



Dividual Film Aesthetics

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Abstract

The term “dividual” aims to present a critical view of the Western conception of persons and artworks as individuals. It is used in Euro-American anthropology in order to analyze the practical and ethical interferences between single persons and communities mainly in non-Western cultures. It is also used by Gilles Deleuze in Cinema 1. The Movement-Image in order to describe the aesthetic and self-affective character of films: since the filmic images cannot be temporarily fixed and individualized, he calls them “dividual”, much like contemporary plurivocal musical compositions. He reads their articulations as transitions between temporarily varying semiotic combinations; thus, they are not “divisible or indivisible”, but ‘dividual.’ (14) Referring to this Deleuzian concept, I want to delve into different films under this aesthetic perspective, exposing their character of mutual allusions and formal adaptations: from a docufiction by Jean Rouch to feature films by Jean-Luc Godard, Med Hondo and Jean-Pierre Bekolo. These films dividuate themselves due to their aesthetic interferences and the curious observation that certain European film styles were “invented” in an African context.

Keywords: Anthropology; Dividual and Dividuated Film Aesthetics

Introduction

With a decolonial perspective in mind, my reflection as a philosopher and theorist of aesthetics aims to present a critical view of the Western conception of persons and artworks as individuals. Linked to a specific politico-economic ideology and a historical understanding of the bourgeois person, the term ‘individual’ shall be revised under the given conditions of worlding and under aesthetically widened perspectives on our participation in these processes.

In order to grasp these changes in the personal and aesthetic realm, I propose a countering concept called ‘dividuation’, a concept derived from various philosophical sources. I chose this concept since it may help to replace the notion of the individual motivated mainly by judicial autonomy and economic selfinterest and bring to the fore

insights into the relatedness of human existences with bio- and socio(techno)logical, cultural and aesthetic entities. The new perspective refutes the binary concepts of self and other; it privileges ideas of entanglements and of mutual constitutions of agencies of different kind; it points at cultural factors which co-constitute the single person’s existence; and it is interested in the heterogeneous and composite-cultural quality of works of art and films. The term also wants to provoke an increased awareness of our voluntary and involuntary modes of participation for example in the digital media and the need to decide on their quantity and quality.

The Contested Concept of the Individual

The concept of the individual is indicative of the historically early attempt to define a basic and undivided

unit within a physical worldview. Greek atomists formulated the concept *átoma* as the smallest undivided entity of the universe. The Latin term *individual* is the translation of this Greek term by Cicero in the first century before Christ [1]. It suggests 'undividedness' and initiated a 2000 years' history of philosophical interpretation of the individual as substantial and personal entity. I criticise the term for its connotation of undividedness since already historical interpretations demonstrate that the person has always been conceived of as immanent multiplicity. By emphasising on this insight, I even want to state that there is no such thing as an undivided entity, nor in the human nor in other realms. Therefore it should be replaced by the more encompassing term of *dividuation* which tries to evoke all sorts of cross-participation. In German it opens a whole range of associations between 'Mitteilung' und 'Teilhabe' which allows to amplify our perspective on our involvement in processes of worlding.

In the world we live in everything – place of residence, workplace, insurance portfolios, the way we produce works of art – is made to appear as dependent on one's personal choices, and so we are stylised into the captains of our life conduct. But as today's critical epistemological perspective teaches us, contemporary becoming-world needs to be understood as an expanded 'principle of relativity'. This principle constrains us to adopt perspectives informed by various optics and to direct them at multiscale levels. For example in the realm of the infinitely small, microscopic observation reveals that living microorganisms below our threshold of perception contribute to our psycho-physical constitution. The new biotechnologies demonstrate that we share a large portion of our genetic dispositions with non-human others. The articulation of genes is said to be co-performed and temporalised by viruses and parasites – thereby contributing to the articulation of our destiny. We are also called upon to think of ourselves as partly determined by dynamics of aesthetic atmospheres or the planetary ecosystem.

On the macroscopic level, technologically provided information inserts us into mediated forms of social existence. We enter into intense virtual relations with persons often unknown to us; we vitalise ourselves by means of imaginary and intellectual participation in activities in distant parts of the world. Comprehensive self-care and self-government, thus the promise, thanks to the smartphone, the palm-sized global interconnection device!

Recently we have become aware of how the technological devices also condition and help subjectivate us. The sensory apparatus connects with our neuronal structure and determines the way we manage our time and affects. In the

interest of capitalizable bio-politics, the single address is nowadays registered as a meta datum. While due to digital technologies we can fine-tune our desires, we at the same time are captured and forced to participation in an often unreflected manner. The recorded information can yield insights on our future psycho-physical developments we know nothing about. So how can we still think of ourselves as autonomous actors and individuals?.

The question concerning the autonomy of participation poses itself in a more urgent manner with regard to those parts of the population that have less free choice in social auto-determination. Even if the technological divide has been minimised thanks to the worldwide distribution of mobile phones there are still important participatory inequalities due to financial and infrastructural conditions of access. Participation reveals itself to be a highly precarious value, one that can signify an increased transfer of knowledge, affective alliances as much as harsh separations, involuntary capture, capitalized appropriations and undesired presences of others in 'our' place. It becomes obvious today that the notion of individual evokes a perspectivation of the world that is no longer epistemologically adequate and has to be replaced by a notion which testifies our multidirectional entanglements on different levels.

