

Suely Rolnik
**Deleuze,
Schizoanalyst**

01/06

e-flux journal #23 — march 2011 Suely Rolnik
Deleuze, Schizoanalyst

First scene: 1973.¹ I begin a friendship with Gilles Deleuze, whose seminars I have been attending over the past two years or so. With his mischievous humor, he insists on saying that he, and not Félix Guattari (with whom I am undergoing analysis at the time) is my schizoanalyst. He proposes that we work together, offering me a gift and a theme: an LP with Alban Berg's opera *Lulu* and a suggestion to compare the death cries of Lulu, its lead character, with those of Maria, a character in *Wozzeck*, another opera by the same composer.

Berg's *Lulu* – already impregnated by the image of Louise Brooks, who played the protagonist in G.W. Pabst's beautiful film – is an exuberant and seductive woman whose attraction to many kinds of worlds sets her off on a life of experimental drift. On one such adventure, her vitality suffers the impact of reactive forces that cause her to leave her country. In the miserable cold of a Christmas night in her town of exile, Lulu hits the streets to make some money. In the anonymity of hustling, she meets none other than Jack the Ripper, who inevitably attempts to kill her. Foreseeing her death in the image of her face reflected on the blade pointed in her direction, she lets out a piercing cry. The timbre of her voice has a strange force that startles the Ripper to the point that, for a few seconds, he hesitates. We too are hit by this strange force, transported by it – the pain of a vigorous life that does not want to be taken resonates in our bodies. On the other hand, Maria, the woman from Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, is the gray wife of a soldier. Her death cry is almost inaudible, it blurs with the aural landscape. The timbre of her voice conveys the pale pain of an inane life, as if to die were the same as to live. Lulu's cry vitalizes us, despite, and paradoxically because of, the intensity of her pain. Maria's cry drags us into a kind of melancholy that tinges the world with monotonous dullness.

Second scene: 1978. The setting is one of the Saturday afternoon singing lessons I have been taking along with two friends. The teacher is Tamia, whose repertoire is contemporary music and free jazz, an effervescent current within the Parisian 1970s. On this particular day, to our surprise, she asks each of us to choose a song to work with.

The song that occurs to me is one of the many Tropicalismo songs I learned in Brazil.² As musical expressions of the intense movement of cultural and existential creation Brazil had seen at the end of the 1960s, the movement marked a period whose brutal interruption by the military regime had been the reason for my exile in Paris.³ "Cantar como um passarinho..." as Gal Costa sang it, with the soft and tender timbre of her interpretations.⁴



Hélio Oiticica, *B14 Box Bólido 11*, 1962. Oil with polyvinyl acetate emulsion on plywood and nylon mesh, plastic sheeting.

As I sing, a similar vibration takes over my own voice; hesitant at first, the timbre slowly builds up and gains body, becoming more and more crystalline. I am overcome by a feeling of estrangement: a sensation that this timbre has always belonged to me, as if it had never ceased to exist in the corporeal memory of my voice, even if silenced for so long. Soft as it is, its vibration steadily perforates a tiny point in my body and takes over the space of the room. The act of perforation makes me discover, on the white surface of the T-shirt and overalls I am wearing, a compact skin that covers my body like a thick layer of plaster; what is more, it seems to me that this envelope has been there for a long time, without my ever noticing it. The curious thing is that the body reveals its petrification at the same moment when the delicate stream of voice punctures it, as if skin and voice were somehow interlocked. Could it be that my body had become rigid just as that timbre had disappeared? Whatever the answer, the plaster became a constraint: it was urgent to get rid of that carapace. I decide, there and then, to return to Brazil, even if I had never considered leaving Paris until then. I went back, and never for a moment doubted the wisdom of that decision.

It took me a few years to understand what had happened in that singing lesson, and then a few more to realize how that could, in turn, be related to the work that Deleuze had proposed to me. What the singing announced that Saturday afternoon through the reawakened memory of my body was that the military dictatorship had caused a wound in desire, and that wound had healed enough for me to return to Brazil, if I so wished.

