Nicola Bozzi

TAGGING AESTHETICS: FROM NETWORKS TO CULTURAL AVATARS

Abstract

Social media have given social movements unprecedented tools for self-representation, however emancipatory identity politics are drowned out by the white noise of neoliberal self-branding practices. In response to this highly-aestheticised, de-politicised environment, we need a cultural re-negotiation of online categorisation. Rather than focusing on networks, this essay frames tagging as an everyday gesture of social media users that participates in the collective performance of identity. I argue this performance gives way to the materialisation of *cultural avatars* – collective identity figures that lie beyond coherent representation and can reinforce reductive social stereotypes or inspire politically critical figurations. Apart from offering a cultural critique of tagging itself, the essay discusses a range of creative approaches to tagging that de-naturalise processes of online categorisation by drawing critical attention towards them.

In the age of social media, identity has indeed "returned with a vengeance" (Apprich, ix). Networked platforms have definitely given social movements unprecedented tools for self-representation (think #Occupy, #BLM, #metoo), however the concept of "identity politics" has been complicated by the ambivalent nature of their architecture. Originally stemming from 1970s black feminism, the radical use of collective identity labels for political emancipation is drowned out by the white noise of neoliberal self-branding practices, constantly hi-jacking the flows of the attention economy for individualised purposes. In response to this highly-aestheticised, depoliticised environment, we need a cultural re-negotiation of online categorisation.

How does identity politics change in the age of social media? How does one reconcile the creative and emancipatory potential of resilient, far-reaching networks with the top-down determination of filter bubbles and online advertising? What "new theories of connection" (Chun) can help conceptualise this momentous change in mass-mediation?

Rather than focusing on networks, this essay frames tagging as an everyday gesture by social media users that participates in the collective performance of identity. This performance gives way to the materialisation of what I describe as *cultural avatars* – collective identity figures that lie beyond coherent representation and can reinforce reductive social stereotypes or inspire politically critical figurations.

I start by introducing tagging as a founding feature of the participatory web, hailed for its democratising potential in terms of information organisation. Then, I frame it as an operational form of identity labelling that contributes to naturalise historically grounded practices of social classification, with especially fraught implications in terms of identity politics. In the second section I delve into the aesthetics of tagging,

highlighting its role as a stepping stone between the structured ideology of social media categorisation and the poietic power of imagination. Emphasising its aesthetic quality as a performative gesture, my main argument is that tagging is more than data to be arranged in tag clouds or network maps, but a gesture that stitches together complex figurations that lie beyond representation. Finally, I conclude by discussing a range of creative approaches to tagging that de-naturalise processes of online categorisation by drawing critical attention towards them. These tagging tactics, I argue, may lead to the creation of more socially imaginative cultural avatars.

For a Cultural Critique of Tagging

Before I venture into exploring the aesthetics of tagging as a performative gesture, I shall introduce it as a practice of labelling and contextualise it within the identity politics of social media. Significantly, while I pay particular attention to the phenomenon of tags and hashtags, I also factor in the tagging of users as an underestimated form of labelling. In so doing, I use different terms: 'classification' (the act of dividing objects and individuals into groups, according to pre-defined categories), 'label' (a category embedded within specific historical-political contexts, often socially charged), 'identity labelling' (the act of classifying an individual as part of a social category, usually from the top down), 'tag' (an operational link created on social media with the purpose of categorising a piece of content – usually textual, but also linked to a username or a geographical coordinate), 'tagging' (the gesture of creating a tag). While these terms refer to materially

distinct objects and actions, in this essay I focus on tagging as a form of identity labelling, a context in which these terms blur and overlap. Rather than confusing the reader, my goal is here to highlight the critical charge and poietic potential of this conflation.

To understand the implications of tagging in terms of social categorisation and identity labelling, it is useful to consider the foundational framework provided by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star. Discussing several categorisation systems that are immediately relevant to human bodies – such as the International Classification of Diseases and race classification under apartheid in South Africa – Bowker and Star highlight how classification systems are far from neutral: politically and socially charged agendas are often presented as purely technical and thus difficult to see, while the "enfolding" of the layers of classification into a working infrastructure (Bowker and Star 196) leads to the "naturalisation" of political categories – when members of a community forget the local nature of an object's meaning or the actions that go into maintaining and recreating its meaning (299). Being politically and ethically crucial to recognise the vital role of infrastructure in the "built moral environment", Bowker and Start call then for "flexible classifications whose users are aware of their political and organisational dimensions and which explicitly retain traces of their construction." In other words: "the only good classification is a living classification" (326). Tagging, we shall see, seems to respond to many of these requirements.

