

**ARTICLE**

# The ethical (and political) status of theorizing the subject: Deleuze and Guattari

**Bert Olivier**

Department of Philosophy, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

**Correspondence**

Bert Olivier, Department of Philosophy, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa  
Email: olivierg1@ufs.ac.za; bertzaza@yahoo.co.uk

**Abstract**

With Lacan's exhortation that the subject's ethical task is to "take up" his or her desire as its point of departure, this paper thematizes the question of the ethics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the subject, as articulated (mainly) in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). It is argued that, given their ontological conceptualization of the subject as an open, complex "agency-assemblage" that is ineluctably characterized ("virtually", if not "actually") by a rhizomatic and multiplicitous structure (every subject always already being "a crowd"), their conception enables one to address the issue of the ethical status of theory in psychology in an exemplary manner. The reason for this claim is that their complex, multifaceted theorization of the subject construes it in a nonsubstantialist, "machinic", or rather "structural-machinic" manner (that is, with a complex structure that operates like a becoming-machine). This stresses the enduring possibility for change on the part of the subject – something that has to be presupposed in any psychological or psychoanalytic theory of the subject, lest the possibility of efficacious therapeutic intervention be theoretically and ethically compromised. Another way of putting this is that, at the level of what Deleuze and Guattari termed "the abstract machine", the subject is overdetermined insofar as it comprises an indefinite sphere of "virtual" possibilities that may be actualized under certain conditions – the subject is always already more than what has been historically actualized. Moreover, such a theory allows for the "deterritorialization" of the subject along "nomadic" "lines of flight" that effectively resist its endless "territorialization" by the "state apparatus".

**KEYWORDS**

abstract machine, actual, assemblage, Deleuze, deterritorialization, Guattari, lines of flight, rhizome, subject, virtual

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to talk about the ethical task of the subject? And how does theorizing the subject relate to this in ethical terms, if at all? What I propose to do in this paper, is to attempt a demonstration of the indissoluble link between these two instances of ethical (and, by implication, political) engagement. To put it in a nutshell, if ethical action on the part of the subject presupposes a certain “freedom” to act, then theorizing the subject of and in psychology presupposes a subject who is not forever caught in the grip of pathologizing forces and has no room to manoeuvre. In short, it presupposes a subject-in-becoming, or more tersely, a becoming-subject. Such a conception is already perceptible in Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of the subject as caught in the complexifying, intertwined registers of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, each of which marks a different subject position. In the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari it is developed further and, arguably, considerably radicalized in terms of the complexity of the subject. Although one may point to fundamental similarities between Lacan's idea of the subject, on the one hand, and that of Deleuze and Guattari, on the other (Olivier, 2014), I believe that closer scrutiny of the latter would yield dividends as far as insight into the conditions of ethically oriented, therapeutic change is concerned. To this end, a slight detour via Lacan's exhortation, that the subject should “take up” her or his desire is required.

## 2 | LACAN ON ASSUMING YOUR DESIRE

Towards the end of the 7th Seminar – *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* – Lacan (1997) brought into focus something that most people, including psychotherapists, would find wholly disconcerting, if not anathema to what they usually take to be their vocation, namely to provide therapy, a “cure” of sorts, to their patients. Importantly, I believe that “cure” is here understood, most of the time, as that which enables their patients to “carry on” living their lives in a society inescapably governed by ethical conventions of different kinds, including psychotherapeutic conventions. This corresponds with what Lacan (1997, p. 314) designated as “the service of goods that is the position of traditional ethics”. To those unfamiliar with Freud's and Lacan's work, it may come as a big surprise that Lacan here explicitly opposed this position of traditional ethics to what he called the “pole of desire”, which is familiar to psychoanalysis, and that, moreover, is intimately bound up with ethical judgment of a kind that it gives the (following) “question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?” (Lacan, 1997, p. 314).

