

Machinic Animism

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“There has been a sort of de-centering of subjectivity. Today, it seems interesting to me to go back to what I would call an animist conception of subjectivity; to rethink the Object, the Other as a potential bearer of dimensions of partial subjectivity, if need be through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena for example. I do not recommend a simple return to irrationalism. But it seems essential to understand how subjectivity can participate in the invariants of scale. In other words, how can it be simultaneously singular, singularizing an individual, a group of individuals, but also supported by the assemblages of space, architectural and plastic assemblages, and all other cosmic assemblages? How then does subjectivity locate itself both on the side of the subject and on the side of the object? It has always been this way, of course. But the conditions are different due to the exponential development of technico-scientific dimensions of the environment of the cosmos.”

“I am more inclined... to propose a model of the unconscious akin to that of a Mexican Cuandero or of a Bororo, starting with the idea that spirits populate things, landscapes, groups, and that there are all sorts of becomings, of haecceities everywhere and thus, a sort of objective subjectivity, if I may, which finds itself bundled together, broken apart, and shuffled at the whims of assemblages. The best unveiling among them would be found, obviously, in archaic thought.

—*Félix Guattari*

“We do not know, we have no idea what a society without a state and against the state would be. Animism is an ontology of societies without a state and against the state.”

—*Eduardo Viveiros de Castro*

Guattari brings about a de-centering of subjectivity in separating it simultaneously not only from the subject, from the person, but also from the human. His challenge is to escape from subject/object and nature/culture oppositions, which makes man the measure and the center of the Universe, in making out of subjectivity and culture specific differences (differences) between man and animals, plants, rocks, but also machines and mechanics. Capitalist societies produce both a hypervalorization of the subject and a homogenization and impoverishing of the components of its subjectivity (parceled out into modular faculties



COPY xecution in "Old Sparky," Sing-Sing Prison's electric chair. c1900. William M. Van der Weyde. (Library of Congress).



such as Reason, Understanding, Will, Affectivity, governed by norms).

It is within this framework of a search for a new definition of subjectivity, one that could escape the capitalist enterprise, that the reference to animism is often made. In Guattari's work and in the same manner as in animist societies, subjectivity loses the transcendent and transcendental status that characterizes the Western paradigm. Guattari's thought and that of animist societies can find common ground in this understanding of subjectivity.

"I very much enjoyed a passage in which Guattari speaks of a subject/object in such a way that subjectivity is just an object among objects and not in a position of transcendence above the world of objects. The subject, on the contrary, is the most common thing in the world. That is animism: the core of the real is the soul, but it is not an immaterial soul in opposition or in contradiction with matter. On the contrary, it is matter itself that is infused with soul. Subjectivity is not an exclusively human property, but the basis of the real and not an exceptional form that once arose in the history of the Cosmos."¹

It is not subjectivity that separates man from "nature," because there is nothing "natural" about it. It is not a given, but it is, on the contrary, both an epistemological and a political operation. There is indeed something before the subject/object opposition and it is necessary to start from their fusion point. Guattari prefers to speak about "objectivity" and "subjectivity" to mark their non-separation and their reciprocal overlapping.

Guattari does not make a specific anthropological category out of animism, nor does he focus on a particular historical phase, since he does not limit himself to non-literate, non-governmental societies. Aspects of polysemic, transindividual, and animist subjectivity also characterize the world of childhood, of psychosis, of amorous or political passion, and of artistic creation. Guattari's attachment to the La Borde clinic is surely linked, as Peter Pelbart suggests,² to the radical alterity in which psychosis plunges us with regards to the subject and its modalities of "human" (linguistic, social, individuated) expression.

"And it is true that among psychotic people, and notably among schizophrenics, this practically daily commerce with particles of self or perhaps with corpses, outside the self, does not pose a problem... There is a certain very particular "animist" sensibility that one could call delirium. Of course it is a delirium by our standard; it is something that cuts psychotics off from the social reality that is completely dominated by language, social relations, thus effectively separating him from the world. But this brings him closer to the other world from which we are totally cut off. It is for this reason that Félix maintained this laudatory view of animism, a praise of animism."³

Guattari's summoning of animism (he goes so far as to say that it would be necessary to temporarily pass through animist thought in or-

der to rid oneself of the ontological dualisms of modern thought) does not signify in any way a return to some form of irrationalism. On the contrary, for the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, expert on the Amazon Indians, this conception of subjectivity is completely materialist, even permitting a renewal of materialism. "I just read the passages that you sent me on animism in Guattari's work that I was not familiar with, in fact. I find this artificial alliance between animism and materialism incredibly interesting, since it allows one to separate animism from any other form of idealism... To reintroduce a subject's thought that is not idealist, a materialist theory of the subject, goes along with the thought of the Amazon peoples who think that the basis of humans and non-humans is humanity. This goes against the Western paradigm, which maintains that that which humans and non-humans have in common is "nature."⁴

The "animism" that Guattari claims to represent is not at all anthropomorphic, nor is it anthropocentric. The central concern is one of "animism" which one could define as "machinic," to recycle the terms of a discussion that we had with Eric Alliez. In Western philosophy there are traditions of thought (neo-platonic, monadological, from the infinitely small to the infinitely large—Leibniz, Tarde, etc) which can coincide with the cosmologies of animist societies in certain places.