As a form of categorisation, tags are one of the defining features of social media. They were introduced in the mid-2000s by the social bookmarking site del.icio.us, which allowed users to share links and label them individually through the use of textual keywords that made them easily searchable and accessible through the website. According to Thomas Vander Wal, del.icio.us was a turning point because it introduced identity—the object being tagged, but also the tagger—thus allowing for dynamic hyperlinking between pieces of content. In fact, the tags users choose to categorise the content they share on social media are more than textual references: they instantly become active links, easily clickable and dynamically organising content by linking a potentially heterogeneous constellation of items to the same word.

The possibility for users to create their own tags prompted Vander Wal to coin the term "folksonomy" – a portmanteau of "folk" and "taxonomy" referring to the bottom-up organisation of information. Importantly, the collective dimension of tagging and folksonomies is also in sense-making, and the tendency of folksonomies to stabilise around the most used terms has been seen as a sign of positive self-regulation (Shirky), while coexisting with minority views and different perspectives (Weinberger). Weinberger in particular uses the tree as a metaphor for traditional taxonomic structures, linking back to those of the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus and the Enlightenment, and juxtaposes it to the folksonomy as a heap of leaves – a botanical metaphor that Cairns extends to the rhizome, famously theorised by Deleuze and Guattari as a philosophical conceptualisation that allows multiple non-hierarchical representations and interpretations (Cairns 3).

Beyond its taxonomical efficiency, however, the infrastructural openness of tagging can have problematic consequences: spammers, it is estimated, generate about 40% of tags to manipulate search engines (Korner, Benz et al). In terms of ontology and meaning, this can have dangerous implications: the impact of white noise or external "trolling" represents a potential obstacle in the establishment of a shared ontology to represent the values and interests of a group, especially in the case of communities and

social categories where definitional stakes are high. In this respect, Avery Dame uses Tumblr's trans community as a compelling case study, documenting the emergence of a trans-specific folksonomy as well as the definitional conflicts within it. While trans users set themselves apart from wider public discourse through the use of specific terms, the folksonomy is unable to account for different user practices and gives them equal weight in influencing its development. As the folksonomy settles into a stable, ontological organisation through repeat use, debates over tag definition ensue. "Given the deep importance of ontological security to trans self-narrative," Dame points out, "users react strongly to contestations over meaning" (Dame 14). This process results in either the creation of new terminology or the policing of other users' tag usage.

De Kosnik and Feldman also notice the affordances of tagging in terms of identity politics, pointing out that "race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality are among the oldest and most persistent metadata, or 'tags', assigned to and organising human relations" (De Kosnik and Feldman 12). Recent accounts on the cultural specificity and historical situatedness of movements like #BlackLivesMatter significantly juxtapose these phenomena to the post-racial, post-feminist, "colour-blind" ideology that dominates the Internet (Brock), disarticulating racism from systemic oppression to individual beliefs (Florini 189) and producing reactionary campaigns like #AllLivesMatter. In other words, the networks stitched together by tags allow specific identity groups to express themselves, while exposing them to the antagonism of those who believe social difference is only a memory from a pre-Internet past.

As the aforementioned scholars highlight, a tag is then not just a quick technical shortcut for online participation: as an identity label, it can acquire an embodied and cultural character. Since a category is "in between a thing and an action" (Bowker and Star 285), I shall consider an often overlooked instance of tagging: the @-ing of users. While the # is still used for categorisation and topics, on a number of platforms it is possible to tag users by using the @ symbol followed by their nickname. Unlike content tagging, user tagging does not necessarily involve any attachment of keywords: a user is not "tagged" with a keyword as we would a piece of content, but their username is used itself as a tag that links their profile to a piece of content – for example a photo of that user, an article they might be interested in, or a meme they might relate to. Unlike Facebook, Twitter does not allow the "untagging" of oneself from other people's tweets, resulting in a material addressibility (Honeycutt and Herring) that allows anyone to "link up" to anyone else by mentioning their Twitter handle. This function can facilitate forms of trolling or online harassment (Phillips), which can have exponentially heavier effects on users with a large following or, most notably, users whose social identity is defined by "intersectional" (Crenshaw) markers of gender, race, or sexual identity/orientation.

By adopting the technical posture of a living classification, tagging has thus turned this process in a performative gesture that, often without appearing as an act of categorisation, formats identity so that it can be searchable and networkable. Relieved of the ideological weight stressed by Bowker and Star, this de-politicised materialisation of labelling practices risks accelerating the naturalisation of social categories. What kind of cultural criticism, then, shall we combine with this infrastructural awareness?

