

Capital and the shapes of the schizoanalytic unconscious

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“...an unconscious turned towards the future whose screen would be none other than the possible itself...” (TMU 10)

1. Shapes of consciousness

“I am interested”, Guattari says, “in a totally different kind of unconscious. It is not the unconscious of specialists, but a region everyone can have access to with neither distress nor particular preparation: it is open to social and economic interactions and directly engaged with major historical currents”¹. It is useful to think about Guattari’s interest by considering what he says in another essay - “molecular analysis is the will to a molecular power, to a theory and practice that refuses to dispossess the masses of their potential for desire”². The schizoanalytic practice is thus a means by which desire is brought front and centre without it being subsumed under the priests of interpretation.

This desire on the part of Guattari, to liberate the role of desire from the prisons of interpretation, is no doubt tricky to embrace. As he notes in the essay ‘Everybody wants to be a fascist’, the core of this problem lies in the *collective* reality of desire. At one point he reflects on the performative contradiction that might be thought to exist in the situation of an individual lecturer offering this schizoanalytic account - “in reality, everything I say tends to establish that a true political analysis cannot arise from an individuated enunciation” because “the individuated enunciation is the prisoner of the dominant meanings. Only a subject-group can manipulate semiotic flows, shatter meanings, and open the language to other desires and forge other realities”³.

This problem, of the *individuated enunciation in relation to the group ear*, becomes clearly visible when Guattari remarks, in the same essay on fascism, that “what’s the use of polemicising: the only people who will put up with listening to me any longer are those who feel the interest and urgency of the micropolitical antifascist struggle that I’m talking about”⁴. This acute sense of the limitations of those who will ‘put up with’ him appears to echo the

¹ Beyond the psychoanalytical unconscious, in Chaosophy: texts and interviews 1972-1977, Semiotext 2009, p197.

² Everybody wants to be a fascist, *ibid*, p164-165

³ *Ibid*, p161

⁴ *Ibid*, p164

actual practice of engagement with strange and psychotic discourses, no doubt reflecting Guattari's continual concrete engagement with psychotics in institutions like La Borde. The difficulties of dealing with the repetitions of psychotic language or behaviour often express themselves in terms of precisely this capacity to 'put up with' things, a capacity that the wider *socius* - outside of a clinical setting - generally lacks. One of the main difficulties someone with a 'mental health problem' encounters is the wearing down of their personal relationships as people refuse to 'put up with' behaviours and language that disrupts the smooth functioning of the social machine, a difficulty that is shared by anyone who speaks, writes or thinks in a way that doesn't conform to the easy-mode game of social cues and interactions. Most people prefer their games set to easy-mode. So when Guattari - who is often identified as one of the 'deliberately obscure' thinkers - acknowledges that he is difficult to listen to it might be thought that he is acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of his style. It is, however, not simply the style of his language but the content of his thought that is what becomes difficult to listen to.

The relation between the specific enunciator and the group ear, constitute the real terms of actual enunciation. It stands in contrast with the "universal interlocutor"⁵, that great imaginary face of reason in front of whom every rational speaker is supposed to stand, awaiting judgement. Analysis, reason, explanation - all operate, for the most part, inside this system of the 'judgement of God', in which the particularity of the statements are meant to be swept away in favour of the universality of the supposed 'truth' they attempt to articulate. Yet this strange, abstract model of reason hides in plain sight a simple lie, which is that what is said is what matters. This lie, that it is what is said that matters, removes that crucial and seemingly incontrovertible reality of the ear. In practice the users of language constantly negotiate with the ear, constantly re-speak their words as they negotiate with the ear of their interlocutor, a negotiation that constitutes the basis of 'personal relationships'. The to-and-fro between one individual and another in an intimate relationship reveals the reality of the ear in the word - what the other hears matters more than what words were used and the words are highly fungible in the struggle to make oneself heard or to hear what someone means. Anyone who fails to realise this will have many failed relationships. What you think you said matters less than what they know they heard.

