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To Permit: Fernand Deligny’s Cartography of Autism

Working with autistic children in the Cevennes in southern France, Fernand Deligny and his group of collaborators developed an intriguing cartography in his network of living places (1967-1986), a method that disrupts clinical knowledge. In fact, it appears as a sort of strategy to interrupt the tools that psychiatry uses to normalize autistic children. Deligny’s cartography introduces a form of experimental observation in which the observer performs the tracing and takes part in the collective construction of this simultaneously domestic and clinical space. Not knowing what to do with the children, Deligny proposed to the so-called “presences proches” (“close presences”)1 to follow the children around and to draw lines of their movements in space. These are maps of gestures, of objects, of specific events, describing a territory, etc. They describe how a child takes part in the daily activities of the network.

The maps often indicate the things that must be done (à faire), that is, the “close presences”’ daily tasks, as well as the movements of the children – how they start to act (agir) thanks to these tasks or how they evade them; how they make detours; how their actions are adorned by arabesques, that is, by gestures that seem to have no purpose, that are not useful in accomplishing a certain task. Even if the children take part in the things to be done, they always do them in a particular way that is their own. The map traced by the “close presence” Gisèle Durand in 1975 that describes how an autistic child cleans the kitchen is representative of the quality of their gestures. In the center of the map, we see some numbers that indicate how long a supposedly normal speaking adult takes in order to sweep a kitchen (around 300 seconds) (Deligny 2013; Miguel and Rocha 20182). In the peripheral area of the map, we see how an autistic child takes much longer to accomplish the same task. The lines representing the child’s gestures are long, go from the edge of the space towards the center, back and forth – and they seem to indicate how the child dances in the space with the broom. These ‘useless’ gestures for nothing/without purpose (gestes pour rien) – or which appear so from the perspective of the ‘normal’ subject – are called by Deligny “adorned gestures”.

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1 The term is introduced by Deligny to designate the people living in the network alongside the autistic children. However, they were not professional caretakers, therapists, or educators.
2 This map and some others, as well as their descriptions, are also available here: https://deligny.jur.puc-rio.br/index.php/os-mapas.
These maps function as devices that are useful for understanding the children’s activity. They provide insights into the things and regions they are attracted to, into the relation between the children and the territory. They are never interpreted, and they do not serve as a behavioral explanation for why a child is attracted to some specific thing/point. Rather, the maps are entirely descriptive. By drawing maps (as opposed to interfering directly with the children’s behavior), the “close presences” pay attention to the children without interfering directly. What the adults must do is to act in a way that allows the actions of the children to take place. To permit (permettre) is one of the keywords of the network. It means creating the necessary milieu for the children to pass from passivity to activity – or to enable their own normativity (Canguilhem 2011).

On this note, we may agree with Deleuze and Guattari (2005: 12) who argue that cartography is always a matter of performance. In contrast to that they call “decalcomania”, that is, a pure analysis that would extract an already existing explicative image, cartography generates knowledge in the process itself. Or, to put it differently, the map is not a simple transcription of the space but a force exerted on it that helps to create the territory.

The maps produced at Deligny’s network are also a means to transform the intentional gaze (regard) in order to achieve an autistic way of “seeing” (voir) – the maps help block what one wants to see or project onto the child, making visible what one is not able to see: the maps are an attempt to see otherwise. Secondly, the maps are meant to determinarize the normal and civilized space of ‘Man’ in order to fabricate a common territory shared both by ‘normal’ and ‘autistic’ people – the maps deconstruct the space, rearranging it not necessarily in a more efficient or useful manner, but in a way that things may be spotted (répérées) by the children. Finally, the maps aim at a non-verbal means of communication. All in all, the maps are a means to decolonize language. This decolonization critically aims at the underlying language of the given relations through which supposedly ‘normal’ subjects project themselves into the other and interpret/judge the other. For the children must be seen as unalike, meaning that the adults must not project themselves (or what they consider ‘normality’) onto them – the adults should not understand the other as like themselves but accept their radical singular difference. To articulate this critique, Deligny creates the interesting verb “semblabiliser”: render (the other) similar to oneself.

According to the sociologist Isaac Joseph, the maps are not instruments of observation but rather instruments for displacing or suppressing the verbal language (cf. Deligny 2017). In a nutshell, they are instruments for treating the anxiety of those who are supposed to take care of the children. At the same time, the maps allow the “close presences” to perceive things that do not concern them. The different maps that refer to one and the same child may show how they take possession of the space and what they spot in that space.
The maps are a sign of the adults’ incapacity to understand the movements of the children. Over the years, tracing maps of the journeys of the children, “binding joists” (chevêtres), i.e., nodes and tangles, start to appear. They are topoi, the there, where different lines criss-cross and suddenly stop, accumulating themselves. The maps thus help to suspend a (supposed) clinical-psychiatric knowledge.

The relations that are established between the individuals of the network are not based on dialogic interaction. For example, the autistic child Janmari perceives things (as opposed to objects), because he is non-verbal, he is not a properly speaking a subject. That is why the “close presences”, through their relentless actions, try to become things that are then spotted by the children. Deligny’s hypothesis is that autistic children require a space, which he calls an “Us” (Nous) or “common body” in which they can act. This Us is not anywhere, but a specific topos that must be fabricated, an installation in which every single thing is consciously put in place. This constellation of things materializes the space and allows for a common experience.

The maps are a way of immanently observing the progression of the children as they take possession of the space, showing what they spot and how they displace themselves. Moreover, they show how the “close presences” can territorialize the space, and thus how they may improve their relation to the space in order to render it communal. The adults do not intervene but try to rearrange the space, that is, they re-dispose the installation, and the clinical work is always mediated by the territory. The invention of this form of cartography inscribes Deligny’s practice in an experimental field in which knowledge is indissociable from its performance: not so much knowledge on or of autism, but knowledge with these dissident autistic bodies.

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Works Cited


