

Affect, Percept and Micro-brains: Art according to Gilles Deleuze

Catarina Pombo Nabais
CFCUL

Deleuze is perhaps the most important philosopher on aesthetics of the XXth century. His books on Proust, Kafka, Francis Bacon or on Cinema, are milestones in our understanding of the aesthetic experience. In his work, mostly after *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can see a certain radicalization of the artistic experience. He describes the work of art as self-expressive movements of the sensible whose mode of existence is an epiphany of way of life. Recovering the tradition of romanticism, Deleuze thinks aesthetics as a philosophy of Nature, as a philosophy of the self-expressive properties of the natural forms. Art starts with territorial marks. These do not refer back neither to a subject or a sensation which capture them and present them as marks, nor to an object which would just be nothing more than an expression of marks. The deleuzian theory of art is then an affirmation of “a self-movement of the expressive qualities”¹. From the point of view of this philosophy of Nature, art is the primordial event of natural forms. Art must then be thought from territorial marks created by territorial animals. “Art is fundamentally *poster, placard*. As Lorenz says, coral fish are posters”². These marks are artistic events because they are expressive, because they draw new territories which belong to the animal that created them. But these territories are artistic precisely because they are originally expressions, signatures. Only after they become determinations, qualities of the animal that produces them³.

¹ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum, 2007, (TP), p. 349.

² TP, p. 348.

³ “The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive, expressive qualities, or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. Not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them. These qualities are signatures, but the signature, the proper name, is not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode. The signature is not the indication of a person; it is the chancy formation of a domain” (TP, pp. 348-9).

What is relevant here is that this naturalization of art leads Deleuze to a neurological conception of aesthetics. After the discovery of the autonomy of the cinematographic image as a brain materialized on the screen in the volumes about Cinema⁴, Deleuze thinks the brain as the faculty of sensation. Art is presented as a radical philosophy of Nature where the brain exists among vegetables and minerals. It is mainly in chapter seven "Percept, affect and concept" of the second part of *What is Philosophy?* (entitled "Philosophy, Science and Art"), that Deleuze exposes what can be considered his last glance on art.

Thought is materialized in brain as sensation. One can distinguish three plans in sensation - the plan of the affects, that of the percepts, and that of the concepts. Affects, percepts and concepts correspond to the three fundamental forms of thought - art, science and philosophy. Art is now concentrated in a single plan: the cerebral, and condensed in a new ontological dimension: the Thought-brain. The brain is a singular spirit, at the same time virtual as the concepts that it creates and actual as the chaos that it cuts out with its concepts. It is the most subtle dimension of a Nature that contemplates, of an internal sensation, like soul or force, like micro-brains or inorganic life of things. Art is then a spiritual composition of blocks of sensations (as a zone of indetermination between thought and a Nature fulfilled with souls, fulfilled with micro-brains).

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze presents art as a compound of sensations that is preserved in itself, in so far as it exists, and sensations as true beings, real existences. "Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved"⁵. In their expression, sensations find a self-sufficient mode of existence. Art produces, in various materials, beings that remain as much as their own expression. Art is a compound of

⁴ In an interview about his books on Cinema, Deleuze says: "Cinema puts movement not just in the image; it puts it in the mind. Spiritual life is the movement of the mind" (Deleuze, G., *Two Regimes of Madness*, New York: Semiotext(e), 2007, p. 288). With cinema, Deleuze discovers images that let see the activity of thought. Cinema is a life of thought, a spiritual life.

⁵ Deleuze, G., *What is Philosophy* (WP), p. 163. "The work of art only applies by its internal consistency according to the principle that wants the self-position of the created (its independence, its autonomy, its life by itself). As such, by virtue of this principle, the work resembles nothing, mimics nothing. It must 'subsist by itself', on its own, without pointing or referring back to a world outside it, which it would reflect, or to a subject which it would express. The literary work is worth on its own, it is by essence that which stands right, that which stands: it is a 'monument' " (Mengue, Philippe, "Lignes de Fuite et Devenirs dans la Conception Deleuzienne de la Littérature", in *Gilles Deleuze, Concepts. Hors Série 2*, ed. par Stéfan Leclercq, Mons : Les Éditions Sils Maria, 2003, pp. 44, our translation).

beings that preserve themselves for themselves, in themselves, without needing another thing which would justify them or would support them. "It is the percept or affect that is preserved in itself. Even if the material lasts for only a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself (...). Sensation is not realized in the material without the material passing completely into the sensation, into the percept or affect. All the material becomes expressive. It is the affect that is metallic, crystalline, stony, and so on; and the sensation is not coloured but, as Cézanne said, colouring»⁶. There is a coexistence between the material and the sensation. Both create an eternity that remains beyond the material, because it exists in itself. This eternal existence becomes a being of sensation, an autonomous compound, an affect and a percept. Affect becomes coloured, metal or stony, it engages everything in a becoming-color or a becoming-sound, in a becoming-affect.

