

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Thought - part 2

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Rhizome as *Rhuthmos* of Thought

This deconstruction of modernist critiques was naturally meant to introduce the reader to their own kind of writing and theory: the “rhizomatic approach” which was thus presented as a way to radicalize what modernist writers and thinkers, including Heidegger, had announced without being able to achieve: a way of writing and doing theory that would be really immanent in the flux. It was no longer a question of *mimicking* the multiplicity and the fluidity of the world, Deleuze and Guattari declared, but of *participating* in it.

In this sense, the rhizome denoted a truly *rhuthmic* approach that did not separate between world and thought [1]. Since any dualism was to be abandoned, the thought should find a *manner of flowing* similar to that of the world itself. To do so, it should follow a certain number principles that Deleuze and Guattari enumerated in the following pages. It is important here to keep in mind that these characteristics and the rhizome itself were as much methodological concepts as ontological ones.

To begin with, theory as well as ontology should follow the first two principles of “connection” and “heterogeneity”: “Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (p. 7). These principles grounded a conception of theory supported by “semiotic chains” directly indexed on a fundamental ontological heterogeneity associating things as diverse as “organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.” This could be so because signs were not to be separated from their objects and “function[ed] directly within *machinic assemblages*” connecting them with entirely heterogeneous entities (p. 7).

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 7)

The third rhizomatic principle was “multiplicity.” Once the principle of unity removed from the

“object” as well as from the “subject,” and once dismissed the unifying power of the “signifier,” i.e. the language, the fluxes of the world could be reached and participated in by the thought as they really were, that is as proliferating multiplicities composed of heterogeneous transforming lines. None of them could actually be reduced to unity without to be “overcoded,” that is to say, translated into a higher dimension utterly foreign to the plan composing its flourishing lines. In this sense, although they always witnessed a growing number of connections, sometimes causing them to change in nature, rhizomes were “flat” temporal organizations.

The notion of unity (*unité*) appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity by the signifier or a corresponding subjectification proceeding: This is the case for a pivot-unity forming the basis for a set of biunivocal relationships between objective elements or points, or for the One that divides following the law of a binary logic of differentiation in the subject. The point is that a rhizome or multiplicity never allows itself to be overcoded, never has available a supplementary dimension over and above its number of lines, that is, over and above the multiplicity of numbers attached to those lines. All multiplicities are flat. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 8-9)

The fourth principle of rhizomatic theory was “asignifying rupture.” In those fluxes, no cut could possibly separate clearly identified structures. On the contrary, should a rhizome be shattered at a given spot, it would “start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (p. 9).

This paragraph allowed Deleuze and Guattari to sketch the outlines of a theory of becoming that was to be elaborated further in chapter 3 and that was not that far apart from Morin’s. While the latter, based on his survey of modern physics and biology, both contrasted and associated “stabilizing cycles and loops” providing physical or living clusters with a certain order and stability, with “poietic generation” and “creativity” introducing bifurcation, novelty and change, Deleuze and Guattari, capitalizing for their part mainly on biology and cultural studies, envisaged two solidary aspects of rhizomatic flows: one based on “segmentarity” providing order, distribution, organization, meaning and explanation to the matter; another one introducing in it disorder, change and creativity through “lines of flight.”

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 9)

However, as we can see, Deleuze and Guattari’s view of the stabilizing and ordering aspect was much larger than Morin’s. Unlike him, who limited himself to principles such as homeostasis and homeorrhexis concerning only formed systems, they were very careful in identifying the various ways of giving consistency and order to the matter. Associating ontological, ethological, semiotic and schizoanalytic perspectives, they differentiated between “stratification” (the process of ordering matter in strata), “territorialization” (the constitution by a body of a sphere of existence), “encoding” (the process of ordering matter through a code, whether genetic, semiotic or linguistic), or “attribution” (the process of attributing, most often falsely, the consistency of the ordered matter to

a subject).

