

Affects and Percepts: Challenging ‘machinic’ education through art

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Abstract

Contemporary education functions in a ‘machinic’ discursive environment closely aligned to global neoliberal economic, cultural forces. Within such an environment, dominant forces such as economic production, competitive innovation and rigid assessment templates can obscure marginalised learning such as minoritarian knowledge or new transdisciplinary possibilities in both teaching and learning. Drawing from Deleuzian and arts-inspired thinking, this paper seeks ways of thinking that may expose ‘machinic enslavement’ in education, and further, develop an understanding of pedagogy that affirms ‘affects’ and ‘percepts’ as productive forces of change and stimulants of learning. The paper also discusses implications of these insights for arts educators and considers how the arts need to change so that they can inform educational practices more successfully.

Introduction

In Deleuze’s publication *Nietzsche and Philosophy* he discusses, in one section, Nietzsche’s views on the nature of art. He says:

Art is the opposite of a ‘disinterested’ operation: it does not heal, calm, sublimate or pay off, it does not ‘suspend’ desire, instinct or will. On the contrary, art is a ‘stimulant of the will to power’, something that excites willing’. The critical sense of this principle is obvious: it exposes every reactive conception of art. (Deleuze, 1983, p.102)

Like Nietzsche, Deleuze has an interest in art as an active cultural force—as something that invents “new possibilities of life” (Deleuze, 1983, p. 103). As Deleuze notes, this is the opposite of what one might term as disinterested. Deleuze holds a particular view of art and he is not reticent in critiquing commonplace ‘reactive’ conceptions of art that can serve to inhibit the stimulating and powerful attribute of art that affects life’s moments. Here in the statement above, art is not a detached object hanging on a wall ready for contemplation, or a composer’s score yet to be realised in a musical performance. Rather, art is thought about in a particular and special and functional way. Deleuze’s kind of art acts as a ‘stimulant’ or trigger—as something that is able to mobilise and action movement and change. This notion of art is quite different, it seems, from common conceptions of art found in Western culture, of something to be set-apart, used, revered or contemplated. According to Deleuze, art is that which comes forth and changes the world from which it arises—it forcefully challenges that which is normal or everyday. By embracing art as a stimulant of energies and forces, Deleuze exposes what he terms as ‘reactive’ culture, that is, cultural forms which respond conventionally to other more active, stimulating forces.

Deleuze builds a whole system of concepts around creative forces and the systems that mobilise and action such forces. These ideas are encapsulated, later, in his concept of ‘affect’ and the ‘machine’, both of which are intrinsic to the conceptualisation of this paper.

Nietzsche’s idea of art as a culturally stimulating force is similarly challenging. In his earlier *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, 1999), music (read art) is aligned with the Greek god Dionysus, the god of wine and abandonment, of excitable exotic and sexual energies, of rapture, otherworldliness and ruptures of the ordinary. In this romantically conceived but intellectually stimulating work, Nietzsche takes Dionysian art to be an essential component of any life-affirming creative experience—a creative and living force that when

worked in with Apollonian forms becomes the foreground for powerful and life-changing art—art that challenges even the ruling decrees of Socratic rationalism. In this work the seeds are sown for a concept of art as force and this is further exemplified in Nietzsche's later volumes and indeed in Deleuze's own exegesis of Nietzsche in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983).

Deleuze shows particular interest in Nietzsche's concept of the 'will to power' which is sketched together explicitly in Nietzsche's later unpublished materials and underlies his more established thinking on force and power. This concept (perhaps unfortunately named) projects a notion of natural existence as a changing flux of forces and energies. In writing about Nietzsche's will to power concept Allison explains:

“as a physical doctrine, one can say that ‘everything’ is will to power, at every scale of natural and human existence: the scale and, indeed, the form of things, here being defined by the relative differences between aggregations or ‘congeries’ of force – from the subatomic to the geological scale of existence” (Allison, 2001: 121).

