

Becoming-Recombinant

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In the modern, "disciplinary" paradigm, bodies occupy discernable points in space. They circulate within sites of confinement and enclosure -- the office, the school, the home, the prison. Through technologies of power and their regimes of signs, a hierarchical pyramid of individuated, organized bodies arises -- bodies that are coincident with their signifying gestures. It was Michel Foucault who mapped the trajectory of this paradigm. It was Gilles Deleuze who narrated its erosion. Deleuze suggested that these disciplinary technologies of confinement and interiority were transitioning into a very different mode of power. This new mode of power -- coincident with the rise of digitization -- was no longer to be defined by enclosure and containment. It was no longer to be defined in terms of molds; rather, it was to be defined in terms of *modulations*. In contrast to disciplinary society, he termed it "control" society. According to him, this new society of control does not traffic in molar identities so much as molecular multiplicities.[1] The emphasis shifts from the macro to the micro, from spatial enclosures to databanks, interiors to interfaces, keys to passwords, bodily surfaces to bodily substrates. While discipline trafficked in fixed states, defined locations and enclosures, control captures the interval between states, quantifying motion and change. It modulates information flows that are everywhere intertwined with matter, across the entirety of the biophysical realm.

Giorgio Agamben also narrates this shift. But he does not refer to it as control -- he refers to it as "security." While discipline isolates and closes off territories, he writes, security leads to an opening and to globalization. While the former wants to prevent and prescribe, the latter wants to intervene and direct ongoing processes. While the former wants to produce order, the latter wants to guide disorder -- since it "can only function within a context of freedom of traffic, trade, and individual initiative." [2] This is something like the difference between prevention and managed permission. The primary aim of contemporary power, then, would not be to simply enclose and determine, but rather to actively maintain and manage that which could exceed the determinations of the enclosure. As Georges Bataille would have it, the most fundamental problems are posed not by necessity but by excess. For him, one needs to

understand all phenomena in terms of the play of energy on the globe, and the ways in which this activity is appropriated by humans. For living matter in general, energy is always in excess, and so the big questions are always to be posed in terms of its expenditure.[3]

We have here moved from the realm of the repressive to that of the excessive: from a world that is extensive, divisible, and organizable to one that is intensive, libidinal, and fluid, where molecular elements "constantly construct and dismantle themselves in the course of their communications, as they cross over into each other at, beyond, or before" certain thresholds.[3a] If the repressive traffics in locatable objects, or fixed points in space, the excessive understands objects as continually in motion, and thus seeks not to locate them, but to understand how they move, extrapolating tendency. This something like the difference between position and disposition. With the latter, one does not settle for a bodily or spatial enclosure but instead maps a bio-informational ecology. One probes deep into the bodily substrate and the libidinal, sensory transmissions that have the potential to overcome all regulations, unsettling the stability of bodily and spatial confines.

If the repressive operates through signification, the excessive is that which transgresses it. Each, then, requires a different mode of apprehension. Following the Brazilian theorist Suely Rolnik we might articulate the distinction as follows: we have two different ways of apprehending the material world -- either as "pattern of form" or as "field of force." The first involves perception as it confronts the world of formal presence -- the world that we negotiate through representation. The second involves sensation -- the world of living presence that we negotiate through transmission.[4] These modes of apprehension work in conjunction with one another. To acknowledge both is to reach the limits of discourse. Rather than relying solely upon reductive form, or signification, we are challenged to incorporate resonance and excess -- not speech alone, but also screech.

The challenge then is to resist privileging one mode of apprehension over the other, and instead to develop a combinatory, choreographic mode of structuration that can account for specific bodily enclosures (molar identities) as well as micro-variations (molecular multiplicities) -- in other words both position and disposition, action and tendency. In the recombinant reality in which we now exist, pictures enmesh with databases, defined bodies with ontological choreographies, spatial delineations with abstract assemblages. Transversal exchanges exceed the capability of maps. To capture this choreographic mode of

structuration, we are challenged to resist the prioritization of language and spatial or bodily enclosure, and instead map the presence of alternative structuring chords that do not "discipline" bodies so much as orchestrate the endless recombination of micro-variations that occur below and across the surface of bounded bodies -- micro-variations that conduct intensities and structure dispositions. We are challenged, then, not only to think about programs but about programming, not only about discursive *forms* but about *formulas* -- formulas that operate at the level of bodily substrates, sensory transmissions, and molecular recombinations. These "modulating formulas" are the structuring chords of new recombinant realities.

