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Why does a refrain always concern the marking of a territory and what implications does this have for the concept of Art?

Introduction—How to approach *A Thousand Plateaus*?

. . . there is no form or correct structure imposed from without or above but rather an articulation from within, as if oscillating molecules, oscillators, passed from one heterogeneous center to another, if only for the purpose of assuring the dominance of one among them. (D&G, 1987, p. 362)

Although I have taken the suggested title as a starting point for this essay, I will be unable to address it satisfactorily, nor will it be possible to follow an argument stemming from the title with a view to going beyond it. For me it is necessary to start prior to the question, at a more basic level, with a view to building up to it. I do this because the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari fascinate and frustrate me in equal measure.

How does one write (coherently) about something one does not totally understand? And then, how does one write about something which presents itself as a state of becoming, never here or there, but active inbetween?

My feeling when reading Deleuze and Guattari's work is that I have to tread very carefully, keeping in view their concept of the rhizome, picking up each word or phrase as being single nodes in a network – inherently linked to every other word or phrase. As I read, and before I can write, I feel that every term must be explained, or at least understood, anew; within Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy all words all seem to have new implications and relations that require a reassessment of my own vocabulary. I worry this clings too readily to old methods of working, avoiding a real engagement with the principle of the text. I am worried that I am descending into thoughtless jargon.

An explanation of every term is patently beyond the scope of this essay, and my understanding — *at this stage* — precludes all but the most cursory of efforts on this front. However, my natural inclination is to attempt this task, and in the process I will try to address the question on which this essay is founded.

What is Refrain?

A refrain can be sonorous, musical. A bird song can be a refrain: Deleuze and Guattari cite instances of chaffinches, wrens, but also human equivalents – Swann's appropriation of Vinteuil's 'little phrase'. The refrain can also be material – the Australian grass finches have their stubble, the stagemaker bird its overturning of leaves.

At the same time it is territorial – “The role of the refrain . . . is territorial, a territorial assemblage” (p. 344) (**What is Territory?**). The examples in the previous paragraph also satisfy a territorial purpose, effect a territorialisation.

Territorialisation is a result and an engendering of expression (**What is Expression?**). It is a state of active coexistence of territory and expression. It can also be deterritorialised (**What is Deterritorialisation?**), and whatever it is, or can be, is already innate within it. Anything that *expresses* can be territorialised or territorialising:

The refrain is rhythm and melody that have been territorialized because they have become expressive—and have become expressive because they are territorializing. We are not going in circles. . . . There is a self-movement of expressive qualities. (p. 349)

Rhythm is a quality of the difference produced by periodic repetition. Periodic repetition creates the passage from milieu to milieu, but at the same time also creates those milieus (**What is Milieu?**).

A milieu does in fact exist by virtue of a periodic repetition, but one whose only effect is to produce a difference by which the milieu passes into another milieu. It is the difference which is rhythmic, not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it . . . (p. 346)

Deleuze and Guattari state that, in general a refrain is “any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes” (p. 356). In particular the refrain is seen to be sound-based at its most effective:

. . . In the narrow sense, we speak of the refrain when an assemblage is sonorous or "dominated" by sound . . . (p. 356)

The refrain can be deterritorialising as well as providing consistency to the territory.

Even in a territorial assemblage, it may be the most deterritorialized component, the deterritorializing vector, in other words, the refrain, that assures the consistency of the territory. (p. 361)

What is Territory?

The territory is not a milieu or a rhythm, but is an act that territorialises them (p. 347). A territory is the first thing to constitute an assemblage, and as such is fundamental to it. It is "a place of passage" (p. 356) (**What is Assemblage?**).

The territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species. . . . Critical distance is a relation based on matters of expression. (p. 352)

Critical distance is the threshold at which one being passes over into another. This can be interpreted in terms of spatial or psychological membranes, or professional attributes, etc.

How does territory relate to the refrain? In general, it seems to have similar aspects as the refrain, in that it is acting upon things and determined by them at the same time. The refrain, in some cases, defines a territory.

What is Milieu?

A milieu is a context of affects, a setting in which various forces are at play. There is an interior and an external milieu and each has its own code (**What is Code?**):

In effect, expressive qualities or matters of expression enter shifting relations with one another that "express" the relation of territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses and exterior milieu of circumstances. (p. 349–350)

What is Assemblage?

For example, in Deleuze and Guattari's system of the three 'ages' (classical, romantic, modern), each is called an assemblage (p. 382):

They are assemblages enveloping different Machines, or different relations to the Machine. In a sense, everything we attribute to an age was already present in the preceding age. (p. 382)

What is Code? What is Decoding?

