



Assemblage Notes, or, A Comment on the Factory of Things

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abstract

The following comment focuses on Robert Cooper's well-known and rightly celebrated deconstructive style of writing, especially as it is played out in the article 'Assemblage Notes', which appeared in *Organized Worlds*,¹ a book dedicated to Cooper. As the present reading progresses it outlines the actual plateaus that 'Assemblages Notes' establishes, and also the rhetorically forceful use of repetition it deploys. As the themes explored in the original text are touched upon as well as the theoretical landscape in which it travels is depicted, a critical voice is never the less raised regarding the level of affirmation and critical potential produced by the text. It is claimed that social analysis cannot be satisfied alone with a (maybe even by definition) endless deconstruction, which in the end betrays the text, making it become just another prisoner of that despotic signifier it set out to destroy. This should not imply a (equally absurd) 'general' rejection of deconstruction as such, but remind us of the, perhaps subsequent, need for new lines of flight, that is new possibilities for the creation of worlds.

RoboCop is a walking Swiss army knife with unlimited resources designed to combat the most sophisticated villains. (www.mgm.com)

The author is a subject of enunciation but the writer – who is not an author – is not. The writer invents assemblages starting from assemblages which have invented him, he makes one multiplicity pass into another. (Gilles Deleuze²)

In 'Assemblage Notes' a machine is built, a machine that is constantly performing and performed by collective assemblages, creating repetitions 'with a difference'. But what's the problem in the first place? The problem is the three dominant stratifications binding human beings in modern time: the three great strata are the organism, signifi-ance and interpretation, and subjectification and subjection, that is

1 Robert Cooper, 1998, 'Assemblage Notes', in Robert Chia (ed.) *Organized Worlds: Explorations in Technology and Organization with Robert Cooper*. London: Routledge, p.108-129.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, 1987, *Dialogues*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.51-52.

psychoanalysis, structuralism and Marxism respectively.³ Reduction is a too reductive term for characterising the three strata, rather are they fixations and stultifications. It is these fixations and stultifications, these ‘sophisticated villains’, that the RoboCop’er is smoking out of their (w)holes: the politics of identity, ideology, idealism and the corresponding transcendental philosophy of being.

The text is an assembly of textual fragments, or bits and pieces cut (off) from their original flow, which is shown to be no more original than their present deployment: “when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work”.⁴ Also the text has its form: there are books (and articles) of the rhizomatic type, and books (and articles) of the root-type, that is, there are texts clinging to centrality, definitions, representations, and there are texts exploring molecular flows, *schizzes*, breaks. Texts drawing maps.

There are even oeuvres of this kind, Cooper’s whole work⁵ is composed of a number of textual plateaus (‘articles’ surely is not the satisfying term here), all rhizomatically interlinked as the current issue of *ephemera* shows.

Furthermore can there be no representation of the world ‘in’ a text, the relation between the book and the world is non-parallel evolution: their relation is rhizomatic.⁶ The book opens the possibility of the de-territorialisation of the world, the world is constantly re-territorialising the book, which then in turn tries again to deterritorialise itself, if, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari underline: if it can, if it is capable. It is a constant struggle between the war machine-book and the State apparatus-book: an *internal* struggle, as it is played out on the same plane. The war machine is the possibility of creativity within the royal sciences, within the root-type book, it is the possibility of new lines of flight, new bearings for the existence of a new people yet to come.

Different regimes of signs are brought to work in ‘Assemblage Notes’, which are not just notes that have been assembled, but also assemblages that stratifications are trying to note or to knot, to de-note or to knot down firmly. The machine works by repetition, and repeats different textual cuts from other texts: difference must be shown differing, as Deleuze puts it, and this telling-and-showing is the product of the text machine in question.

Thematically the text is occupied with the Durkheimian division of labour, and is in itself performing a division of text: it is a text of division, of di-vision, as “we must

3 Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p.134; and Ian Buchanan, 2000, *Deleuzism. A Metacommentary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

4 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.4.

