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# The Question of Capitalist Desire: Deleuze and Guattari with Marx

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## Abstract:

This paper offers a reading of Marx with Deleuze and Guattari That highlights the importance of the latter's reading of desire back into Marx's work in such a way as to show the importance of thinking the role of capitalist desire in the production and reproduction of the capitalist system. I argue here for the importance of understanding the commodification of desire under capitalism as a material process and not merely an ideological one. This demonstrates the importance of continuing to read Marx (both the early Marx of the Manuscripts and the Late Marx of *Capital*) when thinking through Deleuze and Guattari's own critiques of capitalism. At the same time this article helps us see the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire in helping make sense of Marx's own analysis of the capitalist machine in a way

that allows us to better understand the role that desire plays in Marx's texts.

**Key Words:** Marx, Deleuze, Guattari, Desire, Capitalism, Commodity, Exchange-value

Under Private Property... every person speculates on creating a new need in another, so as to drive him to fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of gratification and therefore economic ruin... Man becomes ever poorer as man; the need for money becomes ever-greater if one wants to overpower hostile being...the need for money is therefore the true need produced by the modern economic system and it is the only need the latter produces. The quantity of money becomes to an ever greater degree its sole effective attribute: Just as it reduces everything to its abstract form, so it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something merely quantitative.<sup>1</sup>

The Capitalist machine does not run the risk of becoming mad, it is mad from one end to the other and from the beginning, and this is the source of its rationality. Marx's black humor, the source of Capital, is his fascination with such a machine: How it came to be assembled, on what foundation of decoding and deterritorialization; how it works, always more decoded, always more deterritorialized, how its operation grows more relentless with the development of the axiomatic, the combination of flows; how it produces the terrible single class of grey gentlemen who keep up the machine; how it does not run the risk of dying all alone, but rather of making us die, by provoking the very end of investments of desire that do not even go by way of deceptive and subjective ideology, and that lead us to cry out to the very end: *Long live capital in all its objective dissimulation!* Except in Ideology, there has never been a humane, liberal, paternal, etc., Capitalism. Capitalism is defined by a cruelty having no parallel in the primitive system of cruelty- and by a terror having no parallel in the despotic regime of terror.<sup>2</sup>

One very productive way of understanding the second epigraph above, taken from the end of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, is as a commentary, in their own idiom, on the Marx's point given in the first epigraph. Much of what follows then will take place between these two pieces of text and will offer a reading that puts them closely together and points to the importance of thinking the role of capitalist desire in the production and reproduction of the capitalist system and also the importance of continuing to read Marx (both the early Marx of the Manuscripts and the Late Marx of *Capital*). Additionally, we will see the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire in helping make sense of Marx's own analysis of the capitalist machine.

I.

To begin then, in the quote from Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, we find the classic recognition that capitalism works by reworking not just social, political, and economic relations but the very subjective needs – and we should read 'needs' here as also 'desires' – of individuals so as to accommodate those needs to capitalism's system and structure. Here Marx is talking about how capitalism works on, and transforms the very way individuals desire, and the objects of that desire: capitalism's ever-present need to produce accumulation for accumulation's sake and its concomitant project of turning everything into a commodity even turns the desires of individuals into commodities to be bought and sold, to be manipulated by the capitalist class in the production of new needs to be filled by new commodities, and ultimately to be directed toward one overarching need: the need for the production and reproduction of Capital itself.

As we also know so well from Marx's *Capital*, in turning things into commodities, capitalism creates a system of equivalencies, or exchange-values, between those commodities in such a way that they all become, in Marx's words, "abstract," quantified, (and quantifiable); detached from their individual use-value:

...When commodities are exchanged their exchange value manifests itself totally independent of their use-value, But if we abstract from

their use-value, there remains their Value...Therefore the common substance that manifests itself in the exchange-value of commodities, whenever they are exchanged, is value.<sup>3</sup>

Under capitalism, the Value (with a capital 'V') of a commodity is, as Marx points out above, detached from the origins of value in use. Value is supplied instead in exchange and this becomes the real foundation of the value of the commodity. It is this form of 'abstraction' that Marx describes here: value becomes 'abstract,' but we should be clear that this notion of abstraction should not be taken in the classical sense, as something that only exists as an idea or a thought (as opposed to the material 'concrete'). It is rather what Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) has called the 'real-abstract' and what Jacques Ranciere, in his contribution to *Reading Capital* describes as that which "solidly preserves the richness of the real concrete" (275).<sup>4</sup> In other words, the abstraction that attends the exchange-value of the commodity form is anything but mere idea, or thought. It is a 'real abstraction' that has material form (in the commodity itself, and in the material act of exchange) and has material consequences in the social world and not just in the minds of individuals. Sohn-Rethel's analysis of this is helpful here:

The essence of commodity abstraction, however, is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men's minds, but in their actions. And yet this does not give 'abstraction' a merely metaphorical meaning. It is an abstraction in its precise literal sense. The economic concept of value resulting from it is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur in the market... It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather it is purely social in character, arising in the sphere of spatio-temporal human relations. It is [again] not people who originate these abstractions, but their actions.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, in commodity exchange as this material social relation, we have the production of the real-abstraction of exchange-value which, under

capitalism comes to dominate the value form itself. This process, as Sohn-Rethel points out here happens outside of people's minds, in their social interactions. Individuals are born into a system in which this social relation is pre-existent and thus though commodity abstractions are ideas and do exist in the mind, their origin is outside of that, in the realm of social practice. Human consciousness is in this way, determined by this practice.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, commodities become stand-ins for capital itself and at the same time, a means for accumulating capital. This is the movement that Marx describes from C-M-C (commodity-money-commodity), or the selling of one commodity in order to buy another (with money acting as the intermediary between the two commodities), to M-C-M (money-commodity-money), "the transformation of money into commodities and the change of commodities back into money again, or buying in order to sell."<sup>7</sup> It is this latter movement, the M-C-M, that is the true movement of capital and as Marx shows us here: "When we buy in order to sell we...begin and end with the same thing, money, exchange-value; and thereby the movement become interminable."<sup>8</sup> The subject that attends this interminable chasing of money via commodity exchange is the true subject of capital. Here again is Marx:

As the conscious representative of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the place from which the money starts and to which it returns. The expansion of value, which is the objective basis, or the mainspring of the circulation M-C-M, becomes his subjective aim, and it is only insofar as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, *as capital personified and endowed with a consciousness and will.*<sup>9</sup>

This quantification and relation of all things to all others via the social relation of exchange-value holds, as we can now see, not just for objects that are bought and sold in the interminable chasing of ever expanding value, but also for human labor and human subjectivity itself. As Marx states here, and as we have seen, the capitalist, his actions, and his

desire for more capital are the product, not of the individual and freedom of individual choice, but of the social relations of commodity exchange within which the capitalist subject is enmeshed. In this process, desire itself is subjected to the law of capital. It becomes a commodity like any other to be produced, quantified and related to other commodities via the abstraction of exchange-value. This is related to the dialectics of production and consumption that Marx identifies and explores in *The Grundrisse*:

Consumption created the motive for production; it also creates the object which is active in production as its determinant aim. If it is clear that production offers consumption its external object, it is therefore equally clear that consumption *ideally posits* the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as drive, and as purpose.<sup>10</sup>

We see here the production of desire as the internalization of the dialectic described above. This happens in the same way that exchange-value colonizes the value form and redirects value away from mere use-value. The production of desire is the production of a commodified desire as an internalization of the material social relation of commodity exchange. Apple, for example, controls the desire of millions of people for their smart phone, and that desire is produced by Apple in the production of the commodity itself, but the hold Apple has on the desire is good only to the extent that they can maintain their capture of desire (so, the company desires that others desire their product, their commodity). Another company may come along and capture that desire; for it is the desire that is valuable here as capital – as long as individuals desire your products they will exchange money for them and propel the interminable movement of capital described above.

In a way then, the desire for the iphone is more valuable than the iphone itself and it is desire that creates the value of the iphone. Not, to be sure, as a use-value, but as an exchange-value: my desire for the phone drives me to trade capital for it at a rate consistent with that set by the collective desire of all for such a commodity (it is not about how useful it is, but about how desirable it is). And the desire of the capitalist

for the expansion of capital itself is, as we have seen, expressed in the ways in which, in exchange, the capitalist can capture and hold the desire of others for the commodity.

The desire to create new desires in others is thus, in this way, ultimately a desire for capital, which, if gained in sufficient quantities, offers the promise, as Marx describes in the epigraph from the beginning of this paper, of overcoming the hostile world of competition and insecurity that capitalism and its quantification of all creates: if I can just accumulate enough, I can exit the constant need to accumulate more (or so I am made to believe). But of course, since exchange is itself an interminable process, then whatever I manage to accumulate is never enough and so the promise of the exit from the process is never realized. In this pursuit, one quantifies the totality of one's own existence. I want not only to create new needs in others, but as we know, if I am part of the proletariat, I want (and need) others to need me, to need my labor, and to need it at a value that offers me the possibility of securing a life that at least allows for subsistence (but always more than that). It is, then, in all of these ways that we have been exploring here, that desire itself becomes a commodity, subjected to the structures of the social relations that are produced and sustained in the production of exchange-value. As Samo Tomsic (also referencing Milner) has recently put the point, under capitalism:

The commodity form becomes the universal source of pleasure: in the modern universe 'there are only commodity pleasures'...exchange-value colonizes physiological or psychological needs. The complication envisaged by Marx is thus apparent. In order to understand any satisfaction whatsoever, one first needs to analyse the structure of the commodity.<sup>11</sup>

Now, of course it is true that for Marx, beliefs and desires are a part of the superstructure- they are ideological through and through and dependent on the economic base (the means and forces of production), so one might wonder why we are talking about them at all as important for analysis. I will return to this below (along with a longer discussion of the concept of ideology), but briefly, nothing in what has been said thus

far diverges from Marx's model- the forces and means of production create commodities (and all of their attached exchange values) which in turn produce, in the super structure, particular wants, needs, beliefs, and desires, that these commodities then satisfy (or partially satisfy) thereby producing wealth for the capitalist, and the need to sell one's labor for the worker. But not only this, subjective desires themselves come to reflect and are determined by the social relations of commodity exchange. They are the internal expression of the external process produced in capitalism.

## II.

Having begun to see how it is that capitalism colonizes subjects and their desires we can see also how this process plays out in larger social structures. In this commodification of all things, capital, not individuals, groups of individuals, or state apparatuses becomes the only force that matters and it exerts ultimate power over all things including what was traditionally understood as the center of social power, namely the state.

Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge this point also in their discussion of the transition from the despotic state form in which the state creates social classes and hierarchies and subordinates them to its power and control, to the capitalist state form in which the state is put in the service of capital. Here the state is subordinated to the class structure created by capitalism: "It no longer of itself forms a ruling class or classes; it is itself formed by these classes, which have become independent and delegate it [the state] to serve their power and their contradictions, their struggles and their compromises."<sup>12</sup> Thus the state, like subjectivity itself (and subjective desire) is not the overarching power – it is merely a tool for the realization and reproduction of the capitalist social structure.

As an example of this, we can think of the ways in which, in our own time, capitalist neoliberal economic policies come to trump state power- Saskia Sassen has nicely described, for instance, the ways in which international trade deals like NAFTA create extra-state entities and economic policies that benefit the movement of capital (in the form of commodities and commodified human labor) at the expense of the traditional power of the sovereign state- protectionist policies under the control of states such as trade tariffs are rejected in favor of the free flow



of goods and services.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created a mobile class of worker who is free to move between and across state borders in order to sell labor power in a way that did not exist before. This class of mobile worker exists for no other reason than serve the interests of global capital and the rules governing this movement are defined and controlled not by states, but the agreement itself (which the nations involved in the agreement, submit to). In this way, this type of immigration policy takes control out of the hands of individual states and effectively transnationalizes it, and does so in the service of capital accumulation (even when states themselves continue to talk and act as though they still control their immigration policies). Here is Sassen writing about the creation of this transnational regulatory apparatus:

This points to an institutional reshuffling of some of the components of sovereign power over entry and can be seen as an extension of a general set of processes whereby state sovereignty is partly decentered on to quasi-governmental entities for the governance of the global economy.<sup>14</sup>

### III.

Returning now to the individual level, as with the decentering of state power, and the colonization of individual desire, capital also, as is well known, exerts power over other parts of subjective existence. It is, for instance, not me the human subject, that is active and free says Marx, it is capital itself that makes me active and free; things (and people) are neither ugly nor beautiful in themselves, it is capital that determines aesthetics and capital that turns what it ugly into what is beautiful:

The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money's properties are my properties and essential powers- the properties and powers of its possessor...I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, but money is honored, and therefore so is its possessor. Money is the supreme good and therefore so is its possessor...<sup>15</sup>

We should not read this as Marx simply pointing out how, under capitalism, those who have sufficient amounts of capital can act in ways that go against particular social rules, traditions, and conventions. Rather, we should understand this as Marx showing us how capital rewrites those rules, traditions, and conventions. Deleuze and Guattari are again helpful here. This latter point is what they explore in their references to capitalism's processes of 'decoding' and 'deterritorialization': particular social and historical conceptions like those of beauty or ugliness, an social and cultural understandings of what makes one ethical or not, are determined by what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'inscribing socius'.<sup>16</sup> The socius (or the social machine) is the agglomeration of all of the various sets of practices, traditions, and such that pre-exist the life of individuals in the socius and form the backdrop of a given society into which such individuals are inserted. Deleuze and Guattari describe this as the process of the coding of the 'flows of desire' and thus, they describe the work of the social machine in this way:

