

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Art - Part 3

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Literature as Bundle of Lines

Except in the few pages we have discussed above, the treatment of literature by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* was generally quite disappointing. Chapter 8, the only chapter entirely devoted to literature, was symptomatically titled “1874: Three Novellas, or “What Happened?” In it, they presented a series of analyses that remained mostly at the level of statements and narratives, without ever evoking enunciation, sound or rhythm. Whether in the “novella,” in the “tale,” or in the “novel,” literature was always about telling stories. It mainly concerned events, whether in the past, in the future or in the present.

It is not very difficult to determine the essence of the “novella” as a literary genre: Everything is organized around the question, “What happened? Whatever could have happened?” The tale is the opposite of the novella, because it is an altogether different question that the reader asks with bated breath: What is going to happen? Something is always going to happen, come to pass. Something always happens in the novel also, but the novel integrates elements of the novella and the tale into the variation of its perpetual living present (*duration*). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 192)

Opposing the famous analysis of folktale in basic structural elements by the Soviet folklorist and scholar Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), which had been translated into French in 1970, Deleuze and Guattari wanted “to demonstrate that the novella is defined by living *lines*, flesh lines, about which it brings a special revelation” (p. 195). In short, they aimed at dynamizing Propp’s “formalist” view—at least as it was known in France in these years since it appeared eventually that Propp had not been as a rigid formalist as the French wanted him to be. But literary texts were thus only used as documents describing social and individual transformations which—amazingly—were in perfect tune with their own political and ethical theory. Consequently, literature was not considered for itself but as an illustration of exterior considerations.

For example, in the 1898 novella by Henry James (1843-1916) entitled “In the Cage,” “the heroine, a young telegrapher, leads a very clear-cut, calculated life proceeding by delimited segments” and

“her fiancé is constantly plotting out [*ne cesse de planifier*] their future, work, vacations, house” (p. 195). A first sociological and philosophical lesson could be immediately drawn from this. She, he and we live a segmentary life in which “everything seems calculable and foreseen.”

Here, as for all of us, there is a line of rigid segmentarity on which everything seems calculable and foreseen, the beginning and end of a segment, the passage from one segment to another. Our lives are made like that: Not only are the great molar aggregates segmented (States, institutions, classes), but so are people as elements of an aggregate, as are feelings as relations between people; they are segmented, not in such a way as to disturb or disperse, but on the contrary to ensure and control the identity of each agency, including personal identity. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 195)

Of course, the young telegrapher discovers, through the telegrams of a client, who seems in danger, “the existence of another life” based on “flows and particles eluding those classes, sexes, and persons” (p. 196). However, the “molecular relation” building between them cannot develop fully because of an unspeakable secret and each of them ends up reintegrating the “rigid segmentary” system in which they and we live.

What happened? The molecular relation between the telegraphist and the telegraph sender dissolved in the form of the secret—because nothing happened. Each of them is propelled toward a rigid segmentarity: he will marry the now-widowed lady, she will marry her fiancé. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 197)

Yet, there is still some hope—this was the second lesson drawn from the novella—because “everything has changed” in the young telegrapher’s life. She has reached “a kind of *line of flight*.”

And yet everything has changed. She has reached something like a new line, a third type, a kind of *line of flight* that is just as real as the others even if it occurs in place: this line no longer tolerates segments; rather, it is like an exploding of the two segmentary series. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 197)

In short, the novella was just used to support Deleuze and Guattari’s political and ethical theories. This is why it would be useless to go into details concerning the two other works analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari, a novella by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) entitled “The Crack-Up” and another one by Pierrette Fleutiaux (1941-2019) entitled “The Story of the Abyss and the Spyglass,” published respectively in 1936 and 1976. Each time Deleuze and Guattari’s method and aim remained the same. They first presented the characters, summarized the story, and finally drew some lessons from it. According to them, all three novellas, despite the fact that they had been written forty years apart from each other and by different authors, described the same cracks in the Modern segmentary world through which we, fortunately, could envision to access to some “lines of flight,” that is, to reach one day a better life.

