

Deleuze and Kant: Two different formulations of transcendental empiricism

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This essay will have two moments: the first will be a confrontation of two deleuzian interpretations of Kant's theory of the sublime (one in 1963 and the other in 1984). In the second moment, I will present my hypothesis concerning the meaning of these two different interpretations. My aim is to stress that in Deleuze's comprehension of Kantian theory of the sublime there are not one, but two different formulations of his program of a transcendental empiricism.

In the two most important texts published by Deleuze in 1963, the book *Kant's Critical Philosophy. The Doctrine of the Faculties* and the article "the Idea of Genesis in Kant's Aesthetics", Deleuze recognises that in Kant's idea of an aesthetic genesis of the transcendental field there is a prefiguration of his own program of transcendental empiricism.

Deleuze tries to show that in Kant there is already the idea of a singular type of experience - the aesthetic experience of the sublime – which can be the point of production of the entire transcendental field. We know that the aesthetic experience is for Kant the place where the agreement among faculties rises to its maximum expression. Besides, the aesthetic experience is nothing but the free and indeterminate agreement among faculties. This experience is caused by the simple form (or absence

of form) of the experience's object. It is in the free agreement among faculties, which appears firstly in the experience of an object like beautiful or sublime, that one finds the condition of possibility of the agreement itself among faculties. Art, that is, the experience of art when it makes violence on the thought, is thus the fundamental ground that contains the possibility of science and morals. It is in this point of an originating experience of all the experience, that Deleuze discovers the importance of the Kantian theory of the sublime.

And it is precisely in the theory of the sublime that Deleuze discovers the kind of experience that is at the root of the effectivity conditions of all experience. The experience of something colossal, unlimited, unformed or even non-representable, is defined by Kant as a "negative representation". What appears is only the object's impossibility of appearance. In this impossibility of figuration, the faculties are as if expelled of their object and, in this way, split up in their plurality.

The harmony produced with the experience of the sublime is built on a disharmony, on a dissension: "This harmony of the sublime is extremely paradoxical. Reason and imagination agree only within a tension, a contradiction, a painful tearing. There is an agreement, but an unmatched agreement, an harmony in the pain. And it is only the pain which makes a pleasure possible"¹.

There is like a production of faculties by a process of explosion starting from an experience of tension at the interior of the thought. The genetic method would be a method which derives the conditions from the experience's possibility, not from a possible experience, nor from an effective knowledge, but from an impossible experience, which, however, requires its possibility. In the sublime, the imagination, in

¹ « Cette harmonie du sublime est fort paradoxale. Raison et imagination ne s'accordent qu'au sein d'une tension, d'une contradiction, d'un déchirement douloureux. Il y a accord, mais accord discordant, harmonie dans la douleur. Et c'est seulement la douleur qui rend possible un plaisir » (Ile Déserte, p. 87).

its relationship with the reason, is forced to face the limits of itself, of the experience in general, and of the limits of representation. The reason convenes the imagination to apprehend its own Ideas as an image. But, in its essence, rational Ideas cannot be presented. As he says: “Imagination thus discovers the disproportion of the reason and it is forced to acknowledge that all its power is nothing compared to a rational Idea”².

For Deleuze, the sublime is precisely the originating point because it is the moment when all the thought is confronted with the impossible and, by the impossible, builds its possibility. The sublime would be the place of explosion of the faculties and, therefore, the place of their production. That is why Deleuze admits that in the definition of the sublime, Kant inaugurated, without full awareness, a comprehension of the genesis of the transcendental field. According to Deleuze, what directs the investigation of Kant in *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment* is the way of production of the faculties’ agreement. Deleuze underlines the fact that it is by the difference between a deduction (of the agreement) and a genesis (of this same agreement) that the new dimension of the transcendental philosophy emerges. This new dimension is not a theory of the condition of possibility of the experience any more, but, “a transcendental Formation, a transcendental Culture, a transcendental Genesis”³.

What Deleuze condemns in Kant’s aesthetics is the fact that Kant has established a difference between a theory of the sensibility and a theory of the judgement (the beautiful and the sublime). This difference, says Deleuze, is due to the point of view of the deduction of the formal (and not material) conditions of the knowledge (in which all the experience is conducted and reduced to sensibility). On the contrary, Deleuze pretends to re-think both the transcendental program and aesthetics.

In what concerns the transcendental program, Deleuze wants to: a) make a

² « L’imagination découvre donc la disproportion de la raison, elle est forcée d’avouer que toute sa puissance n’est rien par rapport à une Idée rationnelle » (*ID*, p. 88).

