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Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Thought - part 1

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Philosophie - Nouvel article

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It is striking that one of the most fundamental issues of our study one of those that will explain both the commonalities and the insurmountable fractures within the rhythmic constellation already appears in the very first pages of *A Thousand Plateaus*, which tackle a famous question raised by Aristotle in his founding work *Poetics*: that of *mímêsis*. As one may remember, Aristotle did not conceive of literature as a mere imitation or reproduction of reality by poets, but considered that it provided an actual *re*-production of it, that was simultaneously enlightening concerning the forms which were at work within it, and creative or open to unknown forms of life (see Vol. 1, p. 103 sq.). Although they dismissed the role of the poet a little too quickly and did not mention that of rhythm which, for Aristotle, was fundamental in this case, Deleuze and Guattari shared his interest both in the way of flowing of the text and in its intrinsic pragmatic power.

Deleuze and Guattari in the Rhythmic Constellation

A "book," they emphasized, was not *about* something nor *by* somebody; it had "neither object nor subject"; it was merely made of "variously formed matters" that "worked" together while remaining totally exterior to each other (p. 3). These various matters, developing according to their own relative "intensity" and "speed," constituted an "*agencement* - assemblage" that was not to be attributed to a common subject (p. 4). In other words, the text be it philosophical or literary, because there was no distinction here to be made possessed its own materiality, its own dynamic and its own embedded pragmatic power, that equated it to a "machine." It was neither a picture of the world, nor an expression of the subject, it was a machinery in its own right.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, this "machinic assemblage" looked at first, i.e. from a structural or systemic perspective, as "a kind of organism, a signifying totality or determination attributable to a subject," i.e. here to a biographical entity. But one could also perceive in it, from the opposite perspective based on what they called a "*body without organs*," i.e. the body as sheer vector of molecular energy without regard to its physiological organization [1], an anti-systemic power that was "continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity" (p. 4). The dynamic "matters" composing a text had thus two faces: one firm and systemic, the other dynamic and corpuscular or molecular. While presenting itself as a totality, the text was made of fluxes of "particles" they did not explain at that point what they meant by that that translated into culture the ever new energies of life and filled up with non-biographical contents the names of its writers (p. 4).

Consequently, a text was not a device used for referring to things and ideas, as in traditional theory of meaning; it was just a "little functioning machine" that produced its effects by connecting its assemblages supported by the fluxes of a particular "body without organs" to other assemblages supported, in turn, by fluxes spilling from other "bodies without organs." Meaning was not based on a dualistic referential movement but on a monist and horizontal connection process between wandering energies and intensities.

As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. 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. A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. A book itself is a little machine. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 4)

Philosophy was not different here from literature. Noticeably, to illustrate this view, Deleuze and Guattari did not take any philosophical example but referred instead to Kafka and Kleist.

But when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work. Kleist and a mad war machine, Kafka and a most extraordinary bureaucratic machine... (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 4)

Thus, the very first lines of *A Thousand Plateaus* already gave some clues about Deleuze and Guattari's particular position in the rhythmic constellation, which, as a matter of fact, could be quite legitimately considered as they themselves suggested as "what it function[ed] with, in connection with what other things it [did] or [did] not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own [were] inserted and metamorphosed."

To begin with, one cannot help noticing their choice to start their journey by introducing the very concept of "machine" that was one of the first concepts crafted by Guattari but that had also topped Morin's recent theoretical construction. Just as for Morin, this notion denoted for them the necessity to overcome the limitation of those of "structure" and "system," which lacked fabrication and creation powers. As we will see, they ulteriorly largely expanded it by developing the concept of "war machine" that was completely alien to Morin, but they still shared with him a common anti-structuralist-systemist view based on the same concern for activity and creativity.

Secondly, since they hinted at Aristotle's *Poetics*, these lines suggested another quite unexpected proximity. Whereas Morin fell short of taking text and literature into account, Deleuze and Guattari were fully aware of their importance. They shared this view with Henri Meschonnic, who had already published since 1970 a series of essays and whose *Critique du rythme. Pour une anthropologie historique du langage* was to be published only two year after. As we will see, Deleuze and Guattari opposed Meschonnic on the primacy he gave to language, on the status of anthropology, and on the difference between literature and philosophy, but, as these first lines of the book plainly suggested, they nevertheless shared his refutation of the dualistic referential theory of meaning, his opposition to structuralism, his attention to the pragmatic power of texts, and, last but not least, his rejection of the biographical concept of subjectivity. For him as for Deleuze and Guattari, the subject was not to be reduced to the individual author of the text but was, on the contrary, what was induced by the text's activity and launched towards new readers as a *transsubject*.

As we will see, other contact points were soon to emerge, if not with Lefebvre's rhythmic critique of everyday life and Barthes' plea for idiorrhythmy, at least with Foucault's and Serres' recent reflections on rhythmic discipline and ancient *rhuthmic* materialism, to which they would in fact often explicitly refer in the book.

At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari stood in a very special position within the constellation. Like many other stars, if I may say so, they were critical of any theory based on reflection. Doing philosophy or theory was not to be reduced to painting an image of Heaven or to representing the organization and becoming of the World. Like others, they claimed that the only possible way to know the real was by intertwining the flows of the thought and those of the world. However, whereas Lefebvre advocated a dialectic approach and Morin a spiraloid movement between observer and phenomena that was meant to get as close as possible to the truth of the being, they rejected any permanent method to the benefit of random experiments and interpretations, and ditched the very idea of searching for a definitive truth as a remain of religious and metaphysical spirit. For them the ultimate truth of the interpretation was not only unreachable but also much less important as its efficiency. Deleuze and Guattari moved away from the scientific attachment to the value of truth, which remained essential for Lefebvre, Morin or even Meschonnic, and replaced it, in a pure Nietzschean spirit, with the value of action and change, which they shared with Foucault, Barthes and Serres.

