Deleuze and the Theory of Thought:
The Universal Thought-Flow and the Structure of Stupidity[1]

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1. Introduction

The title of my talk today was to have been "The Machinic Phylum: Deleuze on Matter and Materiality," but the material I'm presenting today is slightly different from what I originally envisioned. Originally, I wanted to talk about Deleuze's conception of matter, at various levels:

1. First, his critique of the "hylomorphic schema" in Aristotle—in idea that individuation is a combination of form and matter—since for Deleuze, beyond matter there lies an energetic materiality in continuous variation, and beyond the fixed form there lies various qualitative processes of deformation or transformation in continuous development (iron melts at high temperatures, marble or wood split along their veins and fibers, etc.).

2. Second, his development of the idea of the "machinic phylum" as the pure *Idea* of matter, which is precisely this "flow of matter in continuous variation, conveying singularities and traits of expression," an *assemblage* being a "constellation of singularities and traits deducted from the flow—selected, organized, stratified."[2]

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[1] NOTE: This is the text of a keynote lecture that was given on 8 April 2006 at the 11th annual graduate student conference of the Department of Philosophy at Villanova University. The conference was titled *Materialism: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, and was organized by Liz Irvine and Andy Davis, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

[2] Gilbert Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Paris: PUF, 1964). Deleuze was heavily influenced by Simondon's text; see Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale; ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 103-105; Gilles Deleulze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 405-411.

3. Third, the political philosophy he extracts from this conception of matter—what we might call his "historical materialism"—which takes the form of a typology of social assemblages—primitives, States, nomadic war machines, capitalism—each of which constitutes a particular mode of occupying space and time, and for the analysis of which Deleuze has proposed his own philosophical terminology: the earth [*terre*], territories, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and so forth.

That was the paper I originally planned to write, but I'm describing it here in the way that Borges used to write short stories and reviews about non-existent books that he made up. I'm describing the non-existent paper I'm *not* going to present today. Why? Because what came to the fore as I considered the topic was the thing that seems to be the opposite of matter—namely, thought and thinking. Materialism, which broadly speaking reduces things to matter, seems to be the opposite of idealism, which reduces things to thought. If Deleuze's is a materialist, then the test case for considering the nature of his materialism is not his theory of matter, but rather his theory of thought. So the question I'd like to address in today's paper, *from the viewpoint of materialism*, is: What exactly is Deleuze's theory of thought? And to what degree can this theory of thought be said to be materialist? I'm not sure I've arrived at a final answer, but this is nonetheless a start.

To anticipate, the paper has four sections: 1. The Creation of Concepts (on Deleuze's definition of philosophy; (2) the Universal Thought-Flow; (3) The Structure of Stupidity; and (4) The Question of Genesis (on the distinction between the singular and the ordinary).

2. The Creation of Concepts

In their book, *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy—rather famously, now—as a practice of concepts, an activity that consists in the formation, invention, or creation of concepts. "One can very easily think without concepts," Deleuze writes, "but as soon as there is a concept, there is truly philosophy."[3] Deleuze's characterization of philosophy as the creation of concepts is admittedly a rather novel definition—there are few philosophers who would agree with this definition *tout court*—but it is an important definition for two reasons.

One the one hand, it defines philosophy in terms of an activity that has traditionally been aligned with art, namely, the activity of *creation*. For Deleuze, philosophers are as creative as artists—the difference is that what they create happens to be concepts rather than paintings, or sculptures, or films, or novels. In Deleuze's language, philosophers create *concepts* whereas artists create sensible aggregates of *percepts* or *affects*. Deleuze's approach to the question "What is philosophy?" has the advantage of characterizing philosophy in terms of a well-defined occupation or a precise *activity*, rather than simply an *attitude*—for instance, knowing yourself, or wondering why there is something rather than nothing, or taking nothing to be self-evident, and so on. "To create concepts," Deleuze writes, "is, at the very least, to *do* something."[4] Moreover, conceptual creations bear the signature of the philosopher who created them, just as works of art bear the signature of the artist. In painting, we speak of Van Gogh's sunflowers or Jasper John's flags, just as in philosophy

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[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia, 1995), 32, translation modified.

