

On the Diagram (and a Practice of Diagrammatics)

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The following definitions of the diagram—which double as protocols for a possible practice (of diagrammatics)—are taken from different philosophical and psychoanalytic sources, but also from outside of these registers. Generally speaking, I leave aside those uses of the diagram as solely functional tool, as for example in wiring diagrams, or, indeed, for pedagogical purposes, as for example to simplify or instruct (although both of these functions can and do tangentially come into my definitions). The intention of this experimental approach and format (which, at times, moves at speed so as to cover ground) is to think specifically about the diagram in a contemporary art context—or, again, of diagrammatics as a form of expanded aesthetic practice—as well as, more generally (following Félix Guattari), about the role of diagrams in the more ethico-aesthetic practice of the production of subjectivity. What follows might also itself be understood diagrammatically insofar as it performs a certain abstraction (from its various sources), suggests connections and compatibilities (across different terrains), and ultimately offers a certain kind of perspective (a meta-modelization) that might be considered a speculative fiction.

1. Formal (Matheme)

This is the diagram in what we might call its mathematical sense (when the latter is broadly construed). In terms of the softer sciences

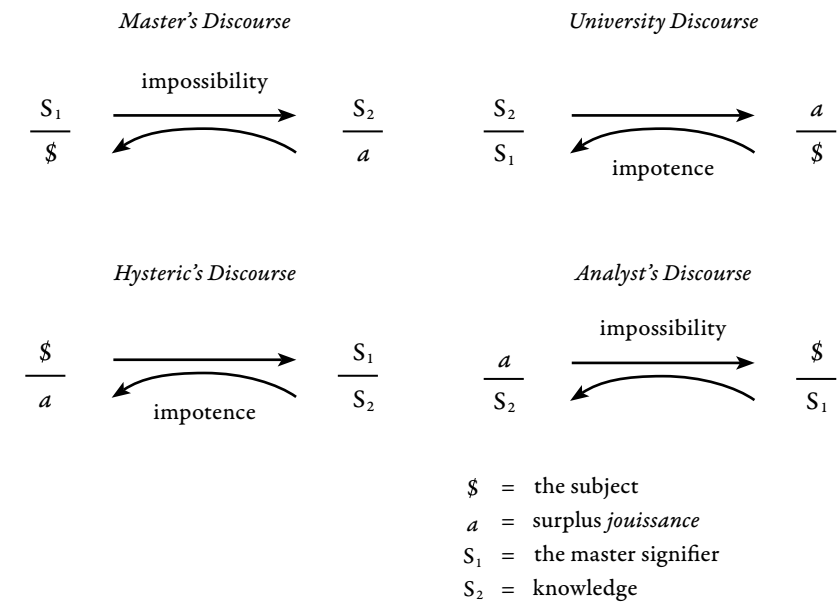
it is the diagram as deployed in structuralism, paradigmatically in Lacanian psychoanalysis (which itself looks back to Freud’s use of diagrams), as for example in the matheme of the Four Discourses (of the Master, of the University, of the Hysteric, of the Analyst). Claude Lévi-Strauss—with his “science of myth”—would also be a key exponent here (as would structuralist anthropology more generally). It is also the diagram as used in a particular type of contemporary Continental philosophy (following both mathematics and Lacan): Alain Badiou, for example, with his mathemes of the subject, but also, more generally, his use of mathematical set and sheaf theory. In relation to Lacan, we might also note here the importance of diagrams for cybernetic understandings of life more generally (see also 10., below).

The diagram here is an abstraction (from the body and/or the world). It tends to take on an objective status (it is usually technically drawn, for example by computer). The account of the subject it concerns is also abstract and formal, tending to foreground language and the symbolic (as a kind of parasite) or an “Idea” that, in each case, constitutes the subject “up and above” any brute existence as (human) animal.

