
Back to (French) Theory: on operational concepts

François Cusset

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19164>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.19164

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 November 2015

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

François Cusset, « *Back to (French) Theory: on operational concepts* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 45 | 2015, Online since 04 November 2016, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19164> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.19164

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

EN

Back to (French) Theory: on operational concepts

François Cusset

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

- Fabien Danesi, *L'Extase esthétique : Jean Baudrillard et la consommation/consumation de l'art*, Paris : Sens & Tonka, 2014
- Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, Paris : Seuil, 2015, (Fiction & Cie)
- Jacques Derrida, *Les Arts de l'espace : écrits et interventions sur l'architecture*, Paris : La Différence, 2015, (Essais)
- Magali Nachtergaele, *Roland Barthes contemporain*, Paris : Max Milo, 2015
- Différence, différend : Deleuze et Lyotard*, Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2015, (Encre marine)
- Gilles Deleuze : la pensée-musique*, Paris : Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine, 2015
- Gilles Deleuze : politiques de la philosophie*, Genève : MétisPresses, 2015, (Champcontrechamp essais)

EDITOR'S NOTE

See also:

- Jacques Derrida, *Penser à ne pas voir : écrits sur les arts du visible, 1979-2004*, Paris : La Différence, 2013, (Essais)
- Lyotard et les arts*, Paris : Klincksieck, 2014, (Collection d'esthétique)
- [already dealt with previously in *Critique d'art* - <http://critiquedart.revues.org>]

- 1 After smelling the sulphur and incarnating the avant-garde elite, Michel Foucault's laughter, Jacques Derrida's *portmanteau* words (*mots-valises*), and Gilles Deleuze's science fiction lexicon—all three of them more or less sidelined in France during their lifetimes—

have become part of the national legacy and joined the stereotypes of a day and age, that “entre-deux-Mai”¹ which they evoke as surely as David Bowie’s costumes and the thousand and one flowers of the Volkswagen truck—judging by the plethora of tributes triggered by every anniversary of their deaths. Or alternatively, to use a recent example, judging by the success of Laurent Binet’s latest novel, which imagines Foucault in a gay nightclub and Deleuze in front of Roland-Garros, fictionalizing, with levity, that bygone intellectual effervescence—in the manner of “San Antonio among the semiologists”.² Lamented by its nostalgic participants, mythologized by its heirs, denounced by many others,³ and mythified by one and all, that “‘68 moment” of French intellectual life had its moments of glory and its yellowing snapshots: the merry and dogmatic chaos of the Vincennes years, named after the alternative, prefabricated university where everybody played a part; the demonstrations which brought them together at the head of processions, despite their divisions, in support of the immigrants in the Goutte d’Or district [a Paris neighbourhood with a large North African and sub-Saharan African population. Trans.], and the prisoners of the Giscard years, with no rights. That moment, needless to say, also had its effects witnessed in the art arena, whether involving neo-Expressionists or late-comer Conceptualists laying claim in the United States to figures such as Baudrillard or Deleuze, or else in France, among many an example, an artist like Christian Boltanski, attributing his obsession with archives and fictitious identities to the “overlapping influence” of Barthes and Lévi-Strauss. The issue is nevertheless raised about this theoretical legacy for the practice and theory of art today—an issue which, for several months now, and with considerable acuity, has been revisited by a series of publications, hitherto unpublished anthologies of the writings on art of these thinkers, and collective exegeses, be they doxic or more scholarly, of their works.

- 2 Before taking a closer look at the theoretical actuality of these authors, let us try to define their common conceptual legacy. For this is roundly proven, in universities and art schools alike, over and above the many divergences between these famous thinkers which prompt one to limit the unity of such a “moment” to the hasty summaries of journalists⁴ and the felicitous distortions authorized by the transfer of ideas from one continent to another: the initial quarrel between Foucault and Derrida about the Cartesian *cogito*, the eventual political distance between Deleuze and Foucault, the mutual criticism of Lyotard and Deleuze, the relative theoretical isolation of Barthes, and Baudrillard’s encouragement to “forget Foucault”⁵, then at the height of his glory. The fact is that a shared legacy is traced here, at the confluence of a threefold critique, or a threefold bypass, which, to a great extent, invalidates, if not exceeds, the “aesthetic system” of the discourse about (and the theory of) art, that interpretative and hierarchical system—if art depends on philosophy to illuminate its meaning—which reached its paroxysm in the mid-20th century, and was ushered in 150 years earlier by Kant and the early German Romantics, headed by Hegel. First there is the bypassing, or rather off-centering, of the long predominant phenomenological tradition which became quintessential in the postwar period with the aesthetic writings of Merleau-Ponty. People suddenly had doubts about the *presence* of the work and the illusions of all presence (Derrida). People disputed the fact that sensibility is the effect of a relation between perceiving subject and perceived work (Deleuze). People wonder if painting is not talking more about itself than about the beautiful, and the profundity of the world (Foucault, in particular with regard to Manet). The second bypass, which this time stems from confrontation and prohibits associating this intellectual moment of the 1970s with who knows what *linguistic turn*,