Deleuze and Guattari also indicate this self-preservation of the sensation in art as an autonomous block of sensations. The work of art is a being of sensation. "Sensations, percepts and affects, are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself"⁷. This autonomy of the sensation is done by a double sacrifice, at the same time of the object of the sensation and the subject of the sensation. From its beginning, the created thing is independent from its model, as well as from the spectator and the artist who created it. The sensations, percepts and affects do not need man as a subject that would grant them a consistency or a justification. They exist besides and before man. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the sensation is above all the process both of exceeding the lived (*vécu*) and of becoming the expressive qualities of the object. It is in this sense that the artist also enters in ecstasy, in an excess of the sensation. Since he is present in any material, the artist becomes himself an affect, a compound of percepts or affects: "it is the painter that becomes blue"⁸.

⁶ WP, pp. 166-7.

⁷ WP, p. 164.

⁸ WP, p. 181.

These autonomous sensations are the effect of what Deleuze and Guattari define as the “wresting” the affects from the affections and the percepts from the perceptions. “By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations”⁹. Aesthetics is thus transformed into a theory of the pure aesthesis, not an anthropology of the pure affects wrested from the affections, nor even a psychology of the pure percepts, but an ontology of pure sensations. The goal of art can then be defined as anti-humanistic, since it corresponds to the extraction of all the subjective features of the sensation. The goal of art is to reach pure sensation, the sensation which is no more a human feeling, the pure affect which is no more an affection, the pure percept which is no more a subjective perception. The main question of a theory of the aesthetic experience becomes then that of the nature of this “wresting” an affect or a percept, this “extracting” a block of sensations.

This act of wresting is initially about a process of demolition of the (too) human conditions of the experience. “Art undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensations that take the place of language. The writer uses words, but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing: this is the style, the ‘tone’, the language of sensations”¹⁰. Art is the uprooting of the pure affect and percept from the whole subjective sphere. It is a process of distillation of the sensation. To succeed this process, there are specific procedures to each creator. But they all concentrate themselves on the same point: the becoming-inhuman, the becoming-color, the becoming-cry or pure sound of man.

Afterwards it is necessary to build these blocks of sensations, to give them the condition of a monument. The work of art is a compound which stands by itself, it is a monument. The monument should not be understood like a lived or a memory of the past, but on the contrary like a compound of sensations of the present, self-sufficient

⁹ WP, p. 167.

¹⁰ WP, p. 176.

and which holds itself on its own. The monument is not a memory of the past but a compound of a plural time which always has the present as a centre of gravity.

In order to deny any vestige of a personal interiority, of the kind of reverie, phantasm, drifts of imagination or of memory, Deleuze and Guattari define the art-monument as an act of fabulation. The concept of fabulation, which appeared for the first time in the work of Deleuze concerning the cinema, expresses the mental activity that is farthest from the subjective sphere. To confabulate is an impersonal act of creation, it connects directly to a community. It is the act of calling upon a community to come, in the form of the It, the neutral, the collective, and which emerges in the form of visions and of hearings. Fabulation is thus not a subjective or a deprived matter, it is rather a question of becoming and of visions¹¹ and belongs to the world of affects and pure percepts, where a life appears as immanent and released from its subjective attachments, a life wrested from the personal lived. Fabulation is the world of the affects and the percepts. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “the percept is the landscape before man, in the absence of man (...). *Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man*, just as percepts - including the town - are *nonhuman landscapes of nature*”¹². Fabulation is this nonhuman becoming of man, this nonhuman landscape of nature, where affects and percepts exist for themselves, in themselves, as pure becomings, in absence of man.

