

## On Signs and Meaning

In Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can find a strong attempt by the authors to combat any system of signs that create a static, unchanging interpretation. Generally, these lead to fascism—the *desire to be controlled*. In religion, and particularly in Christianity, we can find this motif in fundamentalism. As we can see fundamentalism seemingly on the rise, what is an alternative that stays away from such a system? What are some symptoms of it that we may be able to find not only in our world, but also even in our own lives?

### *Faciality*

Deleuze and Guattari call the Face that which decodes and overcodes body and head into a single object: a face. This Face should be understood as an abstract image—a white wall and a black hole. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that these two objects always follow two concepts: signification (signifiante) and subjectification. Signification is never without a white wall and subjectification never without a black hole. At their intersection is where the face appears. In the movies, the close-up treats the face as a landscape—again, the white wall and black hole.<sup>1</sup> Deleuze writes that “Christian education” exerts spiritual control over both the abstract face and the landscape by overcoding them into a predefined system of meaning. But, I suggest we read “Christian education” here more as “fundamentalist

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota, 1987), p 172.

tendencies” as it appears that in other sections of this work that he isn't necessarily against religion—or Christianity—in general, but rather a specific form of it.

Signification happens, regardless of one's approach. In a motion not unlike Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari state that “the world begins to signify before anyone knows *what* it signifies; the signified is given without being known.”<sup>2</sup> Then, Deleuze gives us examples of this: “Your wife looked at you with a funny expression. And this morning the mailman handed you a letter from the IRS and crossed his fingers. Then you stepped in a pile of dog [feces].....It doesn't matter what it means, it's still signifying.”<sup>3</sup> There is always this act of signification, regardless of meaning. Signs always refer to other signs in an infinitely circular pattern—Deleuze's hint at Nietzsche's eternal return. Yet, fundamentalist tendencies take a portion of these signs and deem it knowable. Then, a class of priests that interpret everything is added, but Deleuze points out that they are deceptive because their interpretation always reimparts the signifier—the Face. Hence, “the ultimate signified is therefore the signifier itself, in its redundancy or 'excess.'”<sup>4</sup>

### *Regimes*

This religious regime of signs can be seen as such: the Face at the center, surrounded by priests. Around the priests are circles of society where members move relatively freely between the lines of society, but

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2 *ATP*, 112.

3 *ATP*, 112.

4 *ATP*, 114.

there is always an excess. This excess is taken as the counterbody of the Face. The counterbody is the body of the tortured or excluded and is seen negatively as something always becoming-animal (i.e. inhuman).<sup>5</sup> The priests take this and impart signification on it by transforming it negatively as a scapegoat. The scapegoat is sent out as excess into the unknown desert where the crowd of people should never go. As a result, the priests' system is able to remain hierarchical and without change. Yet, it is precisely this tangent that Deleuze would like to see religion travel along: "It is we who must follow the most deterritorialized line, the line of the scapegoat, but we will change its sign, we will turn it into the positive line of our subjectivity, our Passion, our proceeding or grievance. We will be our own scapegoat. We will be the lamb: 'The God who, like a lion, was given blood sacrifice must be shoved into the background, and the sacrificed god must occupy the foreground.... God became the animal that was slain, instead of the animal that does the slaying.'"<sup>6</sup>

This direction, then, means the eradication of the sign-to-sign circularity. We now have in the place of the center of signification a point of subjectification. Instead of a spiral, we have a "linear proceeding into which the sign is swept via subjects."<sup>7</sup> This line is best seen as a line of deterritorialization—the decoding of signs. Tied with this line is also the line

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5 *ATP*, 115.

6 *ATP*, 122. Quotation is from D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (New York: Viking, 1932), pp. 93-94.

7 *ATP*, 127.

of reterritorialization—the recoding of signs, giving new meaning to signs as they are interpreted through subjectification. This creates a never-ending process of interpretation and re-interpretation while staying away from the overcoding processes of the despotic regime. We now have a cut from the binary system of the despotic regime and a movement towards a polyvocal system. And this polyvocal grouping is Deleuze's alternative to fundamentalism. But, is it the direction that Christianity should follow?