

Machinic orality and virtual ecology

Don't speak with your mouth full, it's very bad manners! You either speak or you eat. Not both at the same time. On one side a differentiated flux — the variety of food taken up in a process of disaggregation, chaotisation, sucked up by an inside of flesh — and on the other side, a flux of elementary articulations — phonological, syntactical, propositional — which invests and constitutes a complex, differentiated outside. But strictly orality is at the intersection. It speaks with its mouth full. It is full of inside and full of outside. In the same space, it is complexity in chaotic involution and simplicity in the process of infinite complexification. A dance of chaos and complexity.

Freud demonstrated that simple objects like milk and shit supported very complex existential Universes: orality, anality, weaving together ways of seeing, symptoms, fantasms.... And we recall one of Lacan's first distinctions between empty and full speech. But full of what? Full of inside and outside, lines of virtuality, fields of the possible. Speech which is not a simple medium of communication, the agent for the transmission of information, but which engenders being-there; speech interface between the cosmic in-itself and the subjective for-itself.

Speech empties itself when it falls into the clutches of scriptural semiologies fixed in the order of law, the control of facts, gestures and feelings. The computer voice — “You have not fastened your seatbelt” — does not leave much room for ambiguity. Ordinary speech tries by contrast to keep alive the presence of at least a minimum of so-called non-verbal semiotic components, where the substances of expression constituted from intonation, rhythm, facial traits and postures, reinforce and take over from each other, superimpose themselves, averting in advance the despotism of signifying circularity. But at the supermarket there is no more time to chat about the quality of a product or haggle for a good price. The necessary and sufficient information has evacuated the existential dimensions of expression. We are not there to exist but to accomplish our duty as consumers.

Would orality constitute a refuge for semiotic polyvocality, a reprise in real time for the emergence of the subject-object relation? Quite frankly too marked an opposition between the oral and the scriptural seems hardly relevant. The oral, even the most quotidian, is overcoded by the scriptural; the scriptural, however highly sophisticated, is worked by the oral. Instead, we will begin with blocks of sensations formed by aesthetic practices before the oral, textual, gestural, postural, plastic ... whose function is to elude significations attached to the trivial perceptions and opinions informing common sentiments. This extraction of deterritorialised percepts and affects from banal perceptions and states of mind takes us from the voice of interior discourse and from self-presence — and from what is most standardised about them — on paths leading to radically mutant forms of subjectivity. A subjectivity of the outside and of wide-open spaces which far from being fearful of finitude — the trials of life, suffering, desire and death — embraces them

like a spice essential to the cuisine of life.

Performance art delivers the instant to the vertigo of the emergence of Universes that are simultaneously strange and familiar. It has the advantage of drawing out the full implications of this extraction of intensive, a-temporal, a-spatial, a-signifying dimensions from the semiotic net of quotidianity. It shoves our noses up against the genesis of being and forms, before they get a foothold in dominant redundancies — of styles, schools and traditions of modernity. But it seems to me that this art doesn't so much involve a return to an originary orality as it does a forward flight into machinations and deterritorialised machinic paths capable of engendering mutant subjectivities. What I mean by this is that there is something artificial, constructed, composed — what I call a machinic processuality — in concrete poetry's rediscovery of orality. In a more general way, every aesthetic decentring of points of view, every polyphonic reduction of the components of expression passes through a preliminary deconstruction of the structures and codes in use and a chaosmic plunge into the materials of sensation. Out of them a recomposition becomes possible: a recreation, an enrichment of the world (something like enriched uranium), a proliferation not just of the forms but of the modalities of being. Thus not a Manichean, nostalgic and old fashioned opposition between good orality and wicked scripturality, but a search for enunciative nuclei which would institute new cleavages between other insides and other outsides and which would offer a different metabolism of past-future where eternity will coexist with the present moment.

In our era, aesthetic machines offer us the most advanced models — relatively speaking — for these blocks of sensation capable of extracting full meaning from all the empty signal systems that invest us from every side. It is in underground art that we find

some of the most important cells of resistance against the steam-roller of capitalistic subjectivity — the subjectivity of one-dimensionality, generalised equivalence, segregation, and deafness to true alterity. This is not about making artists the new heroes of the revolution, the new levers of History! Art is not just the activity of established artists but of a whole subjective creativity which traverses the generations and oppressed peoples, ghettos, minorities.... I simply want to stress that the aesthetic paradigm — the creation and composition of mutant percepts and affects — has become the paradigm for every possible form of liberation, expropriating the old scientific paradigms to which, for example, historical materialism or Freudianism were referred. The contemporary world — tied up in its ecological, demographic and urban impasses — is incapable of absorbing, in a way that is compatible with the interests of humanity, the extraordinary technico-scientific mutations which shake it. It is locked in a vertiginous race towards ruin or radical renewal. All the bearings — economic, social, political, moral, traditional — break down one after the other. It has become imperative to recast the axes of values, the fundamental finalities of human relations and productive activity. An ecology of the virtual is thus just as pressing as ecologies of the visible world. And in this regard, poetry, music, the plastic arts, the cinema — particularly in their performance or performative modalities — have an important role to play, with their specific contribution and as a paradigm of reference in new social and analytic practices (psychoanalytic in the broadest sense). Beyond the relations of actualised forces, virtual ecology will not simply attempt to preserve the endangered species of cultural life but equally to engender conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt. This is to say that generalised ecology — or ecosophy — will work as a science of ecosystems, as a bid for political regenera-