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell

one speaks of Descartes' cogito, or Leibniz's monads, or Nietzsche's will to power. In these cases, the proper name refers less to the person than to the work of art or to the concept itself—the proper name is here used to indicate *a non-personal mode of individuation*.[5] In this sense, it would be possible to do a history of philosophy along the lines of an art history, that is, in terms of its great products or masterworks. From this point of view, Descartes' *cogito* and Plato's Idea would the philosophical parallels to Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa or Michelangelo's Last Judgment—the great philosophical masterworks, signed by their creators.

On the other hand, Deleuze's definition of philosophy (as the creation of concepts) is important for a second reason: not only does it imply that philosophers are as creative as artists; more importantly, perhaps, it also implies that artists are as much "thinkers" as are philosophers. Great artists and authors are also great thinkers, but they happen to think in terms of percepts and affects rather than concepts: painters think in terms of lines and colors, just as musicians think in sounds, writers think in words, filmmakers think in images, and so on. The idea that thought is necessarily propositional, or representational, or linguistic, or even conceptual is completely foreign to Deleuze. He writes, "There are other ways thinking and creating, other modes of ideation that, like scientific thought, do not have to pass through concepts."[6] When sculptors mold a piece of clay, or painters apply colors or lines, or filmmakers set up a shot, there is a process of thought involved; it is simply that that

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(New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 7.

[5] Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. ix: "We dream sometimes of a history of philosophy that would list only the new concepts created by a great philosopher—his most essential and creative contribution."

process of thought does not take place in a conceptual medium. Rather, it takes place directly in and through a sensible medium—and not through the application of concepts upon that sensible medium (that was Kant's definition of knowledge—concepts applied to intuitions or perceptions).

For instance, Jean-Luc Godard, the French filmmaker, used to say that, for a film director, the decision between using a panoramic shot as opposed to tracking shot was a *moral* decision—by which he meant that it was a question of *thought*, albeit a properly cinematic thought. Deleuze would later elaborate on this distinction in terms of the two conceptions of space implied in these two types of cinematic shots. A panoramic shot implies a Euclidean and Cartesian space: an establishing shot (of the kind found so frequently at the beginning of Hitchcock's films) that presents space in a global fashion, as a kind of box or container, which will progressively filled in by successive shots. A tracking shot, by contrast, often creates something akin to a non-Euclidean or Riemannian space, which is constructed gradually and locally, and entails no pre-given metric, no pre-given whole. In Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket*, for instance, the space of the Gare de Lyon train station is constructed in a fragmentary manner as the camera tracks a stolen wallet, starting with it being lifted from the victim's pocket, and then moving from one hand to another, from one member of the gang to another, until it finally leaves the station. This is what Deleuze calls an any-space-whatever—*un espace quelconque*—that is constructed in a piecemeal fashion, and we never in fact see the whole of the Gare de Lyon, the global space encompassing the local action. A director like Godard obviously is not thinking about the

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[6] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 8.

difference between Euclidean and non-Euclidean space when he is deciding between a panoramic shot and a tracking shot. But Deleuze, as a philosopher writing on film, can appeal to this mathematical reference in order to elucidate what is at stake in the choice between a panoramic shot and a tracking shot, and to create a philosophical concept that corresponds to the choice.

This is one reason why artists, when ask to explain or interpret their work conceptually, are often at a loss: their thought was worked out sensibly, it is *already* out there, but it is on the canvas or in the film, or in the novel—in the *work*, in other words—and not in the concepts that are subsequently formulated to explain the supposed 'meaning' of the work. The latter practice is the domain of the philosopher (though Deleuze would say that the proper question to ask of a work of art is not "What does it mean?" but rather "How does it work?").

Deleuze's definition of philosophy as the creation of concepts thus has these two important implications: philosophers are as creative as artists, and artists are as much thinkers as are philosophers. A third point immediately follows from this. None of these activities—art or philosophy, or even science—has any priority over the other. Creating a concept is neither more difficult nor more abstract than creating new visual, sonorous, or verbal combinations in art; conversely, it is no easier to read an image, painting or novel than it is to comprehend a concept. Philosophy, for Deleuze, can never be undertaken independently of art or science; it always enters into relations of mutual resonance and exchange with these other domains, though for reasons that are always internal to philosophy itself. This is why Deleuze could constantly insist that, when he wrote on the

