

*Rita Raley*

*Tactical Media*

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2009

ISBN: 978-0-8166-5150-4; 978-0-8166-5151-1.

Tactical media –or rather tactical use of any given medium– is a notion derived from Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactic, as elaborated in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). A strategy is a form of rule-bound behaviour that implements a goal set by an authority, which perpetuates itself through the realizations of such a strategy. A tactic, on the contrary, is a form of individual or collective reappropriation of the strategy’s rules and possibilities, in order to open spaces of freedom and non-conformity, although not in a ‘revolutionary’ way. Tactics help to escape –a little and just for a while the grip of the ‘system’. In a context of media theory, the notion of tactical media is a form of media activism best studied by Geert Lovink. In the manifesto “The ABC of Tactical Media” (with David Garcia, 1997; online: [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html)), it is stated that: “Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstream media.”

Rita Raley’s book is an interesting yet also problematic overview of the best of the current tactical media uses. It contains first a theoretical introduction in which the notion of tactical media is discussed from a wide range of viewpoints: theoretical, mediological, historical, philosophical, and of course also political. The main references, besides Certeau, are on the one hand Foucault and his ideas on the micropolitics of power and on the other hand Negri & Hardt’s *Empire*. Both references are read by Raley as a theoretical justification of tactic: since global revolution is no longer possible, critical interventions must necessarily take the form of tactical interventions, which raise consciousness by disturbing the dominant modes of representation and signification. Or to put it in a more mediological manner: since the locus of the power is no longer the streets but the network, the only possible way of protesting should target the new forms of digital culture and the virtual ecosystem of delocalized economy. After that, the book offers a study of best practices in three fields: migration and border studies, then war, and finally money. In each case, Raley analyzes examples of tactical media whose aims are analogous –the ambition or at least the hope of the tactical media activists is to contest in a way or another the strategy of totally deregulated neoliberalism–, but whose immediate impact can be very different. In certain cases, tactical media are close to digital sabotage; in other cases, tactical media seem works of art, yet with a more critical twist.

The strong points of Raley’s books are first of all the fact that the author hasn’t tried to offer a general and thus inevitably shallow survey of what tactical media are or represent in today’s media culture. Instead she focuses on three well-defined and closely intertwined fields that can be considered key to a better understanding of contemporary politics (which is by

definition a strategy) as well as of contemporary media activism (as a form of tactic). Second, *Tactical Media* deserves also praise for the clear theoretical underpinning of the issues at work in the three fields that are studied, with sound discussions of border studies, digital warfare and the intrinsic mobility of money. The problem however is that the twofold structure of each chapter dramatically increases the practical weaknesses of almost all tactical media. Not only is the social impact of these interventions often very small (if not inexistent, when the work is seen in the first place as a work of art and not as a political statement, or simply illusory, when the tactical work is made possible by corporate finance and withdrawn from the public sphere), but the very necessity to complete and support the tactical intervention by an often very sophisticated theoretical commentary or explanation inevitably weakens the social impact of the intervention. Something is missing in the global picture, and that something is exactly what tactical media prevent themselves from doing: going into the street and ‘doing’ politics.

This problem brings me to what I consider an even more problematic issue: the very dichotomy of strategy and tactic. Some recent publications, for instance by Lev Manovich (see his essay “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life”, in *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2, Winter 2009): 319–331), one may find interesting observations of the blurring of this boundary: corporate strategies tend to become tactical, whereas tactical interventions are presenting more and more features of strategic policies. Media activism should not be afraid of strategic thinking, just as today’s management of the financial crisis shows that the supposedly collapsed nation-state is far from having totally disappeared.

Jan Baetens