It is not always easy to understand Lacan's poetically inclined prose, but it appears to me that, insofar as he inscribed this “ethical” question in the domain of “the tragic sense of life” (Lacan, 1997, p. 313) – against the backdrop of his earlier analysis of Sophocles's tragedy of *Antigone* – he was hinting that there is an ineluctable gap between the desire of the tragic heroine and that of the person (in the case of *Antigone*, her uncle, the king, Creon) who has the task of restoring “the service of goods” or the realm of conventional morality. This is the case, even if the latter, having been volitionally involved in the unfolding of a tragic series of events, is “tragically” changed by them too. The tragic hero is someone who follows his or her desire through to the (sometimes bitter) end, regardless of whether it conflicts with conventional morality; we see an understanding of this embodied in the great tragedies: *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*, to mention a few. But what does that tell us about ordinary people, who usually live according to the tenets of conventional morality (even when one strays from these tenets, they are implicated in one's actions), and are no tragic heroes? It seems that Lacan was quite aware of this, but believed that psychoanalysis enables one to understand, through the example of the tragic heroine, that the ethical structure of character depends on the unconditional assumption of one's desire – that which makes you into the “singular” person you are. By implication, although few humans are tragic figures, every person is animated by a unique, singular desire, which is usually covered up by all the options of choice and behaviour foisted upon one by the customs and fashions of the day, and that most people succumb to not even knowing that they have relinquished their desire. And sometimes even ordinary people arguably manage to pursue their singular desire (Olivier, 2005), for instance the classical jazz pianist, Sebastian, a character in the recent film *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), who yearns to have his own jazz joint, but settles for playing

in a jazz band run by a friend for a while, then eventually, encouraged by the (lost) love of his life, Mia, ends up opening his very own jazz club, "Seb's". Taking up one's desire also has political implications, of course. Lacan's (1997) analysis of Antigone's assumption of her desire highlighted its ethical as well as political significance (Creon's unavoidable act of sentencing her to death for burying her two brothers' corpses was an eminently political act, in response to what was such an act on her part, too); the two are indissolubly connected.

Heidegger (1978, pp. 264–265) articulated this as the difference between "falling" (into convention) by the person who has been "thrown" (into the world, with no rhyme or reason), but who has the latent, though seldom actualized, capacity of becoming her or his own "project" (reconfiguring their lives according to their capacity to surpass convention or the realm of "everydayness"). The question then becomes: How can I be true to my *desire* (or "project") without necessarily being a tragic figure? Whatever the answer to this difficult question may be, one thing seems to me to be clear, namely that acting "in conformity with" one's desire presupposes the capacity to change, or act differently from what is dictated by the societal norms in which one's life is embedded. This, in turn, means that psychotherapists whose clinical work is *not* underpinned by a conception of the human subject that makes room for such fundamental change or reorientation regarding their ethical horizons, are *not* in a position to counsel their patients accordingly – that is, they are stuck within the bounds of convention, and convention, one should know by now, is not self-evidently justifiable (think of the race-oriented conventions of apartheid and Nazi anti-Semitism, or the "conventionally" accepted, cynical profiteering of some Wall Street bankers that has been exposed).

I believe that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis possesses the theoretical resources – so amply demonstrated by Ian Parker (2011, 196–199) – that justify psychotherapists' acknowledgement of the subject's capacity to question, and reconfigure their (ethical and political) "relationship with power", but here I would like to explore a different avenue to this effect, with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's elaboration on the complex constitution of the subject in their monumental *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Before embarking on this, however, it is important to note that their conception of desire, as articulated in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983, pp. 1–8), is fundamentally different from Lacan's; while the latter thought of desire in terms of lack – one desires because one "lacks", or desire is a function of lack (Lacan, 1977, p. 263) – Deleuze and Guattari construed desire as a positivity of sorts. Ontologically speaking, the world comprises an endless concatenation of desiring-machines, linked by "flows of desire", so that fundamentally everything is "process" and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, pp. 2–4; Olivier, 2014). The subject (if there is such a thing) appears, in recognizably poststructuralist fashion, in the interval between flows and their cessation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983), when becoming is fleetingly arrested into being, so that one can say that the "subject" is an amalgam of becoming and being.

