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Tracing the influence of Fernand Deligny on autism studies

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, I have had a growing interest in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the influence of Fernand Deligny's work on their own, and the similarities and differences between their respective philosophies and those within my own writings as an autistic academic and activist. Recently a translation of Deligny's writing became available. Deligny's writing, even when translated, is not easy to decipher, and perhaps reflects his 'rhizome-esque' philosophy and practice. Yet according to Burk there were three main principals which characterised the work of Deligny: the network as a mode of being (called the 'Arachnean'); the art of acting and doing from which his methodology of 'mapping' attempted to trace; and, lastly, the 'primordial communism' of a shared common site of living. In this article, these themes will be explored and contrasted with the theoretical writings of the autistic author Jim Sinclair and those of my own, as well as indicating how they influenced the concepts later devised by Deleuze and Guattari.

Introduction

Starting in the 1950s, Deligny and his co-workers collectively ran residential communes in France for autistic children and young people, who otherwise would have been institutionalised (Hilton 2015). Being strongly critical of state-run asylums, Deligny sometimes referred to these collectives of people as a band of 'non-violent guerrillas' (Hilton 2015). Deligny also rejected the dominance of psychoanalytic theory and practice that often permeated (and continues to permeate) cultural attitudes to autism within Francophone nations:

> For me, psychoanalysis is a curiously foreign language … And then I got used to it, all the more easily when I met an autistic individual who, clearly, could no more understand our language than I could psychoanalysis. (Deligny 2015, 171)

According to Burk (2013) there were three main principals which characterised the work of Deligny: the network as a mode of being (called the 'Arachnean'); the art of acting and doing from which his methodology of 'mapping' attempted to trace; and, lastly, the 'primordial communism' of a shared common site of living. In this article, these themes will be explored and contrasted with the theoretical writings of the autistic author

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Jim Sinclair (1993) and those of my own (Milton, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), as well as indicating how they influenced the concepts later devised by Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980).

The network as a mode of being

Deligny writes of the 'Humans-that-we-are', a kind of idealised functional state of normative humanity, as a destructive hegemonic discourse, and also as an invented symbolic mythology or fantastical projection. Contrasted with the 'Humans-that-we-are' are presented human beings as gesture and form, a kind of pre-lingual purity exemplified by the way of being and acting of the autistic young people he worked and lived with:

> I shall say the same thing about the mode of being in a network, which is perhaps the very nature of human beings, 'the mind' merely intervening into the bargain, in this case, and its work is the excess rather than the structure of the network. (Deligny 2015, 40)

Deligny further contrasts the symbolic point of view of the 'Humans-that-we-are' against the point of seeing of autistic young people, conceived to be an immediate sensory process. Deligny likens the way of being of an autistic person to a being without consciousness of self and other, not being conscious of being 'woven in language'. In this way, Deligny sets a binary distinction between the non-verbal autistic world, inhabiting a pre-lingual 'network', and the symbolic world of language. This description shares similarities with descriptions of autistic ways of being and acting in the world made by Milton (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), yet rather than describing a spectrum of tendencies toward either extreme as Milton does, Deligny presents an almost 'ideal type' model of these differences, perhaps in order to theoretically juxtapose them, but also no doubt influenced by his working with autistic people who lived largely beyond the realm of language (or at least verbal expression in speech). For Deligny, however, denying the autistic person access (theoretically) to the 'thought-out-project' or the fantasy of neat outcomes pursued by the 'Humans-that-we-are' may be some kind of saving grace:

> … I inflict this right on them and condemn them a likeness – an identity – that is all the more burdensome because it is fictitious. Certainly, they have a right to the higher level; but what can they do with this right, if not live the disarray of extravagating, which literally means to wander off the path? What path are we talking about? The path of the thought-out project. (Deligny 2015, 50)

For Deligny, despite the dogmatic pursuit of the 'Humans-that-we-are' which is imposed onto autistic people, autistic people would continue to operate in the mode of being of the network. Deligny also asked whether the 'Humans-that-we-are' are deprived of access to acting in the present without symbolic referents to depend upon; and if so, if this was a steep price to pay for pursuing the 'thought-out-project'. It is certainly of interest that Deligny imagined a mode of being outside of notions of self and auto-biographical narrative that have later been reflected in the writings of autistic authors such as Milton (2014c), who conceived of the 'aut-ethnography', involving the telling of a fragmented and rhizome-esque story as opposed to a coherent narrative of selfhood over time (as is often the case in auto-ethnographies).

