
Review

The minor gesture

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This book intervenes at an intersection of neuroscience and politics inspired primarily by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (with Henri Bergson, William James, and A.N. Whitehead as additional sources), and is thus akin to recent work by Romand Coles, William Connolly, Brian Massumi, and John Protevi, among others. It also responds to a Canadian academic initiative for funding transdisciplinary scholarship called ‘research-creation’ (in which Manning herself has participated), and draws heavily on her previous work, notably *Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* (2013), and to a lesser extent on her collaborative work with Massumi, especially *Thought in the Act* (2014). Distinctive of Manning’s approach to neuropolitics here is the way she aligns Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of the relation between major and minor with neurotypicality and neurodiversity – with autism standing in for the latter, for reasons that will become clear below.

If in shorthand we can say that the minor is what varies and the major is what is fixed by social norms and standards, Manning is interested in minor gestures for the ways they introduce variation into experience that would otherwise remain fixed or captured by norms. Post-classical works of art, for example, have long been prized for the ways they subvert the existing ‘distribution of the sensible’ (to use Jacques Rancière’s catchphrase). Political activism, similarly, has been valued for the ways it can change not just institutions and habits, but our very perceptions of politics and even of what counts as politics – and indeed Manning refers to the Occupy movement in this connection in the very first footnote of the book. But alongside art and politics, Manning places neurodiversity, and in particular what she here and in her previous book calls ‘autistic perception,’ as an important resource in the minor struggle with the major. This does not mean that all autistics are artists or activists, or vice versa – although both art and neurodiversity activism are given careful consideration here. Rather, autistic perception is valued mostly for what it reveals about the limits and limitations of ‘normal’ (neurotypical) perception. Manning even goes so far as to insist that ‘autistic perception does not belong exclusively to



autistics’ (p. 14) but rather describes ‘a tendency in perception shared by all that privileges complexity of experience over category’ (p. 112). (She does, however, come dangerously close at another point (pp. 4–5) to equating neurotypicality with anti-blackness, as if blacks were inherently neurodiverse and constitutionally immune to identity politics, which Manning associates with neurotypicality – thereby momentarily confusing psychological categories with sociological ones.) But her point in focusing on autistic perception is ‘not only to honor neurodiversity, ... but to make a political case for the necessity of creating techniques and minor gestures that open existence’ to a greater range of perceptual variety (p. 14). So what is it about autistic perception that Manning finds so valuable (even while recognizing the severe, sometimes debilitating, obstacles such perception creates for autistics obliged to inhabit an inflexibly neurotypical society)? This is where neuroscience comes in.

We now know that various sections of the brain process experience at different speeds, with conscious cognition of discrete objects of experience supervening relatively late in the process, and entailing the subtraction or filtering out of much – if not most – of the original sensory input to reduce it to recognizable objects. One might feel fear, for example, before realizing that the sound that provoked it came from a television rather than a real intruder. In ordinary perception, the chaos of sensation resolves into recognition almost instantaneously; we are not even aware of the process by which the welter of sensations is reduced to recognizable objects. In autistic perception, sensation does not resolve into recognition, or at least not as quickly: autistic experience involves remaining in a much richer, comparatively unfiltered sensory environment with a correspondingly greater potential for difference, before cognitive reduction supervenes. For neurotypicals to achieve this, Manning suggests, ‘it is necessary to increase the duration of the experience of [what Bergson calls] direct perception, thereby honing autistic perception’ (p. 22). I call attention to Bergson’s unfortunate (pre-deconstructive) term here because Manning herself is clear that there is no such thing as pure, un-mediated experience: the minor exists always and only in relation to the major; the difference is the degree and speed of the reduction of sensation in favor of standardized recognition. Yet even as a difference in degree rather than kind, it forms the basis of the political claims Manning will make in the name of autistic perception on behalf of neurodiversity, alongside the force of works of art and more readily recognizable forms of political activism.

Political theorists such as Rancière and Connolly (among others) have come to share with cultural studies scholars an understanding that politics is determined not just by action, but as much – if not more – by the perceptions that precede and presumably guide action. Opening perception itself to more difference and a greater range of potential is therefore an important aspect or moment of all politics. Manning calls the philosophical perspective favoring the minor gesture and autistic



perception a ‘speculative pragmatism’ (akin to what Coles calls ‘visionary pragmatism’ in a recent book by the same name): pragmatism because as gesture, the minor gesture always and only intervenes in determinate circumstances mostly defined or captured by the major; and speculative because as minor, the minor gesture opens experience and action to their virtual potential to become otherwise. ‘The minor gesture, we must remember, is defined by its capacity to vary.... For the gesture is only a minor gesture... insofar as it creates the conditions for a different ecology of time, space, of politics.... This is its force, ... its call for freedom’ (pp. 23–24).

Such an understanding of ‘activist philosophy’ (pp. 129–132, 216–118) as speculative pragmatism illuminates the value to Manning of Canada’s transdisciplinary ‘research-creation’ initiative linking art and philosophy, to which the first chapter, entitled ‘Against Method,’ is devoted. Art creates new and richer (non-standardized) forms of experience, which in turn call forth new and non-disciplinary forms of knowledge. At stake, Manning insists, ‘is the very redefinition of knowledge’ (p. 41), for research-creation sees disciplinary method as quintessentially neurotypical in its processing of experience, reducing – even more drastically than everyday neurotypicality – the rich potential of sensation to a set of pre-defined objects (and subjects) of strictly disciplined experience. Conversely, works of art and fashion enrich experience by mobilizing techniques that generate varying degrees of autistic perception, as succeeding chapters show, providing ‘the neurotypical the rare opportunity to participate in the ecology that is autistic perception, an ecology where morphogenesis trumps form’ (p. 100). The final five chapters explore how an understanding of autistic perception improved by both neuroscience and artistic creation can inform both neurodiversity activism and, more broadly, politics and activism in general.

There is much more to this wide-ranging and carefully argued book than can be outlined here. I was particularly taken with the way Manning related her concept of autistic perception to more familiar examples of non-volitional, preconscious perception and action in fields ranging from sports to dance to improvisational music: part of the strength of her argument is showing how inadequate (and often simply false) neurotypical accounts of perception and action actually are. Myths of the (quintessentially neurotypical) sovereign-rational individual once prevalent throughout the social sciences cannot long withstand the preponderance of counter-evidence coming from the neurosciences and linked up here with long-established theories and practices in the creative arts and philosophy. Readers should not be put off by Manning’s extensive (well-nigh Heideggerian) use of neologisms: for how else to direct our attention to the wealth of decisive proto-thoughts and feelings lying just beneath our ability to capture them in the standard categories of our existing language? Now that we know just how much mental activity escapes our conscious awareness and defies standard and dialectical accounts of knowledge,



reason, and agency, efforts like Manning's to better understand neurodiversity and to mobilize that understanding for research-creation and political activism alike are invaluable.

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