arts, he did so not as a critic, but as a philosopher, and that his works on the various arts must therefore be read, as he himself says, as works of "philosophy, nothing but philosophy, in the traditional sense of the word."[7] What does this mean? It means that, in his studies of the arts, Deleuze's aim, as a philosopher, was to *create the concepts* that correspond to the sensible aggregates created by artists or authors. Thus, in his book on Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze creates a series of philosophical concepts, each of which, he says, relates to a particular aspect of Bacon's paintings, but which also find a place in "a general logic of sensation." In a similar manner, Deleuze insisted that his two-volume *Cinema* book can be read as "a book of logic, a logic of the cinema" that sets out "to isolate certain cinematographic concepts," concepts which are specific to the cinema, but which can only be formed philosophically.[8]

It is these three rubrics, then, that seem to sum up Deleuze's relationship to the arts in general. First, philosophers are as creative as artists (they create concepts); second, artists

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[7] Gilles Deleuze, "8 ans après: Entretien 1980" (interview with Catherine Clément), in *L'arc* 49 (rev. ed., 1980), special issue on Deleuze, 99.

[8] Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara /Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 47. Strictly speaking, there is no "philosophy of art" in Deleuze: "art" is itself a concept, but a purely nominal one, since there necessarily exist diverse problems whose solutions are found in heterogeneous arts. Hermann Broch once wrote that "the sole *raison d'être* of the novel is to discover what only the novel can discover" [Quoted in Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 5, 36], and each of the arts, and each work of art, can be said to confront its own particular problems, utilizing its own particular material and techniques. The cinema, for instance, produces images that move, and that move in time, and it is these two aspects of film that Deleuze's sets out to analyze in *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*: "What exactly does the cinema show us about space and time that the other arts don't show?" (Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 58). As Jean-Luc Godard noted, a panoramic shot and a tracking shot give us two very different types of spaces: a panoramic shot is encompassing, it gives us a global vision, as in projective geometry; whereas a tracking shot constructs a line, it links up spaces and neighborhoods that in themselves can remain fragmentary and disconnected, more like a Reimannian geometry. Even the choice between a pan or a track is an activity of thought in filmmaking (Godard says: it is a *moral* choice).

and authors are as much thinkers as are philosophers (they simply think in non-conceptual media, in a non-conceptual *material* or *matter*); and third, neither activity has any priority whatsoever over the other (philosopher can create concepts about art, just as artists and authors can create in conjunction with philosophical concepts—as, for instance, in so-called conceptual art).

3. The Universal Thought-Flow

But there is another question that arises in Deleuze's elucidation of the relation between philosophy and art or science, and that is the question of thought itself. What is thought? What does it mean to think? *What is Called Thinking*? (*Was Heisst Denken*?) as Heidegger put it in the title of one of his best books? And what is the relation between thinking and creating, since for Deleuze this is what links philosophy and art and science—all are activities of thought, they are all activities of creation?

In probing the conditions of this question, we must first of all say that thinking is never, in itself, the activity of an "I" or of a Self—even if this self is a literary, scientific, or philosophical "genius." It is never "Me" who thinks. Leibniz had already made this point against Descartes: it is illegitimate to say "I think, therefore I am," not because "I am" does not follow from "I think," but rather because, from the activity of thought, I can never derive an "I." At best, Descartes can claim, "there is thinking," "thought has taken place," "in order to doubt, there must be thinking." Spinoza—and later Nietzsche—would say that there is an "automatism" to thought just as much as there is a "mechanism" of the body, capable of astonishing us. With regard to the thought that takes place within us, we are all

"spiritual automatons" (in fact, both Spinoza and Leibniz appealed to this image): it is not *we* who think, but rather thought that takes place within us. Nietzsche, in an unpublished fragment from one of his notebooks of June-July 1885, wrote:

> A thought…comes up in me—where from? How? I simply don't know. It comes, independently of my will, usually surrounded and obscured by a mass of feelings, desires, aversions, and also other thoughts....One pulls it [the thought] out of this mass, cleans it off, sets it on its feet, and then sees how it stands and how it walks—all of this in an astonishing *presto* and yet without any sense of hurry. Just *who* does all this—I have no idea, and I am surely more a spectator than originator of this process.[9]