Significantly, Bowker and Star's work is deeply inspired by feminist and race-critical labelling practices, which "offer traditions of reflective denaturalisation, of a politics

of simultaneity and contradiction" (Bowker and Star 308). Arguing computer scientists should read African-American poets and radical feminism (302), Bowker and Star in fact praise Donna Haraway's famously hybrid category of the cyborg for defusing essentialist romanticism and techno-hype (301), as well as Gloria Anzaldua's "borderland". After the Hacker and the Nerd of Internet lore, then, a cultural critique of tagging is useful to consider what kind of figures emerge out of this socially-exploded Internet culture, what kind of cultural ideologies they reflect, and what kind of social categories are reinforced or marginalised as a result.

Beyond the Tag Cloud: From Figures to Figuration

Having clarified the techno-cultural context of tagging as a form of identity labelling in the age of social media, I shall now explore how its materiality can engender a cultural and political aesthetic in its own right. I articulate this argument in two movements: first, I set the premise for an aesthetic framing of social media by reconceptualising the practice of tagging in the context of "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud); then, I build on this premise to explore Olga Goriunova's notions of "art plaforms" and "digital subject" to outline how the everyday performance of social media users engenders cultural figurations that can be critically challenged through tagging.

From a scholarly perspective, the traceability of tagging has inspired a great deal of varied research. In particular, in terms of visualisation, the availability of tag streams as RSS data has enabled a number of tools, which found most prominently expression in the image of the once ubiquitous "tag cloud" (Trant 19). However, information aesthetics has its limits. From a formal perspective, its

"bird's eye view" has been complicated by a variety of recent cultural and technical developments: the emergence of fake news, massive use of bots, AI, trolling, memetic warfare, and in general the ambivalence inherent to Internet content (Milner & Phillips); from a political one, the renovated urgency of identity labels mentioned in the previous section might also demand a different approach. In relation to the first point, Alexander Galloway makes an interesting critique of information visualisation. Galloway argues all maps of the Internet, all social graphs, all word clouds look the same, and the aesthetic repercussion of this is that "no poetics is possible" in such a uniform space. For Galloway, the symbolic inefficiency inherent to information aesthetics is linked to the augmentation of algorithmic efficiency, ultimately proving that "there are some things that are unrepresentable" (85-86). In order to move beyond the visualisation of tagging as a modular element to be arranged in graphs, network maps, and tag clouds, and reinstating its imaginary (if not symbolic) efficiency, I shall consider it in relation with "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud), a concept emerging from contemporary art criticism in the late 1990s.

According to Nicholas Bourriaud, in the context of an exhibition works of "relational art" create an "arena of exchange" that proposes and represents certain "models of sociability" (e.g. a bowl of pad thai served by an artist in a New York gallery, an inside joke for Turkish immigrants diffused through a speaker) which must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria (Bourriaud 6). Since art provides a "plane of immanence" for the "exercise of subjectivity" (101), the above has implication in terms of how the subject itself is produced. The participation in the relational aesthetics theorised by Bourriaud in fact echoes two important theoretical takes on the aesthetic potential of the everyday: firstly the tactical practice of the everyday,

introduced by Michel De Certeau as an artful form of daily resistance against the alienating bureaucratisation of life under capitalism (without any real hope for systemic change); secondly, Félix Guattari's "de-naturalisation" of subjectivity (Bourriaud 88), which conveys the human sciences and the social sciences "from scientific paradigms to ethical-aesthetic paradigms" (96). In other words, for Bourriaud art as a collective relational practice is both inescapably embedded within and somehow at one remove from the productive constraints of capitalistic exchange, giving a glimpse into (and an experience of) a possible alternative.

This paradoxical – indeed, unrepresentable – quality of relational aesthetics offers a good perspective to examine cultural production on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and is especially appropriate in the context of tagging. Bourriaud presents in fact relational aesthetics as a theory of form, and defines form as a "lasting encounter" (Bourriaud 7). Since tagging establishes a material link and a trackable connection between users or content, it is the perfect materialisation of such an encounter. As a techno-cultural gesture, tagging has the power to coalesce a wide range of formations into a relational aesthetics that materialises social values by pulling together the most heterogeneous cultural elements (images, videos, users, places) the sum of which cannot be represented, but indeed engenders 'something'.

