

## Critical Manifestos, Existential Refrains

Birgit M. Kaiser (Utrecht University) ([B.M.Kaiser@uu.nl](mailto:B.M.Kaiser@uu.nl))

... poetry today might have more to teach us than economic science,  
the human sciences and psychoanalysis combined.  
Guattari *Chaosmosis* 21

At the very end of 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), Hélène Cixous notes about writing: 'When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking.' (893) It seems interesting to bring Cixous' notion of writing – along with her ideas of poetry, the feminine and the unconscious – into dialogue with Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*, especially the notion of mental ecology. Both Cixous and Guattari articulate, it seems, at the same time a compelling critique of the Subject and rewrite in the act a modus of subjectivity that is yet to be filled with life. In a sense, a creative critique, which in both cases calls to bring into existence – resonating with Deleuze's Artaudian point (in 'To have done with judgment') that the trick of any critique might lie in the effort 'to bring into existence and not to judge' (Deleuze 135). In the short space of this intervention, only a rough sketch is possible of what such a dialogue between the two might sound like.

### Cultivating our mental gardens

In *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari makes very evident that the critique he has of structuralist psychoanalysis as an analyst is linked to much wider problems, which for him crystallize along two major axes: on the one hand, the 'extreme complexification of social, economic and international contexts' (TE 21) resulting from a decline of the dualist opposition USA-USSR in the late 1980s and the rise of what he calls 'Integrated World Capitalism' ('post-industrial capitalism' that moves from production of goods to production of signs and subjectivity; marked by its equally complexified effect on more than purely economic realms); and on the other hand, the standardization of ways of life and homogenizing of desires, largely promoted by the 'mass-media' (at a time, when television was the prevailing new medium). Guattari sees the 'intoxicating and anaesthetizing' (TE 34) effects of (state-sponsored) television as intimately linked to and at the service of the production of signs and subjectivity he perceives as *modus operandi* of IWC. The proliferation of new media and the internet in the almost 25 years since publication (to which Guattari hints in 1989 as possible future tools for undermining standardization) have made the simple anaesthetizing effects of television somewhat outdated (but have not resolved the problem...). The larger analysis still stands – or has perhaps come into full effect only in the last decades.

As a sort of manifesto that aims to respond to these two predominant vectors, *The Three Ecologies* resonates quite strongly with the concerns that *Terra Critica* hopes to raise and discuss. Guattari writes:

[C]apitalist power has become delocalized and deterritorialized, both in extension, by extending its influence of the whole social, economic and cultural life of the planet, and in 'intension', by infiltrating the most unconscious subjective strata. In doing this it is no longer possible to claim

to be opposed to capitalist power only from the outside, through trade unions and traditional politics. (TE 33)

Given increasingly decentralized sites of power in neoliberal IWC and the 'introjection of repressive power by the oppressed' (TE 32)<sup>1</sup> that goes along with this, the question arises how to exercise critique or modify the effects of such power. Or, in Guattari's terms: How to re-route desires that have come to turn in dead circles? How to activate 'catalysts of existential change' (TE 30)? Or, we could say with Foucault, as Kathrin Thiele's position paper to the last workshop asked: How not to be governed like that, despite the analysis that the subject is a subject of productive power? Part of Guattari's response is to note that – since an opposition only from the outside is no longer feasible – it is

equally imperative to confront capitalism's effects in the domain of mental ecology in everyday life: individual, domestic, material, neighbourly, creative or one's personal ethics. Rather than looking for a stupefying and infantilizing consensus, it will be a question in the future of cultivating a *dissensus* and the singular production of existence. (TE 33)

It is this latter – the singular production of existence – that I am most interested in here, and where I perceive common strings between Guattari and Cixous. Phrasing the mental, psychological, subjective domain as *ecological* – much like the social and environmental domains – is crucial: 'Ecology' stresses that the existential modes it names are 'capable of bifurcating into stratified and deathly repetitions or of opening up processually from a praxis' (TE 35); that they are domains which can close or open (de- and re-territorialize), and which need to be cultivated, largely along these two broad vectors. They may be channeled into the narrow constraints of the law, but they can also be cultivated otherwise. Given his analysis of IWC as a stratification and homogenization of existence for profit, the de-stratification and differentiation of existence is key to any 'critique' under these conditions. Dissensus is not cultivated for Guattari in the name of alternative programs, it seems rather the vehicle of a re-singularizing of existence (or a proliferation of difference) without presupposing structure or *telos*: the subjective domain – subjectivity – is approached neither (prescriptively) on the basis of structure (unconscious, language, law; focusing on adaptation and conformity) nor as possessing directionality or end (self-consciousness, normativity, consensus). It is rather phrased as the affirmation of creatively cultivating new existential refrains.<sup>2</sup>

