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DRIFT, NATURALLY: A TRANSAFFECTIVE UNFOLDING

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ABSTRACT

If any individual is determined by its affects as they are catalyzed in the technicities it unfolds, then one can no longer speak of posthumanism or transhumanism but of transaffectivity. Among genetic, epigenetic, and epiphylogenetic elements, there unfolds a play of intensive material informational exchange that determines both the structural and operational affects of any entity. Hence, evolution returns to its original Latin meaning, namely from the term *evolutio*: to unfold. Contrary to the logic of the survival of the fittest, unfolding does not dictate in advance which forms come forth, but instead, it determines which of them are not viable. In other words, it is the condition that brings forward a new world, one that is viable through the very differentials that determine the condition, and not the other way around. In this paper I will examine how structurally coupled individuals unfold an intensive continuum where there is no natural selection prescribing any outcome, but a continuous natural drift. The affective potentials that produce and are produced in the technicities of the drifted unfolding do not need to be the best, but simply good enough. Put succinctly, evolution, or more precisely, individuation, is satisficing rather than optimizing. Love—human, machinic, everything in between—and not Darwinian struggle or opposition is what determines evolution: not an affective diminution but instead an affirmative, transaffective amplification, where any individual structurally coupled with another brings forth a world through an aberrant nuptial, not because it must but simply because it can.

KEYWORDS

Structural coupling, technicity, individuation, ethology, epiphylogenetics

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AFFECTIVE PARTS TO TRANSAFFECTIVE WHOLES

If we understand an individual — including physical and technical individuals — through its affects — its capacities to affect and be affected — then we can effectively move beyond the posthuman, the transhuman, the inhuman, or any other version that still considers the "human" a valid category to overcome, transgress, or erase. Without the intention to neglect the significant differences amongst all the aforementioned, I claim that if focus is given to the affective technicities that an individual employs to manipulate its environment—and, consequently, evolve—the *transaffective* can emerge as the singular field of intensities that can effectively surpass any binary logics. In this sense, transaffectivity can become instrumental in bringing together the defining features of what feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has called a posthuman critical theory: all matter is one (monism); matter is intelligent and self-organizing (autopoiesis); the subject is not unitary but nomadic; and subjectivity includes relations to a multitude of nonhuman "others" (Braidotti 2018, 340). To develop the notion of the transaffective, two crucial terms need to be introduced: *technicity* and *assemblage*.

For the philosopher Gilbert Simondon, the notion of technicity is taken as a fully relational one since, being abductive, it necessarily deals with a constant becoming. If one aims to avoid reductionism, then one should study beyond the technical individuals to their technicity as a mode of relation between human and world. The autonomy of each technical individual lies in its relational technicity, since "technical objects result from an objectivation of technicity; they are produced by it, but technicity does not exhaust itself in the objects and is not entirely contained within them." In other words, one should move from technical objects to a technicity that operates in terms of *reticularity*. Located within assemblages, reticularity is the immediate relation of events and actions that occur in a given structure that nevertheless is understood in terms of its potentials for action, not in its extensive and formal outlines, and that should be studied in ethological, that is, affective terms.

The concept of the assemblage was first introduced by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, although under a different name: *agencement,* a term that refers both to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer)* and to the result of such an action, an ensemble of parts that come together (DeLanda 2016, 1). In other words, "assemblage" refers simultaneously to both operation and structure. The main characteristics of an assemblage may be understood as component parts that are characterized by relations of exteriority, thus existing in principle independent of their interactions, having both material and expressive roles, interacting in processes that stabilize or destabilize

the assemblage (territorialization and deterritorialization), while others, mainly expressive ones, rigidify its identity (coding and decoding), resulting in larger scale entities that have properties irreducible to the initial components. For Deleuze and Guattari, "assemblage" refers directly to

> a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a "sympathy." It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet [1977] 2007, 69)

However, one must adapt the concept in order to include two crucial parameters that determine both an assemblage's structure and its operation: the degrees of coding and territorialization of an assemblage. Without going into detail, according to the philosopher Manuel DeLanda, coding refers to the degree to which the components of an assemblage have been "subjected to a process of homogenization," while territorialization refers to the degree to which its "defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable" (DeLanda 2016, 3). DeLanda claims that one must also further modify the original concept by stating that all the parts that come together to form an assemblage should also be treated as assemblages. In other words, he suggests that we refer to assemblages of assemblages (DeLanda 2016, 3).