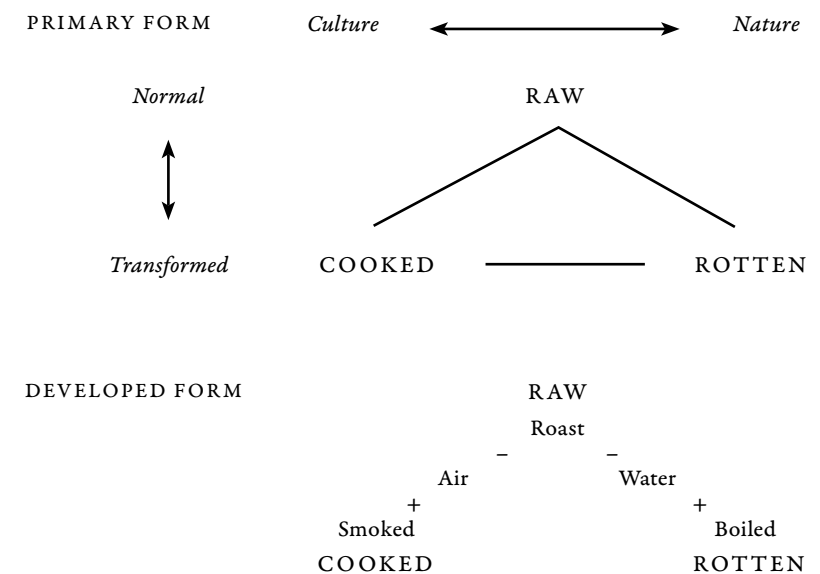
2. Communication Without Meaning

A crucial aspect of this formal understanding of the diagram—to return to Lacan—is its ability (or at least claim) to communicate without meaning. Indeed, this is very much the diagram’s pragmatic character (it moves things on). In relation to this we might note that a text can operate diagrammatically, as in Lacan’s suggestion that his *Écrits* was not written so that it might be understood (the writings, rather, “must be placed in water, like Japanese flowers, in order to unfold”). Jean-François Lyotard also suggests that the sign might operate as a tensor in this sense—demarcating a “region in flames”—not necessarily to be interpreted, but rather, again, to set things in motion.

In relation to art practice more generally we might simply claim that the diagram can short-circuit the discursive (and, as such, demand ever more interpretations) whilst also calling for other



Claude Lévi-Strauss’ culinary triangle



forms of interaction to be enacted. This is especially the case with abstract art, and, more particularly, the non-figurative and mute. Indeed, what is the appropriate response to a diagram in this form? And what about a similar kind of abstract diagram that moves away from a two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional space (and, as such, introduces the dimension of time)?

3. Animal (Patheme)

Animal here refers to a more creaturely—or affective—understanding of the diagram (and, as such, stands in contradistinction [with respect] to the formal). This is the diagram in its more processual (and experimental) use. Or, put more simply, the diagram as drawing. In terms of contemporary Continental philosophy (and psycho/schizoanalysis), it is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially in *A Thousand Plateaus*, that exemplify this kind of diagrammatic work (as, for example, in the plateaus on “Faciality” and “On Several Regimes of Signs”). In terms of the subject, or here, the production of subjectivity, this kind of diagram foregrounds the potentialities of the body and world. It provides an ethology and cartography of lived life (the speeds and slownesses that make up an “individual”; the various capacities to affect and be affected).

This diagram is still an abstraction, but of a different kind (a working out of the conditions of possible experience). The hand-drawn nature of this kind of diagram is important (in *A Thousand Plateaus* the diagrams are reproduced as drawings), not least insofar as this necessarily involves a certain affect that accompanies any strictly conceptual work. Indeed, might we even say that drawing (when this is not figurative [does not delineate a recognizable form] but follows the “abstract line”) is opposed to the diagram in its more formal, fixed, and apparently objective sense?

4. Forces and Experimentation

Following this animal understanding, we might turn from Deleuze and Guattari to Deleuze, for whom the diagram can be a “picturing” of forces—as, for example, in the account (and accompanying

diagram) that Deleuze gives of Michel Foucault and his account of subjectivation as the “folding in” of the forces of the outside. In relation to art practice we might also note Deleuze’s take on Francis Bacon’s paintings, wherein the diagram announces the enactment of random marks and splashes—a whole asignifying economy—that disrupts a given signifying order (in this case figuration), allowing a “new” world to emerge. We might also reference here the way in which a “minor literature,” with its stuttering and stammering of language—and foregrounding of the affective—offers up a diagram that disrupts common sense (and, as such, contains the germ of new forms of sense, calling forth a people adequate to the latter).

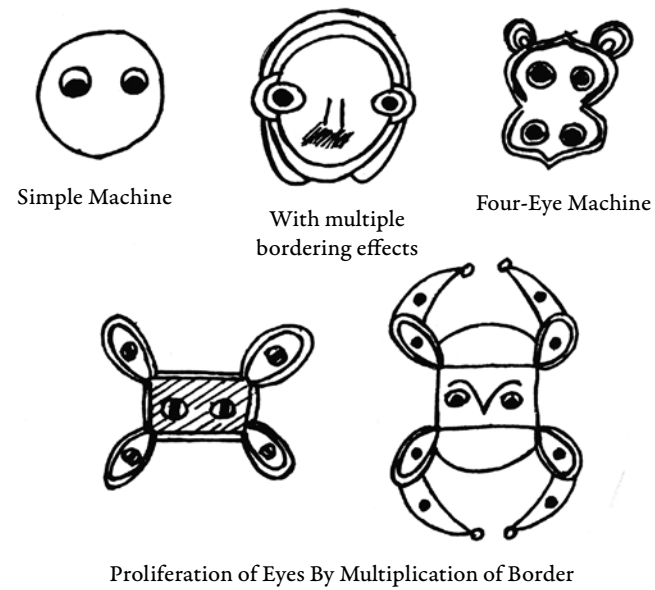
The diagram here is a strategy of experimentation that scrambles narrative, figuration—the givens—and allows something else, at last, to step forward. This is the production of the unknown from within the known, the unseen from within the seen. The diagram, we might say, is a strategy for sidestepping intention from within intention; it involves the production of something that then “speaks back” to its progenitor.

5. Conjunction and Synthesis

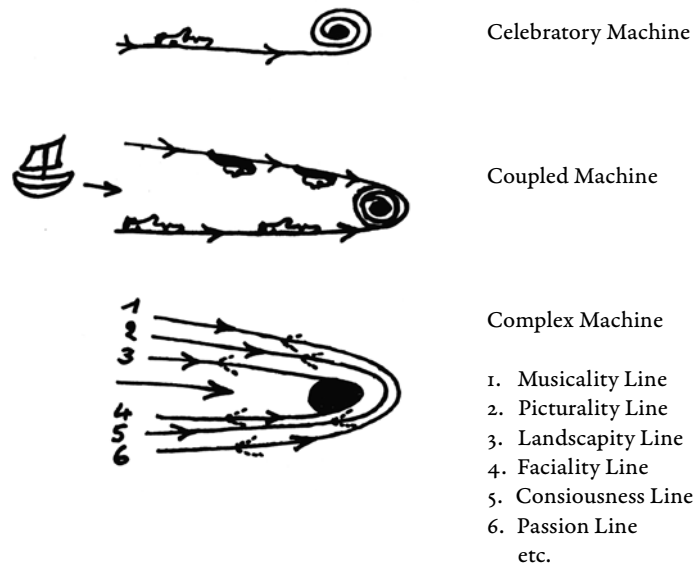
A practice of diagrammatics (in terms of both art practice and the production of subjectivity more generally) might also involve the bringing of the above understandings of the diagram together. This is the “drawing” of matheme/patheme diagrams that incorporates both the formal and the creaturely (and, as such, offers a more accurate image of a lived life). In fact, with a thinker like Spinoza do we not already have a diagramming of the matheme/patheme insofar as in *The Ethics* the rational (formal) and affective (animal) are inextricably entwined and co-determinant? (But also, we might note, how one reads Spinoza [and which parts one reads closely] can determine one’s take on both analysis [psycho or schizo?] and philosophy [rational or affective?].)

More generally, diagramming concepts might allow for the forcing of encounters and conjunctions and the production of surprising compatibilities (as, for example, when diagrams from different milieus are superimposed on one another). A practice of

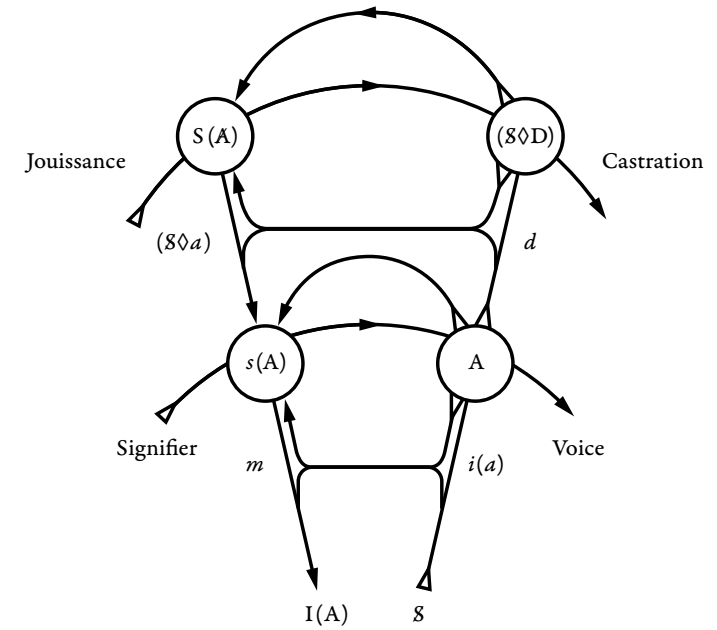
Deleuze and Guattari's Terrestrial Signifying Despotism Face
from "Year Zero: Faciality"



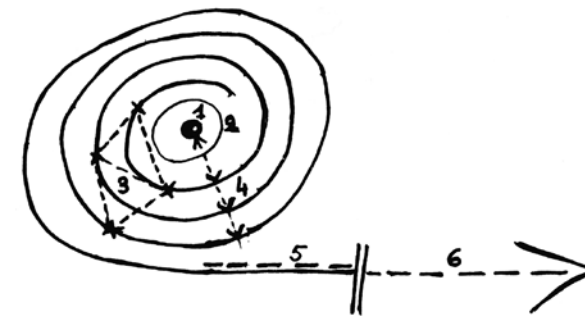
Deleuze and Guattari's Maritime Subjective Authoritarian Face
(after Tristan and Isolde) from "Year Zero: Faciality"



Lacan's completed graph of desire



Deleuze and Guattari's diagram from "On Several Regimes of Signs"



1. The Center of the Signifier; the faciality of the god or despot.
2. The Temple or Palace, with priests and bureaucrats.
3. The organization in circles and the sign referring to other signs on the same circle or on different circles.
4. The interpretive development of signifier into signified, which then reimparts signifier.
5. The expiatory animal; the blocking of the line of flight.
6. The scapegoat, or the negative sign of the line of flight.

diagrammatics might in this sense involve the production of composite diagrams. (In relation to this, it is also worth noting the way in which new digital-imaging technology allows ever more complex modeling and, especially, the animation of diagrams.)

6. Meta-modeling

One name for this kind of synthetic project, following Guattari, is meta-modelization. This is the bringing together of different models, even the placing of one model “inside” another (as, for example, in Guattari’s situating Lacan’s signifying schema within a broader schema of signifying and asignifying semiotics). Here the diagram is a way of re-positioning existing frameworks, and of working out possible relations as well as divergences. Crucially, meta-modelization refuses a partisan attitude (as in, “This is the way things are”), and opens up thought to other perspectives and points of view (see also 8., below).

Indeed, meta-modelization involves a less objective take on diagrams. They are understood as less universal (and timeless), but rather tied to particular kinds of subjectivity and drawn for particular kinds of purposes (not a tracing—reliant on a predetermined given—but a map that is always open to revision). Which is to say they are strategic and pragmatic (as in, “What diagram do I need here to get me out of this impasse?”). As such, again, they relate to both art practice and life, especially when the latter is itself understood aesthetically (as in Foucault’s thesis on subjectivation and “life as a work of art”).

7. Speculation and Speed

On the one hand a diagram can offer a kind of “view from elsewhere.” Indeed, in terms of Philosophy (as a discourse of the Master), the diagram offers a birds-eye perspective, precisely “from above” (on a world that, in fact, it co-constitutes—but also on the other disciplines that it surveys from its throne). On the other hand, however, we are always already “on the ground” and in the thick of it, and, as such, this perspective can only be a kind of fiction. Indeed,

the diagram, although it can be an index of Philosophy’s arrogant and autocratic functioning, also operates to dethrone the king and open thought up to other adventures. The diagram, in this sense, might be thought of as a speculative fiction (see also 8., below).

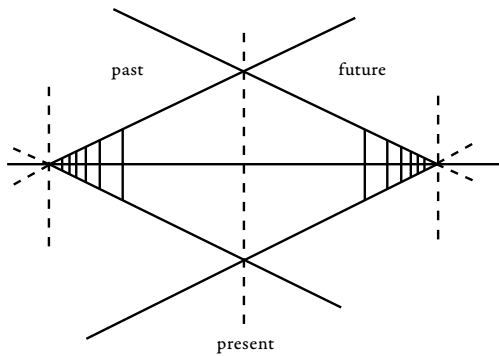
A diagram, especially as drawing, often leads ahead of conceptual thought. It operates as a probe prior to any consistency (this, we might say, is the diagram as sketch). The diagram can also move at a different speed from, for example, writing, and as such can achieve an escape velocity from the purely textual (this, we might say, is the diagram as automatic writing). The speed of the hand (or intelligence of the body) can outrun the cogito (or, more simply, the diagram is of the unconscious, however the latter is figured).