That something, I argue, is a 'cultural avatar': a collective, contradictory, unrepresentable subject that is culturally shared and yet may or may not be politically activated. For Bourriaud, in fact, material entanglement in the socio-economic infrastructure and narratives of empowerment interact. Similarly, the lines and dots traced by tagging appear first and foremost as expressions of a productive ethos, which often masks the ideological baggage of the practice as a form of social

classification. Its re-politicisation is thus not a given: it has to be achieved by identifying it as a labelling practice. In other words, to re-politicise the relational aesthetics of tagging we need some kind of figurations to outline what models we are critiquing. Using the term "avatar" is then important to highlight how these figures lack the emancipatory potential of figurations like Haraway's cyborg – they too exist between fiction and materiality, between the cultural ideals they stand for and the socio-political predicaments they arise from, but their historical grounding in problematic labelling makes them too contradictory and stereotypical to be truly utopian. The emphasis on stereotype is here crucial: rather than from authenticity, cultural avatars stem from areas of culture as they become compromised. To clarify this and critically conceptualise social media as an aesthetic infrastructure for the production of subjectivity, it is useful to consider the notions of "art platform" and "digital subject" outlined by Olga Goriunova.

Goriunova does not address mainstream websites like Facebook or Twitter, but provides a relevant conceptual framework in her definition of "art platform": a network platform that produces art, here understood broadly as a process of creative living with networks. Art platforms are "awkward mappings between technical, aesthetic and social forces that allow us to come closer to key issues in larger cultural formations, but also discover the exceptionalities of the particular" (*Art Platforms* 2). Crucially, an art platform engages with practices that do not necessarily self-conceptualise as art (7), although they participate in the production and amplification of new cultural currents and maybe even create new cultural figures and vectors of change (10).

This possibility for "new cultural figures" and "vectors of change" is crucial to my argument and it is further explored in Goriunova's

later theorisation of the "digital subject". Highlighting the distance between lived and datafied subjects, Goriunova explains how social media complicate the relationship between fact and fiction. She emphasises that digital subjects are always "more or less than human" ("Digital Subject" 9) – a formulation that opens up to the possibilities of fiction. In this respect, Goriunova references Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), a prolonged Instagram performance in which the artist impersonated a fictional character that participated in all the dynamics of social interaction required and encouraged by the platform to become a typical influencer. In her tale of personal development, delusion, and eventually redemption, Ulman inhabited a range of stereotypical female tropes: the next-door girl moving to the big city, the image-obsessed go-getter pursuing fame through artificially-enhanced appearance, the detoxed mother finding her way back to self-love. For Goriunova, Ulman's fake identity (whose success lied also in its controversial character) exposed the stereotypical dynamics of identity construction through a painstaking re-enactment ("Digital Subject" 17). Since "[d]ata regimes do not distinguish between bodies and novels, nature and culture", this type of participation taps into a key site of contestation: the question of how the real will be constructed (18). In the case of Ulman, the specific performance enacted by the artist feeds back into the contradictory narratives of the female stereotypes she is channeling – an open "constellation of references" that do not amount to facts or documents (Day 66, cited in "Digital Subject"), but may nonetheless shape how the aforementioned contestation of reality is played out. Ulman's material engagement with collective stereotypes through social media may thus be exemplary of a tactical approach to networked identity, but her reliance on what we could describe as the Aspiring Female

Instagram Influencer – a "cultural avatar" of peer-pressured femininity and capitalistic self-branding, unfinished and contradictory yet culturally shared and materially accessible – is necessary for her intervention on that configuration.

Goriunova's aesthetic framing of social media is not only very useful in order to renegotiate the terms of representability in the age of social media, but also a very good premise for a cultural critique of tagging. I have in fact framed tagging as a techno-cultural gesture that draws lines across users, concepts, ideas: cultural avatars do not coalesce merely out of data, but "evaporate" (to keep within the cloud metaphor) out of a range of tagging gestures that suggest or evoke these stereotypical figures, with different ideological orientations. Importantly, a cultural avatar does not correspond to any identity label per se, but emerges in part from a series of collateral labels – a tag-cloud of sorts, which broadly defines a relevant (yet not exclusive or exhaustive) imaginary. Be it the #BlackLivesMatter movement, followers of the #ootd ("outfit of the day") hashtag on Instagram, or an army of trolls @-ing a celebrity on Twitter to target her with sexist insults, the cultural avatar being evoked at each tagging is not a coherent representation, but something elusive and contradictory that materially embodies social conflicts and, sometimes, exacerbates them. Networks may serve as the material skeleton of such figure, but it is fleshed out by heterogenous layers of cultural references and social stereotypes.

An aesthetic critique of tagging practices shall then not simply be grounded in the materiality and embeddedness of these practices – to do that would be akin to the network mapping criticised by Galloway for being devoid of poetics – but in some kind of "formations" (to use Bourriaud's term) that these practices feed into. If these do not

amount to finished facts, they may instead engender something that is unfinished, and for this very reason political.