But what is it that I am referring to when I say “desire”? In a few words, I refer to three processes. First: the impulse of attraction, which draws us towards certain universes, and the impulse of repulsion, which pushes us away from others without us knowing exactly why, blindly guided by the affects that each of these encounters generates in our body. Second: the forms of expression that we create in order to bring into the visible and utterable the sensible states that such connections and disconnections progressively produce in our subjectivity. Third: the metamorphoses of ourselves and of our territories of existence, which are fabricated in this process.

After all, totalitarian regimes do not impinge only upon concrete reality, but also upon this intangible reality of desire. It is an invisible, but no less relentless, violence. From the micropolitical point of view, regimes of this kind tend to establish themselves in the life of a society when the connections with new universes in the general alchemy of subjectivities

multiply beyond a threshold, causing veritable convulsions. These are privileged moments in which the movement of individual and collective creation becomes intensified, but which also harbor the risk of unleashing microfascisms once a certain threshold of destabilization is crossed. When the boundaries of a certain stability are broken there is a danger that baser subjectivities tied to common sense will infer the risk of an irreversible collapse, and will begin to panic. Due to a weak will to power that limits their force of creation, subjectivities of this kind consider themselves to be constituted once and for all, and have no means of understanding such ruptures as inherent to the delineation of their own limits, which are always being redrawn as the function of a desire for new connections. It is common to explain those ruptures as works of evil and, in the name of safety and stability, to confine them to the unknown universes that have entered the existential landscape. The solution is easy to deduce: these universes, personified by their bearers, must be eliminated. Such elimination can go from the pure and simple disqualification of these inconvenient others, weakening them through humiliation, to their concrete, physical destruction. One expects that this will relieve, at least for some time, the unease produced by the process of differentiation unleashed by the living presence of others.

The proliferation of this kind of politics of desire develops a fertile ground for forms of leadership that embody it and provide a focal point for it: this is when totalitarian regimes of all kinds rear their heads. Although microfascisms do not take place only in totalitarian contexts, such contexts are the main support for this kind of regime within the realm of the subject. Anything that deviates from common sense is considered a mistake, irresponsible, or worse, an act of treason. As common sense blurs into the very idea of the nation, to differ is to betray the motherland.

It is in these moments that the conservative forces of common sense triumph over the forces of invention. Thought is intimidated and retreats from the threat of punishment, which can fall upon the social image of oneself in the form of a stigma, or upon one's body, with varying degrees of brutality ranging from prison and torture to death. Humiliated and disowned, desire's creative dynamic becomes paralyzed by fear, often combined with guilt; even if this interruption is welcomed in the name of life, the experience of it can become similar to death. The trauma of these experiences leaves behind the poisonous stain of disaffection with life and the impossibility of thought – a wound in desire that can contaminate everything, halting movements

of connection and the invention that they mobilize.

One of the strategies for protecting from this poison consists of anesthetizing the marks of trauma in the affective circuit. By isolating them under the cover of forgetfulness, one prevents their poison from spreading, making it possible to keep on living. But the syndrome of forgetfulness tends to encompass much more than just these wounds; the affective circuit is not a fixed map but a continuously made and remade cartography upon which individual points can be associated with any other at any moment. A large part of the body's capacity to resonate is then anesthetized. One of the darkest effects of this narcosis is a separation between speech and the sensible – its corporeal reality, the site of a living relation to the world that nurtures its poetic density. My exile in Paris had this sense of protecting me from the seismic shock that the experience of the dictatorship and imprisonment had inflicted. It was not only an objective and concrete protection, given my geographic displacement, but also, and above all, a subjective and desiring protection, given the linguistic displacement. I entirely disinvested Portuguese, and with it the poisonous marks of the fear that froze my movements of desire. To avoid contact with that language I avoided Brazilians entirely. I settled into French as my adoptive tongue, accentless to such a degree that people would often take me for a native speaker. French became like a plaster that both contained and cohered an agonizing affective body: a clandestine shelter where the wounded pieces of my corporeal memory found refuge, allowing me to make new connections and to experiment certain affects that had become frightening in my mother tongue. In that singing lesson, nine years after my arrival in Paris, something in me realized, before I myself did, that the poison had sufficiently receded for there to be no more risk of contamination. The soft timbre of a joy of living resurfaced and brought me back to Portuguese, less frightened than before. But what actually happened on that day?

