

The Sounds of Disability

A Cultural Studies Perspective

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While Anne Waldschmidt has approached disability studies from within, my side of the introduction comes to disability studies by way of literary and cultural studies, a field whose history for about the last 60 years has been defined by a number of diverse theories bundled under the term ‘poststructuralism.’ This occurred more in American discourses than in the UK, which witnessed the development of a number of Marxist and post-Marxist approaches that were only later aligned with poststructuralist concepts. The historical vector of Poststructuralism went roughly from Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In its gradual unfolding it became the theoretical spine not only of literary studies, but also of minority studies, such as critical ethnic studies and queer studies. When I began reading works from within the field of disability studies a number of years ago I realized that, at least in theoretical registers, much of it followed the gradual unfolding of that spine. At that moment, disability studies had just turned towards Deleuze and Guattari.

Before Deleuze and Guattari, much of poststructuralism was defined by a deep unease about the concept of ‘nature,’ which was often assumed to imply characteristics such as ‘inevitability’ or ‘essentialism.’ To a large degree, the poststructuralist fear of nature resulted from the assumption that if nature was indeed considered as essentialist, critical cultural agency could always be kept in check by references to purportedly ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ practices. And indeed, for a long time the notion *of* – and often a belief *in* – an essentialist nature was the weapon of choice wielded by almost any politics of discrimination. Even while the poststructuralist fear of nature was understandable, therefore, it ultimately revealed more about the political and cultural misuse of the term than about the reality of how nature, whatever that might be, ‘in actual fact’ operates.

This reality has come into focus not only by way of Deleuze and Guattari, who replaced in *Anti-Oedipus* the distinction between nature and culture with a general field of ‘machinic production:’ “[T]here is no such thing as either

man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together [...] the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever” (2). A similar view is held by scholars such as Gilbert Simondon, Michel Serres and Donna Haraway, who proposed the term “naturecultures” (Haraway 15) for this field. Such conceptual superpositions resonated well with disability studies, where it also makes little sense to categorically, or even empirically, separate the fields of nature and of culture. According to the ‘new machinic natureculture,’ the world consists of an infinitely complex arrangement of machines, ranging from physical, chemical, biological to cultural machines. In Deleuze and Guattari, the machinic field is made up of a combination of both ‘autopoietic, living machines’ and ‘allopoietic, industrial machines’ that together work according to a general machinism that defines the world from its most microscopic to its most macrocosmic levels. As Deleuze notes in *Dialogues*, “each individual, body and soul, possesses an infinity of parts which belong to him in a more or less complex relationship. Each individual is also himself composed of individuals of a lower order and enters into the composition of individuals of a higher order” (59).

While the world is indeed everywhere a singular ‘field of production’ that consists of a diversity of site- and time-specific, inherently dynamic and constantly changing machinic assemblages, it is, at the same time, filled with an unlimited potentiality for change that destabilizes every machinic arrangement and that allows for always new and surprising alignments to emerge. Also, the machinic world is inherently ‘constrained’ in that it *affords* certain operations and modes of life, but also *prohibits* others. In fact, the world might be described as the arena of the constrained and interrelated play of human and non-human life.

If that sounds too celebratory, we must be aware that we cannot ‘trust in the world,’ because the world is nothing that exists outside of us and it is ‘itself’ not an agent, because the world is just the name for what is brought about, at every moment, by the totality of its creations. All it does, therefore, is to express itself *by way of* and *in* its creatures, which means that it is, like them, invariably constrained and ‘disabled.’

It is not only that all of individual life is ‘constrained life,’ it in fact *depends* on specific constraints, be these temporal, spatial or operational. From such a position, the field of disability can be defined, in very general terms, as a multiplicitous field of site- and time-specific constraints that play themselves out on an infinite number of levels simultaneously.