Noticeably, in none of these analyses did Deleuze and Guattari comment a single time on the poetic differences between their respective writings, which were considered only as mere carriers of information about the world. The literary peculiarities of the texts were completely erased to the benefit of an immediate philosophical or sociological reading. The perspective was implicitly dualist: informational content was everything and therefore the “rest”—style, enunciation, sound, rhythm, the flows of language—was deemed formal and inessential. Like modern linguistics, modern poetics was totally ignored. The end of Chapter 8 was instead devoted to the French educator Fernand Deligny (1913-1996) and the particular objectives of “schizoanalysis”: to find one’s “abstract lines” and “Body without Organs.”

The lines are inscribed on a Body without Organs, upon which everything is drawn and flees, which is itself an abstract line with neither imaginary figures nor symbolic functions: the real of the BwO. *This body is the only practical object of schizoanalysis*: What is your body without organs? What are your lines? What map are you in the process of making or rearranging? What abstract line will you draw, and at what price, for yourself and for others? What is your line of flight? What is your BwO, merged with that line? (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 203)

Literature as Part of a War Machine

In Chapter 12, the one introducing the concepts of “nomadology” and “war machine,” a few literary examples were discussed, this time with regard to their independence from or, conversely, their supposed involvement in the State apparatus. Deleuze and Guattari’s approach became even weaker than in Chapter 8.

Once more, Goethe was wrongly associated with Hegel. Both were summarily referred to as “State thinkers” and “old men next to Kleist” (p. 356), who, for his part, was considered as the herald of the war machine against the State of the time. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “modernity” was not on Hegel’s or Goethe’s side, but on Kleist’s because his writing was based on “secrecy, speed and affect,” because in it “feelings were uprooted from the interiority of a ‘subject’” and “projected violently outward,” and because Kleist dealt mainly with “the becoming-woman, the becoming-animal of the warrior.”

Throughout his work, Kleist celebrates the war machine, setting it against the State apparatus in a struggle that is lost from the start. [...] Goethe and Hegel, State thinkers both, see Kleist as a monster, and Kleist has lost from the start. Why is it, then, that the most uncanny modernity lies with him? It is because the elements of his work are secrecy, speed, and affect. [...] Feelings become uprooted from the interiority of a “subject,” to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings but affects. And these affects are so many instances of the becoming-woman, the becoming-animal of the warrior. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 355-356)

Kleist, they argued, introduced for the first time into literature the “exteriority” of the war machine

and this resulted in giving it “a new rhythm” consisting of a succession of “catatonic episodes or fainting spells, and flashes or rushes.”

This element of exteriority—which dominates everything, which Kleist invents in literature, which he is the first to invent—will give time a new rhythm: an endless succession of catatonic episodes or fainting spells, and flashes or rushes. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 356)

As we can see this analysis was again far from the complexity of the literary practice itself and simplistically separated between a good and a bad way to do art indexed on the relationship or absence of relationship to the State. Moreover, it came back, once more, to using the common metric concept of rhythm as a succession of stressed times. Far from shedding light on the “rhythmic character” of the text or on its poetic “consistency” or “intricacy”—to use their own words—Deleuze and Guattari limited themselves once again to the story and the “succession of episodes” it was composed of.

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By taking into account all the discussions devoted to arts in *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can now better understand the qualities and limits of Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to the artistic question but also, since art was presented as a sort of ethical and political benchmark, to much broader issues.

1. In their grand fresco of the Western history of art from the 17th to the 20th centuries, we first find a series of illuminating insights.

1.1 By considering art from a “molecular” point of view, they completely renovated the description of art works. Artistic matter was no longer considered as a “subject matter” liable of a “representation” but as a “*moving matter in a continuous variation*,” while artistic forms, for their part, were deemed “*in continuous development*.” On both levels, a *rhythmic* perspective was thus vigorously introduced into the theory of art.

