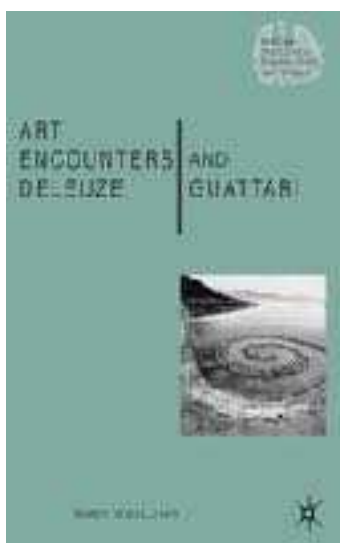


## Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari - Simon O'Sullivan

Just before Christmas, Serendipity crossed my path, shook me by the hand and said, "Have one on me!" I had chanced upon a tweet from someone in my Doctoral Training Partnership alerting me to a too-good-to-be-true offer from the academic publisher Palgrave Macmillan. Well, as it happened, it was true. They were offering £30 off any of their titles with free postage. I rummaged through their catalogue and in the philosophy section I saw *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari | Thought Beyond Representation* by Simon O'Sullivan. At £27 my online order generated an invoice for the grand total of £0.00 and a few days later the package, from Heidelberg, dropped onto my doormat. "Na fargen!" as they say in these parts. See how The Fates their gifts allot.



I have more than my fair share of the burgeoning secondary literature on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and my thesis is heavily influenced by their thought, so the fact that I hadn't come across Professor O'Sullivan's work before might be considered surprising. I suppose it must be down to the ghettoisation of academia. O'Sullivan works primarily in the orbit of art history while my own research is based within music and musicology. But, in another life, I am a painter and so, equipped with my undergraduate knowledge of art history, I took the plunge.

It is commonly acknowledged (even by them!) that the work of D&G is phenomenally difficult to read. Indeed, some prominent writers go so far as to say that it is nonsense.<sup>1</sup> Many of the secondary commentaries and analyses of their work fall into the trap of parroting their complex prose, which does little to aid understanding of the underlying concepts. Helpfully, O'Sullivan says,

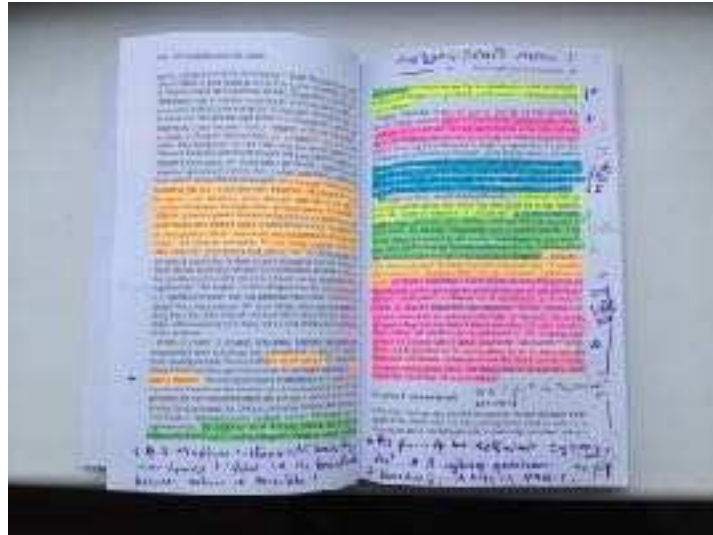
It seems to me to be of critical importance to keep alive a certain style of Deleuze's thought without over-academicising his writings or endlessly repeating his own words. We need to repeat the energy and style of his writings without merely representing his thought. (3)

Representing (or, more precisely, *representing*) is, for O'Sullivan a cardinal sin in aesthetics. It is the ultimate territorialisation and leads to stasis.