DeLanda is right to claim that the concept should be pluralized and problematized via the addition of the crucial parameters of coding and territorialization. Adding them allows us to ward off the opposition between assemblages and strata—between minor and major modes—since they are both understood now as phases, "like the solid and fluid phases of matter" (DeLanda 2016, 19). By expanding the concept of assemblage to include both its expressivity (coding) and its relations with a given environment (territorialization), any binary is replaced by an understanding of any given entity not as opposed to anything else, but rather as a process (operation) of continuous becoming that affects and is affected by the entity's formal capacities (its structure). If an assemblage is the minimum unit of reality, it is not because it "'exists" in reality but, rather, because it "produces" reality; affective technicities manipulate an environment that, at the same moment, is directly produced by assemblages.

From the largest to the smallest, from the planet, to a city, to a person, each is an assemblage composed of and taking part in relations which are contingently obligatory and not logically necessary (DeLanda 2006, 11). In addition to that, any assemblage is always composed of heterogeneous elements. Again, this is

DeLanda's way of claiming that in any assemblage, it is relations of difference that come first, constituting therefore its problematic field composed of the singular and the ordinary—an unassignable yet perfectly determinable field, since assemblages do indeed emerge from the interaction between their parts, but "once an assemblage is in place it immediately starts acting as a source of limitations and opportunities for its components" (DeLanda 2016, 21). Finally, and crucially for my argument, any assemblage can become part of another assemblage. DeLanda insists on approaching the interexchangeability between assemblages as an issue of scale—from larger to smaller and vice versa—but I will argue that scale does not suffice to provide a satisfactory account of the relations of exteriority that assemblage thinking entails.

How, therefore, can we examine the intricate relationships between assemblages? The concept of structural coupling can prove extremely helpful in that direction. In a nutshell, to advance a methodology for examining assemblages, as well as their relationships through structural couplings, helps us to examine any individual regardless of shape and size, but rather in the relationships that it partakes in and the ones that take place within it. According to the logic of structural couplings, every relationship within and among given entities functions as a medium that expands or diminishes their agential capacities (Bryant 2014, 31). The biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela introduced the concept and examined forms of relations among various entities as well as the ways in which the relations affected the entities through their reciprocal—or reticular—development (Maturana and Varela 1998). Maturana and Varela claim that structural coupling can be either unidirectional or bidirectional. In the first case, an entity can affect another and trigger an action on its part, with the latter entity and its actions being unable to affect the former, while when a structural coupling is bidirectional, the affectivity of two entities is reciprocal (Bryant 2014, 25). I would hesitate to formulate yet another binary, this time between unidirectional and bidirectional coupling, suggesting, on the contrary and similarly to what DeLanda has proposed in the case of assemblages, that the two extremes are mere gradients within a relational field. In other words, there is no difference in kind among the relations one comes across when examining assemblages and their structural couplings, but only differences of affective degree.

SIGNS, MEDIUM, AND THE LIMIT

The sociologist and systems theory thinker Niklas Luhmann claims that "structural couplings rest on a material (or energetic) continuum, into which the borders

of the system do not inscribe themselves . . . on a physically functioning world" (Berresem 2009, 80; quoted from Luhmann 1997, 102). In other words, the limits of any individual's figure are replaced by the limits of its actions, especially since the actions of an individual are always relational and affective. That is, any individual deploys a technicity while synchronously being part of one, with the potentials to affect and be affected within a fully active assemblage of technicities defining both its structure and its operation. As Maturana claims, "the result of the establishment of this dynamic structural correspondence, or structural coupling, is the effective spatiotemporal correspondence of changes of states of the organism with the recurrent changes of state of the medium" (Maturana 1975, 320). Put succinctly, Maturana claims that when one entity enters into a structural coupling with another entity, then it functions as a medium for that entity. Maturana, influenced by the media theories of Marshall McLuhan, understands the term *medium* as an extension or an amplification of an entity's agential capacities. In this sense, Maturana expands McLuhan's use of the term, since, for him, the medium was only an extension of the human (McLuhan, 1994). Moreover, following the suggestion of the philosopher Steven Shaviro, we can understand the medium as what Alfred North Whitehead calls "prehension." As Shaviro notes,

> all actual entities are ontologically equal because they all enter into the same sorts of relations. They all become what they are by prehending other entities. Whitehead's key term *prehension* can be defined as any process—causal, perceptual, or of another nature entirely—in which an entity grasps, registers the presence of, responds to, or is affected by another entity. All actual entities constitute themselves by integrating multiple prehensions. (Shaviro 2014, 29)