³ « Une Formation transcendantale, une Culture transcendantale, une Genèse transcendantale » (*ID*, p. 85).

genesis (instead of a deduction) of faculties; b) think this genesis as the genesis of the material conditions (instead of the formal conditions); and c) think the conditions of the effective experience (instead of the possible experience). With all these reformulations, Deleuze arrives to a new concept of aesthetics, according to which the work of art, as experimentation and in its effectivity, affirms at the same time both the plan of sensibility and the plane of taste. The work of art becomes not only the condition of the experience which is not larger than the conditioned, but also the genesis of both the object and its aesthetical judgement (its becoming-sensible).

The sublime is precisely the experience of the impossibility of experience. We understand better why the impossible generates the possibility, why the inaccessibility of the Idea is taken by Kant as the genetic point of faculties. As Deleuze stresses, the “passion” of imagination is the only means of showing its suprasensible destination, its vocation for the impossible, for the inaccessible: “Under the violence of the reason, it is released from all the constraints of the understanding; it enters in agreement with the reason to discover what the understanding hid to him, i.e. its suprasensible destination, which is also as its transcendental origin”⁴.

On the basis of the disharmony between the faculties of sensibility, understanding, imagination and reason, the imagination builds a higher harmony. And this higher harmony allows a short cross between reason and sensibility, presenting the rational Idea in the intuition of a material object: “Undergoing a violence, imagination seems to lose its freedom; but at the same time, it rises up to a transcendent exercise, taking its own limit as an object. Exceeded of all parts, imagination exceeds itself its terminals, it is true in a negative way, by representing the inaccessibility of the rational

⁴ « Sous la violence de la raison, elle se libère de toutes les contraintes de l’entendement, elle entre en accord avec la raison pour découvrir ce que l’entendement lui cachait, c’est-à-dire sa destination suprasensible, qui est aussi comme son origine transcendante » (*Ibid.*)

Idea and by making this inaccessibility something of present in significant nature”⁵.

The analysis of the agreement among faculties is thus an analysis of their reciprocal genesis. And this analysis is carried out in two plans: the Analytical of the Beauty (as a free agreement between reason and imagination), and the Analytical of the Sublime (as a free and an unspecified agreement between reason and imagination). The incompleteness of Analytical of the Beauty, the fact that Kant has like additioned, outwards of all architectonic equilibrium, an Analytical of the Sublime, would have been the result of the impossibility of the judgement of beauty to offer a genetic comprehension of the agreement itself between imagination and reason.

According to Deleuze, the harmony in the judgement of beauty would be itself derived, generated, by the higher harmony that exists in the judgement of something as sublime. The agreement between imagination and reason (which is carried out in the judgement of sublime) would thus offer the genetic description of the harmony between the imagination and reason in the judgement of beauty. The judgement of sublime becomes for Deleuze the crucial experience. It explains both the sublime and the beautiful because it explains how it is possible the “dissonant agreement”, the “harmony in the pain”, that is, a superior harmony built up on a dissonance, on a disharmony.

But what Deleuze wants to stress, in both of the experience of the beauty and the sublime, is the fact that experience is only possible as a harmony among faculties. The theory of the sublime is the only theory that shows that this harmony is constructed in a paradoxical way because it is the result of a previous disharmony. So, above all, what Deleuze wants to stress is the fact that the disharmony among faculties leads to a superior harmony.

⁵ « Subissant une violence, l'imagination semble perdre sa liberté ; mais aussi bien, elle s'élève à un exercice transcendant, prenant pour objet sa propre limite. Dépassée de toutes parts, elle dépasse elle-même ses bornes, il est vrai de manière négative, en se représentant l'inaccessibilité de l'Idée rationnelle et en faisant de cette inaccessibilité quelque chose de présent dans la nature sensible » (*Ibid.*)

Twenty years later, in 1984, in the article “On Four Poetic Formula Which Might Summarize Kantian Philosophy”, Deleuze confronts himself again with the Kantian theory of the sublime. The question, once more, is the disharmony of the faculties. But one can find there a decisive difference.

This time, for Deleuze, the sublime does not lead to a superior harmony of the faculties any more. The sublime is in itself the experience of the absolute disharmony among faculties, not as a foreground for a posterior harmony, but as an ultimate plan without any possible harmony. Deleuze now underlines the dissonance, the dissension, the disharmony among faculties: “The sublime (...) sets the various faculties into play in such a way that they are opposed one to the other like fighters, one pushes the other with its maximum or its limits, but the other reacts by pushing one to an inspiration which it would not have had all alone. (...) In the two others *Critiques*, dominant or fundamental faculty was such as other faculties provided it the closest harmonics. But now, in an exercise in the extreme limits, the various faculties mutually give each other the harmonics most distant from each other, so that they form primarily dissonant agreements. The emancipation of the dissonance, the unmatched agreement, is the great discovery of *Critique of Judgement* (...). It is a disordered exercise of all faculties which will define philosophy of the future as well as, for Rimbaud, the disorder of all senses defined the poetry of the future”⁶.

