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**On the Use and Disadvantage of Deleuze
for Understanding Digital Art¹**

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Deleuze and cybertheory

It goes without saying that new information and communication technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, GPS systems, etc. have radically changed our world. It has for example become possible to traverse space without having to experience the time interval that was usually connected with it. As Bernard Stiegler writes in *La technique et le temps 2: La désorientation*, the time interval has nowadays been reduced to almost zero; the delay that used to exist between the event, the registration of the event and the reception or interpretation of it – a delay which allowed for reflection – has been annihilated. We are living at “light speed”.² The incorporeity and interactivity that are implied by these ICT technologies extend the image we have of ourselves to the virtual lives we live on the internet and to the virtual communities of which we are part. In brief, ICT technologies stimulate the blurring of classical boundaries, like those between reality and fantasy/virtuality, here and there (or present, past and future³) and me and the other. Virtualization, decentralization and desubjectivation can be considered as the principal characteristics of our contemporary, technologically mediated world. Focusing on these themes, cybertheorists end up rather quickly referring to Gilles Deleuze. His conceptual critique of any kind of totalitarianism - whether it is ruled by the subject, the here and now or the real - , together with his plea for experimenting with fixed determinations, make him the cyberphilosopher *par excellence*. I will now, by means of introduction, concentrate on three Deleuzian notions - the virtual, the simulacrum and the machine - which occupy a central place in cyberphilosophy.

Just as virtual reality technologies like 3D-architectural drawing programs, virtual medical surgery programs and astronaut training programs do not end at the boundaries of the imaginary world in which they operate but determine in a fundamental way our experience of the real, Deleuze’s notion of the *virtual* is not opposed to the real but concerns a very important part *of* the real. The real consists of an actual and a virtual part which do not bear any resemblance to each other. The virtual is real because it is the condition of reality of the actual; it is that which brings about actualization, which makes the distribution of qualities and identities possible.⁴ Hence, the actual contains the level of individual qualities and identities (which can be abstract or concrete), whereas the virtual consists of the spatio-temporal dynamics that move the actual. The real is thus extended to the immaterial processes which move the individual but are themselves of a pre-individual, a-universal and singular nature.

The idea of the *simulacrum* often appears in cyberculture as a literary theme. The impossibility to discern what comes first - the material world as origin of our sensory impressions or the virtual or simulated experiences as opening up a technologically mediated but nevertheless real world, is a recurrent motive in cybernovels or science fiction movies.⁵ Deleuze's concept of the simulacrum can be used to construct the theoretical frame for this literary theme. Originally, the term 'simulacrum' refers to Plato's distinction between good and bad copies of the perfect Ideas; simulacra are bad copies because they do not share their essence with the identical Ideas. Since 'identical' implies coinciding with itself and thus being undividable, simulacra are not identical but differential and bear only an external or secondary resemblance to the Ideas. As Deleuze's philosophy of the event implies the impossibility of an origin being identical with itself, there are consequently only bad copies or simulacra. Deleuze exchanges the primacy of self-coinciding, original, perfect and eternal identities for a world in which there are only differences, differences which differ from themselves and from others in an ever changing but still repetitive way.

A third notion central in the philosophy of Deleuze and of great interest to cybertheorists is his notion of the *machine* or automaton. It is clear that in cyberculture the shifting of boundaries originates in the close interaction of man and machine, an interaction so close that one must speak rather of cyborgs (cybernetics+organisms) and leave an instrumentalist view on technology behind. Machines have become a prosthetic extension of man, a new sense or organ, instead of the means by which man manipulates nature. In Deleuze's philosophy the term 'machine' appears in the context of thinking as well as of desire. According to Deleuze, thinking is a mechanized activity in this sense that it cannot be understood as the activity of a subject discovering an already existing truth. It is not the subject who thinks but thinking occurs through the subject; the truth is not enclosed in the subject or in the whole of which all the organs are parts but it is quasi automatically produced by the network of which subject and object are only junctions. Truth thus depends on the functioning of the different parts of the machine.⁶