Whilst this problem of the ear is acute in the relations people have with the 'psychotic' individual, it is prevalent to one degree or another in all talk, in all discourse. It's not a clean

⁵ Ibid, p161

problem, however, not an error that can be corrected. Rather it's a dirty problematic, one that refuses to be washed away and which calls for other strategies, ones that cannot be prescribed but which must be acquired. When Guattari says that the ones who will put up with him are the ones 'who feel the interest and urgency' of the problem he is addressing it is crucial to hear this emphasis on feeling. The collective conversation, this coming together of mouth and ear, is grounded in this 'vague sense' that we ascribe to feelings. It may be true that I feel before I think but what is forgotten is that I don't stop feeling once I begin to think. Thought is only ever alive and real, actual, when it is within a specific network of feelings. There is no actual thought in the pages of a book left on the shelf, at best only virtual thought. There is no thought without a tone of existence, without an 'affect' within which it is both produced and constrained.

It's easy to find much talk of 'affect' in modern philosophy and critical thought, although it is perhaps waning as the flavour of the month. Yet the connection between 'affect' and the 'schizoanalytic unconscious' is strong and thinking them together can amplify their capacity to be useful tools in making the world thinkable. In the contemporary world the problem of a political future distinct from the one we live in is deeply constrained by the problem of 'thinkability'. We hear the idea that "a radically different future is unthinkable", a point that has been made enough times now to become almost second nature to many. Yet the problem of the unthinkable future is best encountered not through pessimism but through a kind of joy, a joy that rests in the fact that thought is explosive. What I mean by this is that thought operates not in a causal sequence but in terms of excessive moments, those breakthroughs, sudden glimpses, the shifts and slides of the 'aha!' moment, what sometimes goes under the name of 'insight', a term not without its own difficult implications. In this situation if the problem of the moment is that the future is unthinkable then, at the same time, this blockage is deeply fragile. All it takes is for the thought of the future to arrive in order for the damn to burst.

This 'all it takes' is not nothing, however. It is not there to suggest an easy way to thinking the future but rather to indicate that there is a peculiar fragility which perhaps cannot be perceived in the present but that, nevertheless, we can wager exists. The wager becomes easier to make if the stakes are placed on the right horse and it is here that the connection between the role of 'affect' and the 'schizoanalytic unconscious' can help, predominantly by replacing the 'cognitive priority' conception of consciousness. Within this 'cognitive priority' conception of consciousness thought is conceived as a series of moments, usually moving

from starting point to conclusion, whereby an 'input' is transformed into an 'output'. This model of transformation is deeply delusional and massively idealistic. It assumes some kind of autonomous module that exists within the 'mind' and which mediates the input/output relations, relation that are in the broad sense between 'world' as input and 'behaviour' as output. Instead of such an abstractly autonomous module, consciousness is instead a kind of shape, one that exists as a network of relations and which possesses only as much autonomy as is possible within the particular state of relations. That network of relations, a network which places limits of the amount of autonomy possible, is what can be thought with the concepts of 'affect' and the 'schizoanalytic unconscious'. The connections is something like the following: the material body that thinks exists inside the social relations it is organised into, which it expresses as a particular set of affects (feelings) that in turn constitute the landscape of its possibilities, it's 'schizoanalytic unconscious'.

These four elements - the material body that thinks, the social relations, the sets of affects and the landscape of possibilities - all operate to constitute a world and each is malleable to a greater or lesser degree. A political thought which takes each seriously and which understands them to be moments of the articulated whole needs to think of causality less as a sequence of temporal moments and more as a fluid articulation of complex connections between points, as a set of vertices and edges. The shape that is constituted by the vertices and edges is the contemporary world of the subject - it is, in effect, the shape of consciousness at any particular moment. Within contemporary capitalism the shapes of consciousness continually undergo a set of pressures that attempt to 'push' such shapes into a particular mould, that attempt to fit square pegs into round holes, or more exactly that attempt to fit variable pegs into round holes. The round hole is constituted by 'capital', by an abstract, non-conscious immaterial force - a law of production - that is capable of direct effect on the points and lines that form the shape. It's capacity to deform the shapes of consciousness rests in the force it brings to bear on the shapes of consciousness, forces which produce, amongst others, the idea of the 'wage labourer', but which operates, fundamentally, as the primary force acting on contemporary consciousness.

