

Academy: 'The Production of Subjectivity'

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In a world variously called postmodern, late capitalist, or simply *Empire*, a world in which power has been decentred, *virtual centres* of power exist everywhere. We might say that these virtual centres of power are our own subjectivities, and thus that the battle ground against this power is in some sense ourselves. Hence the importance in understanding politics - and political art practice - as not just being about institutional and ideological critique, but as involving the active production of our own subjectivity. Hence also the importance of creative pedagogy; teaching practices that involve student participation, workshops, 'laboratories', and other teaching models that do not mimic the top down structures in existence elsewhere. Such pedagogical practices can contribute to the active and practical involvement of individuals in determining their own intellectual and creative projects, and indeed their wider lives.

As regards this pragmatic and aesthetic programme, I want, in my contribution to *Academy* - and as a way of giving some theoretical background to some of the work we do in 'Visual Cultures' at Goldsmiths - to revisit a reading I have previously made of an essay by Felix Guattari, 'Subjectivities: For Better or Worse', that concerns itself specifically with our capacity for self-creation.ⁱ Guattari's essay operates as a powerful manifesto for a serious consideration of subjectivity as itself a political field, as well as for the development of a more fluid and complex notion of subjectivity in general.ⁱⁱ Guattari's essay also draws attention to the specifically material nature of subjectivity (it is never just a question of saying 'I') as well as providing some pointers for thinking subjectivity beyond what we might consider its typical articulations.

The essay might be seen to evolve out of Guattari's pragmatic involvement in psychoanalytical practice (and especially *La Borde* clinic in France), although it also contains lines of flight into other areas, for example the aesthetic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. In fact, the essay might be read as an affirmation of the importance of aesthetics, or of what Guattari calls *ethicoaesthetics*. It amounts to a call to creativity, a call to become actively involved in various strategies and practices that will allow us to produce/transform, and perhaps even go beyond, our habitual selves. As Guattari remarks elsewhere: 'through interacting with one another, with other objects and with other "means of expression"' we create new possibilities of life just as an 'artist creates from colours on his palette' (C 7). The production of subjectivity, and of anything 'beyond'

subjectivity, is then precisely an ethicoaesthetic business. In the language of contemporary art and its theoretical articulations, we might say this production of subjectivity is also a specifically *expanded practice* - it will always involve a diversity of projects and programmes.

For Guattari then subjectivity is multivalent and polyphonic: there is no one dominating factor, for example the economic, which determines our social being (*S* 193).ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, and as Guattari points out, subjective factors often interact back, which is to say, determine themselves, larger economic movements (for example psychological factors producing stock market crashes) (*S* 193). Hence the importance in thinking through the complexity of processes that produce subjectivity, the mental and social ecologies that produce us as subjects.^{iv} In this particular essay Guattari is interested in three aspects of this production, and of its subsequent increase in relevance for us today. First, that subjectivity in general is having an increased centrality, and visibility, on the world stage. Guattari gives us the example of the Chinese students in Tianamen Square, though he also gives us the contrary example of the 'subjective revolution of Iran', and the subsequent mistreatment of women (*S* 193-4). This amounts to saying that the processes of emergent subjectivations can go backwards as well as forwards (put simply, they can be reactionary). Indeed, we are all familiar with this in the West with the emergence of nascent nationalisms within Europe, and the resultant suffering. We might also position here the apparently extreme opposing subjectivities of the West and the East, which is to say of Euroamericanism and Islam. This is not to revivify an Orientalism, but it is to note that what we have here are two distinct regimes, two different productions of subjectivity. In fact, it is worth considering whether the conflicts between these two - so-called terrorism and the so-called war on terrorism - can ever really be resolved until this question of the production of subjectivity is addressed; certainly subjective factors, and in particular, religion, are playing, their part in the ongoing business of terrorist and counter-terrorist strikes. Religion here is not necessarily a veil masking deeper economic issues, but rather part and parcel of the whole complexity of factors, of which the economic is but one. Whether the 'universalist representation of subjectivity' embodied by capitalism, and the capitalist colonisation of the East, is increasingly bankrupt as Guattari remarks, is open to question (*S* 194).^v What is not is that many see this particular production of subjectivity in a very poor light, linked as it is to larger historical issues of dominance and exploitation.^{vi} For Guattari, we are at present unable to measure the consequences of this. Of course it might be argued that we are no longer in this state of ignorant innocence.