What Deleuze calls a desiring machine refers likewise to a desire that does not originate in a subject and is not aimed at filling up a lack or absence. He argues in other words against a psycho-analytical and phenomenological definition of desire. Desire is, conversely, absolutely positive or affirmative; it concerns a fullness or excess of undefined energy, an amalgam of forces or intensities that is about to explode without having a pre-given aim or direction. It thus has nothing to do with a *vécu*, an emotion or experience. The energy does not go anywhere but only searches to maintain itself, or, like the *conatus* of Spinoza, to develop its own internal energy. Just like the machines in early science fiction novels, the desiring machine consists of an unrestrained and disoriented production: elements are combined and separated only out of a sense of experimenting and differentiating.⁷

To conclude these introductory remarks one could say that the Deleuzian notions with which the cybertheorists - among which I also count critics of digital art - are familiar are mainly notions that refer to the desubjectivated, non-actual and artificial - that is to say postmodern - character of his philosophy.

The modern character of Deleuze's aesthetics

What is peculiar however is that the aesthetics that Deleuze presents in his book *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* contains ideas which are - according to his own

standards - rather 'pre-digital' or 'modern'. The focus in his aesthetics on notions such as 'presence', 'coincidence' and 'immediacy' has a strong affinity with what Deleuze himself considers to be the essence of modern Cartesian philosophy.

In *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* Deleuze describes 'good' art - with a term borrowed from Lyotard - as figural art, as opposed to figurative art. Art has nothing to do with representing the world or creating forms that imitate a model as closely as possible, whether it regards objective reality or subjective interiority. It does not have to depict a scene or sketch the original relations between things by putting their forms into perspective, by using *clair-obscur* to create depth, relevance and thus meaning. Especially after the advent of photography, which fulfils this representational function perfectly, it became clear that art must be about something else. According to Deleuze art should *present*, and not re-present the forces or fluxes that move themselves behind, or better in, these forms. Or as Cézanne says: the painter has to reach for the '*force pommesque*' inside the '*pomme*'.⁸ How does one realize this? Deleuze describes a method based on the analysis of the paintings of Francis Bacon. However innovative and rebellious an artist may be, before the actual start of the painting process his head is full of institutionalised forms, conventional images and symbols. When he thinks about painting a peach, for example, he will inevitably make associations to the peachy skin of babies, the sinful sweetness of a peach, etc. Deleuze calls these 'clichés' that have to be actively brushed away, dismantled and deformed. This can be done by isolating the forms such that the narrative of significant relations between them is broken - this is the function of the '*aplat*' or monochrome colour fields in Bacon's paintings - , or by creating points of flight inside the figures such that they can escape from themselves. The deconstruction of the significative context and content of the figures opens up the energy that crosses these figures and brings the material to the fore. The couple 'form-matter', in which form is primary to matter as matter is being moulded by a form, is replaced by the couple 'force-material', in which force and material are equally present as the material catches the force. The result is a kind of immediacy, proximity or even fusion between the 'presented' and the 'presenting'.

According to the Belgian Deleuze commentator, Mireille Buydens, this immediacy has a double nature. It consists firstly in an immediacy of the painting to itself; there is no distance inside the painting, whether it concerns the distance created by a viewer or reflective point inside the painting (for example the mirror in the Arnolfini painting by Jan Van Eyck), by a chromatic or perspectival difference between form and background or by a significative relation between the figures. Everything in the painting is situated on the same plane;⁹ the painting is flat. Secondly, there is an immediacy of the painting to the outside, that is an immediacy of the painting to the viewer: the painting hits the nervous system of the spectator directly instead of the rational decoding necessary in representational or figurative art. There is also an immediate relation between the painting and the painter: in order for the painter to be able to paint at all, the painter has to infiltrate into the heart of the flux he is presenting; a kind of fusion between painter and painted is required. The art that incorporates best this ideal of immediacy and presence is what Deleuze calls 'haptic art'. The notion 'haptic' refers to the Greek verb for touching, 'hapto', and refers to the possibility of the gaze to palpate its object, to feel it with the non-tactile senses and thus to eliminate every distance.