The plaster that had until then been the guarantee of my survival, to the point where it could be mistaken for my own skin, lost its purpose the moment the soft, tender timbre recovered the courage to manifest itself. What had been a remedy for wounded desire began, paradoxically, to have the effect of arresting that desire. It is probably because of this shift that, during that particular class, everything happened at once – the return of the timbre, the discovery of the hard shell that had been covering me, and the feeling of asphyxiation it had come to give me. Like every defensive strategy, the plaster made of the French

language – which had functioned as the territory within which, for a time, my life was able to expand – had also produced the side effect of being a limitation. But the restrictive vector could only be problematized when defense became unnecessary; the various connections that I had already made in my adoptive tongue had reactivated the experimental process of desire, creating conditions for it to be resumed in the wounded tongue. I was cured, not of the marks of pain left by the fury of despotism, as these are indelible, but of their toxic effects. It is in singing – as an expression of the body of language, of the reserve of affective memory – that the metabolization of the trauma's effects expressed itself. And with it, the syndrome of forgetfulness that I had developed in order not to die, dissolved.

04/06



1964 poster for *Wozzeck*.

What does this have to do with Deleuze's *Lulu*? I arrived in Paris carrying a sort of collapsed desire in my body, branded by the

Brazilian dictatorship, dragging a corresponding collapse of the will to live and of the creative gesture – which has that will as its origin and primary condition of existence. Listening to Deleuze in his seminars had, in and of itself, the mysterious power of moving me further away from Brazil. This did not necessarily depend on the content of his speech – since, in the beginning, I hardly spoke any French – but on the poetic quality of his presence and particularly his voice. His timbre conveyed the wealth of sensible states that populated his body; the words and the rhythm of cadences seemed to emerge from such states, delicately sculpted by the movements of desire. An imperceptible transmission that contaminated whoever listened to him.

Deleuze's proposal that I should investigate the death cries of the two women in Berg's operas sprang from this. The strange force communicated by Lulu's cry is that of an energetic reaction to death. This is the potency we feel resonating in our body, and her cry vitalizes it, in spite and because of the intensity of her pain. Maria's cry, on the other hand, transmits a melancholy resignation that saddens and devitalizes its listeners. Arising from this comparison are distinct degrees of the affirmation of life, even and above all in the face of death. It is a recognition that, even in the most adverse situations, it is possible to resist the terrorism against life, against its desiring and inventive potency, and to stubbornly go on living. Together, Lulu's and Maria's cries convey this lesson and contaminate us.

Of course, I could not arrive at any of this when Deleuze made his suggestion to me. Perhaps it was because his figure intimidated the fragility of my twenty-four years, even if nothing in his attitude justified any kind of reverence or inhibition. It is probably more likely that my wound was too fresh for me to let go of the defense strategy I had created to protect me from the intoxication of desire caused by the dictatorship's cruelty. However, the direction he had pointed me in with Lulu and Maria installed itself imperceptibly in my body and operated in silence, slowly oxygenating the fibers of desire, reactivating their drifts and the vital work of thought that normally accompanies them. Six years later, my Tropicalist birdsong announced that Lulu's affirmative timbre against brutality had, over and against Maria's negative timbre, returned to my voice. I could once more reconnect my body and speak through the singing of its sensible stages in voice, song, and speech. By launching a liberating movement through a sung cry, Deleuze had, in fact, been my schizonanalyst – even if such movement would only bear fruit years later.