Guattari's second aspect is the importance that new technology, and in particular new machines of communication and information (from television to the omnipresence of the www) are now playing in the production of subjectivity, on a signifying register and also on an affective one (*S* 194).^{vii} Is the production of subjectivity different for a generation brought up with the ubiquitous personal computer? This is an important question in terms of working in the academy – and indeed in relation to pedagogy in general (how to make courses relevant to this moment? how in fact to address these new subjectivities?), but it is also, of course, of much wider significance. How to think through, for example, the massive subjective revolution taking part in Asia and on the Indian sub continent in particular (the nationwide implementation of computer training and computer industries (spear-headed by *Microsoft*))? There are also newer technologies to consider, Virtual Reality and emergent AI for example; one can only speculate on the strange and novel subjectivities that will be produced by these technologies. Again, this can have positive results, the production of new means of expression, the opening up of what Guattari calls 'new universes of reference' (for example as might be seen to be happening with the www), but also negative results, most obvious in the omnipresent top-down programming of the mass media.^{viii} Art practices that utilise and experiment with these new technologies might be seen to be at the 'sharp end' of this technological production of subjectivity, and as such, are certainly a key area of enquiry for any discipline that concerns itself with 'Visual Cultures'. We might say further that the new universes of reference opened up by these technologies will also have a less obvious, more oblique impact on art practice, on pedagogy, and on subjectivity in general, which is to say that technological developments will have an impact on contemporary productions of subjectivity whether or not particular subjects are PC users.

Guattari's third observation is the importance of ethological and ecological factors in the production of subjectivity, that, for example, it might not be the case that we go through various stages of mental life as we mature (as for example psychoanalysis suggests: an Oedipal stage, a mirror stage, and so on), but that each of these states exist in parallel to one another and can be 'accessed' whatever ones 'stage of life' (*S* 195-6). Thus we have Deleuze and Guattari's mobilisation elsewhere of the notion of 'blocs of childhood', precisely a 'becoming child', understood as a spontaneous and creative state of being (and having nothing to do with regression, with a nostalgic 'return to childhood') (*ATP* 256-258). Again, creative pedagogy might involve actualising some of these different states and temporalities. Guattari writes also of the possibility and potentiality of trans-subjective states (love for example - a molecular love like that between the wasp and the orchid) that effectively tears down the ontological curtain between

self and other (*S* 195)). The plateau ‘November 28, 1947: How Do You Build Yourself a Body without Organs’ might be positioned as precisely a series of strategies to produce trans-subjective states such as these.

Thinking ecologically we might see subjectivity in terms of a multiplicity: a complex aggregate of heterogeneous elements. Important here will be decentred relationships (i.e. no specialists, no priests, no teachers as such - no transcendent principle) and also relationships with architecture, with the group (however this is thought), with economic factors and always with an outside to whichever institutions and academies the individual happens to be ‘part of’. Indeed, an ecology of subjectivity will precisely emphasise this contact and communication with an outside (there are in this sense no closed systems, no completely isolated individuals).^{ix} Importantly, this ecology and ethology of subjectivity implies a kind of self-construction or self-organisation, a certain kind of auto-cohesiveness, or what Guattari calls, following Francisco Varela, an autopoiesis (*S* 195). Thus we have Guattari’s notion of subjectivity as an ‘existential territory’, sometimes formed predominantly by an individual in the world and sometimes - as is the case with laboratory and participatory work - the result of group formation (*S* 196).