Here, in the natural order of things, is the entire possibility of human culture of both natural and human-made structures, the thought world and the art world too. What Nietzsche calls the 'will to power' is a transdisciplinary notion of force and power that envisages the possibilities of becoming by means of relational differences and movement in life events. Deleuze finds in the 'will to power' concept a philosophy of movement, affect and change that is different from structuralist notions of coding and signification (commonly found in educational policy). Expressions of power mark out the active and stimulating forces of nature and culture that enable cultural forms (meaningful words, symbols, sounds, images) to emerge. Such thinking about power show us more clearly what *allows* coding and signification to become manifest rather than the other way around. In this context, the mechanical repetition of representational forms in cultural coding and signification is reactive—as something that follows and responds to initial projections and urges of active creative forces.

What both Deleuze and Nietzsche find in art is the capacity to energise and stimulate power relations. This insight is not so much drawn from an 'arts discipline' perspective as such but from the active presencing of art—the act of artistic engagement. Nietzsche saw this characteristic most vividly in the engaging properties of music performance.

This paper examines education from this Deleuzian and Nietzschean insight into art as a stimulating active force, as a force that exposes reactive and controlling expressions of pedagogy. To do this I use Deleuze's notions of 'affect' and the 'machine' to draw out a line of thinking about how educational practice can be challenged and re-thought as a plane of immanence where relational forces act and react and where an art inspired pedagogy can act as a stimulant to new democratic or emergent learning/becomings.

Machines and Machinic Enslavement

One of Deleuze and Guattari's more interesting and invigorating concepts is their notion of the 'machine'. Ignoring conventional use of the concept of the machine in the industrial economy, Deleuze, the “diagnostician” and “scathing critic” (Osbourne, 2003, p. 510) uses the term as a challenging tool to explore, expose and examine machinic forces in society that operate in processual and mechanical ways. Using the concept of the machine, Colebrook (2002, p.55) observes that Deleuze “moves away from humanist and organicist models in order to think a becoming and time that has no ground or foundation”. Similarly Deleuze's idea of the machine helps us develop a kind of “active ethics” (ibid.), a radical ethics that responds to what becomes, but is not necessarily the direct result of singular human action—but may be, for example, an emergence from a combination of relational forces and actions.

It is not difficult to imagine the processes, forces and movements in education as machines. The practice of education, that is, formalised teaching and learning operates through contingencies of interest, of curriculum policies, assessment regimes, structured learning systems and instructional pedagogies that combine in order to process student learning according to established levels and standards. Machinic education has certain 'industrial' characteristics that stand out: the actions of teaching and learning are repetitive (regardless of student difference); learning is organised around clearly defined templates of action; there is a obvious alignment with dominant functions informing the pedagogy—for instance curriculum policy directives; and there are also specific areas of control or focus points that tend to dominate emergent forms—more particularly assessment systems that shape, format and generically mould and pattern criteria driven learning outcomes.

A Deleuzian machinic critique of institutional education highlights the technical and processual components of a learning enterprise; it focuses on the functional powers or disabling/enabling elements in a teaching and learning instance. Such a critique does not come from within a disciplinary centre that may often seek to defend or justify a particular curriculum stance, rather it stands outside particular value interests and examines the educational process as a repetitive movement and as a contest of relational forces. This helps the critical analyst understand the ethical issues implicit in specific educational events in as much as they come out of broader templates of 'inhuman' machinic action that exert overriding ethical restrictions on both students and teachers.

Deleuze and Guattari also write about "machinic enslavement" which takes place when a cultural process (eg. classroom learning) becomes subject to an "apparatus of capture" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 424-473). This occurs when strong machines exert overriding and controlling forces on an area of focus, demanding compliance with a particular discursive stance or function. An example of this can be found in recent treatment of the term 'creativity' as a contemporary learning ideal in educational policy. Creativity, a concept that has been long considered important in the creative arts—the "machineries of creativity" (Osborne, 2003, p. 515)—and aligned with the ancient notion of *poiesis* (making art), has more recently been 'captured' by the powerful global machine of creative enterprise. The newer machine links the ideal of creativity with market place innovation, with new ideas for successful business, the creative industries, the knowledge economy and the generic educational ideal of human 'competencies' (human capital). The new machinic enslavement of the concept of creativity links human being with inhuman notions of creative capital, of innovation and the production of economic gain. This new type of emphasis raises some critical ethical questions. Within the global economy paradigm informing the new machine, the 'creative self' as a mode of existence becomes channelled with the ideal of creative enterprise, obscuring other related or possible ideal notions like creative communities, creative expressions, creative voices or creative democratic perspectives.