The 'Arachnean' analogy

In order for networks as a mode of being to grow and propagate, humans – like any other creature – must make use of the coincidences of their environments for their own purposes. As an example, a spider must find something to attach its web to:

> … the network being nothing more than 'a permanent or accidental assemblage of interwoven lines.' (Deligny 2015, 77)

Throughout Deligny's writing, he makes an analogy with the network as a mode of being with the life of the spider and the weaving of a web. In using such an analogy, he suggests that the existence of networks is in constant danger of falling apart, or else becoming a constraining institution:

> A network can complete itself by disappearing or by becoming an institution. The sole under-pinning that allows for a network is a breach, a rift. (Deligny 2015, 46)

The notion of lines of flight becoming 'clumped' and reified in institutional form has also been a topic addressed by autistic authors in recent times (Milton 2013). One can also easily see the striking influence Deligny had on Deleuze and Guattari's (1972, 1980) concept of the rhizome, but also the notions of a 'plane of immanence' and a 'body-without-organs'.

Deligny's maps

Deligny used a method of making ongoing 'maps' of the wander lines (tracing the movements over time) of the autistic people he lived and worked with. These maps were not seen as completed products but continuous works in progress, with traces of the movements of the autistic people being layered upon each other over a number of years, because it was not a finished product which was the object of the exercise but the exercise of tracing and mapping itself. Deligny envisioned these maps as inscriptions of a way of being and acting in the world, the mode of being of the Arachnean network, a pure form of humanity acting without the purpose of a 'thought-out-project'.

In explaining these maps, Deligny refers to an example of Aboriginal art from northern Australia, where a painting of a turtle is made on a piece of bark. Whilst the turtle painting is meticulously made, once 'finished' it is then discarded, with the meaning of the exercise being in the making, the process, and not the product. Of course, being seen as unproductive could have its difficulties when viewed by the 'Humans-that-we-are':

> An autistic child traces; you can always ask yourself what, and answer your own question in the same breath. (Deligny 2015, 93)

The maps were seen as interactive living entities, not static pieces of art to make a coherent meaning from – like the Aboriginal art Deligny cites – and yet also as a way of attempting to engage with the way of being of non-verbal autistic people.

Primordial communism

Deligny utilised the term 'primordial communism' to describe the way of living he experienced, not trying to evoke an historical period but in terms of that which formulates an origin. In this sense, Deligny saw the network as more fundamental to human existence than language, yet as destroyed by language and the 'thought-out-project':

> To communicate? I understand well, or rather the word, as I understand it is doubled … In order to make the tacit speak, what is required is to want, to do violence and to violate, and not at all a secret or something that would resist being said. (Deligny 2015, 91)

For Deligny, the network as a way of being is outside of language, and thus by naming it one is somewhat doing violence to it:

> We could have been led to an over-abundance of comprehension, which is often what happens to these children … (Deligny 2015, 156)

In seeking to gain a commonality with the autistic people he and his colleagues worked and lived with, Deligny used the term 'topos' or the local environment and affordances of living, a place which to Deligny appeared resistant to being fully comprehended. Yet by mapping the wander lines of autistic people over many years, Deligny argued this allowed them to see (yet not comprehend) something else, something of the network at play, with the intersections of the wander lines (what Milton [2013] referred to as 'clumping'), showing an underlying commonality and mode of being of the network.

Conclusion

Deligny asks us to imagine a mode of being and relating to others, without imposing on autistic people the need to be like the 'Humans-that-we-are', a functioning whole subject or 'thought-out-project'. Nothing could stand in stronger contrast to the notion that one needs to find out what the function of autistic behaviour is, or what autistic behaviour is trying to communicate. Indeed, Deligny's view could be seen as anti-interventionist if one considers the main aim of many autism interventions to be remedial in focus:

> To respect the autistic being is not to respect the being that he or she would be as other; it is to do what is needed so the network can weave itself. (Deligny 2015, 111)

Several decades before the growth of the neurodiversity movement, Deligny and his collaborators were rejecting notions of autism as a pathological deviation from the norm, and instead were:

> … in search of a practice that would exclude from the outset interpretations referring to some code; we did not take the children's way of being as scrambled, coded messages addressed to us. (Deligny 2015, 79)

A statement reminiscent of the seminal work of autistic activist Jim Sinclair:

> Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms … Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. Define your terms. Work with me to build bridges between us. (Sinclair 1993)

Whether or not one agrees with the philosophical notions Deligny helped to conceive of and inspire, the similarities with the work of autistic authors, alongside his influence on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980), are striking, and indicate that the network he began to weave all those years ago continues to develop and grow, like a rhizome, but in the shadows.

Disclosure statement

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