obsessed by discourse and textuality. It is no longer a matter of *reading* works and applying to them the hermeneutic paradigm of literature, but of capturing the forces which well up in them, exploring ways of going about things, and preferring the tools which they offer to the *signs* that they make to us (this is the war declared by Deleuze and Guattari on what they call “ensignment” [a play on French *enseignement*, meaning teaching. Trans.] The third bypass, which is tantamount to epistemological rupture, and which goes well beyond the art arena but upsets forever the possible ways of theoretically *intervening*: all totting up, be it theoretical or practical, suddenly becomes suspect, referring orthodox Hegelian Marxism to a bygone illusion, dialectic itself to an “ideology of resentment”⁶, and to a whole hegemonic *episteme*, bequeathed by the colonial century and even by the “fine arts” of the monarchic period, the taxonomies and classifications which separate art from philosophy and politics, and assign to each one its place.

- 3 The legacy in question is here presented thrice in the negative, like a convergent deconstruction, with a varied range of approaches, of the *aesthetic* tradition. But it also carries at its core a twofold drift, or ambivalence. The first has to do with the crazy experiments stemming, at the height of the 1970s, from some of the texts in question, experiments involving writing and paralogical argumentation, deliberately conceived to explore the boundaries of rationality, or reduce its hold on our understanding of art and the world. To take just one example, which is far from being the best known, suffice it to list what Deleuze and Lyotard write about the concept of *death*, once they have extricated it from the metaphysical tradition and its humanistic gangue. In their pages written in the 1970s, death becomes a simple “piece of a desiring machine”. It is “absolute difference”, energy which is “haywire and deconstructing”, “intensity [of] repetition” and “positive power of de-liaison”.⁷ This particular drift, not to say aberration, no matter how stimulating it may be, is not really operational once removed from the context of the period. In other respects, in various forms, a shift informs these major works during the 1970s, a shift which is perhaps the actual signature of the times. For behind the embers of the intellectual cauldron and the wars for which it would be the melting-pot, these particular works in fact slip, more or less ostensibly, from the political to the personal (to talk like the feminist activists of yore), from concept to affect, from the bellicose style to a more modalized tone, from ostentatious deconstructions to more subtle subjectivizations, and in all cases, from historical and disciplinary objects that they had set for themselves (history of philosophy, re-reading of literary classics, archaeology of repressive institutions...) to more *undisciplinary* floating objects, stemming directly from the artistic field—which the work of Deleuze, Derrida and Baudrillard would be concerned with in the 1980s. So headed in the same direction were those of an affective, perceptive and even subjective change of course of the work on concept during the 1970s, the albeit distinct developments of these authors: Barthes, from the structuralism of the previous decade to *Le Plaisir du texte* (and the interpolated autobiographical phrases); Foucault, from a history of disciplinary institutions and systems of thought to a genealogy of the “techniques of the self” and ancient subjectivizations as arts of living; Deleuze, from a parallel history of philosophy (with his pre-1968 books on Hume, Nietzsche, Kant, Bergson and Spinoza) to radically new proposals—worked out with Félix Guattari—on desiring micropolitics and becoming-minor; Lyotard, from the exaggerations about the anarchy of desire and a “libidinal” Marx to the ethical and aesthetic turning point of the 1980s; Derrida, from the pivotal books laying the bases for the possibility of a deconstruction of texts and the traditions of thought to the ensuing explorations of justice, as the sole “undeconstructible” thing; Baudrillard, moving from *Le Système des objets* and *La Société de*

consommation, which took Marx and Henri Lefebvre to new ground, to the more written essays that followed on seduction, simulation and the paradoxes of the event, but also the beginnings of his work as an atypical memorialist (with the first volume of his *Cool Memories*). In each instance, through an odd effect of reciprocal causality, one gets the impression that this kind of shift in style, approach and objects themselves introduces reconfigurations into the intellectual arena, just as much as it is itself the effect of an underground change of period and world. Unless it took cognizance, as Deleuze and Guattari explained at the end of *Mille Plateaux*, in 1980, of the fact that “the period is no longer there”. In any event, it is from this particular shift, in the language and obsessions of a day and age, as in the turn taken by these theoretical works, that results, in a straight line, the legacy of these latter for the practice and theory of art. So it is not surprising that all of them suddenly became interested in this, at that precise moment at the turn of the 1980s.