### 3 | THE ASSEMBLAGE-SUBJECT

In true antisubstantialist, poststructuralist fashion, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explicitly denied that there was such a thing as "the subject": "a subject is never the condition of possibility of language or the cause of the statement: there is no subject, only collective assemblages of enunciation" (p. 130). However, from this remark it is apparent that they articulated an ontology that allows one to reconceptualize the notion of the "subject" that may be described as the "assemblage-subject", which surpasses the theoretical tendency towards solipsism of the self-transparent, "substantial" modern subject. Succinctly put, this means that the subject is rhizomatically configured or "structured" (except that "structure" is too static; "machinically connected" would be better), multiplicitous in its layered interconnectedness, comprising a virtual dimension of possible actualizations in the form of territorializations and deterritorializations, lines of flight and nomadic peregrinations. This is a nonsubstantialist conception of the subject that amply allows for the kind of change that usually accompanies psychotherapy; in fact, some might argue that it is too excessively marked by becoming or flux; that there is no inkling of "stability" here. This is not the case, though, as will become apparent below; for one thing, there is no "pure", "deterritorialized" subject, because it occupies a

position on a spectrum bounded at the other extreme by “territorialization”. What this amounts to will become clearer below, in the course of unpacking what these concepts comprise.

What did Deleuze and Guattari understand by “assemblage”? In *A Thousand Plateaus* they wrote that “subjectifications are not primary but result from a complex assemblage” (1987, p. 79). What this means is that someone is not, in substantialist fashion, first a kind of unitary subject and then enters into complex relations of reciprocity that constitute “assemblages”; the subject is always already an “assemblage” of sorts, which is something similar to what one finds in Lacan in terms of the complex relations among his three “registers” of the “real”, the symbolic and the imaginary (Olivier, 2004, 2006). What one learns from Deleuze and Guattari, too, is that subjectivity is always already a matter of a complex tension among different registers or subject-positions, for example the virtual, the actual, the discursive, and so on, except that their notion of the subject is more complex than Lacan’s. To be able to make sense of this, one should note Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the characteristics of an assemblage:

*On a first, horizontal, axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away. (1987, p. 88, emphasis in original)*

It is telling, as far as their emphasis on becoming instead of being is concerned, that “assemblage” is the not altogether successful translation of the French term, *agencement*, which means “arrangement”, but in an active sense, that is, as “processes of arranging, organising, and fitting together” (Livesey, 2010, p. 18). From this one may gather that the subject, considered as assemblage, is constantly engaged in such processes. It is more immediately apparent that a group of students in a lecture hall comprises an assemblage in the sense of a “*machinic assemblage* [emphasis in original] of bodies, of actions and passions”, and so on, than an individual subject does. Yet, is the “subject” not ineluctably embodied? And if we compare what Deleuze and Guattari said in ontological terms in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983, pp. 1–8) about “desiring-machines” being co-constitutive of a processual realm of “flows” (Olivier, 2014), then it follows that the subject, comprising various “desiring-machines” (such as tongue, lips, teeth, nose, ears, and so on), is tantamount, even at this “horizontal” level, to an assemblage of sorts, of “bodies”. It is easier to give credence to the claim that the subject is “a *collective assemblage of enunciation* [emphasis in original], of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 88), associating the subject, as one usually (and one-sidedly in idealistic terms) does, with the “incorporeal” sphere of the psychic, and easily forgetting the legitimate claims of the body.

Accounting for the latent dynamism, as well as the conservatism, of the “subject” (among other assemblages), Deleuze and Guattari’s allusion to the “(re)territorialized” as well as the sharp, “deterritorializing” sides of an assemblage is a negotiation of the Scylla of frozen stability and the Charybdis of excessive flux, positioning assemblages in general, and the subject in particular, in the spectral field between these two extremes instead. The “subject” is, therefore, neither rigidly “stable” (like the hyperstrengthened Freudian ego), nor inscrutably “in motion”; it is, *and* is not, “stable” or, likewise, “in flux”. “(Re)territorialization” here means being made subject to the constrictive and restrictive regime of some or other power in the guise of an ideology, discourse, code of conduct, and so on, while “deterritorialization” bears on (*inter alia* subjects as) assemblages being liberated from these along what they called “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). At no time, however, is the subject (as assemblage) totally, irredeemably, assimilated to either the one pole or the other, but always exists somewhere on the continuum between the two. Obviously this not only implicates “spatial” characteristics, but temporal ones as well; an assemblage is “open” to spatial connections with other bodies – including other assemblages – and given their status relative to de- or reterritorialization, its specific configuration at a specific time may vary greatly in duration. An audience at a piano recital is an assemblage that disperses after an hour or two, while a sports team competing in a major league is a more stable assemblage, although still subject to change (when members of the team are replaced by others, or when their strategy of play evolves).