This conception of art as the unmediated presence of forces (of life) in the material, as the absolute proximity or immediacy of forces and material, seems very modern, at least in

Deleuze's understanding of this notion. As he explains in the first postulate by which he characterizes modern Cartesian thinking¹⁰ – the postulate of the *cogitatio natura universalis* –, this kind of representational thinking assigns a priori a form to that which generates thinking by defining it, not as the external object of a revelation but as the “right content that corresponds with what should be said or thought.”¹¹ “What should be said or thought” is what should be said or thought corresponding to the nature of thinking. Truth is in other words the natural correlate of thinking. By its very nature, thinking is initially oriented towards the truth; the truth is that with which thinking has a natural affinity. Thinking always already disposes of an impression of truth in the sense that it always already possesses the form of it and only lacks the material completion. Thinking is thus characterized by an innate rightness; the truth is always already, that is immediately, present in our mind. We only need a *'bonne volonté'* to actualise this natural disposition and a method to guide thinking in this actualisation.

Aside from this idea of thinking as the development of an initial presence or immediacy of truth, the second cornerstone of modern philosophy relies on the concept of identity understood as an entity coinciding with itself. Deleuze's fourth postulate – the one of representation – states that representational thinking can only understand difference from within identity, that is as the opposite of that which remains the same throughout change and individual specification, i.e. that which is general and simple and, as such, is what it is in any case. Just as Plato's Ideas are superior because of their essence of *auto kat' auto*, of their being completely what they are, Cartesianism starts from the Cogito as absolute indubitability because of its characteristic to coincide completely with itself. The cogito is indubitable and hence absolutely certain because if I doubt the truth of me thinking, I am already executing the act of thinking and hence affirming its truth. In the execution of the act of thinking, the object of thinking – that which is doubted – and the subject of thinking – the one doubting – coincide. This coincidence produces an absolute transparency of thinking for itself because of the full contact - without any vagueness or ambiguity - of thinking with itself.¹² The requirement that ideas are clear and distinct is another translation of this requirement of absolute transparency or self-coincidence.

Deleuze on the difference between figural art and informal art

Having pointed out the modern character of Deleuze's aesthetics, one could ask if it would not be more appropriate for cybertheorists to choose another theoretical framework to discuss digital art than the Deleuzian one. Is the technologically mediated, and thereby in a certain sense alienating nature of these works of art not in contrast with the fusion, immediacy and coincidence Deleuze wishes from art? Does the disappearance of the aura, and thus of the uniqueness, originality and materiality of technologically reproducible art works not contradict Deleuze's idea of the matter of a work of art capturing the forces of life? It seems that Deleuze's view of action painting, or what he calls 'informal art', can create an opening here or at least can nuance his aesthetics of presence such that his aesthetics is more applicable to digital art. I will try to illustrate this by a brief, Deleuzian-inspired interpretation of the experimental videowork of the Belgian artist Anouk De Clercq.

Deleuze distinguishes three schools of contemporary art which offer an alternative to figurative or representational art: abstract art (Mondrian), informal art (Pollock) and figural art (Bacon). All three of them have left the goal of depicting reality behind. Abstract painting has done this in favour of an arsenal of geometric forms which

nonetheless still possess a significance, although it is a codified meaning which is only understandable for insiders. Deleuze's more severe critique of abstract painting is that its deformation of the representational and the narrative is not to be seen at work in the piece of art itself. Quite the reverse, the work of art only presents the result of this deformation, which implies that the deformation effected by the artist is only an inner affair. The painting is not contaminated by the deconstruction. Informal art, on the other hand, takes the deconstruction of the figurative or the form as its very subject. It thematizes the dissolution of any significative form and delimiting line by presenting only a fluid chaos of wild strokes and coloured spots. Instead of painting what he has in mind, the painter tries to be sensitive to the expressive qualities of the material and the gestures themselves; he tries to exclude any translation or mediation in order to let the forces present in his hand and in the material speak for themselves.