A few months after Guattari's death, I wrote a letter to Deleuze evoking the time he called himself my schizoanalyst, and telling him where those opera cries had led. He replied immediately, with his habitual generosity and elegant writing in which there are neither too many nor too few words to say the unsayable and nothing more. Among other things, he commented on the void that Guattari's passing away had left in him, and ended the letter saying, "Never lose your grace, that is, the power of a song."

What he was certainly saying between these words was that, in order to resurrect the will to live and the pleasure of thinking, it is always possible to bring desire back after it breaks down. And, what is more, that this gift appears where one least expects it – in a simple pop song. However, if we want to sense the situations that carry such powers, it becomes necessary to remove the hierarchy of cultural values in the established imaginary cartography and, above all, to tune our hearing to the effects that each encounter mobilizes – these effects should be the privileged criterion for orienting our choices. This "allowing oneself to be contaminated by the mysterious power of regeneration of the vital force, wherever it is" – is it not what Deleuze would have called "grace"?

In any case, here is the unexpected figure of the schizoanalyst Deleuze. Although he is personally present in this small tale, the potency distilled from this narrative for combatting the intolerable transcends his person and, obviously, the hangover of the military regime. It belongs to his thought and pulsates invisibly throughout his oeuvre, offering itself to whoever may wish to take it.

X

Translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Nunes

Suely Rolnik, psychoanalyst, curator and cultural critic, is a professor at the Catholic University of São Paulo, where she founded the *Subjectivity Studies Centre* in the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program. Since 2008, she is guest professor of the Programa de Estudos Independientes, MACBA. With Félix Guattari, she is author of *Micropolítica. Cartografias do desejo* (1986), published in five languages. She has published numerous essays in books, journals, and art catalogs in Europe and the Americas, and has lectured widely.

06/06

e-flux journal #23 — march 2011 Suely Rolnik
Deleuze, Schizoanalyst

1

This text was written on the occasion of Deleuze's death in 1995.

2

Tropicalism was a cultural movement of the late 1960s, which revolutionized popular Brazilian music, then dominated by the aesthetics of Bossa Nova, by making use of derision, irreverence, and improvisation. Spearheaded by musicians such as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil (the current Minister of Culture in Lula's government), Tropicalism reactivated the ideas found in Oswald de Andrade's "Anthropophagic Manifesto" – particularly the way in which elements of foreign culture are included and fused with Brazilian culture, mixing fragments of erudite, popular, and mass culture, without any reverence for dominant hierarchies. Tropicalism manifested itself in other artistic realms as well, such as the Oficina Theatre, directed by José Celso Martinez Corrêa, which staged Oswald de Andrade's play *O Rei da Vela* (1967), among others. Indeed the very name of the movement comes from visual artist Hélio Oiticica's 1965 installation *Tropicália*. The movement was brutally interrupted in December 1968, when the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) was decreed by Brazil's military dictatorship, allowing for any action or attitude considered subversive to be punished with imprisonment without recourse to habeas corpus. Caetano and Gil were sent to prison and subsequently freed only on the condition that they leave the country. They went into exile in England in 1969.

3

A dictatorship came to power in Brazil in 1964 by means of a military coup. The regime became much more rigid and violent from 1968 onwards. A succession of generals remained in power until 1985, and the first direct presidential elections were held in 1989.

4

Tuzé de Abreu, "Passarinho," recorded by Gal Costa in India (Phonogram, 1973). The lyrics are "Cantar como um passarinho de manhã cedinho... lá na galha do arvoredo, na beira do rio ... abre as asas passarinho que eu quero voar ... me leva na janela da menina que eu quero cantar..." ("To sing like a little bird early in the morning ... up in the branches of the trees by the river bank ... open your wings, little bird, 'cause I want to fly ... take me to the girl's window, 'cause I want to sing"). The Brazilian singer Gal Costa was part of a group of friends from Santo Amaro (Bahia, in the Northeast of Brazil) that included Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethânia. In the 1960s, they formed an important element of the Tropicalist movement's driving forces.