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Again, unlike disciplinary power, this new form of power does not seek to eliminate the "dangerous" excess that threatens the coherency of a body. Rather, it seeks to manage this excess, or to produce it as manageable. The body is not only enclosed but also disposed. It wiggles within the ordering forces that maintain its coherence. By virtue of its resonances and transmissions it is already outside itself. It is fixed yet moving, material yet incorporeal. It manifests what Brian Massumi has described as a "self-disjunctive coinciding" -- a conversion or unfolding of the body that is contemporary with its every move, which sinks an ontological difference into the core of the body.[5] Disposition is a position that is already outside itself, already disassociated from itself. To account for this excessive dimension within the workings of the new recombinant realities is to look not only at forms and actions themselves, but also the ways in which bodies are disposed for action -- "readied." It is to look at readiness as much as regulation: not actions per se, but dispositions toward specific qualities or forms of action. As actors we *pose* (hitting our marks, so to speak, for the gaze of the other), but we are also *disposed* toward certain types of action within given conditions. We are not talking about an unmoving density but rather a moving tendency. And so we are always to look slightly ahead, shifting the emphasis toward anticipatory, preparatory realities. And here a new politics comes into view.

Let us probe into the stuff of disposition or "readiness" -- object of the modulating function. We can understand it in terms of affective transmission -- if we follow the analysis opened up by Brian Massumi, who sharply distinguishes it from emotions and feelings.[6] As Deleuze and Guattari write, the regime of the war machine is that of affects, "which relate only to the moving body in itself, to speeds and compositions of speed among elements." [7] In "readiness" we can perhaps develop a

political useful term. Likewise with the "modulating formula" to which we will turn shortly.

As Henri Bergson would remind us, the world we live in is one of constant motion and change. We are always moving, even if we are simply squirming within the substrates of the machineries that circumscribe our actions. Even now, at this very moment, thousands of stimuli are constantly impinging upon us, embroiling us in a larger sensory network that overcomes all regulations. Our bodies negotiate this, but we're not aware of it. We might sense it as "mood." Potential actions brew inside us, to be expressed outwardly or infolded/repressed inwardly. Our interior states push at the boundaries of visibility with the potential to erupt at any moment: someone could sigh, someone could shout in frustration, someone could gesture abruptly, someone could leave the room. Someone could "blow his top." Change can happen at any point in the practice or performance of the system. But this change does not happen only at the level of an abstract body: it happens at the level of the body's material substrate and within the field of its affective transmissions, which are not necessarily visible in the field of the social.

Far from an identifiable emotion, affect is a vitality, a pure potentiality -- an undifferentiated, moving kaleidoscope of sensations and states. It is a contradictory dimension in which anxieties and pleasures cohabit before they can be categorized as such. As Philip Turetzky suggests, affects are becomings (in Deleuze's sense) rather than structures; they distribute intensities and produce open and attractive possibilities (in Husserl's sense).[8] We are talking about a form of activation that is not necessarily available to the conscious mind, but is shared nonetheless by the synaesthetic perceptual faculties of the body substrate. It operates through both proprioceptive (the unconscious sensory flow from the movable parts of the body, through which position and tone of motion are continually adjusted) and visceral (the deeper excitations registered by the organs and systems of the body before they can be processed by the brain) functions. In other words, it is something that wells up inside the self and is somehow "known" by the body, but which is not yet necessarily available to conscious thought.

It has been said that today, in a multitasking world, our attention has become promiscuous: we do not focus our awareness on one thing for long so much as engage in "continuous partial attention." Motivated by the desire not to miss opportunities, we juggle objects of interest, prioritizing one item at a time but continually monitoring several background tasks just in case something more important or interesting comes up. Affect -- or,

more specifically, "readiness" -- might be understood as the embodied dimension of this "continuous partial attention" -- or in other words, as "continuous partial action." It exists somewhere between an internal bodily state and a conscious opening out onto the world, between ambiguous bodily arousal and focused alertness. It is the body's way of preparing itself for expression, a lived interior state that pushes at the boundaries of activity. Since external stimuli are filtered and the field of attention reorganized through the body's affectual capacities, they provide a port of entry into the body. And here is a realm of political potential, and a term like "readiness" can be politically useful. Readiness could be understood as a site where affects can be operated upon, produced, or otherwise stimulated through response techniques and technologies. Understood historically in this technological sense, readiness could be regarded as the lived, embodied dimension of vigilance.