Machinic enslavement not only manifests itself in the region of discursive emphases and alignment, but also in the processes and formalised knowledge schedules of institutionalised education. One such orientation in recent times has been a move towards aligning computerised digital multimedia information with packaged templates of assessment criteria and learning timetables. The "theatre of fast knowledge" (Peters & Besley, 2005, pp.95-112) defines a new type of contemporary school environment where packaged assignments of collated material provide students with rapid opportunities to satisfy curriculum and assessment obligations and instructional tasks. While digital multimedia forms as new technologies hold immense potential in what they can assist learning and new forms of becoming, the machinic obligations of instructional knowledge templates tend to 'decompose' possibilities of interesting learning becomings and differences because of the overriding normative drive for codified educational reporting. Such are the ethical dilemmas in these types of educational situations.

Machinic enslavement in education can mean a diminishing of democracy and freedom in educational practice. Dominant machinic functions like task driven templates and capital production and economic innovation can obscure other, different learning possibilities. This can mean that potential minoritarian knowledge that emerges from different relational perspectives can be ignored or forgotten in the rush to process hard criteria driven knowledge. Further, dominant education machines can diminish a student's capacity to explore different critical and conflicting perspectives in a learning instance or further the exploration of questions of social justice and inequality because the machinic functions operate within fixed agendas outside these realms leaving little time or space for democratic exploration.

Affects and Percepts

Does art hold any potential to disrupt or even overcome the dangers of machinic enslavement in education? At first glance this would seem to be a difficult prospect, especially given that the arts in education hold a tenuous place in the present day curriculum. The condition of the arts disciplines as effective educational vehicles is under threat due to the rapidly diminishing curriculum time available for arts in schools and ideological problems within the arts disciplines themselves that complicate and negatively position the arts as learning modes for all students regardless of gender, ethnicity or socio-economic position. Conversations about these issues can be found in numerous recent philosophy of arts education publications¹. Clearly the arts, as disciplines seem to lack the ability to stimulate powerful change in the neoliberal milieu of contemporary education.

In his later work, written with Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (1994), Deleuze provides a more detailed exegesis of their concept of 'affect', which has clear similarities with Nietzsche's earlier vision of existence as a changing flux of forces and energies and Deleuze's own developing philosophy of becoming. These authors link affect with art, and thus see affect as something closely aligned with artistic action—and clearly the idea of 'affection' has been consistent with the development of Western aesthetics and notions of emotion and feeling generated in artistic experiences. Deleuze and Guattari however wish to move beyond traditional notions of affection and emotions commonly associated with the arts and aesthetic contemplation. In doing so they try to bring an 'inhuman' factor into the mix, seeking to immobilize any primacy of individual subjectivity. "Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 169). Forces rather act in relational ways—human action and response arises from a constant dialogue with inhuman assemblages, be they art works, hierarchical structures or state policies. Deleuzian affects are thus modes of thought or instances of action that are brought forth as a result of any kind of engagement—more particularly engagement in art—but also engagement in other kinds of cultural activities. The accent here is on the relational cultural connections that bring about different mobile emphases of becoming. As Seigworth (2005, p. 160) notes, a Deleuzian affect is "a moment of singularity...where are universe pours in [and] flows out". A moment of event of some kind (education, musical, mechanical) triggers affects that in turn become mobilised and affect in other ways.

Similarly, percepts are the peripheral movements or sensations that take place in life and cultural experiences of different kinds—commonly but not necessarily in arts experiences—but also other kinds of varied experiences like classroom learning, television viewing, sports events or animal care. A percept is a type of "membrane that is both in contact with, and is actually part of an external world" (Marks, 2005, p.200). Percepts are like our natural interface with the world, they become the figure of change and movement as we experience day to day life.