tion, and as an ethical, aesthetic and analytic engagement. It will tend to create new systems of valorisation, a new taste for life, a new gentleness between the sexes, generations, ethnic groups, races....

Strange contraptions, you will tell me, these machines of virtuality, these blocks of mutant percepts and affects, half-object half-subject, already there in sensation and outside themselves in fields of the possible. They are not easily found at the usual marketplace for subjectivity and maybe even less at that for art; yet they haunt everything concerned with creation, the desire for becoming-other, as well as mental disorder or the passion for power. Let us try, for the moment, to give an outline of them starting with some of their principal characteristics.

The assemblages of aesthetic desire and the operators of virtual ecology are not entities which can easily be circumscribed within the logic of discursive sets. They have neither inside nor outside. They are limitless interfaces which secrete interiority and exteriority and constitute themselves at the root of every system of discursivity. They are becomings — understood as nuclei of differentiation — anchored at the heart of each domain, but also between the different domains in order to accentuate their heterogeneity. A becoming child (for example in the music of Schumann) extracts childhood memories so as to embody a perpetual present which installs itself like a branching, a play of bifurcations between becoming woman, becoming plant, becoming cosmos, becoming melodic....

These assemblages cannot be located in terms of extrinsic systems of reference, such as energetico-spatio-temporal coordinates or well-catalogued, semantic coordinates. For all that they are apprehendable through an awareness of ontological, transitive, transversalist and pathic consistencies. One gets to know them not through representation but through affective contam-

ination. They start to exist in you, in spite of you. And not only as crude, undifferentiated affects, but as hyper-complex compositions: "that's Debussy, that's jazz, that's Van Gogh." The paradox which aesthetic experience constantly returns us to is that these affects, as a mode of existential apprehension, are given all at once, regardless, or besides the fact that indicative traits and descriptive refrains are necessary for catalysing their existence in fields of representation. These games of representation possess multiple registers which induce unforeseeable consequences in existential Universes. But whatever their sophistication, a block of percept and affect, by way of aesthetic composition, agglomerates in the same transversal flash the subject and object, the self and other, the material and incorporeal, the before and after.... In short, affect is not a question of representation and discursivity, but of existence. I find myself transported into a Debussyst Universe, a blues Universe, a blazing becoming of Provence. I have crossed a threshold of consistency. Before the hold of this block of sensation, this nucleus of partial subjectivation, everything was dull, beyond it, I am no longer as I was before, I am swept away by a becoming other, carried beyond my familiar existential Territories.

And this is not simply a gestalt configuration, crystallising the predominance of "good form." It's about something more dynamic, that I would prefer to situate in the register of the machine, as opposed to the mechanical. It is as biologists that Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela proposed the concept of the autopoietic machine to define living systems. I think their notion of autopoiesis — as the auto-reproductive capacity of a structure or ecosystem — could be usefully enlarged to include social machines, economic machines and even the incorporeal machines of language, theory and aesthetic creation. Jazz, for example, is simultaneously nourished by its African genealogy and by its reactualisations in multiple and

heterogeneous forms. As long as it is alive it will be like that. But like any autopoietic machine, it can die for want of sustenance or drift towards destinies which make it a stranger to itself.

Here then is an entity, an incorporeal ecosystem, whose being is not guaranteed from the outside; one which lives in symbiosis with the alterity it itself contributes to engendering; which is threatened with disappearance if its machinic essence is damaged by accident — the good and the bad encounters between jazz and rock — or when its enunciative consistency falls below a certain threshold. It is not an object “given” in extrinsic coordinates but an assemblage of subjectivation giving meaning and value to determinate existential Territories. This assemblage has to work in order to live, to processualise itself with the singularities which strike it. All this implies the idea of a necessary creative practice and even an ontological pragmatics. It is being’s new ways of being which create rhythms, forms, colours and the intensities of dance. Nothing happens of itself. Everything has to continually begin again from zero, at the point of chaosmic emergence: the power of eternal return to the nascent state.