### Diversions

While 'The Laugh of the Medusa' notes that patriarchal imaginaries and power structures have kept women (feminine desires) wandering 'around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brainwashing' (LM 877), Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* sees the isolation and repression of singularities 'that are just turning in circles' (TE 34), in 'cycle[s] of deathly repetition' (TE 27), as one of the principles that sustain IWC. They seem to be striking the same cords here, as well as point in comparable directions when it comes to fleeing these narrow confines of 'deathly repetition'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cixous: Told that they are the dark continent, women have 'internalized this fear of the dark. Women haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house.' (68)

<sup>2</sup> The echoes this has (or does not have) with the last words of Voltaire's *Candide* ('Il faut cultiver notre jardin') and in how far both confront Enlightenment ideas of order and reason and comment on handling their shortcomings might be worth exploring at a later point.

One of the examples whereby Guattari illustrates the issue is that of a patient whose therapy got stuck on a particular problem and who was 'going round in circles, and coming up against a wall' (Chaosmosis 17). It is not, as he mentions in this passage of *Chaosmosis*, the 'symbolic hermeneutic centered on childhood' (Chaosmosis 18) whose psycho-analysis permits the patient to move on, but the patient's unexpected desire to take up driving. This new practice ends up enabling him/her to produce different fields of vision, to divert the problem into a new direction and to learn a different 'existential refrain'. What the driving lessons facilitate is 'to promote active, processual ruptures within semiotically structured, signification and denotative networks' (Chaosmosis 19) in order to set into action different 'existential operators capable of acquiring consistence and persistence', to make possible new 'existential orchestrations, until now unheard and unknown' (Chaosmosis 19). Concerned about his own field of analytic practice, Guattari notes that Freud's Unconscious – anchor of the symbolic hermeneutic centered on childhood – has become an institution itself and in its 'structuralist version, has been recentered on the analysis of the self, its adaptation to society, and its conformity with a signifying order' (Chaosmosis 10).<sup>3</sup> It has lost its teeth, and schizoanalysis and ecosophy wish to answer to this reification and open up new alleys, not only for analysis and 'its theoretical scaffolding' (TE 27), but also for the much larger complex of problems which *The Three Ecologies* raises.

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' as well as in 'Sortie' (1975), Cixous explores *écriture féminine* as a practice of analysis and articulation that finds new routes to get out of the narrow rooms of which we heard her speak above: Confines imposed by what she calls the 'Empire of the Selfsame' (Sortie 80), upheld by a 'constitution of a subjectivity that experiences itself only when it makes its laws, its strengths and its mastery felt [...] this subjectivity is structured around a loss' (Sortie 80). It is this libidinal economy, driving on lack and appropriation, which has structured subjectivity from Hegel to Freud (whereby the latter is Cixous' main interlocutor in both texts) and which has kept 'the little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies' wandering within these confines of a 'loathsome logic of antilove'. Within these structures, woman – most interesting as figure, not essentialist category or empirical group – has adopted a 'narcissism that only loves itself if it makes itself loved for what is lacking' (Sortie 68).<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging the epistemic violence and productive yet streamlining force of these structures, Cixous at the same time affirms that they are 'only' structures, in the sense that complete control over unruly bodies and incalculable imaginations is illusory. It is the sheer abundance of corporeal existences that can be activated – written – and allows for a re-writing, re-routing, proliferating of desires.

There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. [...] But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (LM 876).

---

<sup>3</sup> Which *The Three Ecologies* calls 'an insufferable dogmatism' (27), impoverishing treatment and producing 'a stereotyping which renders them [the psychoanalysts of today] insensible to the singular otherness [*alterité*] of their patients' (27).

<sup>4</sup> She touches on the complicity of feminist and decolonizing struggles when evoking Freud's retreat from feminine desire by claiming it a 'dark continent' and hence unknowable. Feminine desire and articulation has been 'incarcerated, slowed down appallingly and tricked into apartheid for too long a time [...taught that] you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous' (Sorties 68)

Unconvinced by the 'dogma of castration' (Sortie 68) (which mutilates men and women alike), Cixous sees writing as a practice to explore (and call forth in the course of it) this inexhaustible wealth of phantasms (the 'captive' of critique?) – inexhaustible precisely because as they are written, they proliferate. Her's is no quest of finding an alternative structure, but to employ, deploy, practice 'writing' in order to debunk the idea of a typical woman, classifiable into codes. Writing is 'not obliged to reproduce the system', but perhaps – and Cixous is careful not to instrumentalize, glorify or calculate it – gestures toward ways to 'escape the infernal repetition' (Sortie 72).

Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same *and of other* without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, one another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from the other within. A course that multiplies transformations by the thousands. And that is not done without danger, without pain, without loss [...]. (Sortie 86)

The work of writing is aligned with the 'poetic' for Cixous: writing is not aiming to represent, but it is 'deterritorializing' work on what has been subjected and reified for too long, yet can be unsettled, dreamed up differently. 'What is most true is poetic because it is not stopped-stoppable. All that is stopped, grasped, all that is subjugated [...] has lost what is life itself, which is always in the process of seething, of emitting, of transmitting itself' (Rootprints 4). Empirical writing – the 'incessant fictional practice' (Rootprints 5) of Cixous specifically, but also of literature more generally perhaps – is put to work here as labor which shakes up 'everything [that] is already ordered-classes according to a scale which gives primacy to one element over another' (Rootprints 11), everything that has been 'received for a long time, and never called into question, and dead for a long time [including] the cliché of *jouissance*, the cliché of the body' (Rootprints 11). In Guattari's terms, it is part of the potential practices that can serve as a 'poetic-existential catalysis' (Chaosmosis 19), a practice whose task Guattari describes in similar terms:

[T]he task of the poetic function, in an enlarged sense, is to recompose artificially rarefied, resingularised Universes of subjectification. For them, it's not a matter of transmitting messages, investing images as aids to identification, patterns of behaviours as props for modelisation procedures, but of catalysing existential operators capable of acquiring consistence and persistence. (Chaosmosis 19)

The critique of theories of the Subject (in Guattari's case directed at Lacanian psychoanalysis, in Cixous' case directed at phallogocentric, hierarchized sexual difference theorized via lack) is accompanied in both by a stress on the possibility to rupture, divert, rephrase, invent new modi of existence. This possibility averts the mechanisms of what Cixous calls the 'appropriative economy' (Sortie 79) of the '(Hegelian) schema of recognition, [where] there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman' (79). They are both interested instead in what Guattari calls 'existentializing ruptures of meaning' (TE 29) – '[a] singularity, a rupture of sense, a cut, a fragmentation, the detachment of a semiotic content [...to] originate mutant nuclei of subjectivation [...] entities that have no prior existence'. (TE 18)

### **Singularized Refrains**

What is at stake here is not liberal individualism, but the desire for an 'ecology of resingularization' (TE 42), a 'subjectivity of resingularization' (TE 44), an exploitation of 'a-

signifying points of rupture' (TE 37) which can break open what Guattari calls 'capitalist subjectivity' and Cixous 'system'. It is a question of letting other vectors become effective, desires and phantasms which were not imagined and lived before: '[T]he essential thing here is the break-bifurcation, which it is impossible to represent as such, but which nevertheless exudes a phantasmatic of origins [...]' (TE 37) In as much as Cixous privileges the poets as generators of such break-bifurcations, literature also plays a crucial role in *The Three Ecologies* as a practice that can explore symptoms and incidents outside the norm, mobilize vectors of subjectification that elude the mastery of the Self and can serve as 'indices of a potential labour of subjectification' (TE 34), put to work for the re-routing of refrains (which is also how Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* makes use of the literary analyses of sadism and masochism, and how the critical and clinical are linked in his essays of that title). For this reason, Guattari pleads for tapping the 'cartographies of the psyche' (TE 25) that *literary* texts offer and which they concretely perform. The critical and clinical works hand in hand here, as experimentations with existential refrains, mobilizing a storytelling (with reference to Benjamin's storyteller) that diverts the 'same old story' and performs unheard-of steps. These are critical manifestos 'for effective practices of experimentation' (TE 24), to 'bring into being other worlds [...], new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange' (TE 44-5).

## References

- Cixous, Hélène (1976) 'The Laugh of the Medusa' trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1/4, pp. 875-893.
- \_\_\_ (2008 [1986]) 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays' in H. Cixous and Cathérine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 63-129.
- \_\_\_ and Mireille Calle-Gruber (1997 [1994]) *Rootprints. Memory and Life Writing*, Routledge.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1997) *Essays critical and clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Guattari, Félix (1995 [1992]) *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefains, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_ (2008 [1989]) *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London: Continuum.