1.2 This description accounted for the elaboration by 19th century artists of “great forms” such as literary cycles (Balzac or, in the beginning of the following century, Proust) or pictorial series (Monet), which provided the whole magmatic material with a flowing order. It also accounted for what they called “modern” works, i.e. 20th century works, based on a more radical rejection of the classical formal tradition. Since the world, as it was now described by physics, fluidized by capitalism, and reorganized by imperialism, was entirely molecularized, open and flowing, modern art set out to build only local and limited devices capable of “harnessing Cosmic forces” from local points of view. The great cycles which had dominated the preceding period were replaced by more restricted apparatuses trying to cope with an entirely deterritorialized and massified reality by installing pockets of “organized matter.” In short, “modern” artists brought to full recognition the fundamentally *rhythmic* nature of art since the Romantic era, condensing into smaller forms what their predecessors had sought in larger forms.

1.3 The main task for artists was therefore to find ways to give a specific “consistency or consolidation” to the “fuzzy aggregates” of molecularized matter they had to work with. This necessitated an internal “densification” but also, paradoxically, a greater “discernability” of the elements composing them. In other words, each work had to convert fuzziness into consistency by setting up a network of inner tensions which would make its elements solidary but discernible. Densification necessitated internal intensification. This new form of “paradoxical consistency” provided a sort of molecularized equivalent of the global “rhythmic personage” which characterized the literary works according to Woolf and James. It described the same phenomenon from the opposite viewpoint.

1.4 We saw that this new definition of art had notable ethical and political correlates. Since the Earth had been entirely deterritorialized by physics as much as by imperialism, while the peoples had been deeply massified or molecularized by capitalism, mass media and mass organizations, the artists both discarded the romantic equating of art with the exaltation of the self and relinquished the model of the traditional peoples attached to their territories. The artistic challenge was now to arouse or help create “a people yet to come” by transforming the existing populations, which were deeply massified and controlled, into other kinds of “molecular populations.” In the future, these would flow freely at their own *rhuthmos*. Idiorrhhythmy would then be extended from the small group of friends exclusively considered by Barthes to larger societies and why not to the whole humankind, or, to use Morin’s words, it would establish kinds of homeorrhetic peoples.

1.5. Finally, we have seen that Deleuze and Guattari transformed, at the very end of their reasoning, their historical approach into a typological one. In a very few lines, they boldly suggested that the three-period presentation they had just completed was, in fact, intended to identify three types of “machines” that had interacted in each of these periods. This ultimate turn was not entirely clear since they did not explain what were, in each one of the three artistic “ages,” the “proportions” between those three types, nor did they give any example to illustrate their suggestion. But, if we accept it, this meant that art was *always* building from an interaction between three poles: the pole of the “Classical” measure and equilibrium reflecting *heaven*, the pole of the “Romantic” quest for the forces of the *earth* and of the *self*, the pole of the “Modern” attempt at changing the fuzziness of the *cosmos* into consistency by setting a network of tensions between solidary yet discernible elements, and building it, ultimately, into a “rhythmic personage.” This also meant naturally that the Modern *intensification* could be projected back onto the Romantic *cycles* and *series*, and even onto the Classical *metric organization*—and vice versa. A very broad theory of art, encompassing most of Western kinds of artistic expressions, was emerging on an entirely *rhuthmic* foundation.

2. Deleuze and Guattari’s second notable contribution to the theory of art was presented in some of the passages more specifically devoted to literature scattered throughout the book.