The social machine is literally a machine, irrespective of any metaphor, inasmuch as it exhibits an immobile motor and undertakes a variety of interventions: flows are set apart, elements are detached from a chain, and portions of tasks to be preformed are distributed. Coding the flows implies all of these operations. This is the social machine's supreme task inasmuch as the apportioning of production corresponds to the extractions from the chain resulting in a residual share for each member, in a global system of desire and destiny that organizes the production of productions.<sup>17</sup>

Social and subjective production and reproduction are conditioned by the particular ways in which a given social machine 'codes' or sets the conditions and rules for, as Jason Read puts it, "the production and distribution of goods, prestige and desire...these codes become part of the 'inorganic body' of the individual in precapitalist modes of production...that constitute a kind of second nature" in individuals in a given socius.<sup>18</sup> These codes are, for instance, as simple as traditions and rules given societies have for greeting people (handshakes, kissing on

both cheeks, etc) and as complex as the norms that exist in a given society that define the distribution of gendered subjects and the practices surrounding that distribution in a given place and a given time.

As Read also points out here, these codes “are inseparable from a particular relation to the past- a relation of repetition.”<sup>19</sup> That is, they inform subjects in the present about what it means to be a member of that society with reference to history and tradition- they are the social memory that repeats in the present what it is to be this kind of being that lives in this kind of place. These codes then, are the traditions within which individual subjects find their social identities.

We should be careful to point out here though, that this ‘second nature’ that Read describes in his explanation of Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of social codes, should not be read in the classical sense of the term, as that which overwrites (or overcodes) some sort of foundational/pre-existent first-nature. Subjectivity always arises in a given socius whose social machine is always already coded in a particular way, with reference to particular sets of traditions, practices, and beliefs that are found in the ‘inorganic body’ of that particular socius. So there are no subjects who stand outside of, or exist prior to a given socius. A social machine’s codes however, do help subjects make sense of their world in particular ways that exist in particular times and places. They are “territorialized” in this way: social subjects only and always exist in the terrain of these sets of codes.

#### IV.

When Deleuze and Guattari talk about the ways in which the capitalist social machine decodes and deterritorializes it is with reference to this. As we have seen, the capitalist social machine sweeps away the coded traditions and conditions of social and subjective production and reproduction of the past whether they be traditions that produce, distribute, and classify individual subjective desires, or traditions which define state power, or traditions which make sense of concepts like beauty, or ethical and moral standpoints. Capitalism uproots, deterritorializes, and recodes these in relation to capital itself.

Think here of how Marx and Engels describe the transition from feudal society to capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto*. As they point

out there, under feudalism, one's place in society is determined by blood—you are born into a social class with rules about what is possible and impossible for you (a serf could never be king, for instance), and a well defined set of traditions and practices related to this that help make sense of one's world and one's place in that world. Capitalism sweeps all of this away—destroying and 'decoding' the old 'codes' and classes and constructing new ones—individuals are freed from determination by blood and are in turn enslaved to the law of capital and its injunction to sell one's labor (as we have discussed at length). Here Deleuze and Guattari write:

Capitalism is the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows, substituting for intrinsic codes, an axiomatic of abstract quantities in the form of money. Capitalism therefore liberates the flow of desire, but under social conditions that define its limit and the possibilities of its own dissolution so that it is constantly opposing with all of its exasperated strength the movement that drives it toward its limit.<sup>20</sup>

It is at this point that we can see a kind of break with more traditional forms of Marxist analysis. I made reference to the concept of ideology above and I want to return to it here. As is well known, the traditional function of the concept of ideology in Marxist discourse and analysis is to serve as a means for differentiating between what is true about the capitalist system (the economic base and its repressive functions), and what we, living under this system, 'falsely' believe about our social structures and the positions in which we find ourselves in capitalism (the superstructure).