- 4 The effective relation to the art field and the concepts today operating that his oeuvre has bequeathed to him still remains to be evoked, for all and sundry. Jean-François Lyotard, whose cult exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, held at the Centre Pompidou in 1985, represented the richest example to date of a philosopher as exhibition curator, started, in 1971, to take phenomenology apart, as well as what it tells us about the visible and the sayable, or expressible, with his thesis on the State, *Discours, figure*, and the disconcerting concept of the “figural” which offers itself. Two busy, wordy decades ensued. Taking up the notion of “sublime”, precisely where Kant had left it, and focusing on a direct, material access to colours and sounds, his thinking about art, no matter how eclectic it may be, is aimed at an “anaesthetic”: the unrepresentable rather than “acceptable forms”, the invisible rather than the scopic impulse, the “affect-sentence” and the event of desire instead of the previous vocabulary of perception. And if his last text would calm his fervour of the 1970s, the whole of his oeuvre results from a vast critique of representation. Art cannot be attached to any outer referent. It only expresses itself. Whence the interest of overlapping Lyotard and Deleuze, who, in addition to a brief moment of great theoretical connivance attested to by Lyotard’s essay *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*⁸ and his chapter on *L’Anti-Oedipe* (“Energumen capitalism”) share a common obsession with these non-dialectical, objectless *differences*, which seethe beneath structures and set the whole social field adrift. Without forgetting, as François Brémonty⁹ emphasizes, a distinct relation and a sort of equidistance to Marx and to Marxism; Spinozist and “molecular” with Deleuze, immanentist and impulsive with Lyotard (with the famous chapter on *Economie libidinale* on “the two Marxes”, the bearded old man and the Bavarian waitress). It is never the Marx of class struggle and alienation whom they both subvert, rather than criticize him head-on, before resorting to other irons in the fire, companies involved with control and image-movement for Deleuze, an enigma of the fourth Kantian “critique” for Lyotard, whose project he would try in vain to extend.
- 5 Deleuze’s conceptual contributions to the various artistic arenas are better known than Lyotard’s, whether what is involved is his demanding theorization of film in the 1980s,¹⁰ the capture of “blocks of sensations” in Francis Bacon’s painting,¹¹ his ontology of folding and unfolding as typical of the Baroque,¹² or, needless to add, his masterly and very unusual re-readings of Proust, Kafka, and Lewis Carroll.¹³ But from this angle it is music which represents his most fulfilled and most constant space of theoretical experimentation—as is illustrated by the first volume in French, *Gilles Deleuze: la pensée musicale*, which proposes a re-reading of his entire oeuvre through the sole lens of music.

The concepts which he has applied are, here, so many keys for entering the theoretical enigma of music. Difficult keys, as with those notions of “smooth” space (continual variation becoming a single form) and “striated” space (chaotic succession of distinct forms), which he borrowed from his friend Pierre Boulez. Logical keys around the exploration of “sound signals”, “musical beings” and vocal “singularities”, all so many *variations* which Deleuze saw tracing a fabulous “diagonal”, which could be reduced neither to the “verticality of harmonics” nor to “the horizontality of the melodic”. More metaphorical keys, and more freely used, with the famous “refrains” (*ritournelles*), the theory of which might relate the strange attraction exercised by variety hits, or those “fragments of vinyl” which DJs use nowadays to justify their strange activity—consisting in sampling objects found in popular culture to derive new sounds from them. For if Deleuze managed to write about Verdi and the refrains of folklore, he was an obsession for the first DJs and the pioneers of electronic music (from the German label “Mille plateaux”, set up in 1991, to the young DJ prodigies, Shadow and DJ Spooky). Which, guided by his specific tools, such as the notions of matter-flow and pulsated time, in no way bans a painstaking exploration of *real* nomadic music, epic Uzbek songs, and “protoplasmic” tunes of Baluchi blacksmiths—which Elie and Jean During try their hands at in an exemplary way.