2. Habits and molecular transformations

In a short interview called 'The unconscious is turned towards the future' Guattari is asked about the nature of 'molecular transformations'. "People often object to your penchant for abstraction", the questioner begins. Then they ask whether "for once could you be more concrete about what you mean by molecular transformations?".

Guattari doesn't comment on the curiously hostile tone that might be heard in this 'for once' - *just for once do you think you could be reasonable! Do you think you might say something that's not so obscure* - but we can hear it connected to the accusation of being 'deliberately obscure' that so often gets attached to schizoanalytic conceptualisations. Instead Guattari offers an example and it's an instructive one. In response to this question about what on earth molecular transformations are, Guattari says the following:

FG: Let's take an example: the technology of the pill. Here's something that deeply transformed relations to the sexual body, to conjugality and the family. It's only a little gesture, an evening ritual, a monthly purchase at the pharmacy, but it radically alters the socius⁶.

Three things are worth noting here. Firstly, the obviousness of the example, which is no less illuminating for all that obviousness but which indicates that 'molecular transformations' are not some obscure, abstract thing but something that 'everyone knows', that everyone is familiar with to some degree - molecular transformations are not invisible and we might begin to look for them in the concerns a society expresses in its self-conversation. Today, for example, an analogous role within contemporary self-conversations in society might be found with regard the 'black mirror' that is the mobile phone, or perhaps Facebook and the internet more widely. Second, however, note this use of the 'evening ritual' within this process. This curious term - 'ritual' - is perhaps more accurate than 'habit', although why is it more of a ritual than a habit? What would be lost if we spoke about the 'evening habit' of taking the pill (or, analogously, a 'daily habit' of checking Facebook, staring at the phone) - are rituals distinct from habits? Finally, a third thing to note is that this example employs a material technological moment - the pill itself - that is the co-ordinating nucleus through which the molecular transformations flow.

Putting aside the obviousness of the example and the role of the material, technological moment, focus instead on the role of this 'ritual' or 'habitual' moment. Felix Ravaisson locates the power of habit in the mediation between a 'conscious action' (Will) and a 'natural action' (Nature). "Habit", Ravaisson argues, "transforms voluntary movements into instinctive movements"⁷.

⁶ Felix Guattari, Soft subversions, edited by Sylvere Lotringer, Semiotext 1996, p226.

⁷ Felix Ravaisson, Of Habit, p59

“In descending gradually from the clearest regions of consciousness, habit carries with it light from those regions into the depths and dark night of nature. Habit is an acquired nature, a *second nature* that has its ultimate ground in primitive nature, but which alone explains the latter to the understanding. It is, finally, a *natured* nature (nature naturée), the product and successive revelation of *naturing* nature (nature naturante).” (Ravaisson, p59, emphasis in original.)

For Ravaisson habit is operating like a connective principle between domains of freedom and necessity, enabling thought to think the unthinkable, where this ‘unthinkable’ is not beyond but rather prior to any conception. “Between the ultimate depths of nature and the highest point of reflective freedom” argues Ravaisson,

“there are an infinite number of degrees measuring the development of one and the same power, and as one rises through them, extension - the condition of knowledge - increases with the distinction and the interval of the opposites. This is like a spiral whose principle resides in the depths of nature, and yet which ultimately flourishes in consciousness. Habit comes back down this spiral, teaching us of its origin and genesis.”⁸

He goes on to claim that “the history of Habit represents the return of Freedom to Nature, or rather the invasion of the domain of freedom by natural spontaneity”⁹.

Drawing on this sense of habit, one which locates its central role as mediating the domains of ‘necessity’ and ‘freedom’, the role of habits, for Ravaisson, is to transform voluntary movements into instinctive ones. They produce the ‘second nature’ that constitutes a ‘natural spontaneity’, a spontaneity presumably capable of being transformed by a process of reconstituting habitual activities. Guattari’s ‘molecular transformations’ are, in this sense, reconstituted habitualities. New habits form new natures.