But if thought is not the activity of a thinking being, if thoughts constantly arise in me without me being either their author or their source, then where do they come from? What ontological status are we to attribute to thought, and to these incessant thoughts that come and go within me, according to their own rhythms and their own pace? Deleuze made a series of suggestive yet highly enigmatic comments on this question—almost in passing—in one of his early seminars on Leibniz (in 1980, just before the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus*; many of Deleuze's seminars are now available on-line, thanks to his former student Richard Pinhas). What Deleuze said was the following (I'm excerpting heavily here from

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[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 34 (= Notebook 38[1] = KSA 11:38[1]). See also Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 118: "It is not even clear that thought, in so far as it constitutes the dynamism peculiar to philosophical systems, may be related to a substantial, completed, and well-constituted subject, such as the Cartesian Cogito: thought is, rather, one of those terrible movement which can be sustained only under the conditions of a larval subject."

some longer comments):

> What is given, quite possibly, one could always call a flow. It's flows that are given…. Imagine the universal thought flow as a kind of interior monologue, the interior monologue of everyone who thinks…. The concept is a system of singularities appropriated <prélevé> from a thought flow…. One can also conceive of a continuous acoustic flow that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence (perhaps that is only an idea, but it matters little if this idea is justified). A musician is someone who appropriates something from this flow.[10]

There are several themes interwoven into this passage. The first is the theme of *flows*, which obviously took on an importance in Deleuze's thought around the time of *Anti-Oedipus* (1972; the seminar took place in 1980). The second is the theme of *continuity*, which Deleuze rather explicitly ties to the theory of Ideas that he developed in *Difference and Repetition*. We can conceive of a continuous flow of thought in the universe, just as we can conceive of a continuous flow of sound, or a continuous flow of matter—but we can only conceive of these pure continuities of thought, or sound, or matter, as *Ideas*—since what is given to us in experience are discontinuous singularities or traits extracted from these continuous flows (or "variables uprooted from their state of continuous variation," ATP 408). What Deleuze would later call the *machinic phylum*, for instance, is nothing other than the *Idea* of the continuous flow of matter ("matter in movement, in flux, in variation, matter as a conveyor of singularities and traits of expression").[11]

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[10] The following comments are taken from Deleuze's seminar of 15 April 1980, available on-line at www.webdeleuze.com.

[11] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 409.

Now it is fairly easy to understand, at the level of our "intuitions" (as analytic philosophers like to say), the Idea of a continuous flow of matter in the universe, which our material bodies are cut out of or extracted from, so to speak—since we know our bodies are continually in process, with parts constantly being added and taken away. Deleuze suggests that we must conceive of something similar in the realm of thought, perhaps in line with Spinoza's idea of a parallelism between thought and extension. Just as there is a continuous flow of matter in the universe, of which we ourselves are modifications, so there is a continuous flow of thought in the universe, of which we are likewise modifications. The thoughts that come and go in our heads, and of which we are neither the origin nor the author, are simply the products of this thought flow, or more precisely, the very movement of this universal flow of thought in the universe—a flow that is anonymous, impersonal, and indeterminate.

[In passing, I might note that some of Deleuze more enigmatic claims regarding the nature of repetition in *Difference and Repetition*—notably, the status of "clothed repetition" (as opposed to "bare repetition"), which is always, Deleuze says, a *spiritual* repetition—make sense in light of this rather Spinozistic concept of a universal thought flow. For instance, when Deleuze claims that "every spatio-temporal dynamism is accompanied by the emergence of *an elementary consciousness* which itself traces directions, doubles movements and migrations, and is born on the threshold of the condensed singularities of the body or object whose consciousness it is" (DR 220), he is pointing to the way in which this flow of thought is itself *constituted* in every process of actualization—that is, he is talking about the *genesis* of the universal thought-flow. Conversely, when Deleuze that "it is thought that must explore

the virtual down to the ground of its repetitions" (DR 22), or when he claims—almost cavalierly—that "we have the means to penetrate the sub-representational"[12] (that is, the virtual—an extraordinarily un-Kantian claim, since Kant held that we could never get out of our representations), he is saying that we can get beyond our representations because the thought flow that passes through us *already* makes us participate in the virtual, it is *already* sub-representational. In the very activity of thinking, we are already beyond the domain of representation.]