8. Fictions and Models

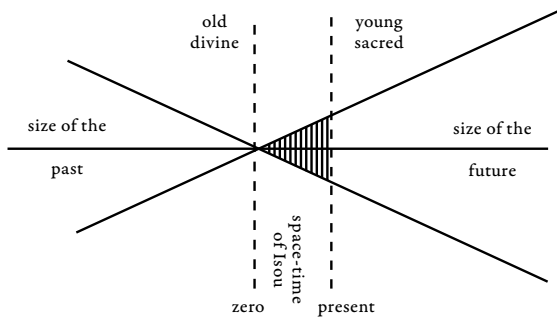
The diagram can be thought of as a model (in the mathematical rather than Platonic sense), which is to say, following François Laruelle, it names those philosophical materials that have been untethered from their properly “Philosophical” function (the claim to be able to give a sufficient account of the real). These “philofictions” can then be laid alongside other models of thought (art, science, the animal, and so forth) in a general democratization of all thought.

Diagrammatics might also refer to the recontextualization and manipulation of concepts (if they can still be called as such) once the philosophical overview has been “dropped down” from its position of transcendence. Such a practice—manipulating concepts as if on a tabletop—might, again, allow for hitherto “illegal” connections and syntheses to be made. One strategy to allow for this change in vision is to draw concepts (as diagrams) and then, perhaps, to allow the drawing itself to suggest further avenues of exploration. In relation to art practice, we might note here the invention of fictional diagrams (for example in Asger Jorn’s account and diagrams of Lettrism and the “System of Isou”) that are given a certain currency or “authority” (after all, all diagrams [whatever their claims] are from [and equal before] the Real).

Isidore Isou's systems of perspective



DUAL PERSPECTIVE OF CLASSICAL EUROPE



CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

The sigil of the gateway or *Necronomicon* gate



A sigil from Austin Osman Spare's *The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love): The Psychology of Ecstasy*



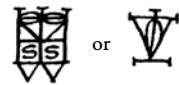
This my wish



To obtain



The strength of a Tiger



Combined as one sigil

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9. Magic(k)

In terms of fictions or simply diagrams of different modes of existence in contrast to the dominant, we might note magical diagrams and schema. Here, again, the diagram is an abstraction—and, in the case of a sigil, a condensing and concentration of information intended to generate focus and transformation (the use of signifying form to produce asignifying effects). Magical diagrams announce the willed transformation of the self and a different kind of sympathetic causality (of macro- and microcosm, where like affects like).

But *magic* also names a radically different mode of existence from the techno-scientific: a pre-modern understanding that also gestures towards a future aesthetic mode yet-to-come. Indeed, following Gilbert Simondon, the magical mode of existence itself involves a diagrammatic structuring of the landscape in terms of lines, tracks, and privileged points. This grid in space is doubled by a similar reticulation in time (the foregrounding of certain moments when it is auspicious to act). In our own moribund and increasingly restricted neoliberal present (with its domination of nature) this kind of diagrammatics becomes politically charged. A practice of diagrammatics might also be understood as more sorcerous, when it involves—to return to Deleuze and Guattari (and their plateau on “Becoming”)—the following of the abstract line from animal to plant to ever stranger and imperceptible becomings.

10. World Building

Finally, might *diagrammatics* also name a kind of second-order art practice (is there any other today?) that uses previous art in its own particular diagrams, perhaps alongside other representational material: for example, the photograph, once it has itself been untethered from its more typical, representational function. Here diagrammatics announces a kind of nesting of fictions within fictions to produce a certain density, even an opacity. Indeed, an art practice in this sense builds its own worlds and suggests the terms by which they could be approached.

Might this diagrammatics also involve a different take on relations among the past, present, and future? This is the “drawing” of lines between different times, the building of circuits and the following of feedback loops; it is to understand time as specific to any given system (or practice) and not as neutral background. This might involve diagramming the way a different kind of future can work back on the present (and determine how we act or make in the here and now). Or, indeed, diagramming how the present itself can involve a re-engineering of the past (understood as resource and living archive) that will then allow a different kind of future to emerge.