"Animism is present in the work of Deleuze before he meets Guattari. And it is a horizon, a totally expressionist category which participates in that which one could call, more globally, a universal vitalism. There, according to the neo-platonic tradition, everything breathes, and everything conspires in a global breath. This vitalism is visible in authors like Leibniz, but also in Spinoza across the general category of expression and expressionism... To my mind, what is going on in his collaboration with Guattari is that animism is no longer invested from an expressionist or vitalist point of view, but from a machinist point of view. And this changes everything, because it is necessary to understand once and for all 'how it works,' and how it works in our capitalist world whose primary production is that of subjectivity."⁵

What are we to understand by machinist animism? The concept of a machine (and later of assemblage), which allows Guattari and Deleuze to free themselves from the structuralist trap, is not a subgroup of technique. The machine, on the contrary, is a prerequisite of technique. In Guattari's "cosmology" there are all sorts of machines: social machines, technological, aesthetic, biological, crystalline, etc.

To clarify the nature of the machine, he refers to the work of the biologist Varela who distinguishes two types of machines: *allopöïétique* machines which produce things other than themselves, and *autopöïétique* machines which continuously engender and specify their own assemblage. Varela reserves the *autopöïétique* for the biological domain in reproducing the distinction between living and non-living which is at the foundations of the Western paradigm, whereas Guattari extends the term to social machines, technical machines, aesthetic machines, crystalline machines, etc.

In the universe there exist everywhere, with no distinction between

living and non-living, “non-discursive *autopoïétique* kernels which engender their own development and their own rules and mechanics. The *autopoïétique* machinic asserts itself as one for self and one for others—non-human others. The for self and the for others cease to be the privilege of humanity. They crystallize wherever assemblages or machines engender differences, alterities, and singularities.

All over the Cosmos there exist becomings, haecceities and singularities. If they are not the expression of “souls” or of “minds,” they are the expression of machinic assemblages. The disparities they create in variations have their own capacity for action and enunciation.

“For every type of machine we will question not only its vital autonomy, which is not an animal, but its singular power of enunciation.” Every machinic assemblage (technical, biological, social, etc.), once contained enunciative facilities, if only at the embryonic stage. They thus possessed a proto-subjectivity. There too, like subjectivity, it is necessary to separate the singular power of the enunciation of the subject from the person and the human. This goes against our philosophical and political tradition that since Aristotle has made language and speech a unique and exclusive characteristic of man, the only animal which possesses language and speech.

Guattari, detaching himself completely from structuralism, goes on to elaborate an “enlarged conception of enunciation” which permits the integration of an infinite number of substances of non-human expression like biological, technological, or aesthetic coding or forms of assemblage unique to the *socius*.

The problem of assembling enunciation would no longer be specific to a semiotic register, but would cross over into expressive heterogeneous matter (extra-linguistic, non-human, biological, technological, aesthetic, etc.). Thus, in “machinic animism,” there is not a unique subjectivity embodied by the Western man—male and white—but one of “heterogeneous ontological modes of subjectivity.” These partial subjectivities (human and non-human) assume the position of partial enunciators.

Additionally and most importantly, the expansion of enunciation and expression concerns artistic materials which the artist transforms into vectors of subjectivization, in “animist” *autopoïétiques* facilities.

“The artist and more generally, aesthetic perception, detaches and de-territorializes a segment of the real in order to make it play the role of partial enunciator. The art confers meaning and alterity to a subgroup of the perceived world. This quasi-animist speaking out on the part of the artwork consequently redrafts subjectivity both of the artist and of his consumer.”⁶

Guattari’s great friend and accomplice, artist Jean Jacques Lebel, on whom Jean Rouch’s *Mad Masters (Les maîtres fous)*, filmed in Cameroon on the occasion of a society of witch doctors’ trance ritual, “left an indelible impact,” was one of the first to emphasize the filiation between the thought of non-Western “savages” and the “savage” artists of the East.

Guattari was not only in the friendly company of anthropologists, who included Pierre Clastres of *Societies without State and Against the State*, but also artists who solicited the “wild libertarian flux” of the

unconscious and its intensities.