But what then is the relation between this universal flow of thought and the act of creation? Why does Deleuze link up the two in his characterizations of both philosophy, art, and science? For Deleuze, the act of creation entails the extraction of singularities from a flow: a philosophical concept, he says, is "a system of singularities appropriated from a thought flow," just as a work of music is a system of singularities extracted from the continuous acoustic flow. But what exactly does it mean to extract singularities from a continuous flow—whether a flow of thought, or sound, or matter—and why is this extraction of singularities equivalent to an act of creation?

4. The Structure of Stupidity

To answer this question, we need to consider what we might call the "usual" status of the universal thought flow. One of the most profound ideas that Deleuze proposes in his book on Nietzsche—and which he develops further in the central chapter in *Difference and Repetition* entitled "The Image of Thought"—is the idea that "*stupidity* [*bêtise*] is a structure of

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, ed. Sylvere Lotinger, trans. Michael Taormina (New

thought as such" (NP 105)—this is what it means to speak *without* concepts. More to the point, stupidity is not only a structure of thought as such; it is, to a certain degree, the *basic* structure of the universal thought flow. The thoughts we think, the thoughts that pop into our mind every day, the thoughts that suddenly appear while we are daydreaming, and so on, are stupid thoughts, thoughts that have the structure of stupidity. They are not falsehoods, they are not errors, nor a tissue of errors; rather they are stupidities. There is, I think, a certain provocation involved in Deleuze's use of this word, since other philosophers have made the same point while making use of seemingly less offensive terms. Heidegger spoke of "idle talk" or "idle chatter," and the fact that, most of the time, the thoughts that pass through our head are simply the thoughts of what "they" think, the thoughts of *Das Man*. Plato spoke about the reign of the *doxa* or the realm of opinion, and he saw the task of philosophy as precisely the attempt to break with the *doxa*, to extract oneself from opinion. Deleuze's point is exactly the same: the thoughts that pass through our heads, carried along by the universal thought flow, are stupid thoughts—thoughts that are determined, often, by the imbecilic culture that surrounds us.

It this not the aim or marketing and advertising: to modify the thought-flow, to populate it with anonymous thoughts about getting the colors in your laundry brighter, or your teeth whiter than white, and so on. According to Deleuze, the power of capital lies in the manner through which it managed to decode and set free flows—not only flows of matter, flows of populations, flows of goods and commodities, and so forth, but also *flows of knowledge*, or *flows of thought*. Even in the realm of literature, we have best-seller lists—top ten

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York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 115.

lists—whose sole aim is to track the flow of literature. Which literary flows are moving fastest? The number one book is the book that is moving the most, that has the greatest flow—and perhaps the greatest flow of stupidity (though not necessarily so, of course). Already in 1977, in his fascinating article critiquing the "New Philosophers" (fascinating because Deleuze rarely said anything negative about anyone), Deleuze had noted that books were becoming worth less than the reviews written about them, or the interviews that surround them.[13] Who has time to read entire books? And in any case, why bother, since I can learn everything I need to know from the reviews ("this book got well reviewed, that book got trashed…."). So well all renew our subscriptions to the London Review of Books, or the Times Literary Supplement, or the New York Review of Books. There is an entire field of research open here concerning this status of stupidity in the universal thought-flow, and the role that the media, and communications, and information technology play in it.

But from Deleuze's point of view, the philosophical question involved here concerns the "negative" of thought: what is the negative of thought, the opposite of thought, the "misadventure" that most profoundly threatens thinking? The traditional answer to this question would *error* or *falsehood*: the greatest misadventure of thought would be *error*, when I mistake the false for the true (I say "Hello Peter" when Paul walks by, or I say that 7 + 5 = 12). But Deleuze wants to contest this traditional presupposition: the greatest threat to thought is not *error* but rather *stupidity*. Why is this the case? Because the flow of stupidity itself is in no way made up of errors or falsehoods; it is *not* a tissue of errors. Stupidity can be made up entirely of truths, but these truths constitute stupid thoughts, imbecilic thoughts, an