The centripetal effect of the art-monument, which wrests the affects from the perceptions, wrests the artist from himself. The artist is the one that becomes, i.e. he is the one that, in the act of contemplation, joins the world, mixes himself with nature, and enters a zone of indiscernibility with the universe. Van Gogh becomes sunflower, Kafka becomes animal, Messiaen becomes rhythm and melody. “It should be said of all art that, in relation to the percepts or visions they give us, artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound (...). The flower sees (...). Whether through words, colors, sounds or stone, art is the

¹¹ “Creative fabulation has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated, or with fantasy. In fact, the artist, including the novelist, goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer, a becomer” (WP, p. 171).

¹² WP, p. 169.

language of sensations”¹³. The artist is the one that lives the affect, the one that works with the affect and lives in the affect, the point of indistinctness between man and the animal or the whole world, the zone of indiscernibility between words and things. The artist is the one that, for example as in Melville, becomes-ocean (Moby Dick), or becomes-mineral (Bartleby).

The affect “is a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, beasts, and persons (Ahab and Moby Dick, Penthesilea and the bitch) endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation”¹⁴. The affect is the state of a life which precedes natural differentiation between formed beings, the state where all form is dissolved. It belongs to a pre-individual state, where man is not distinguished from the animal or the vegetable, where all beings are a-subjective. The affect is the creation of a zero degree of the world. It is not however a return to the primitive state of life. It is rather its re-creation, the restarting of the world: “Life alone creates such zones where living beings whirl around, and only art can reach and penetrate them in its enterprise of co-creation. This is because from the moment that the material passes into sensation, as in a Rodin sculpture, art itself lives on these zones of indetermination (...). It is a question only of ourselves, here and now; but what is animal, vegetable, mineral, or human in us is now indistinct”¹⁵.

Deleuze and Guattari could not be more radical in their anti-humanism. Not even the flesh is accepted. This ultimate authority of subjectivity, halfway between an objective body held for itself, as a pure body, and a significant conscience, has too much of a humanistic taste. “The being of sensation is not the flesh but the compound of nonhuman forces of the cosmos, of man’s nonhuman becomings, and of the ambiguous house that exchanges and adjusts them, makes them whirl around like winds. Flesh is only the developer which disappears in what it develops: the compound of sensation”¹⁶. In this refusal of the flesh, one finds the extreme immaterialisation of the sensation, i.e. the refutation of the phenomenological program of Merleau-Ponty who moves the conscience towards the body of the chasm sensation/felt. The

¹³ WP, pp. 175-6.

¹⁴ WP, p. 173.

¹⁵ WP, pp. 173-4.

¹⁶ WP, p. 183.

sensation exists for itself, without being incorporated by a flesh which would support it and subjectivate it. Therefore the flesh, at the moment of the sensation, must disappear. The flesh reveals the object of the sensation, at the same time as it reveals the sensation to itself.

What is very interesting is that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the refusal of the flesh as the conscience of the body and the assertion of the sensation as an existence in itself, crossed by nonhuman forces, constitutes the basis of the definition of the sensation as a projection of the sensation in the universe, in the cosmos, in the inorganic life that works into the nonhuman becomings of man. Art is captation of the insensitive forces of the cosmos, of the vibrations, of the living lines. Art is the expression of a non-organic life which exists and which vibrates in the universe. There is a force of life, a force of time that only art manages to capture.

Anti-humanism is accomplished in its most extreme formulation, it became a cosmological program, a study of the inhuman forces and a topology of the inorganic life from the rocks and the plants until the nonhuman becomings of the man.

Art is pure spirit. If art is a composition of affects which are wrested from the affection, it is also Nature, it is also territory and house. It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari insist on the thesis according to which the primordial gesture of art is to cut out, to carve, either chaos or a territory, always to make sensations occur there. "Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house"¹⁷. To carve a territory or to cut out chaos: these are the very first moments of artistic creation. "All that is needed to produce art is here: a house, some postures, colors and songs – on condition that it all opens onto and launches itself on a mad vector as on a witch's broom, a line of the universe or of deterritorialisation"¹⁸. By this insane vector, one returns absolutely to the zone of indiscernibility between man and animal, words and things, in short, between art and Nature. Art then becomes the relationship between what Deleuze and Guattari call the "determined *melodic compounds*" and "infinite *plan of symphonic composition*".

¹⁷ WP, p. 183.

¹⁸ WP, pp. 184-5.

They explain it as follows: “From house to universe. From endosensation to exosensation. This is because the territory does not merely isolate and join but opens onto cosmic forces that arise from within or come from outside, and renders their on the inhabitant perceptible (...). But if nature is like art, this is always because it combines these two living elements in every way: House and Universe, Heimlich and Umheimlich, territory and deterritorialization, finite melodic compounds and the great infinite plane of composition, the small and large refrain. Art begins not with flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of the arts”¹⁹.