Tagging Aesthetics

Throughout this essay I have framed tagging as a performative gesture, exploring how it participates in the materialisation of cultural avatars. To conclude, I shall examine a few examples of critical approaches to tagging that de-naturalise social categories, exposing the problematic implications of digital architectures. Most of these endeavours relate to what I have defined as cultural avatars, steering them from the stereotypical towards the critical. Because they often elude the genre of "media art", I see them as happening at the intersection of a semi-spontaneous relational aesthetics (emerging from the intuitive affordances of social networks) and "tactical media" (Garcia and Lovink) – a concept that updates the tactical ephemerality of De Certau's "art of the weak" (De Certau 36) to the guerrilla approaches of 1990s media activism. While some have argued the concept of relational aesthetics may have been made less relevant within the new digital infrastructures of social media – themselves based on platforms, collaborations, and "prosumers" (Bishop, "Digital Divide") – Bourriaud's term has in fact been usefully re-contextualised within a digital environment by Rita Raley in her revisitation of the formula originally coined by Garcia and Lovink.

Tactical uses of tagging are not new. Several scholars of social media have written about how these infrastructures favour a "context collapse" (Wesch; Marwick and boyd), but on a basic material level several artists have used tagging as a tool to target specific imaginaries and stereotypes. Discussing Petra Cortright's YouTube video *VVEBCAM*

(2007), Quaranta points out the artist deliberately used improper tags to categorise the work (related to sex, porn, and pop culture), to the point that the video was removed from the platform for using misleading keywords. In examining Jayson Musson's famous YouTube series *Art Thoughtz* (2010), in which the artist impersonates a heavily stylised hip-hop art critic, Rajgopal also highlights how the possibility to access different audiences through the affordances of social media allows for relational aesthetics to maintain a useful potential for antagonism – originally, its main weakness (Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"). Fittingly, the tags for Musson's first video demonstrate the artist was specifically targeting both the art world and hip-hop listeners, proving that (like in Ulman's case) the aesthetic brilliance or political potential of his intervention should be criticised in reference to those imaginaries.

While Ulman's use of tags in *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) is not immediately remarkable, the Instagram parody account @jenyakenner seems to address the same Aspiring Female Influencer avatar. Portraying a fictional deadpan fashionista, the account participates in celebrity-driven fashion trends and engages in a relentless use of tags like #ootd ("outfit of the day") and even creates new ones (#waterambassador). While the former is a way to plug into mainstream fashion-related discourse on Instagram, the use of the latter exemplifies an ironic commentary on the commodification of natural resources and their exploitation by private companies and self-branding celebrities.

Another performative approach to hi-jacking Instagram tags to challenge mainstream stereotypes is @catonacci_official, presented as a former Marlboro model now forced to work as a cat sitter to pay student debt. While the artist maintains the posture of a self-assured male individual – the old-fashioned template of masculinity of the

Marlboro man – the figure of the cat injects layers of irony, ambiguity and even vulnerability. Ultimately, the contemporary figure of the recent graduate, forced into precarious work and financially pressured by debt, is put in stark contrast with the trope of the cat picture, typical click-bait on social media. This ambiguous, conflicted figure is injected into Instagram's "catscape" through the use of staple cat-related tags like #catlife and #catstagram, piggy-backing on the flows of Instagram's attention economy (Bozzi, "Tagging Aesthetics #1").

Manipulating hashtags is the most immediate of tagging tactics, however other types of tagging can also be used to generate critical discourse about social media categorisation and stereotypical cultural avatars. In *Hipster Bar* (2015), for example, artist Max Dovey used images tagged #hipster and #nonhipster on Instagram to train a machine learning algorithm that classifies queueing patrons at a fictional bar he set up at various exhibitions; if visitors match the hipster stereotype they are allowed in, otherwise the gate remains closed. The deliberately flawed process of selection designed by Dovey exposes the elusive nature of cultural stereotypes – in this case an avatar that stitches together pictures of bearded men and glasses along with coffee cups and clothing brands – and how they are impossible to recreate algorithmically (Bozzi, "Tagging Aeshetics #4"). Another example of critical approaches to a different type of tagging is Helena Suárez Val's research on feminist geo-location: in her PhD project, Suárez Val examines how mapping feminicide across Latin America using geo-tags and open data can be used to interrogate these practices and their implications in terms of embodiment, memory, representing women as victims, and their body as a territory.

Fuzzy and small as they might be, the heterogeneous practices mentioned above offer an encouraging glimpse into the possibilities of tagging aesthetics in the cultural renegotiation of online categorisation. With a bit of luck, the cultural avatars they engender might teach us how to leverage their stereotypical quality as an inclusive, rather than reductive, technology.

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