Therefore, we can incorporate the function of the medium into the affective potential that any technicity implies. Instead of a theory of communication, the medium is first and foremost a catalyst and a product of environmental manipulation, not the mediator of signifying exchanges but rather the materiality of sensorial amplifications. In this respect, the medium, as the continuum of the singular and ordinary points of a technicity, involves both the production and the perception of signs. In the interexchangeability of matter, energy, and information that any structural coupling potentializes, one can no longer speak of affects as belonging to an individual alone, but rather of transaffectivity as the constitutive aspect of any process of individuation. In this sense, any technicity is not only affective, but transaffective. Following the philosopher Stacy Alaimo,

> imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable

> from "the environment." It makes it difficult to pose nature as mere background . . . for the exploits of the human since "nature" is always as close as one's own skin—perhaps even closer. Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creature, ecological systems, chemical agents and other actors. (Alaimo 2010, 2)

I agree with Alaimo, except on a crucial point: it is not only human corporeality, it is all corporeality. If any individual is determined only by its affects as they are catalyzed in the technicities it unfolds, then one can no longer speak of transcorporeality but of transaffectivity. Within the realm of the transaffective, it is the differential limit where the interplay of any structural coupling and any medium takes place. It is at the limit—or, to follow Simondon, at the membrane—that the monadic equals the transmonadic. Guattari is right when he claims that the grasping of the fold, of the membrane, "only confers auto-consistency on the monad to the extent that it deploys a trans-nomadic exteriority and alterity such that neither the first nor the second benefit from a relation of precedence, and that one cannot approach either of them without referring to the other" (Guattari [1992] 1995, 113). Monad and transmonad, the body and its transcorporeality, the individual and its transindividuation, meet each other as that which folds, tears, unfolds, and assembles the membrane, the differential limits that any technicity produces.

SATISFICING NUPTIALS

In a way, any structural coupling deals with the ways in which an assemblage interacts with its world. At least, that is Maturana and Varela's argument. This interaction, however, is never unilateral: an assemblage manipulates the environment it produces while the produced environment affects the assemblage's structure and operation. Any assemblage both acts and reacts to an outside, but also chooses and specifies which external perturbations can and will affect it. As philosopher Ronald Bogue claims, assemblages

> engage in structural couplings with selected features of their surroundings, thereby bringing forth a world. Maturana and Varela equate

> the process of structural coupling with cognition. Hence Maturana's statement that living systems are cognitive systems, and living is a process of cognition. (Bogue 2003, 67)

Consequently, we can reconsider what biologist Jacob van Uexküll calls a horizontal evolutionary account (von Uexküll [1926] 1926). Von Uexküll considers Darwin's evolutionary model as too vertical, or, in other words, too hierarchical and instead advances an evolutionary account that does not develop in the form of a descent, but rather focuses on how entities relate to each other and how they behave according to their relational agency (Buchanan 2008, 8).

What is fundamentally problematic with Darwinism is the concept of *natural selection* itself. As the theoretical biologist Jeremy Sherman reminds us,

> Darwin chose the term *natural selection* to draw a parallel to artificial selection, breeders selecting plant varieties and individual animals with traits that suited the breeder's aims. This analogy is helpful only if we remember where it breaks down. Breeders select; natural selection only results in differential reproductive success, some lineages proliferating more than others, and natural selection operates passively, with no aims in mind. (Sherman 2017, 70)

In other words, one needs to deanthropomorphize evolution, removing from it any all too human features (such as selection, choice, or aim) that were too hastily introduced into it. Therefore, while both traditional and contemporary versions of Darwinism imply the existence of a static and fixed environment to which any individual must adapt in order to survive, the conceptual line I followed thus far claims quite the opposite. If in Darwinism genetic variation serves merely as the motor of adaptation to a static environment, ethological thought claims that individuals and their environments are reticularly determined, concluding that any genetic code cannot be separated from its material context. As Simondon states, all sorts of individuals, both physical and technical, determine their genetic and their epigenetic context through their technicities and through their structural couplings. Moreover, if indeed living is a process of cognition, then the signs that populate the medium of any coupling are what essentially drive evolution. Decisively, the cognition of signs is not a matter of a modal selection but rather a constant ethological practice.