5 One fact, among others, that the editors of this issue enriched the present commentary with.

6 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.11ff.

learn to look out of two eyes, not in the same direction but in two different, and indeed divergent, directions at once" (p.118, quoting S. Weber⁷).

As a result, a number of plateaus are constructed: 'Assemblage', 'Otherability', 'Part-whole', 'Mediations of assemblage.' These four assemblages are progressively iterative: whereas in the first couple of plateaus only a few 'bricks of text' are used, these bricks as well as others are extensively repeated in the last two plateaus.

The configuration of the text is lined up in the 'Introduction', and as in every functional introduction a *Bedienungsanleitung*, an instruction for use, is formulated: how is this machine working, which are its elements, from where does it draw its energy, which are its fields of forces. This as opposed to a traditional signifying introduction, which as a rule puts forward instructions on how to read, how to interpret that is how to delimit and disconnect the text in order to answer the preconditioned question: what does the text mean? Parallel to this machine of signification another semiotic system is at work in a traditional, signifying introduction, which is the machine of subjectification: an introduction as a rule also introduces the reader, the possibilities of being a reader, the subjectivity of the reader. Even if it is happening right before your eyes, it is precisely happening behind your back which is where your eyes - in fact your whole face - is produced in the first place by the machines of faciality.⁸

The approach in 'Assemblage Notes', that is the functional introduction, leaves open the question of the reader, a reader that turns out rather to be a *user*, in the same sense as a lawn mower tends to mow the lawn regardless of who is moving it. The death of the author seems to have been followed by the death of the reader, in the same way as one now is able to invest in lawn mowers that mows the lawn without the need for an external mover, a user or any human steering capacity whatsoever. Similarly your house can be pre-programmed to turn the lights on and off without you being there, the GPS system can take over car driving (there goes the last hero assemblage of the American man), and when you have left both your house and your car, you wouldn't need to return back home, as your gated community is pre-programmed to do without the community, only needing the gates, the limen, to function. Hadrian's wall surrounding the Empire did not represent the periphery of the Empire: the wall was the machine that produced the Empire, regardless whichever side you might find yourself in, as it produced both villains and civilians.⁹

7 In the present text, whenever a page number with no other reference occurs, it refers to 'Assemblages notes' as published in *Organized Worlds* (as cited above). The notion of this di-vision is explored by Cooper in his contribution to *Ideas of Difference*, edited by Kevin Hetherington and Rolland Munro, 1998, Blackwell.

8 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.167ff. The first place, notably, being nothing else than a fold in the surface of the stratum in question.

9 Cf. Thomas Basbøll 'Hadrian's wall', forthcoming. One only needs to imagine the consequences of the atrocity of Tiananmen Square taking place not in Beijing, but at the Chinese Wall, that is at the 'centre' of the territory and not at its limits. The destabilisation of the country and the whole international response and long-term effects would have been of another quality altogether.

In the end, then, the consumer durable can do without the consumer, who is then able to escape the general economy of the production of mass (p.109), creating a smooth space in which to experiment on the much more potent question: to which degree can the consumer do without the durable?

The introduction of Durkheim's "division of labour" (p.108) is launched as the functional societal equivalent to what is actively being followed in the text: how can the labour of division become visible? So P. Fischer's "provisional array of parts" (p.109) is the way the text is describing the production of text rather than being a text of production, the same way as mass production is the production of mass *before*, historically and semantically, it is a mass production.¹⁰ The re-focusing from the entity of mass (production) to the relations of production (of mass) is reflected in the move from a philosophy of being to a philosophy of becoming. Where the former is preoccupied with the essences of things in themselves, the latter treats relations as external to what they relate. This is what is implicated in Whitehead's "mutual relatedness" (p.108), which points out the rhizomic qualities of the assemblage. In this first (or second, or n-1'th) plateau, the plateau named 'Assemblage', Whitehead's "mutual relatedness" (p.110; 112) is related to movement, which, according to Deleuze, "always happens behind the thinker's back, or in the moment when he blinks" (p.112). The key element of this plateau is its quality of becoming-other, its relatedness to the historical matter-flow, the evolution of the stirrup from the nomads to chivalry: is it the becoming of a nomadic war machine of the text? Indeed, de-territorialising the author, the assemblage produces new becomings: of a writer who is not a new ghostly Author, but a becoming of different kinds. (It's not possible to become-ghost - you might become a trickster - nor is it possible to become majoritarian.¹¹) Writing itself produces becomings: becoming-animal, for instance, that is becoming-minoritarian.¹²