“(This leads us) above all to the “savage, to savage thought. Permanent and major influence. Thanks to Artaud and his Tarahumaras, thanks to the surrealist gaze resting on magic art, and thanks to my father who turned me on (starting in childhood) to the art of primitive peoples, with respect to art that is radically different from that which is considered classic, I never considered Paris or New York, Rome or Berlin to be the Center of the world. The intensity that comes from primitive art at its peak is the standard against which I judge what I like or what I do not like in Western art.”⁷

On its end, Lebel’s “Direct Poetry” provides a critique of the “imperialism of the signifier” in “blowing up language” and in carrying out an a-grammatical poetry that is “beyond and beneath the verbal.” This is another theme that runs throughout Guattari’s work: that of a-signifying, a-grammatical, or a-syntactical semiotics, to borrow Lebel’s terms. The privilege of speech has a profound political meaning. Not only have signifying and linguistic semiotics served as an instrument of division between human and non-human, but of hierarchization, subordination, and domination inside the human as well. All of the non-linguistic semiotics such as those of archaic societies, the mentally ill, children, artists, and minorities, were considered for a long time to be lacunar and inferior.

It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that these non-linguistic modes of expression began to be appreciated for their major political role and for making up an experimental field of psychiatry, like at La Borde or as in the work of Deligny with the autistic “savage children” and their a-signifying modes of expression.

“It was an obsession in all of the history of Western thought to define what was natural and what was not, to the point where people thought that if there was no spoken language, it was necessarily animal. Thus they forbade the “savage children” who grew up among animals and without speech to express themselves with signs. People behaved in a similar fashion towards deaf people. For 100 years the Vatican forbade the use of sign language, though it is a language par excellence.”⁸

Polysemic trans-individual animist subjectivity does not constitute a “vestige” or even a simple “renaissance” of ritual ancestral practices in capitalist societies. It is also updated and activated as both a micro and macro-political force which fuels the resistance and creativity of the “dominated,” as Suely Rolnick and Rosangela Araujo explain.

“Trans-individual polysemic animist” subjectivity uncovers the possibility of producing and enriching itself in societies such as that of Brazil (and, according to Guattari, in another way in Japan) by means of updated “animist” rituals. This fascinated Guattari. The Capoeira and the Candomblé, as described by Janja (Rosangela Araujo),⁹ a master of Capoeira Angola, are mechanisms of production and singularization of subjectivity that renew themselves and use “semiotic symbols” of the body, dance, postures, and gestures to speak the language of Guattari, as well as “a-signifying semiotics” such as rhythms, music, and so on.



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The function of speech is not discursive, but existential. With other semiotics and with no privileged role, it helps bring about the “*mise en existence*” or the production of existential territories. In these practices, the fluctuations of signs act upon real fluctuations without the mediation of representation, of the individual subject and its consciousness. In a remark by Guattari on the subject of ritual, we find, as if in a mirror, his entire concept of the collective (or machinic) assemblage of enunciation and of the power of the non-metaphorical use of signs and words: “...primitive ‘magic’ is illusory. This is how ethnologists see it. Primitive peoples are *realistic*, not mystical. The imaginary and the symbolic are real. No backworld. Everything extends into everything. No break—separation. Bambara does not imitate, does not use metaphors, does not index. Its dance and its mask are wholly rich signs which are at the same time representation and production. One does not watch the performance, powerless. It is itself, collectively, the show, the spectator, the stage, the dog, etc. It transforms by means of expression, as a sign that is connected to reality. Or rather a sign such that there is no break between a reality, an imaginary mediated by a symbolic order. No break between gesture, speech, writing, music, dance, war, men, gods, the sexes, etc.”

Thus there are possible echoes and cross-checks between updated ancestral rituals in contemporary capitalism and machinic assemblages, as was discussed by anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski who worked with Guattari. Rituals like collective enunciation mechanisms produce the body as they manufacture an enunciation. But in one case as in others, it is not a question of anthropomorphic productions. The “collectivity,” as Barbara Glowczewski reminds us, is irreducible to a human grouping, it is other than belonging to inter-subjectivity or simply to the social: “If people are interested in Félix today, it is precisely because he defines subjectivity by assemblages according to which humans are just as soon with other humans as with collectivities, with concepts, with animals, objects, as with machines...”¹⁰

The ritual, like assemblage, is a “machine” that concomitantly determines the action of the cosmic and molecular fluctuations, of real and virtual forces, of sensible affects and corporal affects, and of incorporeal entities such as myths and universes of references.

These rituals and these cultural practices produce a subjectivity not based in identity that is becoming, since “the process is more important than the result.”¹¹ This is reminiscent of the process-driven concept of the assemblage of activity in Guattari’s work.