The “subject” is a special case. As assemblage, it exists in time and space, comprising all the elements listed above under content and expression, horizontal and vertical axes. At any given time the subject as assemblage is open to its social, physical and psychic environment at all these levels, continually and intermittently making (and undoing) physical connections with other bodies, psychical and “communicational” connections with other persons and with animals (as when one plays with a pet). Strictly speaking, the subject as assemblage is in the most radical way engaged in a process of becoming or deterritorialization, which may be exacerbated in the case of someone who pursues change incessantly, consciously or unconsciously, and mitigated when someone counters all the deterritorializing “causes” of change (psychic, physical, economic, social, political) impinging on her or him, by means of reterritorializing strategies of all kinds (going to church, seeing a psychologist for “stability”, consulting a financial advisor). The pertinent aspect of this for the present theme is that, to the degree that a psychotherapist (whether psychoanalytical or affiliated to a different school of thought) takes cognizance of this assemblage-character of the patient or analysand as subject, he or she enters into a relationship with the assemblage-subject, modifying it in different ways for the duration of the relationship (and being modified by it in turn). And unless, theoretically speaking, this constitutive openness of the assemblage-subject to new attachments or connections – that is, its susceptibility to salutary (or, for that matter, detrimental) change – functions from the outset as a premise of the therapeutic relationship, it is doubtful that one could call it ethical.

#### 4 | RHIZOMATIC SUBJECTIVITY

The concept of the “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari’s work resonates with that of “assemblage”, and to an extent the two may seem synonymous, except that “rhizome” seems to me to be more encompassing. One could say that the formation and dismantling of assemblages happen through rhizomatic operations, which would therefore indicate their “structure” – except that the latter term belongs to a different thought paradigm, that of “reality” as a structured totality of entities, hierarchically arranged according to a model that is antithetical to that of the rhizome, namely the “arboreal” (with its suggestions of roots, trunk, branches, and so on).

Deleuze and Guattari discussed the rhizome under principles of “connection and heterogeneity” (1987, p. 7), “multiplicity” (p. 8), “asignifying rupture” (p. 9), and “cartography and decalomania” (p. 12). What do these mean? The first two simply suggest that a rhizome can be connected at any “point” along its constitutive “line(s)” to anything else, and that what is connected in this way can be “anything”. That is, not only semiotic signs are (inter)connected in this manner, connections occur all the time among ontologically diverse, heterogeneous “things”, which means that – insofar as the rhizome is the “primary” working form of reality – “things” as well as signs can only be said to “be” (or become) to the extent that they are rhizomatically linked. The heterogeneity typical of the rhizome is apparent where they observe “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). At present the emergent, so-called “internet of things” is an instance of such a rhizomatic network of expanding relations of electronic or digital interconnection among industrial objects themselves, and between these and people; the fact that it is hailed as the “fourth industrial revolution” ignores its deleterious effects in terms of the reinforcement of “control societies” (Deleuze, 1992). This will not be explored at present.

The second characteristic of the rhizome, “multiplicity”, emphasizes the “substantive” nature of the multiple – that is, that it is not merely adjectivally related to a primary quantity of entities that is said to form a multiplicity at a secondary level. Multiplicity is primary. Moreover, they are rhizomatic, and therefore have no “unity” at subject or object levels, because their “determinations, magnitudes and dimensions” (1987, p. 8) are always changing, in the process modifying the character of the multiplicity. An assemblage is therefore “precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections”, and furthermore, there are “no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8).