In his study of modern psychology, L. S. Hearnshaw claims that the term vigilance, defined as "a state of readiness to detect and respond to certain specified small changes occurring at random time intervals in the environment," was first adopted by Cambridge psychologist Norman Mackworth in his wartime studies of visual and auditory monitoring.[9] Following Friedrich Kittler, we could situate a term like vigilance firmly on its media-technological base -- perhaps at the advent of real-time tracking (specifically, radar), which was only as good as the operators who were primed to detect deviation in its patterns.[10] Jonathan Crary also situates a new formulation of vigilance in the continuous scanning of radar screens by human operators during World War II, and thus to the efficient use of new real-time technology.[11] For our purposes, vigilance is real-time attentiveness: attention on a heightened state of alert in response to potential threat, propelled by the demands of instantaneous detection technologies. Its civilian analogue is the just-in-time consumer-trader, ever-alert at the computer monitor, finger poised to click. The consumer-trader who no longer "sees" in the traditional sense, but rather calculates potentials: the trader-gamer armed with a joystick, one foot in the future.

Technologies of bioanalysis are probing more deeply into these intimate, micro-states of bodily movement and affective disposition, arraying these states in calculations and simulations, quantifying potentials in terms of statistical inclinations. These technologies have revealed that a particular action is already set in motion by the body about 0.8 seconds before we consciously experience the performance of it. The body readies itself for action before it has a conscious experience of the action. Compared to our sense perception, our thought processes are too slow, and so, especially when it comes to quick events, nature has routed around them: the parts of

the brain that activate movements are linked directly to the centers for sense perception. In working with the phenomenon of "readiness potential," Benjamin Libet, an American neurologist, showed that consciousness lags hopelessly behind action: thought follows action, however we do not consciously experience it in this order.[12] According to Nigel Thrift, we can expand the time-space of embodiment accordingly, such that it incorporates a "constantly moving preconscious frontier." In other words, what we experience as the immediate presentness of the body is, in a sense, already past. To incorporate the preconscious frontier in our understanding of embodiment is to widen the durational expanse of the present moment, opening up a space between affect and contemplation.[13]

In many ways this space has already become a site of operations. In an escalating, increasingly competitive consumer-security culture, everything happens in this gap between action and thought, detection and engagement. Predicated on shrinking intervals in time and space, within which there is seemingly less and less time to act, a new world has emerged founded on multiple, perpetual crises served up as dizzying arrays of product choice, across which the desiring and fearing self scans, no longer able to act in any one arena since it is already "too late." The next crisis, always imminent, demands full vigilance. This is a world in which genuine action becomes "unproductive" and a form of perpetual proto-action -- readiness -- takes its place. One experiences the *jouissance* of action, yet one does not act. It is something like action without the action: transgression without consequence. Yet this is not simply a "virtualization" of action: it is a kind of inactive action, or an action that plays out along a different scale of measurement, where it has not yet crossed the threshold of what we may regard as movement within a social arena.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's color-coded Threat Level System solicits just this type of proto-action. The current national threat level is Elevated, or Yellow -- a stage at which Americans are advised to "continue to be vigilant, take notice of their surroundings." The focus moves away from genuine action toward dispositions to act that accumulate just at the horizon of movement. The apparatus of security prepares its subjects, calibrating their tendencies to act through a system of coded alerts, readying them against danger. "Actionability" takes precedence over action, statistical inclination over language, calibration over containment. In such a landscape, Paul Virilio has remarked, the emphasis shifts from the "standardization of public opinion" to the "synchronization of public emotion." [14]

According to John Armitage, the "Be Ready" campaign, also put out by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, operates in this space of imminent mobility. The readiness it promotes has no real object, but is simply perpetuated in an endless cycle. The individualized "desire for mobility" -- the consumerist impulse -- is recoded and displaced onto the theaters of threat.[15] It is a theater where desire and fear cohabit, suspended at the threshold of action. Action, as such, is funneled into the arena of shopping, which functions as both pleasure and defense. At the affective level of readiness, combat and shopping, or fear and pleasure, work in conjunction. They constitute an interlocking mechanism of stimulation that is contradictory only at the level of language. Readiness, then, does not simply coalesce as a state of alarm: it is a state of ambiguous arousal. In the state of readiness, one is truly ready for anything, be it danger or desire.