Furthermore, their view on creativity and change was also more elaborate. Like Morin, Deleuze and Guattari drew part of their inspiration from the latest biological and evolutionary theory, which had condemned any crude linear evolutionism. But they noticed that, as some virus transporting “genetic information” from one species to another seemed to demonstrate, evolution followed “a rhizome operating immediately in the heterogeneous and jumping from one already differentiated line to another” (p. 10). Similarly, more complex living beings such as orchid and wasp could “form a rhizome” by being associated, despite their biological difference, through mutualism or ecological interaction. While the orchid formed “an image, a tracing of a wasp,” the wasp became “a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus and transpor[ted] its pollen” (p. 9). In such cases, the becoming could not be reduced to a common and mysterious poietic generation or creativity principle. While maintaining a kind of temporal solidarity, each “line” of becoming would remain heterogeneous, pushing forward in an entirely specific way: the “becoming-wasp of the orchid and [the] becoming-orchid of the wasp” or “the *aparallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other”—a description that, as a matter of fact, perfectly applied to Orchid-Deleuze and Wasp-Guattari themselves.

[There is no] imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying. Rémy Chauvin expresses it well: “The *aparallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 10)

Instead of looking at the solid “genealogical trees” that seemed to govern the becoming, one must look at the light “molecules” that jumped from one line to another. Causality as well as creativity were purged of any substantive subject and indexed on random circulation and association of molecular quanta of energy.

Transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees. Always look for the molecular, or even submolecular, particle with which we are allied. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 11)

This theory of rhizomatic and molecular becoming allowed Deleuze and Guattari to describe a book (or a theory) as associated with the world in a rhizome allowing “an *aparallel evolution*.” The relation between text and world was not that of “imitation” nor “mimicry” but of a dynamic and pragmatic interaction.

The same applies to the book and the world: contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an

image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 11)

Writing philosophy was therefore not anymore an exercise in gathering, classifying and abstracting information but in “deterritorialization,” i.e. in associating with entirely heterogeneous lines of becoming. Instead of the traditional way of describing the world through a conceptual system hierarchically organized, philosophers should cover it by random successive horizontal extensions and associations until it becomes “an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency,” that is the flow itself of the world.

Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 11)

The fifth principle of rhizomatic theory was “cartography” as opposed to “decalcomania.” Instead of using “structural or generative models” like in continental structuralism or Chomskyan linguistics, which were still based on “a logic of *tracing* [*calque*],” they advocated the use of “map.”

It is our view that genetic axis and profound structure are above all infinitely reproducible principles of *tracing* [*calque*]. All of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction. [...] The rhizome is altogether different, a *map and not a tracing*. Make a map, not a tracing. The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 12)

“Tracing,” Deleuze and Guattari contended, intended to reproduce, on a upper level, the subexisting structures as they were organized according to a code. Their pragmatic result, whether “in linguistics or in psychoanalysis,” was to impede any experimentation and innovation, and impose Law and Order.

In linguistics as in psychoanalysis, [the tracing and reproduction logic’s] object is an unconscious that is itself representative, crystallized into codified complexes, laid out along a genetic axis and distributed within a syntagmatic structure. [...] Its goal is to describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relations, or to explore an unconscious that is already there from the start, lurking in the dark recesses of memory and language. It consists of tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 12)

By contrast, “maps” would project intricate and dynamic phenomena on one single plane and therefore help to “remove blockages,” “foster connections between fields,” “open the bodies” to their largest possibilities, that is to allow full experimentation and innovation. Maps would not

“reproduce” an unconscious already given but participate in its “construction” within a common dynamic “rhizome.”

What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency. It is itself a part of the rhizome. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 12)

In that sense, psychoanalysis—but also theology, mystics, history, economics, biology, as well as linguistics—would produce “tracings” of the subject intended to get back to its definitive “competence,” whereas schizoanalytical “maps” would disregard any substantial support and concentrate on its “performance” and openness to the unknown.

Unlike psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic competence (which confines every desire and statement to a genetic axis or overcoding structure, and makes infinite, monotonous tracings of the stages on that axis or the constituents of that structure), schizoanalysis rejects any idea of pretraced destiny, whatever name is given to it—divine, anagogic, historical, economic, structural, hereditary, or syntagmatic. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 13)

Noticeably, Deleuze and Guattari then took as example of “tracing” and “arborescent systems” information and computer science. Although ignoring Morin’s recent critique of the reduction of “information” and “communication” to “program” and “transmission” (see Vol. 4, Chap. 11), they joined him in criticizing their binarity and verticality.

Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centers of signification and subjectification, central automata like organized memories. In the corresponding models, an element only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along preestablished paths. This is evident in current problems in information science and computer science, which still cling to the oldest modes of thought in that they grant all power to a memory or central organ. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 16)

However Deleuze and Guattari emphasized the recent development, unnoticed for his part by Morin, of “acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other.” In these cases, they noticed, the “local operations are coordinated” and “the final result” reached “without a central agency.”

To these centered systems, the authors contrast acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their *state* at a given moment—such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized

without a central agency. Transduction of intensive states replaces topology. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 17)

One remembers that, for Morin, *communication* could not be reduced to the disembodied *information* advocated by computer science. The opposition between the two concepts entailed a radical opposition between two kinds of society: one, authoritarian, based on command; the other, democratic, based on real communication and interaction. But he did not think possible nor desirable to get rid of any central power, especially that of the State that could enslave as well as emancipate society. Based on their rhizomatic approach, Deleuze and Guattari naturally suggested a more radical conclusion: not only there was a solution to organize action in a multiplicity of individuals “without a General,” but such “machinic society” rejected from the outset, as in Pierre Clastres’ description of South American Natives, “any centralizing or unifying automaton.”

The problem of the war machine, or the firing squad: is a general necessary for n individuals to manage to fire in unison? The solution without a General is to be found in an acentered multiplicity possessing a finite number of states with signals to indicate corresponding speeds, from a war rhizome or guerrilla logic point of view, without any tracing, without any copying of a central order. [...] This kind of machinic multiplicity, assemblage, or society rejects any centralizing or unifying automaton as an “asocial intrusion.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 17)

Pluralistic Monism as *Rhuthmic* Theory

Parallel to these theoretical-political considerations, Deleuze and Guattari generalized their description of the rhizomatic way to make the thought flow as the being. To avoid any “simple dualism” (p. 13) or even “Manichaeic dualism” (p. 14), they first insisted on the need to carefully describe the asymmetrical relationship between “tracing” and “map.” If “tracing” tended to “translate the map into an image,” that is, to “organize, stabilize, neutralize the multiplicities according to the axes of signification and subjectification,” therefore “generating and structuralizing the rhizome” (p. 13), reversely mapping could “show at what point in the rhizome there form phenomena of massification, bureaucracy, leadership, fascization, etc., which lines nevertheless survive, if only underground, continuing to make rhizome in the shadows.” But by “plugging the tracings back into the map,” one could thus “open them up to possible lines of flight” (p. 14).

As a matter of fact, the balance between mapping and tracing, structure and rhizome, stiffness and creativity, was extremely variable and its evaluation depended essentially on its pragmatic effects.

Thus, there are very diverse map-tracing, rhizome-root assemblages, with variable coefficients of deterritorialization. There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome. The coordinates are determined not by theoretical analyses implying universals but by a pragmatics composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensities. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 15)

Generally speaking, tracing and map, structure and molecule, tree and rhizome were not to be opposed as bad and good, or as exclusive ontological and methodological principles. On the contrary, one should see how they were specifically intertwined. Rhizome could grow “arborescence” and “despotic deformations,” just as tree could allow “anarchic deformations” as well as “aerial roots, and subterranean stems.”

For there is no dualism, no ontological dualism between here and there, no axiological dualism between good and bad, no blend or American synthesis. There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots. Moreover, there are despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees, aerial roots, and subterranean stems. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 20)

However, those principles were not equivalent either because, according to an evaluation that we will often encounter, each one of them had a particular pragmatic way of acting endowed with a different value. One functioned as “a transcendent model,” the other as “an immanent process.”

The important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 20)

As an “immanent process,” the rhizome was naturally superior to any “transcendent model.” Deleuze and Guattari cited Bateson’s reflections on Balinese culture to blame the Western culture for its prejudice pro transcendence.

It is a regrettable characteristic of the Western mind to relate expressions and actions to exterior or transcendent ends, instead of evaluating them on a plane of consistency on the basis of their intrinsic value. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 22)

Therefore, even if those opposite principles could appear to constitute a “new dualism,” the latter contained its own challenge, its own line of flight. As the analysis of the relation between tracing and map had already suggested, this provisory dualism was only an inevitable passage towards the desired “pluralistic monism.”