One of the things missing in Ravaisson, however, is the sense of ‘social habits’, habits not formed by conscious actions of an individual but rather ones that have been ‘taken up’ or that have ‘caught on’, what we might call *viral habits*. Here the notion of ‘ritual’ is worth

⁸ Ravaisson, *ibid*, p77

⁹ *ibid*.

thinking about. When Guattari discusses the 'evening ritual' of the woman taking the pill he is talking colloquially and to that extent we could legitimately substitute 'habit' for 'ritual' *salva veritate*. Yet a lingering distinction still operates here. Substitution possibilities break down in numerous places. For example, it's not possible to substitute in 'habit' for 'ritual' when speaking of a religious or magical ritual because here the concept of 'ritual' has some content of its own over and above the description of a mode of activity. In particular 'ritual' activity has a mode of connection to the ear, the voice and hearing that cuts across the description of a mode of activity. There might be, for example, 'ritual habits' and 'habitual rituals' but the former indicate a content that determines the habits as those belonging to ritual rather than mundane activity. Whilst 'habit' can describe a mode of activity, it has nothing to say nor does it determine the *content* of that activity. Crudely put, habit is a means not an end. Habit, in particular, is a means deployed by magical ritual activity as part of a process of transformation that might be understood as the deliberate experimentation with and production of new formations of 'second nature'. In fact habit is widely deployed as a means of production of second natures, not just in magical ritual work but in huge areas of social life, perhaps even as the condition of social life itself¹⁰. Habit is a means of production of second natures.

(extremely fragmentary notes follow)

3. Ritual space and revolutionary consciousness

If habits are *a means* of production of second natures and 'second natures' are the shapes of consciousness (relations of production) constituted by the four elements of material body (Earth), sets of affects (Water), social relations (Air) and landscapes of possibilities (Fire), then 'habits' operate something like the 'form-givers' for the various shapes of consciousness (modes of subjectivisation).

Out of the four elements the one that seems to me most odd is perhaps this last one, the 'horizon of possibilities' (Fire).

Fire as the South, the Angel Michael, the emerald verdant splendour, noontide of fecundity.

¹⁰ Cf the example of children in nursery creches having the distinction between work and play imposed onto them that Guattari discusses in Chapter 6 of The machinic unconscious (henceforth TMU), p168-169

Yet the question remains as to how a habit comes to operate, how it becomes capable of binding the shape together in a particular form. How is it possible to ‘catch’ or ‘acquire’ a habit? For example, how would it be possible to acquire a habit that constructed a consciousness capable of *hearing that which is unheard*? Or, to return to one of earlier motivating questions, how is it possible to construct a consciousness capable of thinking the unthinkable future?

4. Here I want to connect ‘habit’ as a means of molecular transformations, with ‘abstract machines’.

An abstract machine is not an abstraction (ie: a universal).

“Abstraction could be defined as a conceptual isolate that *simulates* diagrammatic relations at the precise point where they are powerless. It absolutely declares the order of material and moral things in a world where all creative freedom has disappeared. It incarnates Life, the Spirit, and Change only when we are no longer in the presence of death, insanity and paralysis.

An abstraction will impose itself more like a synthetic a priori category...” (TMU 52)

What is an abstract machine? “Abstraction is not a ‘cooled down’ abstract machine but an active system of neutralization and recuperation of machinic indexes and lines of flight”¹¹.

This ‘cooled down’ is important, this sense of loss of libido or life-force, some vitalistic ‘well of activity’ that slowly trickles away. Vitalism, an active life force, may be discredited but entropy, thermodynamics, dissipation, this form of movement often holds sway. Sometimes this trickling is conceived of in geological terms, glaciers melting, ice-peaked mountains flowing into rivers of waterfalls and deltas of abundance. Be it vitalism or entropy, however, there’s something fishy about all that movement. That fishiness often smells of teleology, but in the end it’s the movement that’s worrisome, its source, shape, form.