By "asignifying rupture" (1987, p. 9) they appear to have had in mind a crucial difference between rhizomes (assemblages, multiplicities) and "structure". Whereas the latter may be decisively broken, or cut in a manner that signifies a qualitatively insurmountable "rupture", when the rhizome is shattered or broken it does not signify anything as conclusive as this, but commences expanding again along one of its remaining "lines", no matter how minimal its remains ("ants", as "animal rhizome", for instance; 1987, p. 9). The principle of "cartography and decalcomania", or "map" and "tracing" (1987, p. 12), in turn, differentiates between the rhizome as a "map", on the one hand, and a "tracing" in relation to a "deep structure" (Chomsky) and "genetic axis", on the other. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the latter two ideas do

*not constitute a departure from the representative model of the tree, or root – pivotal taproot or fascicles (for example, Chomsky's "tree" is associated with a base sequence and represents the process of its own generation in terms of binary logic). A variation on the oldest form of thought (1987, p. 12).*

The difference between the two, they claim, is that a map, unlike a tracing (which obeys the "tree logic" of "reproduction"), allows "experimentation in contact with the real" (1987, p. 12). Moreover, the map is part of the rhizome, is "open and connectable", is performance-oriented, can be perpetually modified, reversed and reworked, and has "multiple entryways", in contrast with a tracing, which always returns to "the same" and involves "competence" (1987, p. 12–13). It is clear that Deleuze and Guattari are proposing an ontological conception that is *radically* different from the customary foundationalist one of western thought. They also offer a summary of the rhizome's features:

*Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees, or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added ( $n + 1$ ). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with  $n$  dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ( $n - 1$ ). When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. These lines, or lineaments, should not be confused with lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions. Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure. (ibid., p. 21)*

From this brief reconstruction of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "rhizome", it is already apparent that to talk of "the subject" in these terms amounts to something completely incommensurate with any substantialist or foundationalist conception of it, that is, one that is premised on the subject being unitary, structured and stable (such as the rationally founded, self-transparent Cartesian subject). Instead, the "subject" – if one could even call it that, and which one should really write "under erasure", as Derrida would say – emerges here as never complete, open, multiply connected *and* connectable, constantly in motion in certain, changeable directions, and inclusive of heterogeneity. In other words, this rhizomatically configured and constantly reconfiguring "subject", as assemblage-under-construction, is ontologically heterogeneous in the sense that it involves not only psychic, "rational", "subjective" states or articulations, but physical and somatic ones as well. Moreover, all of these are constantly connected to one another, their ontological diversity notwithstanding: one's psychic equilibrium (or disequilibrium) is not merely related to the news that your job application has failed; it is just as intimately connected to the persistent pain in your chest, or the fact that the roof of your house is leaking. Just as your own becoming-subject is caught in the web of these interconnections, the "things" that are implicated here (like the leaking roof) also change or "become" in (inter) relation to the

subject. It is difficult to imagine, or form an adequate image of, the truly intricate, infinitely complex, becoming-character of the “subject” (which one might perhaps call the “quasi-subject”) that emerges from Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructuralist scrutiny of the ontological fabric of the world, within which the subject is enmeshed and in tandem with which it is incessantly, sometimes significantly and at other times subtly or minutely, changing. One can truly speak of the (human) subject as one that is constantly “under construction”. And, although one is not privy to the sphere of other animals’ psychic experience, one may perhaps surmise that change is the rule there too, even if it occurs along other lines than those peculiar to the “world-encompassing” human. Given this theoretical backdrop, is it at all possible *not* to ascribe to the subject-in-therapy of the clinic a sufficiently “open” character to vindicate psychotherapeutic intervention in ethical terms? Or, inversely, is this theoretical perspective on the subject commensurate with a psychotherapeutic approach that acknowledges the subject’s capacity to change? I believe the answers to these two questions are negative and affirmative respectively, and, furthermore, that, without such an affirmation of the “becoming-subject” – in the place of which one might tacitly posit a centred, founded, unitary (modern) subject of some kind, whether in idealist or materialist terms – the psychotherapist would lack ethical vindication of her or his intervention, because theoretically speaking such intervention would lack any prospect of salutary (or deleterious, for that matter) change on the part of the subject. It would amount to a mere “rearrangement of the deckchairs”.

