of activity." (Bourriaud p.17) It is a practice of forming new connection between disparate sites, exploring how signs and channels can be inhabited through unlimited use. "We tinker with production, we surf on a network of signs, we insert our forms on existing lines." (Bourriaud p.19) Post-production is a tactic, the semionaut an agent in a culture of re-appropriation.

The semionaut and the practice of postproduction are two methods of understanding processes going on in hacking. In this sense "hacking" means to understand the structure, the vectors and channels onto which code, commands and power flow through a system, and specifically through its materialized concept (as the computer or software). The hacker breaks through the system, through the intentions to inhabit it, re-appropriate it and re-inform it by inserting a new will into the system. The will of the hacker taking back initiative.

*To make a successful hack the hacker needs to keep the power on, to keep the flows through the system intact, to keep it functioning as a tool, but reclaiming it, submit it under his will by taming and modulating the flows through the system. It is thus a manipulation of living forces, a tinkering with channels but as a re-circuiting of processes and flows. To hack is to orchestrate this change, recreating meaning and performing new scenarios. It is a dialogue, a negotiation with flows and vectors, maneuvering though turbulence and codified circuitry.*

The hack is thus a meeting, a confrontation of wills and intentions. It is an act of not playing along with the scenario, manipulating the dominant flow – breaking with the habitual usage (not an act of recognition, but more an act of violence).

The flows of technology and meaning coming together in these two examples above I find interesting to combine into my own research on how I try to manipulate and reform the flows within the fashion system – both on a physical and mythical level. They are both concepts and tools for our imagination and also ready to be reclaimed as concepts on how we imagine and deal with our reality.

Just like in the example of the hacker my aim is to keep the power on – to keep the myth of fashion still connected through the act of hacking garments and system (still keeping the process "energized" from the fashion system). To reconnect the flows and processes under a will of radical democratization (even though it might be a paradox since fashion as we know it is exclusive and elitist).

By creating a more flexible viewpoint, seeing the research more as a journey through flows and processes of negotiations (and not so much on objects, materials, clothes, patterns) the field of tension approaches a de-nounification – looking at how the vectors are energized and turbulences are created. It makes a good start in trying to understand the manual or instruction more as a travel plan or weather map than an object in itself. It becomes in itself a verb, a negotiation with the material and temporal flow of fashion and starts to inhabit specific empowerment processes of re-programming fashion from a very hands-on practice of hacking. The manuals are dialogues, processes of change and enrichment by hacking, by reforming meaning and self-organizing the means of design, publishing and distributing the new form or content, by re-connecting the circuitry of the system thus expanding the co-authorship in the scenario of fashion.

These acts of postproduction inhabit a system of vectors in a zone of activity. They are manipulations of flows and reappropriations of culture. Acts of beautification as well as democratization, challenging scenarios of interpassivity as well as radical mediocrity by a re-injection of active will.

The dialogues could also be compared to the use of language. The system is set up and powered with meanings long before we are born into the system and learn to express ourselves through a set of tools "controlled" by others (the institutions of language, processes of education etc). In subcultures and smaller groups we find rebellious tactics through music and slang, exploring another voice and dialect, inventing own meanings of words, "hacking" them. But many real enthusiasts and authors find their own style and language, their own unique voice and expression. They study the texts of the masters and learn the details of the grammar. They reverse engineer their language tools and invent their own for special maneuvers – but are still understandable and basically use the same words and tools as others.

The tools as such are both imprisoning and liberating depending on how skillful they are used. And how they relate to the other references of meaning and understanding.

THE HACKING OF FASHION PROJECTION
The common ground of these meanings and understandings is produced through projection. Fan fiction is a hacking of projection. It breaks through the main narrative by

giving another and deeper life to the image flows. Projection is about readiness – after a short while watching Star Trek we already know the characters and what they are – they fit into archetypes on how stories regularly are told. We learn to expect from them how they should act and we can thus identify with them and the story.

Fan fiction and slash culture breaks these stereotypes and creates chocking cracks the surface of the narrative. The roles of the characters are on the surface the same but the inner life of these characters has changed drastically and we will not perceive them the same again. We get to know what happened outside of the screen, what was before left as unrecognizable hints in the screenplay. We suddenly know TOO much about our heroes!

But this TOO much is for the devoted fans their freedom or co-authorship, outside the intentions of the official authors but becomes another enriching layer of the story.

I think we can look at re-form or DIY in fashion in a similar way. Fashion (clothes) because it is such a string myth in contemporary society – much stronger than the fashions of cars or architecture, which makes these reforms more like slash-hacks than "pimp my car" or "house makeover" – also because clothes is our second and social skin.

The fashion system can be said to work just like the authorship of the Star Trek – fashion houses authoring new episodes (spring-autumn), broadcasting them (shows) and also creating merchandise (not only the clothes but all accessories). The authors are having total control of their creation, including images and advertising and lets no commoner into the creation process which is often hidden and even mystified. (But we should make one thing clear; we are not fooled by the series, not fooled to watch – we like it, we desire it and it enriches our life with fantasy and stories. And fashion does too).

The fashion hack short circuits some flows of the system – it reinserts an old garment into the flows after it has been remade, transformed and also updated – but not in a submissive style because it cannot be remade totally according to what the system "dictates". The act of re-form also reinserts the garment into a new fashion cycle (another season) but at the same time lifts it out of the same cycle: the wearer now has a different connection to it after investing time and craft on it, and now wears it with a new strength. The reform is thus just like the fan fiction both an act of personal (co-)authorship – releasing the inner designer, but also about publishing it to other fans – or wearing and trying out the garment in public. Just like the fan fiction it bypasses gatekeepers and life cycles of projection but also adds a personal value in the same process (like an act of therapy).

Just like the fan fiction and the hack these processes happen through a range of dialogues – a criss cross between what is told in the official story and what is left blank for fans to fill in. Between useful scripts of code or repurposed details in machines we navigate and sort out the pieces we need to keep the power on. It is through these loopholes we access the functions and reverse engineer the flows and energy that powers up the mechanics, electronics, stories and myths.

The research I do and the reform fashion can thus be said to explore the fashion system's vectors through the living paradoxes of the system (exclusivity of myth contra inclusivity

of hacks). The main tactic in this process is navigating the paths of tension – the resonance and dissonance between these poles (the "oppression" of the system and the freedom/life it breaths, the opaqueness of copyrighted myth and the will for transparency, the approval and subversion). Trying to bridge some function and hack others – but keeping the power on.

It is important is to keep these flows alive, stretch and explore tensions and play of forces in the flows – creating turbulence and short circuits. Creatively break into the system to map, regulate and fine-tune the flow of ohm…

This tension is also the one consumers encounter when being both safe in conformity and free in individuality (by moving between various goods/styles/subcultures and combining various expressions to form an identity). It is just important to keep the harmony, understand ones position, explore the tools, ground oneself, and understand ones limitations to be able to transgress them.

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