5. Guattari on Freud on thermodynamic presuppositions

¹¹ TMU, p53

“Freud botched his brilliant intuition concerning the existence of an unconscious subjectivity by seeking to found it on thermodynamic analogies in a way that radically opposes a sphere of differentiated order and a primary sphere of undifferentiated energetic matter (Fn.9).¹²”

Here Guattari's footnote expands this thought:

FN 9: Freud distinguished:

1. A primary unconscious process setting in play a free energy of specific mechanisms of displacement, condensation, overdetermination, hallucination, etc
2. A secondary conscious or pre-conscious process setting in play an energy bound to mechanisms of inhibition, control, attention, focused thought, etc.

Schizoanalysis / abstract machines - role to enable movement (process) *without entropy being the sole principle of movement* (ie: a role for negentropic processes - binding / habits as core).

If an abstract machine operates as the unifying factor in a negentropic process and binding (habit / molecular transformation) is a negentropic process then binding depends on / results from / is the same as an abstract machine.

What Freud calls ‘binding’ Guattari conceptualises as organised by the ‘abstract machine’.

Discussion in TMU - pp 160-169 (just after the citation below on freedom, necessity and habit.

6. Freedom, necessity, habit

“As soon as we refuse to accord human subjectivity an exceptional existential status and we accept that other instances besides living consciousness and sensibility can ‘attach’ [*Bind*] their essence on the side of actualized flows and codes as well as on the side of a machinics of the possible the question of the constitution of social, spiritual, affective assemblages and that of material and energetic stratifications can be posed in new terms: that it is a question there of phenomenally distinct worlds

¹² TMU, p154

does not imply, in effect, that they are essentially separated from one another, that they do not participate in the same phyla, in the same machinic planes of consistency. There is 'subjectivity' as soon as it is assembled from machines and singularity points. But any concrete grasping of a subject in act is only possible by abandoning trans-historical essences or phenomenological analyses oriented simply around molar ensembles. Being-in-itself or being-for-itself are only relatively equivalent to being-for-praxis, being-for-assemblage. Molecular subjectivity, the living, free, creative part of machinic nuclei [*Abstract machines*], and the economy of the possible at its point of abundant growth on the real: such are the ultimate instances of the unconscious.¹³ (I've added substitution examples in *italics*)

'Molecular choice' (TMU 155)

7. Unlike a Freudian complex

Direct comparison of the abstract machine with Freudian complexes - Guattari distinguishes the abstract machine from the Freudian complex in terms of stages - the abstract machine can "participate in several stages at once under one modality or another: at the level of indexes..and at the level of strata..." (TMU 165).

(Indexes and Strata)

"... due to the bias of abstract machines, the libido never ceases to circulate between the instances of social repression and those of individual semiotization. But there is nothing necessary or automatic about this circulation; in order to be possible, two conditions must be met: 1) 'individual' desire must crystallize its indexes and its machinic points on an abstract machine; 2) certain elements or the repressive socius must be able to be connectable with this abstract machine" (TMU 164)

Example:

"If an enuretic child (bed-wetter) demonstrates the inability to carry out 'multiple division' in school as a secondary symptom, this does not presuppose a general inhibition of her logical competence - on the contrary, it can be seen that she is often

¹³ TMU, p159

capable of handling more difficult abstract problems - but only that she 'organises' a repressive jouissance within the framework of a rhizome:

[school-teachers-parents-grading system-repressive-prohibited notation-traits of faciality bearing upon masturbation, etc]. Her refusal of a certain type of logical discursivity demonstrates her desire to 'globalise' the assemblage in question. Thus, she arranges a sort of **extra-corporeal erogenous zone** (emphasis added), territorialised on a particular 'buttress'; the question of 'doing division' then becomes a machinic point, *the index of a potential line of flight* (emphasis added). Under different circumstances, the same child could also 'opt' for other symptoms, for example becoming mute, having anxiety attacks associated with shouting at the reading of a problem...In fact, the machines of power associated with re-education, the family and the school...**only become effective to the degree that they succeed in attaching themselves to such bio-psycho-social zones which do not have to take on the form of neuroses related to etiquette** (emphasis added) (example: adaptive and recuperative therapeutics that consists in repressing and normalising the child's modes of semiotisation territorialising its libido on a zone of stammering without which its pragmatic field would be reorganised in a way that would open it to new horizons and new realities). FN 18" (TMU 164)