O'Sullivan begins with a quote from Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*: "Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter* (*DR* 139)." It is just such a critical, thought-provoking encounter that I have undergone in the last three days in reading O'Sullivan's book, consumed in one extended sitting with pauses only for rest and refreshment. He ends by saying, "I hope very much that the book will have operated as a productive case study of one particular encounter with Deleuze and with art. If it moves any one reader to read Deleuze further and to conduct their own transversal experiments, then it will have more than served its purpose (155)." It has so moved me. Let me elaborate on the material therein between those opening and closing remarks which has done so. In the spirit of rhizomatics, my remarks are in no particular order. They are snapshots of lines of flight from my reading, which, as you can see from the photograph of the annotated pages, were many.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Roger Scruton's *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left*



In my own writing I am attempting to knit some of Deleuze's (and Guattari's) thinking into a description of a metaphysical aesthetic space, which I call Entangled Network Space. The problem has been in trying to find a methodology which shies away from simply trying to plug examples directly into a Deleuzian framework (like some kind of DeLanda assemblage). O'Sullivan counsels against such an approach. He says, "One might be able to extract such a method or system but this would be to render Deleuze's thought inoperative, to freeze it in, and as, a particular image of thought, to capture its movement, precisely to *represent* it (3)." He strives for an anti-static approach, as do I, by, "jumping from one aspect of Deleuze's thought to another, picking up the same threads in different contexts and repeating key notions with different emphases (3)." But does it work?

Concerning the ideal book, D&G say that it would consist in, "lay[ing] everything out [...] on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determination, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations... The war machine\*-book against the State-apparatus-book (ATP 10)." But such an idealised single-sheet manifesto does not a real book or PhD thesis make. So onward.

In Chapter 1, O'Sullivan tackles the topic which is at the heart of Deleuze's thinking (and, in conjunction with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*) the Rhizome. He says that the style

of *ATP* is “[...] at odds with much academic writing, especially that utilised by art theory,<sup>2</sup> inasmuch as its *modus operandi* is affirmation and creation rather than negation and critique (9).” This is an uncoded jibe at the deconstructionist writings of those O’Sullivan labels the “signifier enthusiasts (10).” “Style” is a word O’Sullivan chooses deliberately in that description, because as he points out in Chapter 2, it is, for Deleuze and Guattari, fundamental to what elevates art from brute matter, something which is intrinsic to art *qua* art. It is style which, in conjunction with brute matter, induces the affect which constitutes the aesthetic.

It is style that organises matter. Style that takes lived perceptions and affects into the realm of art: “in each case style is needed - the writer’s syntax, the musician’s modes and rhythms, the painter’s lines and colours - to raise lived perceptions to the percept and lived affections to the effect.” Quoting D&G *What is Philosophy*: 170 (53)

The beauty (or style) of D&G’s metaphorical rhizome is its lack of hierarchical privilege; its opposition to arboreal structuring, the root-like and tree-like thinking which pervades Western thought and culture. The rhizome is anti-analytic.

It is a flat system in which the individual nodal points can be, and are, connected to one another in a non-hierarchical manner. A rhizome, then, fosters transversal connections and communications between heterogenous locations and events. (12)

With this concept understood, the writings of other “connectionist” thinkers, DeLanda, Latour, Vitale, and even Hodder fall into place.

Writing over ten years ago now, before the advent of the iPhone, O’Sullivan outlines the importance of the development of the web in being a technology which is a “space of creativity, invention and expression (13).” The web is, he says, “paradigmatically a rhizome (ibid.).” Technological interaction marks the transition from monads to nomads, such is its power to connect. The nomadic turn. It is a moment in human evolution which sees a new folding; “prosthetic technologies involve the folding of silicon technologies ‘into’ our carbon ones (142).” O’Sullivan likens this “turn” to Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics”.

[...] we might position the system of arts in general as rhizomatic, each of the arts, and indeed each individual art work, connecting, or having the potential to connect, to every other. In fact, the arts themselves might be said to be in rhizomatic contact and communication with other man-made, or indeed, ‘natural’ systems. (13)

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<sup>2</sup> I would include musicological theory in this criticism.