## 5 | THE ABSTRACT MACHINE, AND THE VIRTUAL/ACTUAL

Without considering what these French thinkers call the “abstract machine” and the “virtual/actual”, one’s grasp of their theoretical facilitation of the psychotherapist’s ethical stance would remain inadequate. In a nutshell, one might say that the potential for change on the part of the subject – already articulated to some degree above – also depends on its being an “abstract machine”, with “virtual” possibilities that may become “actual(ized)” under certain circumstances. From the following remark one may gather that an abstract machine is something like an unspecified ontological matrix that harbours the possibility of diverse, heterogeneous phenomena. Referring to, among others, Chomsky’s linguistic theory of generative grammar (“universal” deep structures enabling the utterance of specific, “grammatical” sentences), they observed:

*Our criticism of these linguistic models is not that they are too abstract but, on the contrary, that they are not abstract enough, that they do not reach the abstract machine [emphasis in original] that connects a language to the semantic and pragmatic contents of statements, to collective assemblages of enunciation, to a whole micropolitics of the social field. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7)*

From this one can gather that what could perhaps be called the “abstract machine of (or underpinning) language” is what makes possible constructs like Chomsky’s, De Saussure’s or Peirce’s linguistics or semiotics, semantics, linguistic pragmatics (the Wittgensteinian or Habermasian varieties, for instance) interconnected (assemblages of) assertions and even micro-political social interactions (which are unavoidably language-oriented). The qualifying term “abstract” should here be understood as simultaneously furthest removed from so-called “concrete” entities, but *also* from other so-called “abstract” phenomena like linguistic theories, *and* “closest” to them as the condition of their possibility *and* impossibility. The last, paradoxical phrase simply means that the “abstract machine of language” has to be presupposed for these phenomena to become actual(ized), but also for them to be relegated to possibility or latency. One is tempted to say that, in this respect, Deleuze and Guattari’s “abstract machine” (and for the same reason their notion of the “virtual”) is reminiscent of Lacan’s register of the “real”, which surpasses the imaginary as well as symbolization – in fact, it functions as the “internal limit” of the symbolic or language, as Joan Copjec (2002, p. 95–96) pointed out. Similarly, the “abstract machine” that may be “glimpsed” via phenomena constituting a recognizable field – or as Deleuze and Guattari would say, a “field of consistency” of some kind – comprises a kind of “inner limit” to those phenomena being interrelated; qualitatively different ones would not allude to the same abstract machine as the “source”

of their production. Graham Livesey (2010, p. 18) foregrounded the relationship between assemblages and abstract machines where he wrote:

*Assemblages, as conceived of by Deleuze and Guattari, are complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning. Assemblages operate through desire as abstract machines, or arrangements, that are productive and have function; desire is the circulating energy that produces connections.*

What does this imply for a conception of the subject? As far as I can gather, that aspect of the subject, as a rhizomatically configured (and constantly, through intermittent de- and reterritorializations, *reconfiguring*) assemblage, which is generative or productive of new states of (inter)connection, is the “subject as abstract machine”. But at no time should this “becoming-subject” be regarded, in anthropocentric, humanistic fashion, as being somehow “fundamental” to knowledge, or “reality”; this would amount to a variety of idealism. Recall that the subject, as assemblage, is rhizomatically interconnected with other assemblages – in fact, one might say that, together with all other assemblages, “it” comprises an intermittently reconfiguring, encompassing “meta-assemblage” (to coin a term “under erasure”), as long as one keeps in mind that the latter is constituted by different assemblages, such as the subject or (perhaps rather) subjects, conceived of in “posthumanist” fashion. It is therefore not surprising that Deleuze and Guattari are among the most important seminal thinkers with respect to the emerging field of “the posthuman” (Braidotti, 2013).