Conceptually, the notion of ‘differently constrained lives’ defines not only ‘lives with disabilities,’ but *all* forms of life in relation to an impossible ‘non-constrained,’ ‘non-disabled’ state. As all lives are subtractions from such an ideal state, each life needs to be considered as a ‘singular life’ with singular constraints, which means that in the gradations of constraint it is no longer

a question of ‘the normal’ set against ‘the abnormal,’ but one of specifically constrained positions within a given multiplicity. In this context, in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari set off “the Anomalous” (242) – a term that refers initially to specific animals in a pack, with the pun operating between the French *anomal* and animal – against the French term *anormal*. The word *anomal* (‘anomalous’), they note, “is very different from that of *anormal* (‘abnormal’)” (243). While the latter “refers to that which is outside rules or goes against the rules” (244), “*an-omalie* [...] designates the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization” (ibid.). If the topological logic of the *an-omalie* is transferred to the field of disability studies, a specific disability is no longer considered as being excluded from a field of normalcy, but rather as in “a position or set of positions in relation to a multiplicity” (ibid.). It is, in fact, that multiplicity’s “borderline” (245) or “peripheral” (ibid.).

To stress the inherently disruptive force of an-omalies as destabilizing given fields, Deleuze and Guattari use the term ‘deterritorialization.’ They deterritorialize the ‘expected,’ habitual movements – the territories within a given space – that define a given multiplicity. Let me set up an example to which I will return in more detail. Picture how a person engaging in what is labelled as ‘spastic’ dancing will destabilize the general multiplicity of a dancefloor (a scene that will be qualified below), not by being excluded from that floor but by bringing it into a different rhythm. By making, perhaps, the habitual rhythm ‘stumble.’ Sometimes, one imperceptibly small stumbling may cause a marching group to begin to dance.

In the following, let me offer a number of modes in which the notion of a constrained and disabled world insists on artistic productions and how these ‘construct’ constrained and disabled worlds. The first example is obvious, in that I have taken the notion of ‘constraint’ from literature, where it designates an experimental writing strategy: Consider the alphabet as a system of communicative affordances and constraints – affordances, in that it allows for a specifically human mode of constructing and moving meaning; constraints, in that there are, in any given language, only a number of letters, as well as rules of grammar, syntax, word-order, etc. In analogy to an individual, specific style of life, an individual style of talking and writing positions an individual in a general, machinic multiplicity of discourses. Within this field, the reasons for ‘linguistic impairments’ might lie on cellular, genetic and chemical levels (autism: presumably genetic, synaptic, environmental; dyslexia: presumably genetic and environmental), on cultural levels (an insufficiently developed educational system), or a mix of any number of in-between levels (a dysfunctional family, a drug habit, anatomical alterities affecting the vocal chords, etc.).

Such linguistic disabilities are usually seen as constraints. They might, however, also be seen from the point-of-view of ‘creative deterritorializations.’ In fact, as with life in general, the constraints themselves might be seen as

sources of creativity. It is in the context of such a logic that, in order to bring about artistic deterritorializations, the French literary movement of *L' Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, abbreviated as *OuLiPo*, developed the notion of 'constrained writing,' which is based on a poetics of the willful 'disabling' or 'constraining' of one's linguistic agency. *La Disparition* by Georges Perec is written without the letter 'e.' Christine-Brooke Rose's 1998 novel *Next* is written without the verb 'to have' and her novel *Between* is written entirely without the verb 'to be.' Ironically, her memoir *Remake* is written without the pronoun 'I.'

The perhaps most elaborate *tour de force* of constrained writing is Walter Abish's novel *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), which tells its story in 52 chapters. The first chapter contains only words that start with the letter 'a,' the second uses words that start with 'a' or 'b' and so on until it reaches, in the 26th chapter, the freedom to use all letters. But then Abish subtracts letters again, with the final chapter using once more only words that start with the letter 'a.' The novel starts "Ages ago, Alex, Allen and Alva arrived at Antibes, and Alva allowing all, allowing anyone, against Alex's admonition, against Allen's angry assertion: another African amusement ..." (1) and it ends with "another Africa another alphabet" (152).