In the play of the faculties, there is neither dominant or fundamental faculty, nor higher harmony among faculties anymore. Now there is only a disordered

⁶ «Le Sublime (...) fait jouer les diverses facultés de telle manière qu’elles s’opposent l’une à l’autre comme des lutteurs, que l’une pousse l’autre à son maximum ou à sa limite, mais que l’autre réagisse en poussant l’une à une inspiration qu’elle n’aurait pas eue toute seule. (...) Dans les deux autres *Critiques*, la faculté dominante ou fondamentale était telle que les autres facultés lui fournissaient les harmoniques les plus proches. Mais maintenant, dans un exercice aux limites, les diverses facultés se donnent mutuellement les harmoniques les plus éloignées les unes des autres, si bien qu’elles forment des accords essentiellement dissonants. L’émancipation de la dissonance, l’accord discordant, c’est la grande découverte de la *Critique du Jugement* (...). Un exercice déréglé de toutes les facultés, qui va définir la philosophie future, comme pour Rimbaud le dérèglement de tous les sens devait définir la poésie de l’avenir » (*Critique et Clinique*, p. 49).

relationship of imagination with reason and understanding, that is, a disordered state of all senses. This is what Deleuze calls “the emancipation of the dissonance”, which now emerges as the centre of Kant’s Aesthetics.

This emancipation of the dissonance in the text of 1984, oblige us, in retrospect, to make some reserves in what concerns the way by which, at the beginning of the sixties, Deleuze reads Kant. Why does he then underline, in 1963, the superior harmony that emerges from the dissension of the faculties? And why, in 1984, does Deleuze underlines in such a strong way the dissonance among faculties (which don’t lead to any posterior harmony)?

Can we say that Deleuze does nothing but to follow Kant when he reconducts the genesis of faculties to a suprasensible harmony carried out in the impossible? And, (in the text of 1963), is it just the theory of the sublime that Deleuze discovers in the *Critique of judgement*, or is it a very particular interpretation of this theory of sublime? Can we think that this change in the way Deleuze reads Kant might be the guideline to understand the transformation of his own transcendental empiricism from a structuralist model of the series (which organizes the texts in the Sixties) to a rhizomatic and pragmatic program (in the Eighties)?

In fact, there is a very peculiar theory of the sublime, not at all naïve. Our assumption passes by two moments: first, the parallelism between the theory of the sublime and the theory of masochism; second, the displacement from an anthropology (in the Sixties) to a cosmology (after the Eighties) which can be detected, among other aspects, inside the way Deleuze changes his reading of Leibniz.

In what concerns the first point, in 1963, Deleuze’s first understanding of the Kantian theory of sublime depended on a structuralist paradigm based on the idea of

harmonic series according to which all the dissensions among faculties lead to a system as an Higher Harmony. Here, the book on Proust is quite revealing and pertinent, because Deleuze presents an enormous structural system: there are four kinds of signs, four kinds of faculties, four kinds of time, four kinds of truth. But above all, the whole system has an ultimate point: the essence (as a kind of Higher Harmony).

Deleuze has a psychoanalytic conception of the sublime as denial. We can say that one of the great chapters of the transcendental empiricism's program is the one dedicated to the analysis of the masochism. Deleuze discovers an essential relation between masochism and the faculty of imagination. The masochist phantasm, as an object of the imagination in its transcendent use, will be revealed as the point of genesis of the image's faculty. And Faculties will be regulated by imagination as the faculty of creation both of the impossible and of the fixed images. The sublime here is precisely the phantasm, the fetish, the interdicted, the condition of impossibility of the pleasure. Besides, the central thesis of Deleuze's book on Masoch is indeed: «masochism is the art of the phantasm»⁷. So, Masochism, by its paradoxical use of the principle of pleasure, introduces the law (as the sphere of interdiction) as a new category of the Transcendental empiricism.

In *Coldness and Cruelty*, literature's fiction is not the involuntary experience of access to the essences, as in Proust, but the creation of an impossible scenario on the basis of a law's interdiction. Sade and Masoch let us see not only how aesthetic experiences are at the origin of the system of faculties, but also in what way this system has its ultimate condition in the relation of the desire to its objects: the sadist reason is the negation of the reality by violence over the symbolic system, the masochist imagination in the denial of the reality by the suspension of the desire in the ideal. As in

⁷ «Le masochisme est l'art du phantasme» (*PSM*, p. 59).