This double movement of art between the finite and the infinite, which constitutes the plan of composition like a cut out of chaos, is what supports Deleuze’s and Guattari’s other definition of art: art as thought. Art is thought, art thinks as much as philosophy or science. The purpose of art is to make the chaos sensitive, because, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes, as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos – neither foreseen nor preconceived. Art transforms chaotic variability into chaoïd variety”²⁰. Art is composition of chaos, it transforms chaos into chaoïde variety, while making it coming out from its state of chaotic variability. All thought is relation to and with chaos²¹. Not a relation of exclusion, but on the contrary, of inclusion. The thought is the result of an operation done to chaos, it is the very composition of chaos. To think is to give consistency to chaos. To make chaos consistent is to cut it out, it is to give it an own reality. Chaos becomes Thought, it acquires a reality as Thought or mental chaosmos.

Art is one of the three forms of cutting out chaos. Art, science and philosophy are the three Chaoïdes, the three forms of thought and the three forms of creating chaos. On each plan that cuts out chaos it occurs an own reality. Thus, according to Deleuze and Guattari, within immanence occurs philosophy, within consistency occurs science and within composition occurs art. The junction of these three plans is called “brain”.

¹⁹ WP, pp. 185-6.

²⁰ WP, p. 204.

²¹ “A concept is a set of inseparable variations that is produced or constructed on a plane of immanence insofar as the latter crosscuts the chaotic variability and gives it consistency (reality). A concept is therefore a chaoïd state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought, mental chaosmos. And what would *thinking* be if it did not constantly confront chaos?” (WP, p. 208).

The brain does not constitute their unity, rather merely being their connection, their chart. The brain is in a state of overflight, self-overflight, it is co-present within all its determinations, and it travels through them at infinite speed. "It is not a brain behind the brain but, first of all, a state of survey without distance, at a ground level, a self-survey that no chasm, fold, or hiatus escapes. It is a primary, 'true form' as Ruyer defined it: neither a Gestalt nor a perceived form but a *form in itself* that does not refer to any external point of view (...); it is an absolute consistent form that surveys *itself* independently of any supplementary dimension, which does not appeal therefore to any transcendence"²².

The brain, both as the creation of concepts and cut of chaos, is a singular spirit. It is the most subtle dimension of a Nature that contemplates, of an internal feeling, as soul or force, as micro-brains or inorganic life of things. It is at the moment of thinking the brain that Deleuze and Guattari propose their most radical assertion of their anti-humanism: it is not man who thinks, but the brain. "It is the brain that thinks and not man - the latter being only a cerebral crystallization. We will speak of the brain as Cézanne of the landscape: man absent from, but completely within the brain. Philosophy, art, and science are not the mental objects of an objectified brain but the three aspects under which the brain becomes subject, Thought-brain"²³. Brain becomes a Subject when it becomes Thought.

Deleuze draws attention to a resonance between making a territorial form of art - house, postures, colors, songs - and the "be to it form in oneself of a Thought-brain. As long as form which returns only to itself, the Thought-brain can be known as one "I". The brain is an I, a philosophical "I conceive", a scientific "I refer", or an artistic "I feel"²⁴. More than being cerebral, art is about soul. As a compound of sensations, art is force of both contraction and resonance of vibrations. Sensation is neither a reaction nor an excitation²⁵. It is rather contemplation. It is also conservation of the vibration

²² WP, p. 210.

²³ WP, p. 210.

²⁴ WP, p. 211.

²⁵ "Sensation is no less brain than the concept. If we consider the nervous connections of excitation-reaction and the integrations of perception-action, we need not ask at what stage on the path or at what level sensation appears, for it is presupposed (...). Sensation is the excitation itself (...) as it is preserved or preserves its vibrations. Sensation contracts the vibrations of the stimulant on a nervous surface or in a cerebral volume: what comes before has not

and, following Leibniz, Deleuze calls this contraction a contemplation which preserves, in the sense of a pure passion. By this definition of contemplation as a contraction, Deleuze can make sensation resound through all Nature, from man to rocks. Let us consider his quote at length, "These are not Ideas that we contemplate through concepts but the elements of matter that we contemplate through sensation. The plant contemplates by contracting the elements from which it originates - light, carbon, and the salts - and it fills itself with colors and odors that in each case qualify its variety, its composition: it is sensation in itself. It is as if flowers smell themselves by smelling what composes them, first attempts of vision or of sense of smell, before being perceived or even smelled by an agent with a nervous system and a brain. Of course, plants and rocks do not possess a nervous system. But, if nerve connections and cerebral integrations presuppose a brain-force as faculty of sensation coexistent with the tissues, it is reasonable to suppose also a faculty of sensation that coexists with embryonic tissues and that appears in the Species as a collective brain; or with the vegetable tissues in the 'small species'"²⁶.