Initially, these experiments sound weird. One should remember, however, that a sonnet also allows only a certain number of lines, that a tragedy asks for a crisis at a certain point and that a short story should be, well, short. In fact, what constrained writing teaches is that any form is nothing but a complicated set of constraints, which means that 'de-formation' is nothing but a shift in the architectures of constraint that have come to be considered as 'good form.' Ultimately, constrained writing throws the notion of good form into perspective by a willful act of deformation. However, this deformation does not 'impoverish' the multiplicity of discourses. Rather, it adds to it in many unexpected ways. It unsettles and invigorates language. It makes language new and it makes it *sound* differently. Who has ever listened to four pages of text in which every word starts with the letter 'a' before *Alphabetical Africa* came along?

My second example also has to do with how 'disabilities' unsettle a multiplicity. It comes from the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk. In his 1982 short story "Burning Chrome," William Gibson's narrator, when he talks about his artificial arm, does not talk about the clichés of disability with their images of loss and pain. In Gibson's world, which is a world pervaded by a multiplicity of man-machine assemblages and interfaces – from artificial memories and synaptic plug-ins to mobile life-support systems and corporeal prostheses – where both psychic and physical prostheses are no longer related to a logic of making up a lack, but rather understood as a 'given' within an overall man-machine multiplicity.

Against this background, Gibson develops a new aesthetics of prostheses, both in the sense of a machinic beauty and in the sense of a new set of

perceptions. Like much of constrained writing, Gibson's text concerns the 'sound of disability,' this time however from the position of the new technological sounds produced by prostheses. The narrator's prosthesis, in fact, heralds the meeting of a 'differently constrained' body, a new electric soundscape, and a new vocabulary of human motion: "The servos in the hand began whining like overworked mosquitos" (199), he notes. Together with this new aesthetics, there are also hints toward a new prosthetic erotics, such as when the narrator describes a girl's fingernails as laquered in a color that is "only a shade darker than the carbon-fiber laminate that sheathes" (205) his arm. What Gibson creates, from within the field of 'differently constrained lives,' however, is not only the perception of new sounds and new, machinic colors. Perhaps most interestingly, he also develops a prosthetic, machinic unconscious. In the face of an unwelcome surprise, the narrator notes laconically: "I stood there. My arm forgot to click" (210). In Gibson's work, 'differently constrained lives' are invariably vistas into such new experiences and affects, literature being a mode of staging these constraints in their singularity and in their 'monstrous' – in the sense of the Latin *monstrare* – technical splendor.

My final example comes from music and it shows how each singular differently constrained individual brings about a singularly 'disabled' environment. In 1969, the Electronic Music Studio of Brandeis University became the setting for the premiere performance of American composer Alvin Lucier's work "I Am Sitting in a Room." The piece consists of Lucier sitting on stage tape-recording a text he speaks into a microphone. The taped text is then played back into the room, where it is once more picked up by the microphone, recorded, and played back into the room. This procedure is repeated until Lucier's voice has completely vanished into an anonymous sound that corresponds to or, as Lucier notes, more precisely "articulates" – in terms of 'making audible,' or 'actualizing' – the resonant frequency of the room. The text spoken by Lucier provides a very concise description of the acoustic process that is at work in the composition:

"I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room *articulated by speech*. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have." (Lucier 31; emphasis added)

Although the internal field of resonances might be broken down into its acoustic components – its landscape of frequencies – by way of what is called a Fourier analysis, Lucier's piece develops not only 'within' these tones, but also,

and more importantly so, between these tones and their acoustic environment. It concerns both the single tones and the acoustic architecture – the sonorous ambience – within which these sounds are produced.