This is to go against Freudians, or rather, it is to see the Freudian model as just one regime of the production of subjectivity (others might be Christianity, Courtly love, Bolshevism, and so on). For Guattari Freud himself was in fact a prodigious inventor of concepts with which to think, with which to organise, subjectivity, rather than as a discoverer of some kind of truth about the latter (*S* 196). The point to be emphasised is that one can invent new ways to live and to love, new cartographies of subjectivity, and that perhaps ‘Freudianism’ - with its phallocentrism, its obsession with domestic representations and face turned to the past - is not necessarily the most relevant or productive for us today (*S* 197). Hence, again, the work Guattari carried out with Deleuze to produce a ‘looser’ notion of subjectivity, as that which is made up of multiple strata (*S* 197). A schizoanalytic cartography to replace the psychoanalytical. As Guattari remarks this is to move from a scientific paradigm where subjectivity is the ‘object’ of ‘study’ towards an ethicoaesthetic one, where subjectivity is always *in process* (*S* 197). It is also to invite us to become involved in our own production of subjectivity, to move from passive spectators to become active participants, to take what we need from Guattari - or indeed from elsewhere - in our own project of ‘processual creativity’; precisely to treat our lives as a work of art.

In fact Guattari looks to Kant's aesthetic here, and to the notion of the disinterested response (S 198). For Guattari the latter might be a kind of model, or strategy, for the production of alternative subjectivities. Indeed, Guattari claims Bakhtin moves in this direction in his suggestion that with art we form a relationship with a part that detaches itself from the object - especially in terms of rhythm and movement (S 198). This aesthetic response itself involves a kind of atypical desire, a break with the norm, a break with already existing 'reality' (and particularly with an already existing temporality) (S 199): 'A singularity, a rupture in a sense, a cut, the detachment of semiotic content - for example, in a Dadaist or surrealist fashion' (S 200). Following on from this 'event' will be the production of a new kind of rhythm, or what Guattari calls the production of 'mutant centres of subjectivation' (S 200).^x Guattari consistently returns to this notion of art as a break, but also as the germ for a new synthesis.^{xi} In the final chapter of *Chaosmosis* for example, Guattari comments on arts:

function of rupturing with forms and significations circulating trivially in the social field. The artist - and more generally aesthetic perception - detach and deterritorialise a segment of the real in such a way as to make it play the role of a partial enunciator. Art confers a function of sense and alterity to a subset of the perceived world ... the work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself (C 131).

We might emphasise here that any real rupture in habit must indeed involve a disinterestedness on some level, more often than not a 'non-reaction' to pleasure and pain. It is also important to point out that breaking with habit requires first and foremost that one becomes aware of such habits, which is to say one must attend to ones already existing reactions and responses. It is in this sense that the making of connections, the production of encounters, must be paralleled by a vigilance of the body-mind.^{xii} Guattari does not attend to this, but I think it follows from his argument (indeed how else can one break habits?). In relation to this we might argue that the predominant production of subjectivity today is based on fear. A fear that is often exaggerated and played upon by the mass media.^{xiii} Hence there is an intrinsic fear of the Other - and of difference generally - within typical subjectivity. Such a mechanism - that operates on what we might call a microphysical level - has to be sorted out before progress can be made on a macro level (after all Fascism arises precisely from this fear). This is not to completely turn inwards (or to reinstall an inner/outer binary), nor is it to suggest that attending to our selves and the production of our own subjectivity can solve all the world's problems, but it is to say that such attention must always and everywhere accompany any obvious political strategy. Once more,

creative pedagogy might have a role to play in bringing about an awareness of this micro-physical - or molecular - terrain, another name of which is the regime of affect.