My contention here is that Deleuze and Guattari discover an interesting way to expose and stimulate a deepening of democratic learning and action through their arts derived concepts of affects and percepts. My reasons are twofold: One, affects and percepts are arts derived, yes, but they are also seen as interdisciplinary phenomena outside the controlling edifices of the arts disciplines. They highlight the point

that artistic and aesthetic elements of power are potentially embedded in all educational practices. They thus provide a way for the arts to become intertwined with general education processes and purposes. Second, and related to the first, affects and percepts bring a radically neutralised notion of force—as sensations and intensities—to educational processes, thus by their very character they diminish the potential for discursive machinic processes in education to exert symbolic or performative capture.

The interesting point, as far as this paper is concerned, is that while Deleuzian affects are generated in *artistic* ways they become manifest in *non-artistic* spheres of engagement. Affects bring an artistic element into a non-artistic milieu. This is in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's thesis of three main paradigms of thought: art, science and philosophy explained in *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). In this seminal work these authors maintain that these three active knowledge systems are in constant mobile relations with one another and constantly impact together in invigorating ways.

Discussion and Conclusion

What I am suggesting in this paper is not that arts education should become more prominent through a greater awareness of affects and percepts, although that could indeed be a conceivable proposition. My main point is that the stimulating and emergent quality found in art (as Nietzsche discovered) as a presencing and engaging process is something that infiltrates all educational processes and indeed all cultural endeavours to some degree. Teachers would do well to consider this point. The notion of art (music, dance, drama etc.) as separate bodies of knowledge, as disciplines, is only a recent cultural phenomenon, unique to the Enlightenment and carried out in extreme cultural circumstances particular to modernist institutions of the last century. What I am suggesting is that the presence of these modern arts disciplines, along with their accompanying discourses, has separated the philosophical position of art from pedagogy. Further, the presence of separate arts disciplines in the curriculum has obscured the notion that affects and percepts—*aesthetic forces that stimulate change*—are embedded in processes of teaching, learning and instructional pedagogy. The arts have been treated as something done in 'art class' (music class, dance class) rather than something intrinsically connected with instructional pedagogy. The Deleuzian notion of affects and percepts borrows an artistic (aesthetic) element from the arts disciplines and makes it available for pedagogues to reflect on and consider alongside their practice.

Teachers can thus consider how affects and percepts stimulate their classroom or studio teaching. This can be done alongside a critical examination and exposure of the machinic processes affecting their work. In such circumstances, the sensations experienced in teaching episodes are fully recognised and affirmed as meaningful agents of change in students' learning. Further, the affects in lessons cumulate to help teachers and students move into different learning possibilities, different becomings. These can be measured alongside machinic flows like assessment and accreditation expectations.

Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of affect is to consider Deleuze and Guattari's own suggestions—their own language creations 'borrowed' from other historical or disciplinary contexts such as affect, machine, territory, plateau, plane etc. that are then used as aesthetic tools of cultural diagnosis, critique and becoming. In books such as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) the authors' transdisciplinary approach of creating new concepts and placing them in fresh contexts generates and stimulates a raft of intellectual becomings and new perspectives. Indeed the Deleuzian academic field is a fast growing transdisciplinary movement. In the book these new concepts are applied artistically to philosophical writing, opening up new learning and new thinking. In such an approach the lines between philosophy and art are blurred and the potential stimulation of affects in the process of learning is something that can be affirmed.

Perhaps the most significant challenge in this respect is to arts educators themselves. As workers and pedagogues in the arts they have potential insight into how arts processes can stimulate new kinds of

expression and thinking in education. As guardians of the arts-discipline machines themselves, whose *raison d'être* has traditionally been to uphold their respective disciplinary standards in modernist fashion, the call now may be for such pedagogues to consider how the processes they hold dearly can be radically but convincingly injected into educational practice more overtly. As Wolfgang Iser (2005) maintains, the present condition of modern art is under threat as we know it. Multimedia technology has blurred the distinctions between the established arts disciplines and a multitude of cultural events such as digital technologies, cinema, sports, games and festivals are decomposing the notion of the arts, providing aesthetic enjoyment for the masses, enjoyment that would otherwise be considered to be the domain of arts and art education practice.

Notes

1 See for instance, the journal *Action, Criticism and Theory in Music Education*.

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