Becoming-other: in 'Otherability' the next plateau, a new machinic function is described as a consequence of abandoning identity and First Difference, since identity is in need of a difference to sustain it, and this first difference lives on the mercy of what comes next, the first difference being as unsustained as identity itself. The hinge in this plateau is Merleau-Ponty's: the hinge around which inside and outside turn (p.116; 117), thus creating a space, a sort of matter-space of movement, deferring difference – and introducing a Derridean 'iterability' being "that which *splits an element while constituting it*" (p.115).

However, at this point of the text, or at this passage of the plateau, the function of constituting seems totally to give way to the de-territorialisation of splitting, the seam that seams is seemingly entering a roundabout: is the war machine beginning to lose its movement and its inner connectedness? Can the war machine survive without choosing

10 Cf. also Cooper's latest article 'Interpreting Mass: Collection/Dispersion' in *The Consumption of Mass*, edited by Nick Lee and Roland Munro, 2001, Blackwell.

11 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.291.

12 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.291ff. Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka has as its subtitle 'Toward a minor literature'.

between 'Part-whole' in the next plateau? Not as a normative judgement from without, but as an immanent critique from within the part towards the whole, not as identity but as lines of flight that break free from the assemblage, seeking to transgress its inner limits to reach a new level of potentiality and intensity. Will it circulate around the hinge like a *perpetuum mobile*? To de-stratify is of course to attack the stratification, showing new possibilities, becoming a 'Body without Organs', that is pure intensity and movement, with no longer a Self, but only speeds and affects. But even so, on the stratum in question there is also a BwO that re-produces the organisation of the organism, in the shadow of the organisation of the stratum itself.¹³ The BwO exists both on the de-stratified plane of consistency *and* on the strata, because the organism must re-stratify at all time, maybe it is a cell threatening to become cancerous. This in order to *be able* to produce the 'other' BwO on the plane of consistency: there are specific dangers of a too sudden de-stratification or a de-stratification that does not preserve in and for itself some of the organisation of the stratum.

Furthermore, to see a *Gestalt*, one by convention has to perceive the constructed figure-ground in one sight. This would need two eyes, and, as will be remembered, a slight movement, a *différance* to take effect. Seeing the part-whole "out of two eyes, not in the same direction but in two different, and indeed divergent, directions at once" (p.118) is more likely to create Cubism (p.116; 121) than criticism, even if Cubism at its best is indeed capable of enabling criticism. The fact that we constantly have to ask the question "Where does consciousness begin, and where end? Who can draw the line? Is not everything interwoven with everything? Is not machinery linked with animal life in an infinite variety of ways?" (p.119), as Butler's marvellous *Erehwon* keeps doing, must rebound us from the ontological flow into describing the actual machines at work. Not Nowhere but Now, Here, and Everywhere, machines that *do* define, *do* cut off, *do* signify.¹⁴ Even conceiving the body as a hinge (p.121) is a stratification that has political implications, as being an organism is one of the great stratifications of the assemblage.

The 'last' plateau, 'Mediations of Assemblage', takes correspondingly the principle of deferral and difference to its zenith:

Movement always happens behind the thinker's back, or in the moment when he blinks' *and* 'we must learn to look out of two eyes, not in the same direction but in two different, and indeed divergent, directions at once' *and* the division of labour *and* the body as a hinge *and* 'the medium is not only the message but is nothing less than reality itself' *and* Whitehead's 'mutual relatedness'

– a list that occurs if we constrain us to the conjunctions on page 124 alone. It has powerful effects, as it follows the delezoguattarian principle of conjunction:

13 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.162ff.