This is not a new or different dualism. [...] We invoke one dualism only in order to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models. Each time, mental correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we pass. Arrive at the magic formula we all seek—PLURALISM = MONISM—via all the dualisms that are the enemy, an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 20-21)

This meant—Deleuze and Guattari remained faithful to Kant on that crucial point—that monism or philosophy of immanence, as metaphysical viewpoint, was not immediately at hand but should be pursued as a transcendental target at which the thought should aim. Monism or immanence philosophy or multiplicity philosophy remained essentially potential and could only be partly actualized by the flowing of the thought through the various dualisms she had unavoidably to deal with. The idea of *rhuthmos* could be nothing but a *rhuthmos* of ideas.

Once exposed the five main characteristics of rhizomatic thought and ontology, Deleuze and Guattari explained why they had composed their own book with “plateaus” and not as a succession of “chapters.” Rejecting both the traditional philosophical systems and the more recent “en-cyclopedizing” approach promoted by Morin, they proposed an immense “assemblage” of heterogeneous texts that could be read “starting anywhere” and be related “to any other” one, except, they warned, for the introduction and the conclusion.

We call a “plateau” any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome. We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus. We have given it a circular form, but only for laughs. [...] Each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau. [...] All we know are assemblages. And the only assemblages are machinic assemblages of desire and collective assemblages of enunciation. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 22)

Strikingly, Deleuze and Guattari’s ended their introduction by contrasting the “tripartite division” world/book (or theory)/author with a dynamic “assemblage” “acting” on “semiotic, material and social flows.” Their book was clearly meant as a *rhuthmic* piece of theory plugged into and participating in *rhuthmic* material and social flows.

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). [...] An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on [*travaille sur*] semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously [...]. An assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 22-23)

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The first chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* was the initial step in the building of a very large *rhuthmic* philosophy. According to the most traditional academic criteria, it presented, under the name of “rhizome,” the methodology and the epistemology that were to be implemented in the book. However, as a result of Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of dualism and their endorsement of “pluralistic monism,” this epistemological and methodological introduction also entailed some ontological considerations. The rhizomatic theory of thought flow was accompanied by elements of a corresponding dynamic theory of being, which would, however, be plainly developed only in Chapter 3.

1. Deleuze and Guattari started their presentation with a radical stand which opposed them to a large part of the philosophical tradition. Knowledge was not to be considered any longer as reflection or representation but had to become action. Its value depended less on its possible adequation to the being, which was in fact only an illusory dream, than on its actual effects on society and culture. In this instance, they implicitly endorsed Marx's famous Thesis 11 on Feuerbach (1845): "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it."

2. This openly claimed hyperpragmatic framework shed light on the concept of "rhizome" which gave its title to the chapter. Traditional roots-and-trees organization of knowledge imposed diagrams upon the flow of the world that were not only simplistic but abusively spiritualizing. For their parts, modernist fragments-and-cycles attempts were only poorly mimicking the diversity and multiplicity of the world while saving in extremis the metaphysical category of totality. By contrast, the rhizomatic organization of knowledge, which was based on lateral growth and association between heterogeneous material, asignifying rupture and unexpected offshoots, was much more adequate to a permanently changing world characterized by multiplicity and creativity. Due to its specific versatility, it had also more chance to spread and become an active force among other social forces.

3. Thus, whether through the epistemological and methodological considerations or the basic ontological elements introduced in Chapter 1, Deleuze and Guattari clearly joined with the *rhuthmic* movement of the 1970s and early 1980s, but they gave it a very particular pragmatic form, the consequences of which will become clearer when we have examined other chapters.

4. The self-proclaimed heterogeneity and openness of their book, however, should not be overstated. As the reader can immediately see from our Table of Contents and as we will see as we go through the book, the latter was actually very well organized and met most academic requirements. Therefore, we will not indulge in the kind of disjointed reading that they recommended and which has prevented many readers from grasping both the immense qualities of their work and their limitations, and we will discuss it as it should, that is to say, carefully, completely and with as few jumps as possible between chapters.

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] As a matter of fact, the term ῥίζωμα - *rhizoma* - "mass of roots" comes from ῥίζα - *rhiza* - "root" which was related to ῥέω - *rheô* - "flow, run, stream, gush." This link explains why it was often used as a metaphor for "that from which anything springs as from a root" (H.G. Liddell & R. Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon)