

Notes Towards a Minor Art Practice

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In this short essay I want to approach the issue theme of syncretism in a somewhat oblique manner—through a consideration of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the *minor*—specifically in relation to contemporary art.¹ Indeed, although the minor cannot be equated directly with syncretism, it might be understood as a parallel concept inasmuch as it names a form of cultural production from within a dominant culture; a kind of 'becoming a stranger' in one's own tongue. The minor, as we shall see, also names the production of a specifically collective enunciation; the calling forth of a people-yet-to-come who in some senses are already here, albeit masked by typical representational models (precisely the major). Specifically then the essay works through the characteristics of a 'minor literature' as laid out in Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka (1986) and provides some thoughts on how these might be usefully brought into contact with art theory. In general, what follows comprises of notes towards a minor practice, although I do make some reference to actual art collectives, especially in the footnotes. I also make a brief detour into Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), a book which involves an 'application' of many aspects of the Deleuzoguattarian project to contemporary geopolitics—and which addresses a key modality of the minor: the complex relationship between dissent and affirmation.

Minor Literature

In their book on Kafka Deleuze and Guattari give three determining characteristics of a minor literature, or, put differently, the conditions in which a literature becomes revolutionary. These are as follows:

1. A minor literature should deterritorialize the major language (*K* 16). Such a deterritorialization involves the neutralization of sense, or the signifying aspects of language, and a foregrounding of the latter's asignifying, intensive aspects. This entails a kind of stammering and stuttering of language, a making strange of typical signifying regimes. Deleuze and Guattari give the example of Black Americans 'use' of English (as well as, of course, Kafka's own 'use' of German). We might think of the ongoing creolization of the English language in general, and indeed the increasing syncretism of the contemporary world. A side effect of this is that a minor literature operates to counteract the transmission of 'order words', and the exercise of power this entails ('To hate all languages of masters' as Deleuze and Guattari remark) (*K* 26).

2. With a minor literature everything is political (*K* 17). Political in the sense that the lives and individual concerns of the characters are always linked to the larger social milieu (and not, for example, fixated on the familial, domestic unit). It is in this sense that a becoming animal is always political, a line of escape (for example, Kafka's Gregor) from conjugality and the nuclear family. This links up with point one above: the animal cry – as sound, as deterritorialized noise – operates to neutralize sense. We might also say to neutralize the habits of representation, of 'being human'. Asignification here takes on an explicitly political function, in so far as it disrupts any given signifying regime. In fact the relationship between asignification and signification, and between literary-linguistic systems in general, is itself a 'political situation', expressing as it does relations of power (relations of domination and resistance). Deleuze and Guattari, following Henri Gobard, provide a tentative matrix for these relations, in fact a four-way model: vernacular language (local and territorial), vehicular language (international, a deterritorialization of the former), referential (the language of sense and culture, a cultural reterritorialization), and mythic. The last is positioned 'on the horizons of cultures, caught up in a spiritual or religious reterritorialization' (*K* 23). This schema can only be provisional; the relationships between, and functions of, different languages will always vary depending on the specifics of space and time (which is to say a definition of the minor will depend on a definition of the major).

3. A minor literature is always collective (*K* 17). It is collective in the sense that it works as a specifically collective enunciation. There is less emphasis on individual authors and talents, which are at any rate scarce within a minor literature, and more on the collective production of work (its always already collaborative status). In this way, we can see the artistic production of statements as a kind of precursor of a community (and often a nation) still in formation. This is the utopian function, specifically immanent, of a minor literature. A minor literary machine then, prepares the way for revolution. In fact, in many senses a minor literature calls into being the revolutionary machine yet-to-come ('We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature' (*K* 18)).

It seems to me that it is especially with this last point that we are given a framework for thinking about several recent contemporary art practices that might be construed as being involved with precisely this utopian pursuit: the collectivization of subjectivity and the calling forth of new kinds of community that this implies. Before I go on to consider this I want to briefly think through points one and two in relation to contemporary art practice.

The deterritorialization of a major language

Deleuze and Guattari point out that a minor literature does not occur ‘elsewhere’ or ‘apart from’ a major literature (this is not a dialectic) but on the contrary operates from within, using the same elements as it were, but in a different manner. In fact it is not so much a question of the minor—or of the major—but of a *becoming* minor in the sense of producing movement from ‘within’ the major (if the minor names this movement—these ‘crystals of becoming’—then the major is the name for their immobilization).ⁱⁱ What then might we understand as the major, and thus the minor, language(s) of contemporary art practice? Here are five ways:

1. Certainly we might think of the major and relatively recent tradition of western art, that is to say modernism, and thus identify practices that are specifically minor to this. Both feminist and post colonial art practices and art histories might be seen as minor in this sense, involving as they do a kind of deterritorialization of, or stammering in, the ‘international language’ of modernism. We might take this further and identify practices of art and art history that deterritorialize legitimate critiques of modernism,ⁱⁱⁱ and indeed other legitimate ‘postmodern’ practices (and this might well involve a return to previously evacuated terrain).^{iv} Indeed, minor practices will emerge wherever and whenever a priest and a party line appear and order words are given.

2. We might also return to those marginal and dissonant practices which were themselves part of modernism but which also in some senses turned against it; modernism’s ‘other voice’ as it were. Dada for example, which made language—and life in general—stammer and stutter. We might also note here the Dada manifestos, and indeed the other dissident manifesto’s of modernity (from Futurism to the Situationists) all of which would precisely fit our above three criteria of a minor literature.^v Here the question of how, when and why a minor literature—or any minor practice in general—becomes major (the apparatus of capture) will be particularly pertinent. In fact, artistic strategy might well involve a ‘return’ to some of those practices that have retained a deterritorializing function, for it might be the case that a minor practice does not necessarily become major but is simply passed over by the major.

3. Leading on from the above, we might alter our focus slightly and think about the major media of art, specifically painting, and thus characterize those practices as minor which abandoned the canvas (happenings, performance, and so on) or otherwise deterritorialize the figure.^{vi} We might begin to identify a general ‘becoming minor’ in art here: art begins with a deterritorialization of forms that have become fixed. The expanded practices of today would be but the latest moment in this genealogy of a minor art positioned explicitly outside the gallery, and indeed ‘outside’ typical and traditional definitions of art

4. It is also important to recognise that contemporary art increasingly has itself a form derived from the international art market (and in particular the increasing presence of international biennales). We might identify this as a vehicular-referential ‘global’ language. A minor practice might then involve itself in deterritorializing—stammering—the global language of contemporary art production, for example in a focus on the local (a turn to the vernacular) or in the use of specifically non-artistic materials. Thomas Hirschorn’s ‘monuments’ to various philosophers would be a case in point, although we might want to ask whether a practice commissioned by Documenta can ever really be positioned as minor in this sense.^{vii} A better example might be ‘Outsider Art’, although this category would itself need to be broken down and specific practices looked at on their own terms (and an account would have to be given of the increasing commodification of many examples). A key question here is the relationship of the minor to capitalism. On the one hand, we might identify the minor as operating at the sharp end of capital’s expansion: the minor involving the production of specifically new forms. On the other hand, a minor practice will precisely stammer and stutter the commodity form, disassembling those already existing forms of capital, and indeed moving beyond the latter’s very logic.

5. In each case, the deterritorialization of the major will to some extent involve the neutralization of sense and the fore grounding of art’s intensive, affective quality. Here art *‘stops being representative in order to now move towards its extremities or its limits’* (K 23). A minor art pushes up against the edges of representation; it bends it, forcing it to the limits and often to a certain kind of absurdity. This is not to say that a minor art cannot itself work through representation (or at least through fragments of representation). Indeed affective ruptures—which themselves utilize existing materials—are the fertile ground for new forms of representation, new signifying regimes. Deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization in this sense. A minor practice must then be understood as always in process, as always becoming—as generating new forms through a manipulation of those already in place. Here the question of the spectator’s investment in, and participation with, a particular practice becomes crucial, which is to say, his or her specific production of subjectivity and propensity for deterritorialization.

As a brief aside we might point to the use of humor in such a deterritorialization of language. Humor can operate as a strategy of dissent—but also of affirmation. In fact we might see humor as a form of affirmative violence: violence against typical signifying formations.^{viii} Humor here is not the irony of ‘postmodern’ practice with its emphasis on parody and pastiche, but something more affirmative, celebratory even—and something that works on an intensive rather than a signifying register.

The Political

A minor art will connect different regimes together, and in particular will connect art to the wider social milieu. Again we might return here to the artistic avant-garde groupings of modernity and beyond, those that sort to ‘bring art back down’ to life (which we might rephrase here as a desire to connect art to life). Even more pertinent are those recent art collectives and groups that interact with, and indeed position themselves as part of, the wider social and economic fabric. The socially engaged projects of groups such as *Superflex* or *n55* would be a case in point (although this does not necessarily mean that such practices will fit our other criteria of a minor practice).^{ix} This turn away from a certain kind of autonomy (from art about art, or art about the art world) also involves a turn away from typical forms of political and social engagement. A minor art practice is not political in the sense that Politics is. It does not involve itself necessarily with political or what we might call *molar* organizations, rather it works to connect the different aspects of life, be they individual or social (or indeed nonhuman) so as to produce new lines of causality and new pathways of experimentation (precisely the production of what Guattari called ‘molecular revolutions’).^x If a minor practice is always political it is because it is always opening itself up to an outside in this sense. It is in this sense also that the minor produces a different kind of relative autonomy, for example, an association of individuals who have ‘being against’ the major in common. We might add here that a minor practice will also often look to more ‘popular’ cultures (those that are self-organizing as it were). Graffiti for example would be a paradigmatic example of a minor literature, as would so called underground forms of music, such as punk,^{xi} and more recently dance.^{xii} Again, attention would need to be given to the specific apparatus of capture of these minor forms.

The collective character of minor literature and its ‘futurity’

A minor art will involve the production of collaborations, of collectivities. Here a minor practice joins forces with what Deleuze and Guattari call philosophy, that practice which in itself calls forth ‘a new earth, a new people’ (*WP* 99). Philosophy, for Deleuze and Guattari, involves a resistance to the present because it creates concepts for a new earth and a new people. We might say that a minor art practice parallels philosophy’s more abstract (and absolute) deterritorializations by providing resistance to the present in the form of its imagined communities and prototype subjectivities.^{xiii} Indeed we might say that minor practices, like philosophy, involve a ‘diagramming of becoming’, the invention of new modes of existence.^{xiv} A minor art is prophetic in this sense: it summons its audience forth.

It is worth a digression to Deleuze’s *Cinema 2* here, to note the comments made about this future orientation in relation to modern political cinema:

This acknowledgement of a people who are missing is not a renunciation of political cinema, but on the contrary the new basis on which it is founded, in the third world and for minorities. Art, and especially cinematographic art must take part in this task: *not that of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people* [my italics] (C2 217).^{xv}

It is this utopian calling that differentiates modern political cinema from classical political cinema, both Soviet and American. In the latter (for example Eisenstein) ‘the people are already there’, in fact, they are the subject of film (C2 216). In this regard Deleuze concludes: ‘Hence the idea that the cinema, as art of the masses, could be the supreme revolutionary or democratic art, which makes the masses a true subject’ (C2 216). For Deleuze this belief was compromised specifically with the rise of Hitler, Stalin and the Party, and with the break-up of the American people, thus Deleuze’s comment that: ‘if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet...*the people are missing*’ (C2 216).^{xvi}

The ‘third world film-maker’, as Deleuze calls him, in particular follows this path of the minor:

Sometimes the third world film-maker finds himself before an illiterate public, swamped by American, Egyptian or Indian serials, and karate films, and he has to go through all this, it is this material he has to work on, to extract from it the elements of a people who are still missing (C2 217).

We might then say that the third-world filmmaker often lacks an audience, and as such must call his/her audience into being through his or her films. Importantly this minor practice is produced through a kind of manipulation of the elements of the major. This is the use of cliché in order to disrupt cliché. It might also involve the utilization of past myth and other elements of an indigenous culture albeit in an absolutely contemporary manner. As Deleuze remarks in relation to the films of Glauber Rocha: ‘...it is not a matter of analyzing myth in order to discover its archaic meaning or structure, but of connecting archaic myth to the state of the drives in an absolutely contemporary society, hunger, thirst, sexuality, power, death, worship’ (C2 222).

We might add that this minor cinema is of course not just apparent in what Deleuze terms the ‘third world’, but in any and all practices that somehow deterritorialize stutter and stammer the major language of film, or indeed any major representational tropes (we might think here of Goddard’s films – to those made under the *dogma* rubric). Indeed, we might recognize such practices as being part of the expanded field of contemporary art today, especially as regards those video works that evidence what has been called the ‘documentary turn’. The development of handheld camcorders, as well as the ongoing

development of digital technology, although it can operate in the service of the major, also allows the production of different forms of 'minor practice' in this sense.

In this respect, we need also note, as Deleuze reminds us, that: 'the difference between minorities and majorities isn't their size. A minority may be bigger than a majority. What defines majority is a model you have to conform to ... A minority, on the other hand, has no model, it's a becoming, a process' (*N* 173). Furthermore this missing people is not necessarily someone else (or not just someone else) but ourselves too, '...for, if the people are missing, if they are breaking up into minorities, it is I who am first of all a people, the people of my atoms...' (*C2* 220). It is then not a question of waiting for the missing people (there is no hanging around in Messianic time), for these people are in a sense already here, albeit masked, obscured by habitual modes of representation and commodified productions of subjectivity (the major).

All of this gives the minor an affirmative function. To refuse, or somehow negate the existing language (and thus the existing major forms) is important, but a minor art must do more than this. It must also involve invention and creation. It is also this that gives the stuttering and stammering of a minor practice such an inspirational, we might even say hopeful tenor. Put simply, a minor art is involved in the production of new subjectivities as well as in turning away from those already in place.

A political art practice must then involve both a politics of dissent *and* a politics of affirmation. Such is the rationale behind Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000). In fact *Empire* clearly and persuasively delimits two moments or movements of modernity: the production of new forms of life (the activation of the plane of immanence) and then their 'capture' by an apparatus of control and classification (the installment of a regime of transcendence).^{xvii} We might see this as a relation between the minor and the major; and note that resistance, or the minor, is primary. Following Deleuze, for Hardt and Negri it is likewise the production of life that is primary. *Empire* acts as a parasite on this fundamentally affirmative and creative production.^{xviii} Usefully Hardt and Negri point out that the strategy of deconstruction merely attacks the second moment, but remains more or less oblivious to the first (deconstruction might be figured here as a form of expanded ideological critique). The same can be said of a politically engaged art practice that contents itself solely with refusal and dissent. It is blind to the very ontological force that exists prior to that which it seeks to negate. Such critiques, although important as a kind of entry point, can become caught in what we might call a melancholic echo chamber of negative critique. They remain reactive rather than creative. We might say that this latter attitude is to do with a certain style of thought. For those who think resistance as secondary (in a sense produced by a repressive state), then an engaged art practice

will always be reactive and involved in negative critique (and in fact determined by that which it critiques). In this place art practice will be involved in a continuous struggle against the 'ideological veils' of the state. If on the other hand one sees resistance as primary, and the state apparatus as secondary (as capturing this 'life'), then one becomes involved in affirming this ontologically prior moment. This is the move from critique to creativity, or in fact the location of critique from within creativity.

Nevertheless dissent is important. A simple celebration of the world as it is can be nothing more than an acceptance of the status quo and an abdication of any critical position. Dissent is crucial, and indeed can itself, in some cases, produce new kinds of thought and new modes of subjectivity. It is then as if there must be two moments, or movements, to a minor practice: one of dissent (either a strategic withdrawal as a form of engagement, or strategic engagement itself), and one of creativity (the production of new forms). Art is a name for each of these strategies. We might reformulate this as a question of moving at different speeds to various institutional apparatus of capture, of moving faster, but also, if we take Henri Bergson's thesis into account, of sometimes moving slower (and sometimes even standing still).^{xix}

We might say then that the minor operates to upset any simple affirmation of a new people, or logic of an already constituted movement that is already here (the minor is always a movement in becoming). In this sense, the minor might be seen to sit between Jacques Derrida's politics, his attention to the mechanisms and politics of exclusion (the limitations of any given system, or sovereignty), and Negri's 'logic of gathering' that can sometimes read as too celebratory (and thus in fact exclusionary). Indeed, if there is an affirmation of a new community, it is precisely of the always already excluded, a bastard community of the sick and the frail, a hybrid and mutant collectivity always in progress, always open to any and everyone.^{xx} If there is a gathering of the new people then what they will have in common is their stuttering and stammering, their failure (intentional or otherwise) to 'live up' to the models offered (in fact forced upon them) by the major.

This then is a minor art's future call. It might well speak to an already constituted audience (no doubt a small one) but at the same time it speaks from a future place in order to draw forth from its audience a subjectivity still-to-come (a subjectivity in progress as it were). This is why often, with art practice, as with jokes, it is a question, of 'getting it'. That is to say, not necessarily of understanding (what is there to 'understand' anyway?) but of being in a certain mode so that the practice 'works' (something is activated by it). To paraphrase Jean-Francois Lyotard, we might say that this is why a successful artwork has the character of an event that always arrives too soon (Lyotard 1984, 71-84). It is also why so many attempts to interpret art are reductive, clumsy and/or redundant. Art outruns any interpretive discourse on it, and a

minor art in particular (including sometimes an art scene) always moves at a different speed to those discourses or disciplines that attempt to track it.

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ⁱ What follows is part of a larger project that involves bringing the writings of Deleuze and Guattari into contact with the field of modern and contemporary art. See my forthcoming book, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (2005).

ⁱⁱ In the plateau 'November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics' Deleuze and Guattari refer to minorities as 'crystals of becoming', which precisely trigger 'uncontrollable movements' (ATP 106).

ⁱⁱⁱ To take just two examples we have Griselda Pollock's feminist critique of T. J. Clarke's own critical attitude towards modernist critics such as Michael Fried (see Pollock 1996), and we have Irit Rogoff's 'deterritorialization' of typical feminist art histories in her turn to post colonial subjectivities and practices (see Rogoff 2000).

^{iv} For example Paul Wood's essay calling for a return to the aesthetic as a strategy for moving beyond the impasses of post-modern theory. As Wood remarks: 'When management comes to conceive of itself as radical, extreme and paradoxical counter-strategies may be required' (1994, 91).

^v And in which case we might make the argument that *The Communist Manifesto* is an exemplar of minor literature.

^{vi} Francis Bacon, at least as Deleuze portrays him, would be a specifically minor painter in this sense. See especially the Chapter on 'The Diagram' in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, and particularly pp. 99-110.

^{vii} Documenta commissioned Hirschorn's Bataille monument, a kind of 'self-organising community' site, that involved the use of a whole variety of non-artistic materials - and the involvement of the inhabitants of the housing scheme in who's public area the monument was built. See Enwezor 2002.

^{viii} A case study of such affirmative violence is the London based art collective *Bank*. *Bank*, as part of their practice, curated a series of open and anarchic shows occupying disused and derelict spaces. They also produced papers and proclamations intended specifically to poke fun at, and provoke, the art establishment to show up its pretensions and affectations (a certain indifference to the art world was crucial here). It is also worth remarking that *Bank* were as much a scene as a collaboration. A scene involving a certain dynamic, or energetics, as oppose to anything specifically concrete (and thus inevitably in opposition and irreducible to any institutional framing). Thanks to Robert Garnett for conversations about *Bank*. For more on the latter more on see the catalogue *Bank* (2000).

^{ix} For details of *Superflex's* practice see their website at www.superflex.net. *Superflex* talks about their socially—and economically—engaged practice in an interview with Asa Nacking. See Nacking 1999. *n55's* website is at www.n55.dk.

^x A case study of the latter is *COUM Transmissions*. This radical art/performance group of the 1970s and 80s involved themselves in the production of new types of subjectivity through exploring the limits and possibilities of 'acceptable' sexuality, through experimenting with collective living, and through generally being involved in processes and practices outside the mainstream. Indeed *COUM* were involved in what we might call the exploration of *ludic* practice and in the possibilities of improvisation that this implies. We

might add that a group such as *COUM* found themselves inevitably and constantly at odds with the state-machine, whether it be in a 'soft' form (the difficulty of securing funding grants, exhibition spaces, and so on), or in a 'harder' one (arrests and general harassment by the police). See Simon Ford's book on *COUM, Wreckers of Civilisation* (2000).