Of course, Clark (2003) has pointed out that humans have always been cyborgs, “Natural-born”, so the nomadic turn might have been around for a very long time. A rhizomatic approach, then, leads to “a mapping out of the parameters, via the rhizome, of an expanded art practice, between art and its participants, and between art and art history (14).” Such an approach in musicological terms is precisely what Small (1998) describes as “Musicking”. We might coin the generic term “Arting” regarding the arts in general. O’Sullivan describes the rhizomatic connections between different milieus and registers as a creative smearing (17). It is an active process with more than a little of the element of *bricolage* about it. He says, “Again, we might note here the importance of the Internet for many artistic collaborations in this sense - the production of micro communities and local alliances even on a global scale (18).” In their paper *Bricolage Programming in the Creative Arts*, McLean and Wiggins (2010) describe the early days of algorithmic music programming, calling practitioners *bricoleurs*. McLean’s subsequent and current work in the field of live-coded music and the development of the worldwide Algorave<sup>3</sup> community is a paradigm example of the utilisation of new technologies fostering rhizomatic connections between “different milieus and registers”. McLean (2017) says, “Live coding is not a genre, or a set of tools, but a community of diverse practices.”

“Art here is less a label for an object than a name for a specific kind of coupling (23).” This is important for arting and musicking. It places the aesthetic experience and, therefore, artistic meaning, firmly at the conjunction of art object and beholder (or auditor).

It is not just our art-machine that produces these effects, but our art-machine in conjunction with a subject-machine. For the signification effect, or indeed the aesthetic effect, does not come from the object, but from the object being confronted by (coupled with) a beholder. (22)

Of course, this conjunction is a real-world experience. It is immanent. This fact is a counter to those such as Dodd and Scruton who would claim that the meaning of an

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<sup>3</sup> <https://algorave.com/about/>

artwork is something intrinsic to it and that which lies partly in some transcendent realm. It doesn't.

This notion of multiplicity then announces a different attitude to the world; an understanding of the latter as a plane of immanent connectivity and complexity. Indeed, this multiplicity is not going on 'elsewhere', in some other 'place', but is here, in our world, albeit 'seen' differently. (28)

Artworks such as statues and paintings are obviously objects, music less obviously so.

After all, where is the musical object when it is not before our ears? Lydia Goehr (2007)

describes the historical processes by which music came to be objectified in canonical

works; exhibits in the "Imaginary Museum". O'Sullivan says,

[...] it is a determining feature of the contemporary work that it is obviously destined for the museum (collection, conservation, exhibition) and for the museum audience. This approach is implied in any 'theory' of art, for the theory is made only of objects, in order to determine them. But the work is not merely a cultural object. (39)

O'Sullivan suspects

that a kind of rhizomatics has always been going on in between the various objects and practices of canonical art history; a secret and nomadic art history of sensation and becoming, and that likewise, art practice when it truly is an art practice, is always already rhizomatic. (36)

Rhizomatics will free the exhibits from the museum cage, virtual or otherwise. Regarding affects in art, in art history (and musicology) "where deconstructive approaches, let alone semiotic ones, to art have become hegemonic, their existence and their central 'role' in art needs asserting (43)." And in this affective, participative encounter with art, as a dynamic process, we,

as representative creatures ourselves, are involved in a dance with art, a dance in which, through careful manoeuvres, the molecular is opened up, the aesthetic is activated and art does what is its chief *modus operandi*. It transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our 'selves' and our experience of our world. (50)

Sullivan's 4th chapter, From "Geophilosophy to Geoaesthetics" has some very useful material from my perspective. He labels it as

an experiment in taking Deleuze's philosophical concepts into other milieus (and in allowing the latter to feed back on Deleuze). It is in this sense that the artistic 'case studies' are meant not as illustration but as parallels to, and in some senses deviations from, the conceptual work. They also serve to demonstrate that art is a form of thought in and of itself. (98)

My own research also involves some ethnographic case studies, what I have termed

'vignettes'. O'Sullivan's approach will have lessons for my approach to the vignette

material. O'Sullivan emphasises Deleuze's thought on the importance of the immanent as a foil to the lazy thinking of the *doxa*.