Since readiness can be transmitted, it is a powerful social force. It can transform, traverse form, and overcome thought in a sweep of delicious delirium. People transmit affective resonances to each other and transform the vibe of rooms and situations. Through these transmissions, actors -- people, things, spaces -- become mutually attuned, sync with each other, or variously coincide. Or not. (I use "attunement" here rather than "relation" because it implies synchronization, hookups, coincidings; and unlike relationality, it does not imply distinction and spatial separation. With readiness, we are prompted to speak of attunements as much as we are of relations.) These transmissions can accumulate into something like a collective good will (as in a rally), or an excruciating anxiousness (as on a turbulent airplane). Moving across and between bodies, they generate a sense of coincidences between subjects and objects. Examples abound. In times of trouble, a feeling of solidarity binds groups together and turns them against other aggregates. When we want to complain, we search for allies. Captivated by a familiar mix, we move together to the beat, infusing the atmosphere with cadence, emitting and inhabiting rhythmic codes with the entire body sensorium. If the moment is right, we can "lose ourselves" in the collective energy and its waves of sensation. Such energies can also turn aggressive: we can lose ourselves in a violent protest or a barroom brawl.

These affective transmissions act at multiple scales of organization, from the individual to the crowd, and they carry with them the potential of redistributing energies and reassigning roles. What we understand as individuals and multiplicities can be understood in terms of relatively stabilized states that can be identified, even though they can quickly

recombine in other levels of organization -- other kinds of recombinant reality -- for which we do not yet have a shared terminology.

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Often more forceful than ideas, readiness can be replicated to a certain degree -- as in advertising, or the tried-and-true mechanisms of "rallying the crowd" in political speech. So it is with DJ-ing, religious ritual, and drill. In this sense it can be formulized. Yet readiness can also emerge in an unplanned way; it can self-organize. It can be generated collectively and polyrhythmically -- emerging from the interactions of various forces and practices, and out of individually- and collectively-acquired patterns of response. In this "emergent" sense, too, it can be replicated -- as with a certain move or gesture that propagates across a dance community. Its source can (simply) be a critical mass of affective transmissions that begin, over time, to bond a community and set the stage for a shared practice, intensifying the accumulation of knowledge, technology, and materials.

Something is said to be emergent when it exhibits the capacity to demonstrate powers at higher levels of organization that do not exist at other levels. Understood as a system of complex interactions, properties of the combination as a whole are more than the sum of its individual parts. (As such what is emergent can't only be grasped with a top-down analytical approach -- i.e., begin with the whole and dissect it into constituent parts.) Something like this is to be found in Manuel DeLanda's concept of nonlinear history, where historical transformation is not a linear advance up the ladder of progress but a crossing of nonlinear critical thresholds. As DeLanda explains, "Much as a given compound (water, for example) may exist in several distinct states (solid, liquid, or gas) and may switch from stable state to stable state at critical points in the intensity of temperature (called phase transitions), so a human society may be seen as a 'material' capable of undergoing these changes of state as it reaches a critical mass in terms of density of settlement, amount of energy consumed, or even intensity of interaction." [16] One can posit multi-layered, resonating levels of organization, temporarily stabilized in form (or material states). These levels may have very different logics and rhythms. Even though they may be locked in resonance with each other, they always contain the potential for variation or emergence -- spontaneous or triggered generation of a new level of reality. Between these regions of potential there are no boundaries, only thresholds.

Yet while readiness is an emergent phenomenon, it is one that can, at least in part, be directed through compositional forces and delineations.

These "formulizers" bring in considerations of language. (Even though readiness itself can be understood as sub-symbolic -- as field of force rather than pattern of form -- considerations of language must be introduced when considering its structuring dynamics. Readiness, like affect, is not a linguistic phenomenon, but its "formulizers" are, in part.) These compositional forces and delineations are not forms so much as they are form-machines. They are structuring chords that operate at multiple levels of organization and stability. When they cross a certain threshold of organization, and are enacted in practice, they can eventualize forms. In this sense they are not things but enactable capacities -- enactable capacities-to-structure. They are activation-shapers, understood through their various instantiations.

Readiness is a state of affective organization that is stable enough to be "formulized," then, and replicated or applied as a template, regardless of whether this formulization is planned or emergent. Such formulizations could be applied as technologies of control, where the "formula" is a kind of control-script. Or perhaps they simply constitute an implicit stage direction. Yet readiness is inherently an unstable phenomenon. Its expressions in practice are not predictable. The modulating formula can change at any time by way of its instantiation in practice.

The modulating formula exists in time, providing a calibrating infrastructure through which things move, or beat, rhythmically. It is not a mechanism of control since it can always be disrupted and transformed. Yet it has effects: it shapes action-tendencies. It carries with it compositional imperatives both material and rhythmic. It sets out formal dynamics, interweaving programs, actors, parts, and tendencies. It is a formalizing machine that works through the shaping of potential.