[13] Gilles Deleuze, "On the New Philosophers," in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–*

imbecilic discourse (NP 105). (No doubt it is *true* that it is good to have white, cavity-free teeth, but this does no lessen the imbecilic nature of the discourse.) As Nietzsche wrote in "Schopenhauer as Educator," truth itself is "a modest being from which no disorder and nothing extraordinary is to be feared: a self-contented and happy creature which is continually assuring all the powers that be that no one needs to be the least concerned on its account; for it is, after all, 'pure knowledge.'"[14] In other words, although the discourse of stupidity may be entirely made up of truths, in and of itself, truth is hardly a threat to the reign of stupidity, to the "established order," as we like to say. Moreover, the examples often invoked by philosophers to illustrate error are often laughable (NP 105). For *who* is it that succumbs to the follies of error? Who says "7 + 5 = 13," except the young child at school struggling with his arithmetic class? Who says "Hello Peter" when Paul walks by, except a myopic person, and or absent-minded professor? In fact and in principle, thought has other and more profound enemies that mere error—for what prevents genuine thought from taking place is nothing other than the flow of stupidity—the flow of opinion, the flow of convention or the *doxa*, the flow of idle talk and idle chatter, the discourse of the "They" (what "they" say). Stupidity—and not error—is the true threat to thought, the *internal* threat to thought; it is what prevents new thought from ever taking place. As Heidegger said, "what is most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is the fact that *we are not yet thinking*."[15]

1995, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 143.
[14] Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1983), 137, as cited in Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 135.
[15] Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York:Harper, 1968), 64.

Moreover, we should emphasize that it is not only in the realm of thought that we confront the threat of stupidity. In his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze develops theme of stupidity, in the context of painting, through the concept of the *cliché*. It is a mistake, Deleuze says, to think the painters begin their work on a white or blank canvas, since the canvas itself is already filled with images, more or less virtually, more or less actually—images that are already in the head of the painter, but for that reason already on the canvas.[16] The first task of the painter is not to put images *on* the canvas, but rather clear out the clichéd images that are *already* on the canvas—that is, to empty out the canvas, to clean it up, so that the creative work can begin. The same is true for filmmakers, who face a constant battle against what Deleuze, in his book *The Movement-Image*, calls "the reign of clichés": "these anonymous clichés, which circulate in the external world [in the magazines we read, the advertisements we view, in that image-making machine most of us have in our houses—the television—and which we consult regularly], but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute our internal world, so that everyone possesses only *psychic clichés* by which he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among others in the world that surrounds him."[17]

In other words, we confront the same problem in thought as we find in the realm of images (such a painting or filmmaking), or that we find in the affective realm of the emotions: the problem of clichés. We think in clichés; we are constantly besieged by images that are clichés; and even our internal emotion life is reduced to psychic clichés, such that we act or even perceive in terms of clichéd schemata. The problem of philosophy, and the

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[16] See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), chapter 11, "The Painting Before Painting…", 71-80.
[17] Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, 208-9.

problem of art (or science), is in this sense the same: How can one produce a new thought (or a genuine thought, or an "authentic" thought, and the early Heidegger would say) out of the universal flow of stupidity? How can one create a genuine image in the midst of the universal reign of clichés? On this score, Deleuze often likes to cite a famous phrase uttered by, once again, Jean-Luc Godard, the French filmmaker: *pas une image juste*….*juste une image*; not a just image, just an image. What Godard seems to mean is this: given the reign of clichés, the task of the filmmaker is not to create just or moral or uplifting images, but rather to simply create an image *tout court*, that is, to manage to create an image that is not a cliché. That, in and of itself, is enough: to create even a single image that is not a cliché. Both Cézanne and Bacon destroyed many of their canvases because they botched the image they were trying to create; as D. H.Lawrence said, "it is already something to have succeeded, to have gotten somewhere, with regard to an apple, or a jug or two. The Japanese know that a whole life barely suffices for a single blade of grass."[18]

5. The Question of Genesis: The Singular and the Ordinary

This brings us to a last question: Given the reign of stupidity in the realm of thought, and the reign of clichés in the realm of art (and even the reign of psychic clichés in our affective and perceptive life), what then is the process that constitutes a true act of creation? We can see that the difficulties of the task of creating concepts in philosophy is not all that different from the difficulties of the task of creating images in painting or film—or of creating characters (or what have you) in a novel. But what does Deleuze mean when he says

[18] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 73.

that a concept is "a system of singularities appropriated (*prélevé*) from a thought flow," or that a musician is someone who appropriates singularities from "the continuous acoustic flow that traverses the world."