^{xi} It is interesting to note in this context that artistic collaborations often involve bands: Art and Language collaborating with *Red Krayola* for example, or *COUM Transmissions* morphing into *Throbbing Gristle*.

^{xii} Dance music would be a particularly good example of 'becoming minor', involving as it does the neutralisation of sense, the foregrounding of the intensive and affective, and also the production of new communities. Indeed, the real indicator of dance music's status as minor comes from the states attitude towards it when the former is in its most deterritorialized form (the illegal raves of the 1980s, the free party sound systems of the 1990s). Both of these might be understood as Deleuzian 'war-machines' (see Hemment 1997).

^{xiii} The collective and expanded practice of *Atelier Van Lieshout* for example, which in 1991 involved the production of whole alternative settlement, or 'free state', in Rotterdam ('AVL-ville'). For details of *Atelier van Lieshout's* expanded practice see the website: www.ateliervanlieshout.com. The group *Transnational Republic* (www.transnationalrepublic.org) have a similar, if less 'realised' utopian aspect. For a whole selection of practices involved in this area see the 'Utopia Station' exhibition at the 50th Venice Biennale (Bonami 2003). We might extend this notion of artistic community further to include the production of artistic *scenes*. In the UK for example there was the *yba* 'phenomena' in London, and also the various scenes that emerged in Glasgow in the 1990s. In all these cases a kind of expanded creativity and an all-important 'self-referentiality' is produced through a complexity of factors, which include a relative isolation (on the *yba's*—and the 'Glasgow scene'—see Michael Bracewell's 'New Image Glasgow to Young British Art: Introducing the 1990s' (2003); for the generation of Scottish artists—and their 'scene'—after this moment see Neil Mulholland's 'Learning from Glasvegas: Scottish Art after "the 90"' (2002).

^{xiv} A case study of this might be the utilisation of the 'collective name' within art practice and wider culture in general. For example the use of the name 'Monty Cantor' or 'Luther Blissett'. This also has political implications: any individual can operate as Luther Blissett or Monty Cantor, thus plugging into any operational benefits that the name has assumed. Thanks to Jim Backhouse for this point.

^{xv} We might note here the similarities with Hardt and Negri's reading of Spinoza in *Empire*: 'Perhaps we need to reinvent the notion of the materialist teleology that Spinoza proclaimed at the dawn of modernity when he claimed that *the prophet produces its own people* [my italics]' (E 65).

^{xvi} To take just two examples of this 'future orientation' from the field of contemporary art: Mike Nelson, who's work we might say stages, and indeed relies on, a missing people (see especially *The Amnesiacs*, Nelson 2000); and Cathy Wilkes, whose work seems precisely to call an audience into being inasmuch as it seems to contain a 'language' albeit one that it is difficult to 'read' (see for example Wilkes 2001).

^{xvii} See the section 'Two Europes, Two Modernities' (E 69-90).

^{xviii} For an interesting counter argument to this, and from the same historical moment as Negri, see Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). As Sylveire Lotringer remarks in his introduction to the latter, Virno's notion is that capitalism is revolutionary in and of itself, hence producing a kind of communism (the 'Communism of Capital') (2004, 11). In fact Virno's position is, as Lotringer also remarks, close to Deleuze and Guattari's own position on capitalism as 'fluid, inventive and adaptive' (2004, 11). Indeed the question here becomes one of 'beating capital at its own game', 'decoding its flows even further, or constantly displacing oneself in relation to them' (Lotringer 2004, 11-12). We might say that minor practices are involved in exactly this latter strategy.

^{xix} I am thinking here of Henri Bergson's gap, or hesitation, between stimulus and reaction which in itself allows creativity to arise. See Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, and especially chapter 3 'On the Survival of Images' (*MM* 133-177).

^{xx} It is in this sense, paradoxically, that the minor does not necessarily denote the *weaker*, or rather it is the minor's apparent weakness its flexibility, fluidity, openness—as well as its ontological prior status (to that of the major) that makes it always a force that must be controlled by the major.