2.1 We remember that, in Chapter 4, in order to support their critique of the mainstream linguistic argument according to which “there are constants or universals of the tongue that enable us to define it as a homogeneous system,” they did not refer to linguists but to writers such as Kafka, Beckett, Proust or Gherasim Luca, who, they said, gave to the German or the French language a whole new sound. Each had “his own procedure of variation, his own widened chromaticism, his own mad production of speeds and intervals,” in other words, his own manner of making the language flow. But we can legitimately extend this conclusion to any other author, and even to any other ordinary speaker. Therefore, languages are not homogeneous systems which impose their constants upon speakers and writers. The activity of language, its “variations,” its “speeds and intervals,” its

“tensors,” always come first.

2.2 These remarks were noticeably akin to Benveniste’s and Meschonnic’s linguistic and poetic descriptions, although Deleuze and Guattari seemed to ignore it. “All men, Benveniste emphasized against Chomsky, invent their own tongue at the moment and each one in a distinctive way, and each time in a new way.” Likewise, Meschonnic added, poetry and more generally literature are only particular forms of “enunciation” which produce “values specific to one discourse and only one” through the global organization of its “prosodic and rhythmic system.” In literature, but it is also the case in ordinary speech, “rhythm”—explicitly taken by Meschonnic in the sense of *rhuthmos*—gives language a specific quality that makes it both entirely particular and shareable. This phenomenon explains why literature can simultaneously express and convey the deepest feelings, emotions, imaginaries, memories, values of a particular individual and be received by readers from totally different social groups and in entirely different historical times.

2.3 Particularly important was here the overcoming of the separation between linguistics and poetics, that is to say between ordinary and artistic uses of the language. Poetry and more broadly literature are not “parasitic uses” of language, as Austin claimed. Quite the opposite, there is a fundamental continuity in its various uses. Consequently, the difference, which makes art what it is, is to be sought only in the degree of “variation” and “tension” introduced into the discourse, a conclusion which was in line with their previous descriptions of the “paradoxical consistency” and the “rhythmic personage” animating the works of art.

2.4 In the discussion of the fourth “postulate of linguistics,” which affirmed that “language can be scientifically studied only under the conditions of a standard or major language”—which was one of the most famous presuppositions of Chomsky, who worked all his life from the sole English language—Deleuze and Guattari did not refer to the numerous linguists still faithful to Humboldt’s spirit and more open than Chomsky to the diversity of human languages. But, strikingly, they used again literature to prove that language should be studied from the point of view of “minor languages.” This reintroduction of literature into the reasoning resulted in a series of notable remarks which naturally concerned both ordinary and artistic uses of the language. By placing language “in a state of continuous variation” through “the impact of tone on phonemes, accent on morphemes, or intonation on syntax” and by “stretching tensors through it,” that is by building “paradoxical consistency” and “rhythmic personage,” authors such as Kafka made their own language become “minor.” It was like, Deleuze and Guattari concluded, becoming a “foreigner” in one’s own tongue. Once again, this description, despite its rapidity and lack of philological illustrations, was close to Meschonnic’s work.

3. Deleuze and Guattari’s other discussions involving art were however sometimes much more debatable. In the last chapter of the book, which discussed the possible means of accounting for the various forms of interactions between “smooth and striated spaces,” and for the respective type of ethics and politics linked to them, they deployed three artistic examples which had very different values.

3.1 In the most interesting section of this chapter, Deleuze and Guattari borrowed from Pierre Boulez to elaborate the opposition between “nonmetric and metric multiplicities,” that is to say between regular and irregular distribution of space-time in music. By referring to Boulez’s desire to introduce “smooth space” and “continuous variation” into regular music, they were clearly parting

from the usual musical definition of rhythm, which accepted, since the middle of the 19th century, a few time distortions such as *rubato*, but which kept the regular pulsation as main reference. Strikingly, Deleuze and Guattari started then to elaborate on the kind of “consistency” contemporary music was aiming at, with the concepts of “continuous variation,” “continuous development of form,” and “rhythmic values.”