The relationship between the “virtual” and the “actual” bears some resemblance to the relationship between the abstract machine and the states it generates. Constantin Boundas (2010, p. 300) described it as follows:

*In Deleuze's ontology, the virtual and the actual are two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real. The actual/real are states of affairs, bodies, bodily mixtures and individuals. The virtual/real are incorporeal events and singularities on a plane of consistency, belonging to the pure past – the past that can never be fully present. Without being or resembling the actual, the virtual nonetheless has the capacity to bring about actualisation and yet the virtual never coincides or can be identified with its actualisation.*

In terms of what is here theorized as the “assemblage-subject” (or the assemblage-agency-subject, to stress its becoming-character), the virtual is/are the non-deterministically conceived condition(s) for actualization(s) of possibilities of rhizomatic (inter)connection between its own assemblage-configuration-in-process and other assemblages. Both are real, but only the actual is realized in the present, only to become past immediately. The virtual comprises all presents that have become past, as well as (virtual) unique, unrepeatable “singularities” that have the capacity of being actualized in the future present.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

If this sounds unbearably abstract, it is not difficult, in conclusion, to match this description to a thousand daily occurrences, for instance: Mia (as assemblage-subject) longs for an opportunity to demonstrate her prowess as an actress, which necessarily has to draw upon the virtual real of something that has not been actualized under assemblage conditions where its “true” character is demonstrated. Someone notices her acting in the assemblage-context of a one-woman play written and acted by herself and attended by only a few people, including this “someone”, who happens to be a producer for a film still to be shot, and who invites her for an audition, which succeeds beyond her wildest dreams. She gets her break and “becomes” a famous actress. To begin with, as an embodied, socially and culturally situated individual, Mia is always already – like everyone else – an assemblage-subject. Immersing herself in this situation of acting involves entering into (inter)connections with other assemblage-subjects, where new connections are made, and where deterritorializations as well as reterritorializations occur. This is only possible because of the



abstract machine that Mia comprises, and which operates through her desire, actualizing the virtual singularities that are the conditions for such actualization. Should it happen that Mia's rise proves to be short-lived, and she falls from grace as quickly as she rose to popularity, she may approach a psychotherapist. If the latter receives her from the perspective of the modern subject, there would arguably be no theoretical room for salutary change on Mia's part, given the implications of its substantialistic, anthropocentric isolation from other subjects, let alone other ontologically heterogeneous beings, like animals.

However, if the notion of the "subject" as assemblage – which I have argued to be implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's thought – forms the theoretical point of departure, it would allow the therapist recourse to the many possibilities of rhizomatic assemblage-interconnections that are available on the virtual "plane of consistency" (where a heterogeneous patchwork of flows temporarily "gel"). Accordingly, she or he would have many possible interventions, and actualizations of therapeutic virtualities, available. These would include, most obviously, Mia's talents for writing and for acting, which harbour many other virtual possibilities of actualization, as well as related talents, like singing, not to mention the contingent role of rhizomatic connections (like the presence of the film-producer at her one-woman performance, and initially favourable public receptivity to her first film appearance) that were decisive for both her initial success and later perceived "failure". In a different scenario, the virtual possibilities of actualization could include actualizations of political virtualities, such as Mia setting out to actualize a social dispensation in the domain of acting that is commensurable with political justice, for example working towards the inclusion of actors from hitherto excluded ethnicities in an actors' guild or workers' union. A therapist working within a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical field would have all these theoretical "elements" and their rhizomatic configurations available for therapeutic intervention, in this way enabling subjects' reassessment of their relationship with power (Parker, 2011: 196–199), simultaneously "preparing" the subject of therapy for possible political action. As Parker reminds one, however, a "revolution in subjectivity" in the clinic is no guarantee of a social revolution outside the clinic. The ethical status of the theory at stake here (that of the becoming-subject, formulated by Deleuze and Guattari) is such, however, that it *does* allow for change in the form of ethical and political action.

In sum: Deleuze and Guattari made the "model" of a rhizomatically conceived assemblage-subject available to psychotherapists, with its capacities of deterritorialization pertaining to constricting territorialities along multiple lines of flight, not excluding intermittent (and temporary) reterritorializations that will ineluctably, in turn, be subject to possible future deterritorializations. Moreover, in contrast with the modern theoretical option, the assemblage-articulated theoretical orientation would be ethical (and political) insofar as it allows for intelligible change or "becoming" on the part of a complexly configured assemblage-subject.

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**Bert Olivier's** principal position is that of Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. He has published academic articles and books across a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, art theory, architecture, literature, psychoanalytic theory, cinema, communication studies and social theory. Bert received the South African Stals Prize for Philosophy in 2004, and a Distinguished Professorship from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2012. He is also a National Research Foundation B-rated researcher.

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