As through art as Guattari understands it (and which constitutes for Eduardo Viveiros de Castro an authorized reserve for “savage thought,” providing that it does not transgress assigned boundaries), ritual pierces the chaosmosis, bringing us back to the point of subjectivity’s emergence, to the condition of the creation of the new. “Art is, for Guattari, the most powerful means of putting into practice some aspect of the chaosmosis” (Jean Claude Polack), to plunge beneath the subject/object division and to reload the real with “possibles.” These indigenous cultures of the Americas do not represent a simple survival of ancestral practices that are doomed to extinction. They do not constitute a simple quest for the improbable “African” identity in the face of the reality of slavery and the social inequalities in Brazil. These processes of subjectivization are actualized through the use of the myth

(and, for Guattari, mythograms—from Leninism to Maoism—are indispensable in any process of subjectivization) of an Africa that never existed.

“It is a reinvented Africa, an Africa before slavery, where men and women are free, in order to be propelled into a future of liberty and autonomy for all.”¹² What fascinated and intrigued Guattari during his numerous voyages to Brazil and Japan was not only the power of practices like the Candomblé (“an unbelievable factor in the production of subjectivity which contaminates not only its initiates, but the entire population”), but also the meaning and the political function of these modes of subjectivization.

For Suely Rolnik,¹³ these practices contain a “popular knowledge of the unconscious which is very strong and very effective.” If they play a major role in the elaboration of the trauma of slavery in a “beyond post-colonial” situation, they can and should play a major political role.

If there are hierarchical class divisions at the macro-political level in Brazil which seem insurmountable, at the micro-political level this “questioning of” and “this other politics of subjectivization” cross the same divisions and class hierarchies and circulate and diffuse into the population as a whole, through bodies.

According to Suely Rolnik, the richness of the micro-political dimension expresses all of its power when it assembles with the macro dimension, as it has occurred at certain moments in Brazilian history (1968, the beginning of the 1980s...). The valorization of this “production of other subjectivity” has a long history in Brazil, since the “anthropophagic” manifesto of the 1920s had already legitimized it.

Guattari was particularly attentive to all of the modes of production of subjectivity that recharge themselves in non-Western traditions, since the primary production in contemporary capitalism is the production of subjectivity and since the crisis that we have been experiencing for the last forty years, “before being economic, it is precisely the fact that there is no intermediary for subjectivization. There is a settling of modes of subjectivizations, and no one knows what to cling to, subjectively speaking, anymore.”

The production of subjectivity, having never been “natural,” means we have things to learn about these practices if we are to be capable of updating them for contemporary capitalism: “Archaic societies are better armed than white, male capitalist subjectivities in charting the multivalence and the heterogeneity of components and of semiotics that help bring about the process of subjectivization.”

For a reversal of history, science will force us deeper and deeper into an animist world: “Every time science discovers new things, the world of the living gets bigger... It is obviously a thought problem. The certitude of knowing what is living and what is not continues to shift... we are in an animist problematic, of the soul, of animation...”¹⁴

It is not only the evolution of science, but the development of capitalism itself which forces us to an “animist” thinking and politics.

“That which appears natural to us—springs, rocks—are loaded with history for the aboriginal peoples, who practice forms of totemism, and are thus cultural and non-natural... There are those here among us who function this way even

more today than in the past, because we have less and less apprehension regarding what is natural, while the category that philosophy contributed to setting up opposes humans to untouched nature. And the greater the desire was to leave it untouched, the more it was developed. This sort of opposition no longer really makes any sense. The nature/culture opposition nevertheless constricts our thinking a great deal. It is still our paradigm, since we continue to fantasize about natural peoples, natural environments, about the fact that we must preserve nature. And as much as we think this way, I think we are wrong when it comes to the solutions to be found for the different problems. For example, the question of the environment is not really about protecting nature by stopping pollution. On the contrary, it is necessary to invest it with new forms of assemblages and cultural mechanisms.”¹⁵

But, as in archaic societies, one cannot imagine an ecology of nature without simultaneously considering an ecology of the mind and of the social. One must then update a cosmic thinking, where “soul” and “machine” exist everywhere concurrently—in the infinitely small as in the infinitely large. The three ecologies of Guattari, leaving behind the parceling of reality and subjectivity, acquaint us with the conditions of possibility of a cosmic thinking and politics.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, our interview, Rio de Janeiro, 2009.
- 2 Peter Pelbart, our interview, Sao Paolo, 2009.
- 3 Jean Claude Polack, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 4 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, our interview, Rio de Janeiro, 2009.
- 5 Eric Alliez, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 6 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose*, (Paris: Galilée, 1992).
- 7 Jean Jacques Lebel, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 8 Barbara Glowczewski, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 9 Salvador de Bahia, our interview, 2009.
- 10 Barbara Glowczewski, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 11 Rosalgela Araujo, our interview, Salvador de Bahia, 2009.
- 12 Rosalgela Araujo, our interview, Salvador de Bahia, 2009.
- 13 Our interview, Sao Paolo, 2009.
- 14 Jean Claude Polack, our interview, Paris 2009.
- 15 Barbara Glowczewski, our interview, Paris 2009.