In the wake of Freud, Kleinian and Lacanian psychoanalysts apprehended, each in their own way, this type of entity in their fields of investigation. They christened it the “partial object,” the “transitional object,” situating it at the junction of a subjectivity and an alterity which are themselves partial and transitional. But they never removed it from a causalist, pulsional infrastructure; they never conferred it with the multivalent dimensions of an existential Territory or with a machinic creativity of boundless potential. Certainly, with his theory of the “objet a”, Lacan had the merit of deterritorialising the notion of the object of desire. He defined it as non-specularisable, thus escaping the coordinates of space and time. He took it out of the

limited field to which the post-Freudians had assigned it — the maternal breast, faeces and the penis — in order to relate it to the voice and the gaze. But he did not realise the consequences of his rupture with Freudian determinism, and didn't appropriately situate "desiring machines" — whose theory he had initiated — within incorporeal fields of virtuality. This object-subject of desire, like strange attractors in chaos theory, serves as an anchorage point within a phase space¹ (here, a Universe of reference) without ever being identical to itself, in permanent flight on a fractal line. In this respect it is not only fractal geometry that must be evoked, but fractal ontology. It is the being itself which transforms, buds, and transfigures itself. The objects of art and desire are apprehended within existential Territories which are at the same time the body proper, the self, the maternal body, lived space, refrains of the mother tongue, familiar faces, family lore, ethnicity.... No existential approach has priority over another. Thus it's not a question of a causal infrastructure and of a superstructure representative of the psyche, or of a world separated from sublimation. The flesh of sensation and the material of the sublime are inextricably interwoven. Relationship to the other does not proceed through identification with a preexisting icon, inherent to each individual. The image is carried by a becoming other, ramified in becoming animal, becoming plant, becoming machine and, on occasion, becoming human.

How can we, in this sensory submersion in a finite material, hold together an embodied composition (be it the most deterritorialised, as is the case with the material of music, or the material of conceptual art) and this hyper-complexity, this autopoiesis of aesthetic affects? In a compulsional manner — and here I return to that incessant coming-and-going between complexity and chaos. A cry, a monochrome blue, makes an

incorporeal, intensive, non-discursive, pathic Universe suddenly appear, and as a result other Universes, other registers, other machinic bifurcations are brought about: singular constellations of Universes. The most elaborate narratives, myths and icons always return us to this point of chaomic see-sawing, to this singular ontological orality. Something is absorbed — incorporated, digested — from which new lines of meaning take shape and are drawn out. We had to pass through this umbilical point — the white and greyish scabs at the back of Irma's throat in Freud's principal dream or, by extension, an object, fetishist and exorcising — so that a return to finitude and precariousness could occur, to find a way out of eternal and mortifying dreams, and to finally give back some infinity to a world which threatened to smother it.

The blocks of sensation of machinic orality detach a deterritorialised flesh from the body. When I “consume” a work — a term which ought to be changed, because it can just as easily be absence of work — I carry out a complex ontological crystallisation, an alterification of beings-there. I summon being to exist differently and I extort new intensities from it. Is it necessary to point out that such an ontological productivity in no way leads to an alternative between Being and being or between Being and nothingness? Not only is I an other, but it is a multitude of modalities of alterity. Here we are no longer floating in the Signifier, the Subject and the big Other in general. The heterogeneity of components (verbal, corporeal, spatial...) engenders an ontological heterogenesis all the more vertiginous when combined, as it is today, with the proliferation of new materials, new electronic representations, and with a shrinking of distances and an enlargement of points of view. Informatic subjectivity distances us at high speed from the old scriptural linearity. The time has come for hypertexts in every genre, and even for a new cognitive and sensory writing that

Pierre Lévy describes as “dynamic ideography.” Machinic mutations understood in the largest sense, which deterritorialise subjectivity, should no longer trigger in us defensive reflexes, backward-looking nervous twitches. It is absurd to impute to them the mass media stupefaction which four-fifths of humanity currently experience. It is simply a matter of the perverse counter-effect of a certain type of organisation of society, of the production and distribution of goods. Quite the contrary: the junction of informatics, telematics, and the audiovisual will perhaps allow a decisive step to be made in the direction of interactivity, towards a post-media era and, correlatively, an acceleration of the machinic return of orality. The era of the digital keyboard will soon be over; it is through speech that dialogue with machines will be initiated — not just with technical machines, but with machines of thought, sensation, and consultation.... All of this, I repeat, provided that society changes, provided that new social, political, aesthetic and analytical practices allow us to escape from the shackles of empty speech which crush us, from the erosion of meaning which is occurring everywhere (especially since the triumph of the spirit of capitalism in the Eastern bloc and the Gulf War).

Orality, morality! Making yourself machinic — aesthetic machine and molecular war machine (look at how important Rap culture is today for millions of young people) — can become a crucial instrument for subjective resingularisation and can generate other ways of perceiving the world, a new face on things, and even a different turn of events.

- 1 Abstract space where the axes represent the variables characterising the system.