Neither of these two art schools receives Deleuze's undivided approbation. His remarks about the shortcomings of the second school are especially interesting: Deleuze thinks that the deformation work of informal art only results in plain, undifferentiated chaos, in a '*brouillard indistinct*'.¹³ The reason is that the deformation is done in a brutal way, without care, prudence and subtlety.¹⁴ '*La vue proche*' which is created by annihilating the difference between figure and background, by negating perspective and bringing everything into the same plane, has become too '*proche*' now; everything is blurred. The lines of flight that took the figure beyond its boundaries and towards its surroundings have now turned into lines of death and destruction. To translate this into the discourse of presence and coincidence: Deleuze's remarks about the mistakes of informal art reveal the necessity of a minimum of form, that is a minimum of distance, reflection and narration. The form has to be molecularized but not to its final point; the eye has to invest in a certain tactile function but not to the extent that it loses itself in the gesture. Form is a necessary evil. Deleuze's idea of the uselessness of a map being as big as the land it depicts forms another illustration of the necessity of a certain amount of *mis-en-scène*, interpretation and thus distance in order for an image to be of any interest.

Kernwasser Wunderland¹⁵

The animation film *Kernwasser Wunderland* by the Belgian videoartist Anouk De Clercq incorporates this subtle equilibrium between deformation and a minimum of form in a magnificent way. The film refers vaguely to the atomic disaster in Chernobyl in April 1986, although the images that are shown cannot simply be identified as landscapes suffering from radiation and abandonment. Any attempt to construct a narrative or a chain of significative images that link up with and clarify each other is gently interrupted. The non-figurative composition of lines somewhere in the middle of the film, for example, shifts the attention to the abstract nature of the film, thereby blocking the sensation of death and emptiness the spectator initially has.

Another obstacle for 'understanding' the film is the fact that the images zooming in and out do not allow one to take a better look or to have a general overview. Images of different perspectives are put on top of each other or follow each other in a non-logical way. The disorientation that is thus generated is further reinforced by the regular disappearance of depth in the images. The result is that sometimes figure and background can be switched - like in Rubin's figure-vase ambiguity - , which again stimulates the feeling of incomprehensibility and alienation. In the case the images do possess depth (created by means of grey shades, shadows or movement) the shadows and movement do

not always obey physical laws: either the shadows do not have an origin or the movement is not contained within one object. As a consequence, the forms in the scene can hardly be put in front of one another but are, on the contrary, part of the same, more or less flat, plane.

The dissociative relation between image and music is another and final way in which deformation takes place in this film: the sound does not always accompany the image but often follows its own track, at one time preceding or stimulating the event, at other moments echoing it.

What is remarkable however, and what constitutes the genuine artistic value of this film, is that the deformation strategies never turn into a psychedelic association of meaningless forms and movements. All the means by which the narrative is broken down still leave enough sense in order to be able to experience the movie as a disorientating and alienating picture of a deserted place. Although this sense cannot really be determined or articulated - and neither can it be located - , it is there as the minimum of form required to prevent an image of drowning into senseless, undifferentiated fluxes. As such this minimum of sense might be considered as a criterion to evaluate digital art.

¹ This title is a modification of Aaron Schuster's article *Over het nut en nadeel van Deleuze voor de kunst (On the Use and Disadvantage of Deleuze for Art)* (De Witte Raaf, nr. 119, jan.-febr. 2006, p. 8-9), which is itself a parody of Nietzsche's book *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*. My paper accepts the invitation Schuster raises to "examine the conflicting status of the work of art that neither coincides with life, nor is completely detached from it, - to examine in other words the possibility of a *positive* alienation." (De Witte Raaf, nr. 119, jan.-febr. 2006, p. 9, own translation) According to Schuster, Deleuze was not aware of this ambiguity of the work of art, an opinion which I will try to argue against in this paper.

² Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps 2: La disorientation* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 136.