The key concept here is the well-known Deleuzian concept of *singularity*, though people writing on Deleuze too often use this term without realizing its implications. In classical logic, the notion of the "singular" has long been understood in relation to the "universal," just as the "particular" has been understood in relation to the "general." The singular designates what is not "difference," that which is non-relational. In mathematics, however—which is the model to which Deleuze is appealing—the concept of singularity is related to a very different set of notions. On the one hand, the singular is distinguished from or opposed to the regular: the singular is precisely that which escapes [*sort*] the regularity of the rule—it is the production of the new (the point where a curve changes direction). On the other hand, and more importantly, mathematicians tell us there are singularities that are remarkable, and there are singular points that are not remarkable, that are ordinary.

In this sense, one could say that there are two poles of Deleuze's philosophy, which could be summarized in the phrases: "Everything is ordinary!" and "Everything is singular!" One the one hand, every moment, every individual, every event in this universe is absolutely new and singular—this conference, this talk, is a singular moment that has never occurred before, and will never happen again. This is the principle that lies at the core of Deleuze's ontology, and which he shares with Bergson, Whitehead, and even Sartre: the constant production of the new, the incessant genesis of the singular. Being, in other words, is difference, the inexhaustible creation of difference, of the singular. (This is where Deleuze

differs from Alain Badiou: there is no dualism between Being and Event, as there is in Badiou; in Deleuze, Being is equivalent to Event.) At the same time, all these singularities tend to become regularized, made ordinary. This present moment, though absolutely singular, is the most ordinary thing in the world: yet another boring academic talk, at yet another academic conference—could there be anything more ordinary than what we've gathered together here today to do? It is this reduction of the singular to the ordinary that Deleuze calls the mechanism of capture: the inevitable processes of stratification, regularization, normalization—or perhaps what we might call "stupid-ization" in the realm of thought.

But this is why Deleuze says the distinction between the singular and the ordinary is much more important in philosophy than the distinction between the true and the false, since the distinction between the ordinary (what belongs to the rule) and the singular (what escapes the rule) is not always an easy distinction to make. Let me give some examples:

1. In one of my favorite Monty Python sketches, in the movie *Life of Brian*, Brian is being chased by a mob who has mistaken him for the Messiah, and he turns to them and says, "Look, you don't need to follow anybody. You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals. You're all different!" To which the mob responds, in one voice, simply repeating the master's words, "Yes, we're all individuals! We're all different!" The single exception to this response is one elderly man who raises his hand and says, "I'm not." This is a nice summation of our contemporary condition: we all believe fervently in our own individuality, our own singularity—"We're *all* individuals!"—but in fact the idea that we're all singular turns out to be the most ordinary idea of all, it's something we *all* believe; something

that renders us absolute common to each other. The only singular individual in the Monty Python sketch is the one who mutters "I'm not an individual, I'm not singular, I'm just like everyone else…."

2. Another example: in our physic multiplicities, a singularity could be said to be marked by those points where someone—say a new-found friend—boils over in anger, and melts down in tears. In such situations, I might ask myself what I could possibly have done to provoke such a singular reaction—until an acquaintance leans over an informs me that in fact my newfound friend *always* gets angry at the slightest provocation, his boiling over is the most ordinary thing in the world.

3. Or consider—a third example—a historical multiplicity. Reinterpretations of past events—for instance, the French Revolution—often involve deciding what is singular and what is ordinary within that historical multiplicity. Was the singular moment the storming of the Bastille, the execution of Louis XVI, the establishment of the National Assembly, the Reign of Terror, the Thermidorian Reaction? Or was it perhaps an hitherto overlooked and seemingly ordinary moment that constituted the turning point in the revolution? I had a history teacher who once surmised that medieval church history was irrevocably altered when a theologian attending one of the great church councils had an accident on his horse on his way to the council, and wasn't able to attend—an ordinary event, perhaps, but one which had the singular result that, since he was not at the council, his position was condemned as heterodox, and was henceforth declared a heresy. Such debates in the domain of history are arguments about what constitutes the singular and ordinary points within the historical multiplicity of what, in these cases, we call the French Revolution, or the Church.

