Building Sensorium: Perceptual and Affectual Art Processes

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ABSTRACT

Gilles Deleuze assumes that the source of creativity/the new (as opposed to just the development of what already is implicit in existing things) lies outside conscious thinking. Deleuze argues that film mimics our automatic processing of visual input and therefore is able to intervene in this processing in ways that conscious thought cannot, at the level of the most basic sensory experience. Since computers can and already offer input to multiple senses, can they do similar work? The authors discuss Deleuze’s approach to finding the difference between development and creativity via the analysis of film technology and ask whether anyone is using computers the way Deleuze conceives of those film-makers who are philosophic using film? The focus of this article is on creativity in the domain of art making.

KEYWORDS
Deleuze, Creativity, Virtual Reality, Speculative Fiction, Computer-Based Art

INTRODUCTION

There is a problem with creativity: the danger is that any experiment/approach which dreams of escaping conventional parameters will nevertheless inscribe these parameters in its assumptions. The difference between development and creativity has to be approached with some rigor and the question, “How do you get to the new?” has to be approached with some caution. In answer to this question, Gilles Deleuze’s assumption is that the source of creativity/the new (as opposed to just the development of what already is implicit in existing things) lies outside conscious thinking (Deleuze, 1985). For this reason, new ways of thinking begin in new forms of sensory experience. And “creating new forms of thought/experience” implies building a new sensorium which would extend the “human” sensorium beyond its present parameters.

This paper focuses on Deleuze’s philosophical approach to these problems and asks whether Deleuze’s solutions, solutions that are grounded in the analysis of film technology, can be brought into dialog with current debates on the ways computing technologies and computer art affect human creativity. In section one the authors discuss the problem of creativity. Section two is a very brief summary of Deleuze’s understanding of cognition. Section three explores Deleuze’s approach to creativity via his analysis of film technology. Section four examines VR technology, particular its immersive and interactive qualities, to ask if anyone is using computers in the way Deleuze conceives of those film-makers who are philosophic using film. Section five discusses Improvising Consciousness, a computer-based art project made by one of the authors (Anstey), reflecting on both the process and products of the project to see how they map to a Deleuzian solution/perspective to the problem of getting to the new.

DOI: 10.4018/IJACDT.2018070103
THE PROBLEM OF CREATIVITY

The particular problem with creativity discussed here, has its roots in post-structuralism and is known as the problem of re-inscription. The original problem deals with language itself. The assumption is that the unconscious is structured like language, that the subject is constructed through language, and that consequently we never escape the laws (of gender, of family relations, of power) that are encoded in language - there can be no revolution (Lemaire, 1977).

However, this notion is encountered in many fields. Here are some other examples:

- Photoshop was an advancement in image processing which greatly expanded our ability to manipulate images. However, these operations were given traditional terms – burning, dodging. In this way, Photoshop re-inscribed the darkroom. This re-inscription was enabling in so far as it facilitated users’ transition. But to what extent did it limit users’ ability to develop the full potential of the program by also re-inscribing the limits of analog photography?
- Every movement to free a minority from oppression/discrimination begins with an attempt to redefine the pejorative term that has been imposed on them. They do this by embracing what had been a term of shame and transforming it into one of pride. Black is Beautiful, We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used To It. But Judith Butler in her essay “Critically Queer” makes clear the paradox of these attempts (Butler, 1993). Every positive use of Queer inevitably re-inscribes and reproduces the pejorative category of queerness. The new meaning of queer just becomes to some extent one variation of the old meaning.

Working with/in language, visual sign systems, film grammar, computer programs, HC interfaces, programming languages, computing devices, may simply be a wheel-spinning exercise of embodying and developing existing forms.

So, how do you get to the new?
Deleuze’s assumption is that the source of creativity/the new lies outside conscious thinking.

- For this reason, new ways of thinking begin in new forms of sensory experience.
- Creating new forms of thought/experience implies building a new sensorium which would extend the human sensorium beyond its present parameters.

DELEUZE AND COGNITION

In Deleuze, cognitive processes have their origin in sensory input. The living being is immersed in a flow of sensations and the reactions they produce. Initially, there is little or no distance between sensation and reaction. Gradually, as systems of perception become more complex, a gap emerges between stimulus and response. Sensations are transmitted to the brain which can transmit the stimulus into one of several motor responses. So, a squirrel can see a dog at some distance and can react in a number of ways – attack, stand still, run. But there’s nothing like self-consciousness involved here. The brain is just a switching mechanism – a center of indetermination.

There are, however, what Deleuze calls habits (Deleuze, 1985). Over time the living being registers that certain responses to certain stimuli produce positive results. Again, register here does not mean self-awareness or self-reflection. But it does indicate some separation from the immediate experience in which several, similar experiences are contracted to form an association – if A then B will follow. The resulting structure of habits constructs the world of the living being.

In his book The Open, Giorgio Agamben describes Uexkull’s experiments with the tick (Agamben, 2004). The tick is surrounded by sunlight, colors, birds, bees, etc. – a torrent of sensory input. But it is unaware of most of this because its experience of reality is filtered. This experience is limited to three habitual associations – the sensation of sunlight signals it to climb, the sensation of butyric
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