- 6 Another logic, with that of Jacques Derrida,¹⁴ also linked by friendship to the worlds of art (from Micaëla Henich to Valerio Adami), but advancing its own “incompetence” the better to challenge the competence of professional art criticism. Three intersecting themes form an unlikely Derridian topology in art theory: the wanderings of language, with that “regulated deregulation” which he makes words undergo, from *destinerrance* to difference, and the certainty that there is always text in art, delay, and something missing (hence *writing*); the contradictions of seeing and looking, developed in his essay *Mémoires d’aveugle* and relaunched everywhere where there is “nothing to see”; and the space of things built, crucial for anyone who questioned architecture (in dialogue with Peter Eisenmann, Bernard Tschumi, and the assembly of the first Berlin *Stadtforum*) and often brought it up in order to, in return, question the claims of thinking. In describing “the general aestheticization” of our societies, Jean Baudrillard, for his part, became more fleeting, vanishing into the effects of his paradoxes: whether it was a matter of refusing his paternity in the New York Simulationist movement (in a shock lecture at the Whitney Museum in 1987), summoning an exaggeration of capital in Pop Art, or simply pinpointing the “nullity” of contemporary art—which can turn it into a weapon if the whole challenge is to “destroy value”,¹⁵ as is suggested by Fabien Danesi. As for Roland Barthes, whose rich biography by Tiphaine Samoyault offers us infinite nuances (in particular because of her access to his notebooks in the “large files” [*grands fichiers*] in the BnF, he remains, of them all, the most generous purveyor of operational conceptual tools, for practitioners and theoreticians alike. Less by virtue of his passion for Nicolas Poussin, Cy Twombly and Robert Mapplethorpe, less thanks to his connections with Yvon Lambert and the team of the review *October*, less for his free excursions to do with Brechtian theatre and the photographic *punctum* (*La Chambre claire*), less even for his work as a rigorous, pioneering theoretician of Pop culture (from the *Mythologies* to the *Système de la mode*) than by the measure of the few malleable and multi-faceted notions which his oeuvre has been ceaselessly weaving and re-weaving. The *fragment* first and foremost, the unclassifiable, the discontinuous, where only the salience arouses desire, versus the conformities of the smooth and the retrospective. The *death of the author*, needless to say, which Magali Nachtergaele slightly too quickly makes the “most important concept for 20

th century art”,¹⁶ but which nevertheless remains a theoretical and (techno)political Pandora’s box—if the DJ and the graphic designer, those invisible anti-creators, are the artists of today, and if reading and use are to the theory of the 2010s what the concepts of writing and text were to the core of the 1970s. And the *neutral*, even more so, present since its analysis of “blank” writing (*Le Degré zero de l’écriture*), then in his transgender reading of Balzac (*S/Z*), then in the major intuitions of his eponymous course given in 1977-78 at the Collège de France: exploration of the undecidable, of the not wanting to grasp, and of the non-work just as much, antidote to dualisms and classicisms alike, the *ne-uter* (neither the one nor the other) refers to Melville’s reluctant scribe (in *Bartleby*), to the years of Minimal art and John Cage’s performances—while, in the height of the 1970s, becoming *queer* or post-colonial ahead of the pack. There is nothing surprising in the fact that Barthes had such an impact, against his will, on the *pictorial turn* of the Human Sciences, when *visual studies* (from Stuart Hall to W. J. T. Mitchell) once and for all wrenched the images from the predominant textual paradigm. The author of the *Plaisir du texte* would have smiled at all this, the virtue of delays, transfers, uses and appropriations.

NOTES

1. To borrow the fortuitous title of the historian Pascal Ory: *L’Entre-deux-mai: histoire culturelle de la France, mai 1968-mai 1981*, Paris : Seuil, 1983.
2. Title of the recension in August 2015 in *Le Point* (Laurent Binet, *La Septième fonction du langage*, Paris : Grasset, 2015).
3. Yesterday by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in their acclaimed pamphlet *La Pensée 68* (Paris : Gallimard, 1986), today by the equally as popular Michel Onfray in season 13 (the last) of his cycle of lectures on the “counter-history of philosophy”.
4. Like those of *LeNouvel Observateur* bringing together in one and the same school, in an article of 7 April 1975, all “the high priests of the French university”.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault*, Paris : Galilée, 1977
6. According to Deleuze’s formula in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris : PUF, 1962).
7. Terms used by Claire Pagès in her article “La mort ou la répétition ? Quelques réflexions sur les pensées deleuzienne et lyotardienne de la mort”, in *Différence, différend : Deleuze et Lyotard* (edited by Corinne Enaudeau and Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos), Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2015, (Encre marine), in particular p. 258 sqq.
8. Published by 10/18 en 1973, and issued with less ado by Galilée in 1994.
9. “Deleuze et Lyotard face à Marx”, in *Différence, différend : Deleuze et Lyotard*, op. cit., p. 201-232
10. *L’Image-mouvement. Cinéma 1* and *L’image-temps. Cinéma 2*, Paris : Minuit, 1983 and 1985
11. *Logique de la sensation*, Paris : La Différence, 1981
12. *Le Pli - Leibniz et le baroque*, Paris : Minuit, 1988
13. *Proust et les signes* (Paris : PUF, 1964), *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (with Félix Guattari, Paris : Minuit, 1975) et *Logique du sens* (Paris : Minuit, 1969)
14. See: Derrida, Jacques. *Penser à ne pas voir : écrits sur les arts du visible, 1979-2004*, Paris : La Différence, 2013
15. Danesi, Fabien. *L’Extase esthétique*, Paris : Sens & Tonka, 2014, p. 24
16. Nachtergaele, Magali. *Roland Barthes contemporain*, Paris : Max Milo, 2015, p. 80