At this point, it is possible to exchange the term epigenesis for the even more inclusive term *epiphylogenesis*. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler provides us with the concept of epiphylogenesis, since according to him, there are not two, but three forms of memory: genetic memory that is unfolded in our DNA, epigenetic memory that is acquired during an individual's lifetime and is stored

in its nervous system, and, third, epiphylogenetic memory that is embodied in a technicity (Stiegler [1994] 1998). For Stiegler, through epiphylogenesis, successive epigenetic experiences are stored, accumulated, and transmitted from a generation and a population of individuals to another in the form of technical objects. Stiegler's epiphylogenesis stands very close to an account that examines technicities as that which sets into action the evolution of all assemblages involved in structural couplings within any given environment and the manipulations it can afford. In this regard, Maturana and Varela and Stiegler, from different perspectives and for different purposes, follow the analyses of the philosopher Susan Oyama.

In *The Ontogeny of Information,* Oyama claims that most contemporary research in genetics goes against the notion that the DNA alone suffices to provide an account for biological evolution (Oyama 2000). To substantiate her claim, she examines the example of the development of the egg. In the fertilized egg there are three components that are crucial for its development: nuclear DNA, regionalized cytoplasmic macromolecules—what are known as mRNA and do not belong to the embryo but to its mother's genome—and the cytoskeletal matrix, that is, the structure of the cell (Bogue 2003, 67). All three components affect the embryo's development, while none of them can be retroactively claimed as the determining factor: in the technicity they imply, they all co-determine the development of the embryo. In their co-determination, signals "between developing embryonic cells, as well as environmental influences such as heat and light from the outside of the embryo, at times initiate sequences of differentiation, at other maintain differentiation in surrounding cells" (Bogue 2003, 68). Among genetic, epigenetic, and epiphylogenetic elements unfolds a play of intensive material informational exchange, in the form of signs, which determine both its structural and its operational affects. In this sense, Oyama concludes that

> it is not that genes and environment are necessary for all characteristics, inherited or acquired (the usual enlightened positions), but that there is no intelligible distinctions between inherited (biological, genetically based) and acquired (environmentally mediated) characteristics. (Oyama 2000, 122)

Hence, evolution returns to its original Latin meaning, namely the term *evolutio*: to unfold. Contrary to the logic of the survival of the fittest, unfolding does not dictate in advance which forms come forth, but instead, it determines which of them are not viable. This was von Uexküll's main argument against Darwinism: a theory of evolution should be a theory of fewer folds, an unfolding of folds, and not a theory that explains the complexity of unfolding by

introducing a static element that drives it (von Uexküll [1926] 1926, 263). Nothing drives the unfolding but the unfolding itself. In other words, it is the condition that brings forward a new world, one that is viable through the very differen-tials that determine the condition, and not the other way around. Structurally coupled individuals unfold an intensive continuum in which there is no natural selection prescribing any outcome, but a continuous *natural drift*. The affective potentials that produce and are produced in the technicities of the drifted un-folding do not need to be the best, but simply good enough (Bogue 2003, 68). In other words, evolution, or more precisely, individuation, is, as Oyama puts it, "satisficing (taking a suboptimal solution that is satisfactory) rather than op-timizing, proceeding by the putting together of parts and items in complicated arrays, not because they fulfil some ideal design but simply because they are possible" (Oyama 2000, 196). For that reason, Maturana and Varela claim that love, and not Darwinian struggle or opposition, is what determines evolution (Maturana and Varela, 1998). Put succinctly, evolution is not determined by an affective diminishing but instead an affirmative, transaffective amplification, where any individual structurally coupled with another brings forth a world through an aberrant nuptial, not because it must but simply because it can, because it is possible. As Bogue wonderfully states, "the broad constraints of survival and reproduction allow myriad structural couplings but dictate none; ever new couplings emerge simply because living systems are inherently creative, inventive, formative processes" (Bogue 2003, 69).

In other words, transaffectivity does not constrain itself because of what has already been produced or of what it wishes to produce: the only constraint is the constraint of production itself, the larval field where everything is possible and yet only something occurs. Even more, it no longer bothers with the illu-sion of producing something out of nothing, but rather with the affirmative, impersonal, and purely affective qualification of *this* over *that*, not as a contest of fixed, static, and predefined terms but as a series of consequences that are their own consequence. This dynamism of consequences, this propagation of affective constraints, is both intensive and expressive; or, more precisely, it is intensive because it is expressive and vice versa. With the technicities that it deploys, it affords the reticular determination of both the individuals it produces and the environments that they manipulate, of a transaffective meaning that is shared while it remains autonomous and nonsubjective: a larval individuation that is at once the beginning, the end, and the means.

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