Kant, there is a harmonic correspondence among faculties and their objects. Reason is the faculty of the Ideas, and Imagination is the faculty of the Ideal.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the role of the phantasm and of the imagination in *Coldness and Cruelty*. This book can thus be seen as the great deleuzian theory of imagination. It is the moment when the question of the non-actuality, in all its devices of irrealisation (as the denial, the suspension, the fiction), occupies for the first time the centre of the work of Deleuze.

In 1984, Deleuze presents the sublime inside the programmatic and rhizomatic model (of the desiring machines) based on the immanence of *Thousand Plateaus*, according to which there is only chaos and never Harmony. For Deleuze in the Sixties, the sublime is a form of higher harmony among the faculties within the limits of the imaginative figuration. While in the Eighties, Deleuze presents the sublime by the dissonance, by the disordered state of all senses, by the expression of the entrance of the impossible in the very field of the possibility of knowledge.

But Deleuze also presents the sublime inside the pragmatic conception of the sublime, where art is no more the fiction as the denial of this world and the creation of a double of the world, but rather the actualization of the fictioned world in one single plan of immanence (of the body-without-organs). And yet, it was Deleuze himself who broke this association between masochism and imagination, leaving us in the darkness on what would it be its view on the contribution of the question of perversion for a theory of the pleasure. In *The Anti-Œdipus*, ten years after the publication of *Coldness and Cruelty*, the reference to perversion completely disappears. The perverse forms of the desire are replaced by the topic of schizophrenia (a form of psychosis that Deleuze had explicitly left without approaching it in *Coldness and Cruelty*, because, as he then

explained, perversion remains between the neurosis and the psychosis). It is the need of substituting a theory of the masochism as phantasm, by a theory founded in the idea of program, which organizes, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the chapter “How to make a body without organs”. The concept of masochism appears but without the equivalence between suspension-imagination-phantasm. The concept of “body-without-organs” appears precisely to evacuate the psychology of the phantasm (from the explanation of the masochism). Deleuze will take again the topic of masochism, but to define it as a program of the immanent body of desire against a theory of imagination.

With the change from a model of harmony to an irrevocable dissonance among faculties, the concept of masochism is no longer thought as the transposition of the desire to a plan of suspension in the phantasm. Masochism becomes the experience of total absorption of the forms of the pleasure in the immanence of desire. And this immanence corresponds precisely to the states of generalized dissonance of faculties, (the states which Deleuze will present, by the concept of body-without-organs, in the construction of a plan of consistency).

The criticism of the psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus* had led Deleuze and Guattari to a theory of literature without the concepts of « imaginary », « symbolic », «structure» and «phantasm», that is, without all the instruments which organized the Deleuze’s literary approaches in the Sixties⁸. Here, the literary reference is Kafka. Deleuze presents him as the author who, using the collective assemblage of enunciation sets all the desiring machines in action in order to finish with both imagination and

⁸ All the program of *Kafka - towards a minor literature* is stated in the following sentence of Deleuze and Guattari: “Nous ne croyons qu’à une *politique* de Kafka, qui n’est ni imaginaire ni symbolique. Nous ne croyons qu’à une ou à des *machines* de Kafka, qui ne sont ni structure, ni fantasme. Nous ne croyons qu’à une *expérimentation* de Kafka, sans interprétation ni signification, mais seulement des protocoles d’expérience” (*K*, p. 14). And in this program there could not be any doubt about its goal: it is the whole of the literary paradigms before to *Anti-Oedipus*, all paradigms of Deleuze itself before its meeting with Guattari, that Deleuze and Guattari were now refuting.

culpability. The collective assemblage of enunciation is the place of the negation of the imaginary (both of the theory of faculties and the phenomenological imagination); and the machinical assemblage is the erasure of the symbolic system, of the relations between law and desire. It is another way of thinking literature in Deleuze: a political, a machinical and an experimental paradigm.

In what concerns the different readings of Leibniz, we may say that Deleuze passes from a structuralist theory of harmony to a cosmology of impossibility among worlds. We can discover this change inside the question of fiction. In the Sixties, mainly in the books on Proust and Masoch, we find a conception of fiction as the creation of an impossible world (as a denial movement of the real world). In the Eighties, first in the books on cinema, but more precisely in the book on Leibniz (*The Fold*) there is the conception of fiction as fabulation, that is, as the assertion of the impossibles worlds in the same universe.