For Guattari then subjectivity is made up from a multiplicity of refrains. Indeed, we are, in this sense, all musical beings (*S* 199). Guattari gives us the example of the multiple refrains involved when we watch television: the kettle is boiling, the baby is crying, the phone is ringing, and then there is the television itself, which has a narrative refrain, but also affective ones (*S* 200). For the time I am 'hooked' into the screen then the latter operates as the dominant refrain (this is the point around which my subjectivity is organised). A simpler example is bird song, understood as a territorialising refrain, producing a kind of home - and thus a kind of 'subjectivity' - for the bird (*S* 200). We might also think about the use of music to create a territory in this sense, for example the simple humming of a tune when one is scared, or indeed when one is safely in ones territory. In each case the tune operates as a kind of territory-building technology. The plateau '1837: Of the Refrain' deals specifically with these multiple modalities of the refrain (*ATP* 310-350). We might position art practice - or indeed any kind of expanded aesthetic practice - as a particular type of refrain in this sense; the production of a particular kind of subjective-territory (and also, as we shall see below, the production of a more cosmic refrain of deterritorialisation). Indeed, for Guattari all human societies, modern and premodern, have these refrains. For example the rituals and practices of archaic societies or the refrains of Greek Tragedy (*S* 201). In this latter case we can see quite clearly the existence of purely affective refrains; the production of a module of sound or rhythm that produces an affective response (*S* 198). Again, these affective refrains are kind of 'mutant centres of subjectivation', they are a rupture that throws us off onto another path, allowing us to break with old habits and form new ones (*S* 200).

We have here a chemistry - indeed a laboratory - of subjectivity: the extraction and separation of different elements as precisely the exercise that might allow for other recombinations (*S* 200). As Guattari remarks:

Just as chemistry had to begin by purifying complex mixtures in order to extract homogeneous atomic and molecular matter, and then to create from them an infinite array of chemical entities that had not existed previously, the 'extraction' and 'separation' of aesthetic subjectivities or partial objects, in the psychoanalytic sense, facilitates an immense complexification of subjectivity, of new and unprecedented existential harmonies, polyphonies, rhythms and orchestration (*S* 200).

It is here, once again, that Guattari positions art - or the 'poetic function' - as that which can produce these ruptures in the dominant *and* produce new refrains which themselves hold together the heterogeneous in new ways (S 201). This is to assert the importance of new forms of organisation (we might even say new habits) as well as breaking with the old. As with Spinoza then, the business of an ethical life involves precisely going beyond appearances and 'felt affections' to their causes, thus producing the knowledge to alter our make up. Again, for Guattari, it is the encounter, with other things as well as with other beings, that accompanies and in some senses produces this chemical 'knowledge' of subjectivity. Hence, the importance of Guattari's *La Borde* clinic, an expanded psychoanalytical practice that might be understood as precisely an arena of encounter. Here individuals are given access to 'new materials of expression' as well as to the 'individual-group-machine' which allow them access to hitherto unknown 'universes of reference' which further allows them to resingularise themselves (C 7). It goes within saying that this also applies to the academy, at least, when the academy is operating in its most expanded and creative aspect - as a machine that produces difference.

In passing it is worth noting Antonio Negri's work, and his attention to the specific importance of experienced time in the constitution of our subjectivities (Negri 2003). For Negri we live in a time of the total subsumption of capital, it penetrates every aspect of our lives, including our experience of time. Thus, I would argue, the importance of exploring different temporalities: of daydreaming, of being with friends, of being creative (but not necessarily for a specific end and certainly not for the market). This is a kind of non-productivity in capitalist terms (and indeed, in terms often set by the managers and bureaucrats of the academy), but it is precisely productive in a more Spinozist sense. In fact, art practice might be a name for the exploration of some of these different temporalities, not just in film, and the other arts of the moving image, but the time of painting for example, or the time of sculpture (the time we spend *with* art).

Again, these questions about the production of subjectivity might involve us in a rethinking of political strategy. For example it might not necessarily be a question of 'resisting', of 'slowing down' capitalism at least in one sense. Indeed we might say that we need more and not less; more mutations, more lines of flight, more alternative temporalities. We need more experimentation and expression and not the proliferation of controls on the latter. This will involve always being alert to the apparatus of capture that blocks this expression. Indeed the business of demarcating the two is crucial and calls for scrupulous attention (and flexibility). After all, the academy, as well as being a name for the site of this experimentation, can also be the name for just such

apparatuses of capture. It is in this sense that we need also to demarcate those productive and creative subjectivities from the production of other apparently ‘free’ subjectivities (for example the production of liberal tolerating subjects in the western liberal democracies that masks a deeper intolerance to non-Western subjectivities). Indeed, we need to ask ourselves the fundamental political question: where are the dissenting/creative subjects of today? And how are they being produced? In both cases, I would argue, the answer must involve a serious consideration of the role of the academy, of art, and of the aesthetic dimension in general, in the production of subjectivity.