In a sense, any number of forms will do, as long as the formula is in place. Consider popular entertainment: in the soap melodrama or the Hollywood action-adventure movie, it doesn't matter who the characters are, or where it takes place, so long as the formula holds. A bad movie, predictable and transparent, is referred to as "formulaic." When someone finds a productive way of doing something, one is said to have found a "formula." Even tragedy itself could be understood as a formula. The objects are ultimately interchangeable, their status fluid. They can change from hostile to friendly, object of attack to that of acquisition, prompted by the dispositions of the embodied agents that mobilize them.

To grasp the operation of the modulating formula, we cannot focus on meaning alone. Following Suely Rolnik, once more, we can speak of

resonance as much as representation; living presence as much as formal presence. What is central to the operation of the formula is *jouissance*, the kind of perverse enjoyment that both attracts and repels us -- something like a "morbid curiosity" about the direction and objects of our looks, and what we don't want to see, as we find with images of war or catastrophe. Here scopophilic pleasures and surveillant anxieties cohabit. To acknowledge this domain is to admit danger and conflict as constitutive elements of attraction -- manifest in the unpredictable, perilous web of intrigue that pulls us into the narrative world, and which compels us to inhabit the drama. In the next moment, we could be the victim. We do not know what danger lurks ahead, but we must continue at our peril. At any moment, desire could meet its constitutive other -- death. As Bataille would say, what compels us is the possibility of union.[17]

The modulating formula cannot be deciphered or interpreted: we miss its resonance if we engage it only within the field of the ideological. Ultimately, no one can control the formula's manifestations and effects: it seems to take on a life of its own, like the silly pop tune that you can't get out of your head, propagating across a community and, at least at some level, developing social bonds. A dance move; a repetitive behavior; a conspiracy theory; a religious ritual; a catchy phrase; a celebrity fascination; a gambling addiction; a design preoccupation; an erotic compulsion; a fetish. The modulating formula takes root to the extent that it connects with something "in you" -- in Lacanian terms, something that is in you more than yourself. In this sense the readying formula is something of the order of the "sinthome" -- that variation on the concept of the symptom that pertains to enjoyment rather than meaning.[18] It is something like a perverse motif, a propagating pattern that generates excitations and structures disposition, yet at its core is meaningless.

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The modulating formula, then, is an agile, aformal form that can maneuver between the affective and symbolic registers, or between dispositions and concepts. It traffics between the intensive and extensive registers, acting as a structuring component or activation-shaper. It functions at once as an actor, a conductor, and a surface-effect. It can locate objects and make them potential objectives; yet it manifests a deformational affective potential that upsets the order of the grid and thereby opens up new assemblages of agency.[19] In these recombinant realities one does not seek to represent so much as engender and traverse. One must look to relays between the levels, transversal mixings, redistributions of energy and meaning -- how modification of potentials (whether intentional or

emergent) are conducted; how they globally reconfigure in ways that might result in amplification or dampening. The form/content bifurcation and the signifier/signified duality are avoided. Not to mention the old oppositions -- real/artificial, nature/culture, body/other.[20] What emerges instead is something like a distinction between form and substance -- or matter, content, and expression. What we understand as "content" is formed matter, codification its order.

To understand an object at the level of modulation, one does not look to the object, but also to the things with which it functions in combination, and to the things with which it transmits intensities, and with "which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed." [21] In other words it is to understand it as an ecology, articulating it in terms of compositions (aggregates, assemblies) as well as transformational processes (transmissions, flows). We can think of multiple levels of organization, from the minimal to the maximal, and the ongoing translations between higher order and lower order states or aggregates. What we recognize as form is a temporary stabilization.

A body can be anything: it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a book, a mind or an idea; it can be a social body, a collectivity. The outcome of each encounter depends on what forms of composition these encountering bodies are able to enter into.[22] Subjectivity is a complex body that emerges out of an alliance of many simple bodies. It's all one mix -- no a priori differentiation between body and other, or subject and object, or thought and action. These are not given but emergent: a material state, and a condition of subjectivity, emerges out of the mix. Positions are adopted; roles emerge; identities coalesce.

In these recombinant realities, it is not a matter of either/or, but of different registers and circuits of emergence. Images enmesh with databases, defined bodies with ontological choreographies, spatial delineations with abstract compositions. Between these assemblages, transversal operations and exchanges are conducted. Whether or not a term like "modulating formula" is politically useful, the challenge stands: to articulate the structuring chords that do not "discipline" bodies so much as orchestrate the endless recombination of micro-variations that occur below and across the surface of bounded spaces and bodies -- micro-variations through which both positions and dispositions are structured.