3.2 As in their discussion of the history of art, they finally relativized the opposition between “metric and non-metric” forms by noting that Boulez was actually concerned “with the communication between the two kinds of space, their alternations and superpositions.” Striated or metric space-time should not be conceived as simply contrary to smooth or non-metric space-time. While remaining opposite to the second, the first had to be included in what constituted a larger concept. Like writing, music was based on a “paradoxical consistency.” In short, metrics should be comprised into *rhuthmics*—and not the other way around.

3.3 The two other examples provided by Deleuze and Guattari in the very first and very last pages of the chapter were unfortunately much less convincing. Whereas the discussion of contemporary music as theorized by Boulez took into account a dynamic relationship between smooth and striated space-times, these sections devoted to “felt,” “quilt” and, lastly, “nomad art” implemented an impressively dualistic perspective. Art was divided into two opposite and exclusive kinds. Ancient nomad textile, jewelry and domestic objects would reflect the consubstantial relation of nomad groups to smooth space, while the Roman and Greek art would by contrast reflect the striated space instituted by the City-State. Moreover, this social and political division would entail a series of other more technical divisions: on the one hand, nomad art would oppose the Greek and Roman “long-distance vision” and “optical space” with “close-range vision” and “haptic space”; on the other hand, it would make a systematical use of “continuous variations,” “infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction,” discarding thereby measure, regular repetition, symmetry, and what Deleuze and Guattari called the Greek and Roman “ordered ambient space.” In a final touch of philosophical simplification, all these features would make nomad art one of the best visual and haptic equivalent of the “becoming itself,” of the “process” in its purest form, a “local absolute,” while, naturally, state art would reflect eternity, immobility, and universal absolute.

3.4 Likewise, in Chapter 8, Deleuze and Guattari regressed to a conception of literature that reduced it to its mere narratological dimension. Enunciation, sound or rhythm were totally neglected and the analysis remained mostly at the level of statements and narratives. What is more, literary texts were used only as documents describing social and individual transformations or as illustrations of political and ethical theories. Finally, in Chapter 12, a few literary examples were used to support the idea that only art, which like Kleist’s poetry, novel and theater is part of a “war machine,” would have a certain value, and that, by contrast, any art produced by “State thinkers” such as Goethe should be discarded *durch Nacht und Wind*. In all of these occasions, the same simplistic dualism which had been applied previously to textile, jewelry, housewares and architecture was now applied to literature.

3.5 These descriptions made it impossible to think of any other relations between these two opposite sides than a harsh subjugation of the “smooth nomadic art” by “the striated art of the state,” or a complete and anarchic emancipation of the first with regard to the second. As we have noticed, this was not however the conclusion drawn by Boulez, who clearly avoided any such strict dualism, that had more to do with philosophical speculation on art than with true artistic practice. Nor was it the opinion of any of the writers whom they cited, such as Woolf or Proust, or of those who were well

known for equally opposing both metric and dualistic views, as Baudelaire, Hopkins or Mallarmé. In this discussion, art escaped a vision motivated more by political aims and philosophical speculation than by actual observation.

4. If we are to fully understand this extraordinary imbalance or inconsistency in the artistic approach of Deleuze and Guattari, which made them oscillate between some of the most advanced *rhuthmic* perspectives and some of the most traditional dualistic viewpoints, we must certainly invoke various factors.

4.1 Many times, we have noticed that they recognized the *rhuthmic* aspect of art but that, due to the prevalence of the common musical model, this recognition was not accompanied by the development of a consistent theory of poetic rhythm. In these cases, Deleuze and Guattari faced a vexing problem: on the one hand, the traditional musical concept of rhythm could not be of any use in approaching art and more specifically literature, but on the other hand, the modern theories of music such as Boulez's, which theorized its *rhuthmic* aspect, dismissed the term rhythm as a mere by-product of a metric conception.