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ⁱ What follows is a reworked extract from Chapter 3 of my book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* (2005).

ⁱⁱ Guattari's essay is an earlier version of Chapter 1 of *Chaosmosis*, 'On the Production of Subjectivity' (1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is, of course, to critique Marx - or rather to critique those Marxists that insist on a crude economic determinism.

^{iv} These being two of the *Three Ecologies* of Guattari's last work (2000).

^v In a sense art has often involved itself in foregrounding this type of Western centred subjectivity (namely the artist genius). Indeed 'The History of Art' is, in one sense, the name for this particular production of subjectivity. To follow Guattari is not to disavow the work that has been done in decentering the artist centric model (precisely a reactionary model), indeed it might be to explore precisely the specific production of subjectivity involved in various representations of artists - and understand how these are complicit with wider socio-political factors.

^{vi} We might add further, along with Guattari, that with the end of the cold war the issue of subjectivity - and of the production of subjectivity is becoming increasingly important in the West itself - as is the need to think it through in terms of the three ecologies of the environment, society and the psyche. Again, this is the subject of Guattari's last book, *The Three Ecologies*, in which Guattari points out that solutions to global problems - pollution for example - can only come about by addressing questions of Western lifestyle, or rather, of Western *subjectivity* - and of creating a new *style* of living, a new kind of subjectivity (Guattari 2000). In this, the possibility of environmental disaster or the possibility of nuclear devastation (two of the possibilities produced by capitalism), as with so many other pressing problems, is intimately tied to the production of subjectivity.

^{vii} Hardt and Negri also devote a significant portion of their *Empire* to this issue. See the section on 'The Sociology of Immaterial Labour' (E 289-94).

^{viii} This Janus faced nature of technology, and its contribution to the production of subjectivity, is nothing new. Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979) make a similar, if more extreme argument, put simply that the advances in technology have given us the tools to ease much of the world's suffering, and yet that very technology is used precisely to inflict suffering.

^{ix} And this collectivisation of subjectivity is not just to do with external relations, but also internal ones as it were: 'In fact, the term "collective" should be understood here in the sense of a multiplicity that develops beyond the individual, on the side of the *socius*, as well as on this side (so to speak) of the person, that is, on the side of pre-verbal intensities that arise more from a logic of the affects than from a well-circumscribed, comprehensive logic' (S 196).

^x Alain Badiou attends to this rupturing quality of the event, and of a continuing fidelity to this event, in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001). There, an event is always a *supplement* to a given historical situation, and is indeed an experience that lifts the human from animal to subject (Badiou 2001, 41). As Badiou remarks: 'To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* ... the situation "according to" the event. And this, of course - since the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation - compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation' (Badiou 2001, 42).

^{xi} See for example Guattari's analysis of three paintings by Balthus, 'Cracks in the Street' (CS), in which the paintings - in their organization and style (the mobilisation of a variety of expressive components and multiple signifying/asignifying registers) - produce what Guattari calls a 'fractalisation, processualization and existential recomposition' leading to 'modalities of individual and/or collective subjectivation which stand in the way of dominant subjective formations' (CS 85).

^{xii} Christopher Gray makes a similar point in relation to the Situationists:

What was basically wrong with the SI was that it focussed exclusively on the intellectual critique of society. There was no concern whatsoever with either the emotions or the body ... What needs understanding is the state of paralysis everyone is in. Certainly all conditioning comes from society but it is anchored in the body and mind of the individual, and that is where it must be dissolved. Ultimately the problem is an *emotional*, not an intellectual one (1989, 75).

^{xiii} Although there is not space to develop this line of enquiry here we might note that this fear might also be characterised as a fear (and hence avoidance) of death. Eugene Holland, in his own

book on *Anti-Oedipus*, attends briefly to this - in relation to capitalist development (see Holland 1999, 8-9).