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Singularization

Birgit Mara Kaiser

Singularization is the **processual** emergence of entities. It is, as Félix Guattari uses the term, always a *re*-singularization: a response to and redirecting of standardized, entrenched habits towards new, different modes of living. When thinking about (re)singularization, it is important to keep this **per-spective** in mind, because the term singularity (and the related singularization) can also give rise to very different approaches and stakes. Therefore, first a brief word on singularity.

Singularity is an over-determined and contested concept, with a wide range of meanings and diverse theoretical and political investments. Apart from its mathematical usage, singularity has recently become a prominent term in fields ranging from philosophy (Badiou 2004; Derrida 1998; Deleuze 1990; Guattari 1996; Nancy 2000), literary and cultural studies (Attridge 2004; Clark 2005; Hallward 2002; Jameson 2002) to science and technology studies (Eden, Moor, et al 2012; Kurzweil 2005), with widely diverging implications. These span an understanding of singularity as uniform oneness (the singular as single in Fredric Jameson, or as non-relational absolute in Peter Hallward, who draws on Alain Badiou's [2004, 146–147] use of the singular as universal in his second thesis on the universal), as singularities in the sense of nonhuman forces constitutive of any process of individuation (Deleuze 1990), as well as a technological "event or

156 phase that will radically change human civilization" (Eden, Moor, et al. 2012, 1) in techno-scientific or transhumanist debates, which aim to overcome human limitations by artificial intelligence.

Let us now zoom in on singularization, a term that has, in its stress on the process of emergence, closest ties to the Deleuze-Guattarian use of the term singularity. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, singularization brings into focus the formation of objects and subjects, or the **(trans)formation** of entities – unlike individuality or specificity, which are terms geared toward the classification of differences (as species or genres) that are already formed on a molar level. Contrary to this, Deleuze and Guattari interest in singularity and singularization lies in the terms' capacity to consider the transversal emergence of entities as the result of a relation of forces. For its critical potential, especially Guattari's use of (re-)singularization is of interest here.

In "Microphysics of Power/Micropolitics of Desire," Guattari discusses in this vein that – much like Deleuze's recourse to (Simondonian) individuation – the aim of Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (and other projects) is to move from "things," traditionally considered as anterior to discourse, to the formation of "entities" or "statements," which are "immersed in an enunciative field" (1996, 180). Singularization is, thus, not about the single, the (liberal) individual or the unique object, but about material-semiotic processes (to borrow Donna Haraway's term). Singularization describes the emergence of entities, and consequentially also the processes that undo (or deterritorialize) existing stratifications and in turn congeal (or reterritorialize) new modes of being. In that sense, Guattari employs the term in *The Three Ecologies* ([1989] 2008).

Guattari's argument in *The Three Ecologies* is anchored in a two-fold critique. On the one hand, as an analyst at La Borde (1955–1992), he is discontent with Lacanian structuralist psychoanalysis, which uses Freudian models of analysis focused on childhood experience and parental-familial structures. On the other hand,

as a political activist, he is concerned about two socio-political developments observed at the time of writing: First, the “extreme complexification of social, economic and international contexts” (2008, 21) resulting from a decline of the dualist opposition USA–USSR in the late 1980s and what he calls “Integrated World Capitalism.”¹ Second, the standardization of ways of life and a homogenizing of desires, largely promoted by the media (at the time, television as the prevailing medium). Guattari sees the “intoxicating and anaesthezing” (34) effects of (state-sponsored) media as intimately bound up with the production of signs and subjectivity, which he perceives as *modus operandi* of IWC. His hopeful excitement about new media and the Internet as possible openings are on the horizon of this critique in the late 1980s.

Singularization for Guattari is a counter-force to these formations, as it facilitates “new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self” (45). In regard to his intervention into Lacanian psychoanalysis, he illustrates singularization in *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (1995) with the example of a patient whose therapy got stuck and who was “going round in circles, and coming up against a wall” (17). Ultimately, the therapy moved forward not due to a Lacanian “symbolic hermeneutic centered on childhood” (18) but because of a schizo-analytic encouragement of unexpected, transversal practices: the patient suddenly desired to take up driving. This new habit fostered different fields of vision and enabled him to divert his problem into new directions. The driving lessons produced “active, processual ruptures within semiotically structured, signification and denotative networks” (19) and set into action different “existential operators capable of acquiring consistence and persistence,” making possible new “existential orchestrations, until now unheard and unknown” (19). Concerned about analytical practice, Guattari holds that Freud’s unconscious has

1 For Guattari, IWC is the post-industrial capitalism that moves from the production of goods to the production of signs and subjectivity, marked by its equally complexified effect on more than purely economic realms.

158 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” (10). It has lost its teeth, while schizoanalysis and ecosophy counter this reification to open up new passages, not only for analysis and “its theoretical scaffolding” (Guattari 2008, 27) but also for the socio-political problems that *The Three Ecologies* perceives. The real processes that set into motion such new “vectors of subjectification” (25), which are not directed at conformity with an established signifying order, is what Guattari calls singularization. The enactment, encouragement, and **affirmation** of such processes is in itself a critical practice.

The inventions of new “vectors of subjectification” are intimately bound up with Guattari’s concern about contemporary forms of capitalist **power**.

[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. (33)

Given increasingly decentralized sites of power in neoliberal capitalism and the “introjection of repressive power by the oppressed” (32) that goes with it, the question arises how to modify or redirect the effects of such power. Or, in Guattarian terms: How to re-route desires that have come to turn in circles? How to activate “catalysts of existential change” (30)? Partly, Guattari’s response is to note that – since an opposition only from the outside is not sufficient or 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” (33). Therefore, “it will be a question in the future of cultivating a *dissensus* and the singular

production of existence" (33), the singularization of desires and modes of living.

Importantly, processes of singularization and new subjectivities are approached from an ecosophical perspective, inspired by Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* ([1972] 2000). "Ecology" (of which human subjectivity is one of Guattari's *three* ecologies, alongside social relations and the environment) stresses that these existential modes are capable of morphing or being "cultivated." They can "bifurcat[e] into stratified and deathly repetitions or ... open ... up processually from a praxis" (2008, 35), they can be constrained or opened (*de-* and *re-*territorialized). Given Guattari's analysis of IWC as a stratification and homogenization of existence for profit, the de-stratification and differentiation of existence is key to any critical intervention into these conditions. Dissensus is not articulated in the name of an alternative general project; rather, it serves to re-singularize existences (or proliferate difference) without presupposing a *telos*. The subjective domain – human subjectivity – is viewed neither (prescriptively) on the basis of structure (unconscious, language, law) nor as possessing directionality or end (self-consciousness, normativity, consensus). It is rather phrased as the affirmation of **creatively** cultivating new existential refrains, the desire for a "subjectivity of resingularization" (44) which exploits "a-signifying points of rupture" (37) to care into existence hitherto unimagined vectors, desires, and phantasms.

Literature plays a crucial role for Guattari in this: as a practice that can explore **symptoms** and incidents outside the norm, and mobilize vectors of subjectification that elude the mastery of the self to **work** for a re-routing of refrains (in a similar way, Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* ([1967] 1991) makes use of the literary analyses of sadism and masochism, linking the critical and clinical). For this reason Guattari pleads for tapping the "cartographies of the psyche" (2008, 25) that *poetic-literary* texts offer. The critical and clinical work go hand in hand here, with literary texts seen as critical manifestos "for effective practices of

160 experimentation" (24) to "bring into being other **worlds**" (44–45, bold added) and to critically intervene into and transform oppressive modes of living.

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