In short, the first philosophers are those who institute a plane of immanence like a sieve stretched over chaos. In this sense they contrast with sages, who are religious personae, priests, because they conceive of the institution of an always transcendent order imposed from outside... Whenever there is transcendence, vertical being, imperial State in the sky or on earth, there is religion; and there is philosophy whenever there is immanence. (WP 43, quoted (111))

Religion and a transcendent worldview, then, can offer no proper explanation of art and the aesthetic. Confronting this doxatic, theoretical, opinion amounts to nothing more significant than "pleasant or aggressive dinner conversations at Mr Rorty's (WP 144 (112))." Non-philosophers are but "functionaries" who enjoy a "ready-made thought (113)," the *quasi* thoughts of the *doxa* (112). Instituting the plane of immanence is a "survival mechanism" which "will allow thought and creativity to unfurl (114)." It is the life raft which saves us when the ship of transcendence sinks beneath us.

In the 5th chapter, "Possible Worlds to Future Folds", O'Sullivan talks about certain philosophical concepts, the *monad* and the *fold*, making reference to the paintings of Gerhard Richter. This interests me, not least since some of my own paintings have been inspired by Richter's abstract works.



Pink Plank | Acrylic on canvas | Tom Tomos

He labels this another experimental approach; to construct a Deleuze-Richter conjunction, to set each alongside the other and in so doing to produce a new kind of assemblage between the two (121). It would be a rich vein, which O'Sullivan acknowledges in his

footnote, would require another book to do it justice. Art considered as actual landscape (even abstractedly) proves a powerful metaphor for a “region of being (122).” A canvas, whether “blank” (which it never is) or painted upon is a metaphor for the plane of immanence. Richter says,

The invention of the readymade seems to me the invention of reality, in other words the radical discovery that reality in contrast with the view of the world image is the only important thing. Since then painting no longer represents reality but is itself reality (produced by itself). And sometimes or other it will again be a question of denying the value of this reality in order to produce pictures of a better world (as before). (RIC 124, quoted (127))

This alone ought to stop the doxastic question, “But what is it a picture *of*?” Sadly, it does not. The empty canvas isn’t; it is full of promise. “Painting then becomes a process of subtraction from Leibniz’s ‘dark background’, the black dust of the imperceptible (130).” O’Sullivan says that this is a distinctive feature of Deleuze’s and Leibniz’s ontology, “An ontology of fullness, of plenitude, of which ‘the world’ as we ‘see’ it is an abstraction/ subtraction (130).” The air is always already pregnant with music.

I have said nothing about O’Sullivan’s excursus into the workings of the Red Army Factions in Chapter 3, “Art and the Political”. He uses the activities of the terror group to make valid points about D&G’s idea of the major and minor. I noticed parallels in this discussion with what Barrett says in *After Sound* (2016) concerning the music collective *Wandelweiser*, who are still a major force (albeit without guns and explosives) in the minor. These words have been but one salami slice as a line of flight through O’Sullivan’s book. There are very many others slices to cut. As a work to engage the thinking of anybody who is working at the conjunction of Deleuze *and* aesthetics, it is a “must read”. One note on style. The book contains 62 pages of endnotes. O’Sullivan explains why he has done this. I found myself reading two parallel texts the whole time, since there is probably no page which doesn’t have a referential note. I found the notes so informative and germane to the text that they could easily have been included in the flow of the overall narrative. Lines of flight are one thing, but authors and editors could make things easier on the eye and the thumb.



\* For “war machine”, read “metamorphosis machine”. Much nicer!

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