The rhizomatic and pragmatic conception of transcendental empiricism presented in *A Thousand Plateaus* is then grounded on the conception of impossible and uncommunicating worlds (coming from Leibniz's baroque model of a New Harmony). In the chapter "About the New Harmony" of *The Fold*, Deleuze speaks about Kant's sublime as the precursor of the idea of a new harmony. And this new harmony would have been thought by Leibniz in the concept of impossible worlds. So, instead of the structuralist Leibniz from *Difference and Repetition* which was the thinker of the convergent series leading to a superior harmony, Deleuze now presents Leibniz as the thinker of the chaos, of the chaosmos and of the rhizomatic model. Kant's sublime becomes the symbol of the impossible, and so Deleuze invites us to take the leibnizian principle, not as a sufficient reason, but as a divergent reason. The

main concept would then be, not that of impossible or contradiction, but that of impossible. As Deleuze writes: “the impossibility is an original relation distinct from impossibility or contradiction”⁹. Precisely, in *The Fold* impossibility is defined as a process of divergence between worlds: “Divergent series always trace bifurcated paths in the same chaotic world. It is a ‘chaosmos’”¹⁰. Deleuze can then think fiction not as the denial, that is, as the construction of a double of the world (like the case of perversion), nor as the production of the real (as in Kafka), but as the experience in itself of the impossibility as in Borges: a false universe of impossible worlds.

So, Deleuze passes from a conception of the fiction (as creation of an impossible world as a movement of the denial of the real world) to a conception of fabulation (as the assertion of the impossible worlds in the same universe).

With *The Fold*, literature becomes a solitary experience of characters who live reality as a realization of possible worlds at the edges of their own impossibility. The immanence of a life is played at every moment in the imminence of a world which will cease being possible. Literature is the confrontation of each character with all the figures of impossible (the impossibility of choosing of Bartleby, the impossibility of moving in a space or even speaking in Beckett). The concept of impossible that Deleuze formulates from Leibniz can mostly be found in his book on Beckett and in his text on Bartleby Melville’s character. There, the impossible becomes a limit situation, without any exit, ultimate and last position. Both the formulas “I gave up before born” from Beckett and “I would prefer not to” from Bartleby express another logic beyond all the possible. A logic as a renouncement of all preference and all possibility. It is, as

⁹ *Pli*, p. 84.

¹⁰ «Les séries divergentes tracent dans un même monde chaotique des sentiers toujours bifurcants, c’est un ‘chaosmos’» (*Pli*, p. 111).

Deleuze says, “the Bartleby’s beckettian formula”¹¹.

To the Kantian difference between the conditions of possibility and the modes of effectivity which define the description of the formal and material conditions of the phenomenon, Deleuze opposes the leibnizian difference between actualization and realization, or virtual and possible. Deleuze thus propose a new figure of the transcendental empiricism - which he calls “the leibnizian transcendental philosophy”. It is a true rupture in the thought of Deleuze: the assertion of two different worlds, one of the possible and its realization, the other of the virtual and its actualization. To Kant, Deleuze substitutes Leibniz, since Leibniz allows him to think the virtual and the possible like parallel plans of the transcendental, and thus, of a transcendental which is already rooten (enraciné) in the transcendent use of sensitivity. With Leibniz, Deleuze avoids the dead end of the transcendental idealism: conditioned is not larger than its condition because the virtual does not exist in the same plan as the possible. And so, with Leibniz, empiricism acquires two plans of the transcending use of the sensitivity, the one of the realization of possible and the other of the actualization of the virtual.

The first model of transcendental empiricism, in the Sixties, is mainly an anthropology, a theory of the Man. Transcendental empiricism concerns exclusively the problem of faculties, the problem of their genesis and their higher harmony over an initial dissonance. The second model of transcendental empiricism, on the contrary, is a cosmology. The dissonance that engenders the condition of effectivity of knowledge is a propriety of the world. It is not the man’s faculties (and their disharmonies) but the world’s facts as singularities that contain chaos, impossibility and incommunicability.

¹¹ *Epuisé*, p. 60.

There is no higher harmony because the disharmony is related to the fact of the chaosmos and does not concern human faculties any more - they are into rhizomatic and schizophrenic relation anyway. That is why Deleuze had to read Leibniz and his metaphysics of the impossible worlds once again. That is why he now writes about Bartleby's formula "I would prefer not" and Beckett's characters which live the exhaustion of all possibilities in face of impossible facts and do strange things as put the slippers on and get out to the street.

Finally, that is why Deleuze goes from a theory of the faculties to a theory of plans: the plan of immanence of Philosophy (and its concepts), the plan of consistence of Science (and its functions), the plan of composition of Art (and its affects and percepts). And among these plans there is no higher harmony.