Traditional conceptions of ideology analysis and critique argue that liberation from the oppressive social forces of capital begins when we come to see ideology for what it is— a false or inverted understanding of the social order. Ideology under this reading, functions in such a way as to prop-up and serve the interests of capitalist modes of production by making them seem as though they are natural, necessary, and eternal. For instance, the idea that "of course capitalist competition is natural – it is based on a human nature that is fundamentally competitive!" or the

notion that, “capitalism’s allowing for one to sell their labor on the market is an expression of individual freedom insofar as it allows one to become whomever one wants!”. These are two simple forms of ideological belief about the nature of capitalism. The former, some Marxist analysis argues is what is overcome in recognizing a true class consciousness – that capitalism divides workers and makes them understand themselves as competitive and in competition with one another when this is simply a mistaken belief and one that is attended and underscored by another mistaken belief that this is the natural order of things (that we are, fundamentally, competitive beings). The latter mistaken belief is overcome when we come to understand that what looks like freedom to do and be what we want, is really enslavement to wage labor and capital. In order to overcome these beliefs, one needs to see them as ideological – as a false understanding of the way the world (and individuals) actually are. This is the main job of Marxist critiques of ideology on this view: In raising consciousness in this way, we can begin to overcome the oppressive social forces of capital and set things right or, so says this tradition of Marxist thinking.

Deleuze and Guattari reject this conception of Marx’s work and ultimately reject the concept of ideology all together. As they put it: “There is no ideology, there are only organizations of power.”<sup>21</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, as we are now in a position to see, the problem with the concept of ideology, if we understand how desire itself is colonized, is that relegates desire to the category of a falsehood. My desire for particular commodities, to sell my labor, to provoke desire in others, etc (and all the other ways we have discussed desire’s existence under the capitalist social machine) is false, merely a belief about what I desire that can be set right through a proper understanding of my relation to the social.

In this way, in the classical conception of ideology, desire is merely superstructural; dependent on the economic base (as noted earlier). On D and G’s analysis, this is incorrect. Desires cannot be false in this way- they are desires; very real material affects produced in individuals by and through the social relations in which they find themselves. Any conception of Marxist critique that takes desires to be false or ideological in this way is, as they say:

A perfect way to ignore how desire works on the infrastructure (the base), invests it, belongs to it, and how desire thereby organizes power: it organizes the system of repression...the organization of power is the unity of desire and the economic infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

In this way and as we have seen throughout this paper, there is, and can be nothing 'false' about desire to be set right in Marxist critique- rather such critique should serve the function of exploring the ways in which desire is constructed in and serves to reproduce the capitalist social machine. The Capitalist socius does not merely restrict desire, nor does it produce false desire (as such a thing is impossible- desire is neither true or false- it just is), rather, it produces desiring subjects in the same way as other social machines produce subjects. The difference is that capitalism does this by producing a decoded and deterritorialized desiring subject whose whole being is, like the social structure in which he finds himself, aimed at capital in the same way that reorients other social institutions and puts them in the service of capital.

The importance of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis here should not be missed. Not only are they offering a reading of their own of the capitalist social machine and those subjects who are enmeshed in it, but they offer a reading of Marx in which we are able to see how Marx himself, from his early essays through to the mature work of *Capital* and its analysis of the commodity form, is already keenly aware of the ways in which subjective desire is wrapped up, not in the superstructure (and hence false) but exists as a part of the material base, or the infrastructure as Deleuze and Guattari refer to it in the quote above. Subjective desire is produced as capitalist desire in the capitalist socius, and thus it serves as the ground and reproduction point of capitalist power.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in Robert Tucker Ed., *The Marx Engels Reader 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York and London: Norton, 1978) p.93.

<sup>2</sup> Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) p.373.

- <sup>3</sup> Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, in Tucker ed. *The Marx Engels Reader*, p.305.
- <sup>4</sup> See Sohn- Rethel, Alfred, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, translated by Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: MacMillan, 1978) and Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establit, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Ranciere, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2016) p.275.
- <sup>5</sup> Sohn-Rethel, p.20.
- <sup>6</sup> For more here see Alberto Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction" in *Re-Thinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Society, and Culture*. 20:2 (2008) pp.273-287. and Geoff Pfeifer, "Žižek as Reader of Marx, Marx as Reader of Žižek" in *Repeating Žižek*. Ed. Agon Hamza (Indianapolis: Duke, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p.329
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.332
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.334 (my emphasis)
- <sup>10</sup> Marx, *The Grundrisse* in Tucker, ed. P.229.
- <sup>11</sup> Samo Tomšič *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London and New York: Verso, 2015) p.119
- <sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.221.
- <sup>13</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1998).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.15.
- <sup>15</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in Tucker, Ed. P.103.
- <sup>16</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.139.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.141
- <sup>18</sup> Jason Read, "The Age of Cynicism: Deleuze and Guattari on the Production of Subjectivity in Capitalism" In Ian Buchanan and Nicholas Thoburn eds. *Deleuze and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p.142.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp.139-140.
- <sup>21</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, "On Capitalist Desire" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974* (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004) p.264.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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