The code is the structure of the milieu (perhaps conceived as a genetic form, or as local concentrations which are the milieu?). At the margins, where decoding takes place, territory appears:

The territory arises in a free margin of the code . . . Each milieu has its own code, and there is perpetual transcoding between milieus; the territory on the other hand, seems to form at the level of a certain *decoding*. (p. 355)

Decoding allows for differentiation/speciation and hence territory is indirectly responsible for inducing new species (p. 355). This is distinguished from mutation—“changes internal to the code”—which is an effect of deterritorialisation:

Whenever a territorial assemblage is taken up by a movement that deterritorializes it . . . we say that a machine is released. . . . a machine is like a set of cutting edges that insert themselves into the assemblage undergoing deterritorialization, and draw variations and mutations from it. (p. 367)

What is Consistency?

The effects of the Machine create *machinic statements* that define consistency (p. 367).

. . . what holds these territorializing marks, territorial motifs, and territorialized functions together in the same intra-assemblage. This is a question of *consistency*: the "holding together" of heterogeneous elements. (p. 357)

What is Expression?

Consistency leads to expression and territory:

[Color in animals] becomes expressive . . . when it acquires a temporal consistency and a spatial range that make it a territorial, or rather territorializing, mark: a signature. (p. 347)

What is Life?

Life “implies a gain in consistency” (p. 370) and an aspect of life is to disrupt orders:

It is true that [life] is both at once: a particularly complex system of stratification and an aggregate of consistency that disrupts orders, forms, and substances. (p. 370)

The Refrain as Consistency?

Relating back to their concepts of the ‘ages’ of art (classical, romantic, modern (for want of a better term)), the authors pose the problem of consistency (or consolidation) as the way to harness those “unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces” of the Cosmos (**What is Cosmos?**).

They are divided into the following types:

(1) territorial refrains that seek, mark, assemble a territory; (2) territorialized function refrains that assume a special function in the assemblage . . . ; (3) the same, when they mark new assemblages, pass into new assemblages by means of deterritorialization-territorialization . . . ; (4) refrains that collect or gather forces, either at the heart of the territory, or in order to go outside it . . . (p. 360)

What is Art?

The authors propose that art is an emergence of “proper qualities (color, odor, sound, silhouette . . .),” a becoming-expressive of rhythm or melody, and as such territory is a result of art (p. 348).

. . . although each expressive quality, each matter of expression considered in itself, is a placard or poster . . . Expressive qualities entertain variable or constant relations with one another (that is what matters of expression *do*); they no longer constitute placards that mark a territory, but motifs and counterpoints that express the relation of the territory to interior impulses or exterior circumstances . . . No longer signatures, but a style. (p. 351)

How does Refrain relate to Art?

In Deleuze and Guattari's eyes, the refrain favours sound and potentially music. But there is a warning of the capability of the sonorous to fall into a black hole of fascism:

The refrain is sonorous par excellence, but it can as easily develop its force into a sickly sweet ditty as into the purest motif . . . The potential fascism of music. (p. 383–4)

Two types of refrain allow music to develop:

Music requires a *first type* of refrain, a territorial or assemblage refrain, in order to transform it from within, deterritorialize it, producing a refrain of the *second type* as the final end of music: the cosmic refrain of the sound machine. (p. 385)

The final end of music is a deterritorialized refrain (p. 386), which is the Cosmos.

What is Cosmos?

A concept based on the author's readings of Nietzsche. A place of forces that an artist opens themselves up to:

. . . modern philosophy tends to elaborate a material of thought in order to capture forces that are not thinkable in themselves. That is Cosmos philosophy, after the manner of Nietzsche. (p. 377–8)

End

To return to the question I posed in the introduction (rather than the question in the title) – given a philosophy of *becoming* (as I understand Deleuze and Guattari's writings to be), how can one talk about anything ever actually being, such that an elucidation of terms could be undertaken, much less completed? What can one usefully say about things that are always *on their way*, that never reach their fulfilment (where fulfilment possibly does not actually exist outside of the movement from one thing to another)?

An answer to *that* question is obviously provided by *A Thousand Plateaus* itself. What I think this essay has shown is that the methodology I have used, of picking terms and trying to isolate them, trying to tie them together serially, runs counter to Deleuze and Guattari's own philosophy, and perhaps is doomed from the start to tie itself in knots in its attempt to recreate what they themselves might call an arborescent schema.

-end-

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Bibliography

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