Roots and Trees, Fragments and Cycles as *Antirhuthmoi*

Once this very first step had been taken, Deleuze and Guattari differentiated between three types of "books" but we may as well say of "theories." First, the "root-book" or root-theory organized as a tree or, more simply, based on a common root, and anchored in the belief that the theory should "reflect" or "imitate the world, as art imitates nature," through its "dichotomous" system of ramification. Instead of shedding light on the real play of multiplicities and assemblages, this type of theory reduced multiplicity first to a series of dichotomies then to "a strong principal unity." It thus operated a kind of artificial "spiritualization" of the world (p. 5).

But the book as a spiritual reality, the Tree or Root as an image, endlessly develops the law of the One that becomes two, then of the two that become four. . . Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 5)

Saussurian and Chomskyan linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism and even information science were given as examples of this rather traditional way to do science and to think according to "a binary logic and biunivocal relationships" (p. 5).

The second type of theory, typical of 19th and 20th century modernisms, was based on a "radicle-system, or fascicular root." This time, Deleuze and Guattari noticed, "the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed" and "an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development" (p. 5). Nietzsche's aphoristic philosophy, Joyce's multiple root words writing, or Burroughs' cut-ups, were given as examples of this second type. All meant to shatter the traditional primacy of unity and totality to the benefit of multiplicity, but their efforts, Deleuze and Guattari argued, had actually been quite unsuccessful. Due to the constitution of larger "cycles" re-integrating at an upper level what had been first disintegrated at the local level, the multiplicity that had been superficially retrieved in the object was again totally negated in the subject.

Joyce's words, accurately described as having "multiple roots," shatter the linear unity of the word, even of language, only to posit a cyclic unity of the sentence, text, or knowledge. Nietzsche's aphorisms shatter the linear unity of knowledge, only to invoke the cyclic unity of the eternal return, present as the nonknown in thought. This is as much as to say that the fascicular system does not really break with dualism, with the complementarity between a subject and an object, a natural reality and a spiritual reality: unity is consistently thwarted and obstructed in the object, while a new type of unity triumphs in the subject. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 6)

While this kind of writing and theorizing was supposed to definitely get rid of the traditional metaphysical perspective, it actually, Deleuze and Guattari claimed, maintained the primacy of unity and totality.

That is why the most resolutely fragmented work can also be presented as the Total Work or Magnum Opus. Most modern methods for making series proliferate or a multiplicity grow are perfectly valid in one direction, for example, a linear direction, whereas a unity of totalization asserts itself even more firmly in another, circular or cyclic, dimension. Whenever a multiplicity is taken up in a structure, its growth is offset by a reduction in its laws of combination. The abortionists of unity are indeed angel makers, *doctores angelici*, because they affirm a properly angelic and superior unity. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 6)

Surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari thus rebuffed most modernist critiques of metaphysical worldviews for not being radical enough. The accusation was strong and has usually remained unnoticed among their followers: the texts and theories that had been considered in the 1960s as the most advanced in breaking with the Western essentialist tradition had been only "mystifications" that maintained the desire for totality throughout the implementation of fragmentation.

The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos. A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 6)

The explicit rejection of Nietzsche whom had been considered by Deleuze himself but also by Foucault and many others as a forerunner of his own critique must be clarified though. At first, this seemed to imply adopting Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche's *Will to Power* as the culminating expression of Western metaphysics, a critique that had been known in France since its translation in 1971. The concept of eternal recurrence, the "return of the same," would thus oppose and balance that of "will to power" and its fragmenting effects.

But Nietzsche was often and positively quoted in the rest of the book and we know that critiques of Heidegger's reading were at the same time developing in the 1970s due to the realization that *The Will to Power*, on which Heidegger had focused his approach, was, as Montinari had convincingly shown, a "historical forgery" composed posthumously by his sister from notes drawn from his literary remains and wrongly presented by her as his *magnum opus*. Consequently, one wonders if more than Nietzsche himself, who actually doesn't seem to have ever considered encompassing his thought in this kind of ontological synthesis, Deleuze and Guattari's criticism did not actually indirectly target Heidegger himself and his numerous followers who claimed to have overcome Nietzsche's failure and have achieved *the* complete and definitive critique of Western metaphysics, thus both closing and enclosing the case. [2]

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[1] "A body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs (wolves, wolf eyes, wolf jaws?) is distributed according to crowd phenomena, in Brownian motion, in the form of molecular multiplicities." (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 30)

[2] For Deleuze, metaphysics was far from being finished and he sometimes presented himself as a metaphysician. He also explicitly reproached Heidegger and his French followers for their reception of Nietzsche's thought, which balanced his aphoristic approach with a reformed but nonetheless encompassing ontological view. Heidegger did not go far enough, he argued, into the *polemos*: "The Heraclitean element has always gone deeper in Foucault than in Heidegger, for phenomenology is ultimately too pacifying and has blessed too many things." (*Foucault*, 1986, trans. Seán Hand, 1988, p. 93).