14 Machines that are "at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts". Cf. the very opening paragraph of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1977, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. New York: Viking Press.

The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and...and...” This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb “to be.”¹⁵

In the text the assemblage obviously functions as a powerful analytical concept, but the question remains - as indicated above - to what extent (if at all) the two different analytical strategies of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze are in the end compatible. Do Deconstruction and Schizo-analysis (or Pop-analysis or Nomadology) work productively together?

The fact that Deleuze ‘himself’ recognised deconstruction as such, but did not relate it to his own project is hardly an argument for not combining the two strategies in that particular schizzoid compilation one is befitted to use, and then see how the text works. However, one is tempted to follow Kenneth Surin’s argument, that the assemblage in itself is a concept created to oppose exactly deconstruction.¹⁶ The assemblage has two sides or components: from the one perspective, it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, occupied with expressions and their codings and conditions on the strata. From the other perspective it is connected, by prolongation, to the massive Body without Organs and its collective of materials and intensities. In other words, the abstract machine of the assemblage is *bipolar*, like a double pincer: on the one side it organises form-substance of expression (the collective assemblage of enunciation) and on the other it organises the form-substance of content (the machinic assemblage).¹⁷ The play on inter-textuality, the floating nature and arbitrariness of the signifier-signified chain and the instability of dualisms and their hierarchy must be recognised as productive reading strategies. It stands out, however, that Derrida (and Robert Cooper), in order to ‘de-centre’ and ‘de-stabilise’, have to cling on to the structures exactly in order to *show* these characteristics of the text in question.¹⁸ Deconstruction remains occupied with the signifier-signified relation (which is important), and consequently has to negate the extra-textual matter-flows, resulting in the strong bias the strategy has towards the expressive part of the assemblage.¹⁹

From a Nietzschean perspective, what is lacking is a positive affirmation, a will to power, indeed a will to another life, another people. The productivity of ‘Assemblage Notes’, that is, its capability to connect to extratextualities and disconnect unproductive passions (‘sad passions’ is Spinoza’s term), is to a very large extent thwarted by its endless deconstructions: rather than building a war machine, an immanent ‘counter-Fordism’ perhaps, the threat of a paralysing flow of debris is alarmingly real. The

15 Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.25.

16 Kenneth Surin: ‘A Question of and Axiomatic of Desires: The Deleuzian Imagination of Geoliterature’, reprinted in Buchanan and Marks, 2000, *Deleuze and Literature*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University, p.172ff.

17 See Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.140ff, and Brian Massumi, 1992, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, ed. A. Swerve. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p.27ff.

18 Kenneth Surin, 2000, p.173.

19 See also Peter Engelschmidt, 2001, ‘The War Machines of Madness. A Transversal Inquiry into the Sectorised Psychiatry in Denmark’, Copenhagen Business School, p.49.

deconstructions themselves are indeed vivid, surprising and thoroughly encyclopaedic and scholarly in the most positive of senses, but the whole endeavour avoids the affirmative and hence the political project of countering, pointing towards new ways of struggle.

On p.111 Cooper quotes Deleuze:

The minimum real object is not the work, the idea, the concept or the signifier, but the assemblage...which is always collective, which brings into play within us and outside us populations, multiplicities, territories, becomings, affects, events.²⁰

The original text by Deleuze reads differently: "The minimum real object is not the *word*" (my emphasis). The minimum real object might in fact *be* the *work*, namely the work of the abstract machine that produces the collective assemblage of enunciation and the machinic assemblage of desire. This certainly does take place in the text, but also elsewhere, in fact, *everywhere*.

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²⁰ Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p.51, never mind that it reads p.52 in 'Assemblage Notes'.