In the context of this introduction, two aspects interest me in particular. First, the notion that, as Lucier notes, the operation should “smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.” Of course this is not a plea for order, regularity or normalcy. Rather, it is the attempt to let his speech interact actively with the environment. Even more, it is a way to let the environment – the world, that is – speak through one’s own speech. To channel the disabled world, in that the eigenfrequencies of the room are “articulated by speech” in his performance. The second aspect that interests me is Lucier’s remark “with perhaps the exception of rhythm.” To understand this exception, one needs to know (or listen to the performance) that Lucier stutters – the linguistic equivalent of stumbling – making his voice different from the statistical voice, which it deterritorializes. It is an *an-omalie* in that it destabilizes the general, given multiplicity of voices. In particular, of course – and Lucier, as a musician, is very aware of this – it does so in terms of rhythm, because stuttering is, musically, a rhythmic *an-omalie*. Within the poetics of the piece, therefore, the particular ‘differently constrained’ parameter remains as the only element that retains a singularity. All other speech vanishes in the process of articulating the room. At the end of the piece, then, it is quite literally Lucier’s impairment that reverberates through the concert hall. It has been *dis-attached* from Lucier to become pure rhythm. The room whose sound is articulated by Lucier’s ‘differently constrained’ voice articulates, in return, Lucier’s ‘differently constrained’ voice. It is ‘articulated by space.’

In his essay “He Stuttered,” Deleuze writes about an analogous stuttering not in terms of speech, but of language: “It is no longer the character who stutters in speech, it is the writer who becomes *a stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, no longer an affectation of the one who speaks” (107). Although Deleuze remains within the medium of language, he also opens this language up to its environmental aspect. To make language stutter brings out in language “an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words – that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated affect reverberate through the words” (108). Lucier, however, goes even further. With Lucier, it is not so much about “a *minor use* of the major language” (109; emphasis added), nor is it about what Deleuze calls “a music of words” (113). In fact, it is not about making language stutter at all, but rather about making ‘the world’ stutter. With this move, Lucier brings stuttering to its extreme. If for Deleuze stuttering implies bringing language and sense to their limit, Lucier literally ‘disables’ the world through his speech. He singularizes the world through its articulation, by way of a ‘differently

constrained' speech, operating at the limit of anonymity and singularity – the singularity of a speech impediment.

It is not difficult to transpose these 'differently constrained poetics' onto other artistic fields, such as dance, where the kinetic room that is articulated by the dance is also a 'disabled' room. Here as well, the disability is expressed as the residue of singularity within an anonymity or multiplicity – the two are, of course, ultimately the same – of movement.

A more thematic instance of such an expression is Ian Dury's song "Spasticus Autisticus" that was played during the Opening of the 2012 Paralympics. Linking a political agenda to a bodily performance, Dury, who contracted polio when he was young, expresses both in the movements of his body and in his music the 'spastics' of rock 'n' roll. He articulates an *anomal*, disabled dancefloor. Symptomatically, one might easily misunderstand – mishear, that is – the title as "Spasticus Artisticus."

My examples have all stressed the sense of hearing, not so much from within the problematics of deaf- or muteness as from within an expansion of the spectrum of sound. As Deleuze notes, "Dante is admired for having 'listened to the stammerers,' and studied 'speech impediments,' not only to derive speech effects from them, but in order to undertake a vast phonetic, lexical and even syntactic creation" (Deleuze, "Stuttered" 109).

Already my digression into the field of dance has implied that such expansions of sensuality might also be 'applied' to the other senses and thus to other, new surfaces of sensation. Without forgetting the pains that often surround impairments the 'expression of disability' widens the spectrum of sensation for both artist and audience. It also widens the self-expression of an inherently disabled world. If we come to love this disabled world, we have come a long way toward an adequate treatment of people with disabilities. There is a line that goes from Lucier to Herman Melville's stuttering hero Billy Budd to the notion of a 'minor,' inherently stuttering, disabled literature, and finally, to a disabled world.

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