To feel is to contract, and the contraction is what preserves and is preserved. As an answer to chaos, the sensation contracts and preserves vibrations. It is in this force of contraction that the sensation is preserved in itself, and becomes quality or variety. The sensation contemplates and, at that time, it fills itself with what it contemplates. The soul preserves what the matter dissipates, and is composed of other sensations that it contracts in its turn. However, the soul is not an action but rather a faculty to smell, to collect, to contemplate²⁷. Soul is a pure internal Feeling, a passive faculty, a contemplation without action, movement or knowledge. It is a pure internal contraction of self-filling. Soul is thus a sensation in itself.

As such, the spiritual and the territorial dimensions form the two poles of art. Art as spirit corresponds to the other definition of art as demarcation of a territory, as

yet disappeared when what follows appears. This is its way of responding to chaos. Sensation itself vibrates because it contracts vibrations (...). Sensation is the contracted vibration that has become quality, variety. That is why the brain-subject is here called *soul* or *force*, since only the soul preserves by contracting that which matter dissipates, or radiates, furthers, reflects, refracts, or converts" WP, p. 211.

²⁶ WP, p. 212.

²⁷ "Contemplating is creating, the mystery of passive creation, sensation. Sensation fills out the plane of composition and is filled with itself by filling itself with what contemplates: it is 'enjoyment' and 'self-enjoyment'. It is a subject, or rather an inject» (WP, p. 212).

construction of a house, because soul is present even at the level of plants and rocks. Soul is not specific to the brain, in its connections or nervous tissues. It also incorporates itself into the most elementary and embryonic existences, as a pure faculty of feeling. This vitalism essential to all form of existence, this soul of the brains as well as of rocks or plants, Deleuze and Guattari condense it in only one expression: the inorganic life of things. "Not every organism has a brain, and not all life is organic, but everywhere there are forces that constitute micro-brains, or an inorganic life of things"²⁸.

Art is capture of the force of life and also creation of a life which stands by itself and which, for itself, captures the intensity of life's immanence. And it is by the explanation of this mode of capturing life that Deleuze proposes a philosophy of the spirit. Because spirit, defined in *What is Philosophy?* as "soul", "force", "form in itself", is what, in the thought, manages to fly over chaos, to make it sensitive, to cut it out it so as to turn it into a *chaoïde* or a compound of affects and percepts. The spirit is the inorganic life of thought, the micro-brain as pure self-contemplation (of itself) without knowledge. Art is then a true transcendental exercise, because it is at the same time both a cerebral experimentation (instead of faculties, Deleuze now proposes the brain, the micro-brain) like thought, and an artistic creation of a life, a life as total immanence of the sensation. Art is then a transcendental empiricism of the sensation as an inorganic exercise of the brain.

We therefore understand that the program of transcendental empiricism is the research of the absolute immanence. With the figure of the brain as spirit or form in itself, Deleuze can now make the formal or the conditions of possibility coincide with the real conditions of thought. Art and thought meet each other as creation, the former of sensations, the latter of concepts. Thought has its genesis in an immanent spirit, a spirit as a "form in itself" that renders the chaos sensitive. And art is precisely creation and spiritual composition of chaos. If Deleuze, as he himself acknowledges it, was always interested in vitalism, it is in this pure immanence, in the spirit as pure contemplation without knowledge, sensation in itself, that he will find, its final

²⁸ WP, p. 213.

formula: "Immanence: a life...". The immanent life is then at the same time a life as inorganic spiritual life, pure image in contemplation of itself, and a life as what art produces under what there is of more impersonal, pre- and a-subjective: micro-brains present in all Nature, or, to take once again the expression used by Deleuze, the "collective brain" of the small species like plants and rocks. To understand art according to Deleuze is thus to understand that, as a collective matter of Nature, art is a pan-psychism, a natural and neurological theory of the micro-brains.