4.2 Obviously, Deleuze and Guattari's difficulty in dealing with art and literature was also linked to their rejection or ignorance of the linguistic and poetic side of the rhythmic constellation. Not only they caricatured Benveniste, but they entirely neglected Meschonnic whose work was not mentioned once in the whole book. Of course, this was not a personal matter but involved deeper issues. We meet here with the main limits of Deleuze and Guattari's Generalized Pragmatics. Due to their rejection of the specificity of language, whose unique semantic and subjective power they never recognized, due to the minor status they conferred on it by considering it secondary in relation to forces and action, and due to their hostility towards anthropology, which they wrongly imagined impossible to fully historicize, the linguistic, poetic and artistic sorts of pragmatics and *rhuthmics* were inaccessible to them. They could only have limited insights into them, the development of which was immediately blocked by a number of obstacles that diverted them towards metric and dualistic views.

5. As a matter of fact, this limit had been firmly set from the very first pages of the book. In Chapter 1, we will recall, Deleuze and Guattari developed a radical critique of philosophical theory.

5.1 Due to the second principle of "rhizomatic thought" which they defended there, the principle of "heterogeneity," the so-called "semiotic chains" supporting theory should not be separated from their objects and "functioned directly within *machinic assemblages*." In other words, language was always connected with entirely heterogeneous entities such as "organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (p. 7). This was true, of course, but the consequence they drew from this fact was less convincing. Since language was only partaking in "heterogeneous machinic assemblages," it had, they argued, no existence of its own, no specific nature, and a rhizomatic method should "analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers."

There is always something genealogical about a tree. It is not a method for the people. A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyze language only by decentering it onto other

dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 8)

5.2 In other words, eager to question the primacy of semiotics, they forgot that the latter was only a representation of language and, moreover, that its simple inversion to the benefit of a primacy of raw molecular matter and cosmic forces was not sufficient to overcome it. Based on their legitimate controversy against structuralism and the semiotic theory of sign, they mistakenly concluded that language enjoyed no theoretical and epistemological primacy. According to them, the world was accessible through it but also through other “modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.)” based on “different regimes of signs” and “states of things of differing status” whose relations with language they did not care to specify. How the “biological, political, economic” “modes of coding” do actually signify remained entirely mysterious.

On the contrary, not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 7)

5.3 Last but not least, they contended that language was not a universal feature of humanity. Therefore it could not be considered as the most solid—if entirely historical—foundation of anthropology, which actually evaporated.

There is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 7)

5.4 On all three accounts—the ontological specificity of language, its primacy upon matter, action and being, and its being a universal trait of humanity—Deleuze and Guattari were at odds with those among their contemporaries who advocated a fully *rhuthmic* conception of language and who, rightly in our opinion, claimed that language is a human and historical universal; that it is not reducible to a mere addition of semiotics and pragmatics, or of statements and states of things; that it is the only complete semiological system possessing both semiotic and semantic powers, and therefore the basic support of all other systems; in other words, that it is the most fundamental *interpreter* of the world and *generator* of society as well as subjectivity.

6. Therefore, art and especially literature, which are fundamentally based on the activity of language, on its capacity to produce meaning and subjectivize the speaker and the listener, the artist and the reader or the spectator, could not but escape an approach which made language secondary to matter and forces. Ironically, Deleuze and Guattari’s proclaimed hyperpragmatism prevented any “rhizomatic extension”—to use their own words—of their naturalistic conception of *rhuthmos* towards a linguistic and poetic conception of it. We remember that at the end of Chapter 11, they declared that art was a “question of technique, exclusively a question of technique,”

involving “a direct relation material-forces” (p. 342). This statement was obviously and rightly aimed at subjectivist conceptions of art, but it also entailed the bracketing off of the language and of the peculiar kind of subject and *transsubject* it sometimes allowed to circulate. Everything in their vision of art referred to the primacy of matter, forces and cosmos upon language, man and history. Although they strongly advocated the assemblage of entirely heterogeneous elements, something stronger than this commitment to openness and hybridization blocked the growth of new connection lines to the Aristotelian side of the rhythmic constellation: their fundamental naturalism.

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