³ Bernard Stiegler speaks of a contraction of the three temporal dimensions into the present; contemporary technologies are real time technologies, ignoring the prosthetic relation that always exists between present, past and future. (Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps 1: La faute d'Epiméthée* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 237.)

⁴ Deleuze states that the virtual consists of relations and singularities which actualize themselves in species on the one hand, and determinate parts or extended realities (which are characteristic for a specific species) on the other hand. « Quand le contenu virtuel de l'Idée s'actualise, les variétés de rapports s'incarnent dans des espèces distinctes, et corrélativement les points singuliers qui correspondent aux valeurs d'une variété s'incarnent dans des parties distinctes, caractéristiques de telle ou telle espèce. » (Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, [1968]), 266.)

⁵ See for example the first scenes of the movie *The Matrix* (Wachowski brothers, 1999) in which it is unclear if the sensations the main character is experiencing are original (that is, based on the material world) or artificially stimulated.

⁶ « Au logos, organe et organon dont il faut découvrir le sens dans le tout auquel il appartient, s'oppose l'anti-logos, machine et machinerie dont le sens [...] dépend uniquement du fonctionnement, et le fonctionnement, des pièces détachées. [...] Pourquoi une machine ? C'est que l'œuvre d'art ainsi comprise est essentiellement productrice, productrice de vérités. [...] C'est pourquoi Proust refuse avec tant de force l'état d'une vérité qui ne serait pas produite, mais seulement découverte ou au contraire créée, [...] » (Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, [1964]), 176.) The productive nature of thinking shows itself also in Deleuze's idea of thinking being forced by the sign with which it is confronted to develop its sense; in contrast to truth, sense is not discovered but developed. In the same way problems need to be invented instead of being resolved.

⁷ Deleuze's notion of 'agencement' or 'assembly' equally refers to the bringing together and separating of different elements, which are only determined in and throughout this process.

⁸ « C'est tout le travail de Cézanne, tout son combat harrassant pour extraire un peu de la force pommesque cachée au fond des pommes... » (Mireille Buydens, *Sahara. L'esthétique de Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 156.) And: « Ainsi, lorsqu'il peint une pomme, ce n'est pas l'objet-pomme qu'il représente [...],

mais bien plutôt ‘l’événement’ dont son corps de pomme est le lieu, la force qui le pétrit, ‘l’être pomme de la pomme.’ » (id., 118.)

⁹ « Si les aplats fonctionnent comme fond, c’est donc en vertu de leur stricte corrélation avec les figures, c’est la corrélation de deux secteurs sur un même plan également proche. » (Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002, [1981]), 11.)

¹⁰ Cfr. chapter III of *Différence et Répétition*.

¹¹ « Elle [la philosophie] y [dans la vérité] a vu non seulement l’objet d’une révélation mais le juste contenu correspondant à ce qui doit être dit ou pensé, [...]. » (François Zourabichvili, *Deleuze. Une philosophie de l’événement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), 7.)

¹² The explication of the Cogito in terms of coincidence as I presented it in the main text does not appear as such in Deleuze’s texts. It can be found however in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Editions Galimard, 2002, [1945]), 438.) with which Deleuze’s interpretation of Cartesianism corresponds very well (cfr. Judith Wambacq, *Differentie en immanentie van het denken in het werk van Maurice Merleau-Ponty en Gilles Deleuze. Resonanties en divergenties tussen twee denkstijlen* (Leuven, 2006-2007, chapter 1.)

¹³ Buydens, *Sahara. L’esthétique de Gilles Deleuze*, 151.

¹⁴ « Il faut que le diagramme [the specific way in which the painter undoes the figurative in a particular painting] ne ronge pas tout le tableau, qu’il reste limité dans l’espace et dans le temps. Qu’il reste opératoire et contrôlé. Que les moyens violents ne se déchaînent pas, et que la catastrophe nécessaire ne submerge pas tout. » (Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation*, 71.)

¹⁵ This short animation film can be seen on <http://www.portapak.be>. Scroll the images on top of your screen until you encounter the title ‘Kernwasser Wunderland’, then double click.

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