4. A final example: in mathematics, Henri Poincaré used to say that an unsuccessful proof for a profound problem was more important than a sound proof for a trivial problem. The latter would remain eternally trivial and pointless, whereas the former might indeed produce a singular result down the line. Even in mathematics, one must distinguish, at the level of the problems themselves, between problems that are singular and problems that are ordinary.[19]

The question of the conditions of genesis or creation, then—in philosophy as well as art or mathematics—amounts to asking: What are the conditions for the production of the singular, the genesis of the new. At one level, the response to this question is given in Deleuze's ontology: Being is itself the constant production of the singular. But the problem is: Being produces the singular under the conditions that constantly subject it to processes of normalization and stratification, reducing it to the regular or the ordinary. The task of creation amounts to, on the one hand, a constant and ever-renewed struggle against the reign of clichés and the domain of stupidity, on the one hand, in order to, on the other hand, produce something new, something singular. How does this take place?

Like each of us, the philosopher—or the artist or the mathematician—begins with the multiplicities that have invented him or her as a formed subject, living in an actualized world, with an organic body, in a given political order, having learned a certain language. But at its highest point, both writing and thinking, as activities, consist in following the abstract movement of what Deleuze's calls a "line of flight," that extracts variable singularities from these multiplicities of lived experience—because they are already there, even if they have

[19] Deleuze refers to this text of Poincaré in *Negotiations*, 130.

been rendered ordinary—and then makes them function as variables on an immanent "plane of composition." The task of the thinker—or the artist, or the scientist—is to establish non-preexistent relations between these variables in order to make them function together in a singular and non-homogeneous whole, and thus to participate in the construction of "new possibilities of life"—for instance, the invention of new compositions in language (through style and syntax, which break with the way our everyday idle chatter uses language), the formation of new blocks of sensation (through affects and percepts, which breaks with the reduction of our inner life to perceptual schemata and affective or psychic clichés), the production of new modes of existence (through intensities and becomings), or even the political constitution of a people (through speech acts and fabulation)—and at the limit, the creation of a world (through singularities and events).

This is no doubt why Deleuze, in an interview, said that he liked to spend his weekends going to movies or art exhibitions, not because he aspired to be a connoisseur, but because he was on the lookout for new encounters, shocks that would jolt his thought out of the reign of stupidity and into the new. For we must not be deceived: the battle against stupidity and against the cliché is a battle that is renewed at every moment, at all times. It never ends. We all know how the greatest of masterpieces—Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel or Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—are quickly reduced to clichés, such that they have to be retrieved, by all of us, at some point (hopefully) in all their singularity (this is Heidegger's theme about the need to actively repeat history—*Weiderholen*). Even in our own work and writing, is there not the ever-present tendency to repeat ourselves, to fall back on singularities that have now been rendered ordinary.

Deleuze seems to have had a presentiment of this when, in *What is Philosophy?*, he mused on the effects of ageing on philosophy and creation, and marveled that Immanuel Kant, at an age when philosophers rarely have anything new to say—their "system" already having been set in place—wound up writing the *Critique of Judgment*, a book that is literally bursting at the seams in its novelty, upsetting even Kant's own internal architectonic, and setting the stage for Romanticism and German Idealism (among so many other things). When Deleuze appeals to Paul Klee's phrase—that in any great work of art or philosophy, "the people is missing"—he is elucidating the status of *any* singular work, which always lacks an initial audience. Most Hollywood blockbuster movies, for instance, do *not* lack a people; rather such movies are made *for* a people that already exists, in anticipation of their pre-given expectations and affects, their psychic clichés—which is why studio executives make such extensive use of market research, predictive analytics, focus groups, and test screenings. But the great philosophers and artists do not write on behalf of an already-existing people. It is precisely because of the singularity of the work that the audience is always to come, it is something that must always be constructed, that we must construct ourselves, in our retrieval of the past, and even more so, our invention of the future.

Put simply, then, this is the "materialist" theory of thought one finds in Deleuze. Though can be said to be the "medium" or "matter" worked on by philosophers, in particular, a medium Deleuze defines in terms of a kind of universal thought-flow, ideally continuous, which is productive of singularities, but which is at the same time dominated by the reign of stupidity and clichés. This is no doubt why Deleuze insisted that philosophy can never be undertaken without having recourse to other domains such as art and science, since

art and science are sometime capable of "shocking" the philosopher out of his stupidity, providing Deleuze (or any philosopher) a way of thinking through a a problem given to him in philosophy, perhaps, but which he could not ultimately work through philosophically without having recourse to the thought-process of an artist or writer or scientist working in a different domain, or a different medium—but who, within that medium, had managed to carry the activity of thought to a singular point.