The philosopher Jacques Nanema of Burkina Faso criticizes on his part African disciples for obeying the cult of the European design of the individual. The cult would be followed only in order to leave behind the constraints of African solidarity and would necessarily induce the tragedy of non-communication in the new limitless world. The economist Nyamnjoh FB [2] in contrast, maintains that researches in Cameroun and Botswana „suggest that Africans are not only interested in rights and freedoms as individuals, but also in rights and recognition of communal and cultural solidarities. This reality is a marriage of the bifurcation between “citizens” and “subjects” (...), an acknowledgement of individuals and groups who live their lives both as citizens and subjects as a strategy of survival“ [2]. The neoliberal demands are accused of being detrimental for African self-understandings and traditions [3]. Inspired by narrow, individual-centred philosophies of personhood, agency and property rights, neoliberalism is aggressive in its sacrifice of community rights and group interests, as it pursues profit through the illusion of promoting the interests of the autonomous individual as a consumer and citizen. Old patterns by more inclusive philosophies of ownership and control are increasingly giving way to new configurations with a focus on the individual, consumerism and exclusion“(58). Not only global markets, but the global consciousness of all inhabitants risk to be synchronised; an illusion of plenty would obscure the poverty of perspectives.

The Nigerian psychologist Amina Mama on her part denies even that there is an expression for 'identity' in the African languages: „Perhaps there is good reason for this. In English, the word 'identity' implies a singular, individual subject with clear ego boundaries. In Africa, if I were to generalise, ask a person who he or she is and a name will quickly be followed by a qualifier, a communal term that will indicate ethnic or clan origins (Omoregbe 1999:6). To this day, African bureaucracies use forms that require the applicant (for a passport, a driving licence, to gain to access to public education, housing or health services) to specify 'tribe'. The idea of identity is an interesting one to most Africans, largely because it has remained so vexed. We seem to be constantly seeking the integrity and unity that the notion implies, without succeeding in securing it or coming to terms with it. We are being asked to think 'beyond identity', when for many of us identity remains a quest, something in-the-making. I think that the reason that African thinkers – or indeed other post-colonial subjects – may balk at the prospect of working 'beyond identity' is clear. It relates to the contentious nature of the term in our upbringing, as a site of oppression and resistance. We recall distasteful colonial impositions that told us who we were: a race of kaffirs, natives, negroes and negresses“[4]. She exposes the lack of choice concerning personal identity due to colonial impositions. In a general sense this is probably the reason why many people of the global South describe their relation to the community as an unstable and shifting one. Anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro or Arjun Appadurai often use the term *dividual* to determine the personal status of persons of the global South between particularity and sociality.

As one of my theoretical forerunners, I would like to mention the Caribbean poet and theorist Edouard Glissant and his claim of aesthetic “disindividualisation” [5] (211) and of the necessary abolishment of unified and folkloristic cultural understandings. When he describes the development of composite cultures on the French Antilles, he underlines that composite culture does not mean dilution or dispersion of aesthetic signs, but their affirmed and not imposed “partition”. Partition in his understanding also points at the necessity to transform the different layers into a particular artistic expression and a political counter-strategy to which he concedes even a certain opacity. Glissant’s concept of partition does not mean division and loss of coherence, but tells us that works of art highlighting their inner tensions should not be named individual expressions. It even seems to be their privilege to de-individualise canonised forms by exposing their inherent and unnoticed diversity, by subverting their universalised norm and even their claim of uniqueness, by parodying the aesthetic norm, by performing their heterogeneous elements and nevertheless synthesising

them into a particular expression.

So what does it mean to understand cultural and aesthetic articulations as an affirmed and non-imposed partition? A partition which at the same time means participation and *dividuation*, being part and partly not being part, being together and being apart of something which is a heterogeneous composition? Glissant underlines the necessity to accentuate the aesthetic differences resulting from the different cultural layers which should remain audible and visible within the composite-cultural expression.

Partition in his understanding also points at the necessity to transform the different layers into a particular artistic expression and a political counter-strategy to which he concedes even a certain opacity. Very much like the concept of *dividuation*, Glissant’s concept of partition does not mean division and loss of coherence, but tells us that works of art highlighting their cultural or aesthetic tensions and their formal allusions to other art practices should not be named individual expressions. It even seems to be their privilege to de-individualize canonised forms by exposing their inherent and unnoticed diversity, by subverting the universalized norm and even the claim of uniqueness, by parodying the aesthetic standards, by performing their culturally heterogeneous elements and nevertheless synthesizing them into a particular expression.

The Counter-Concept of *Dividuation*

Today, we recognise that our self-understanding as undivided entity expresses a misleading negation of inevitable processes of participation. Since we find ourselves faced with the task of considering, affirming, and moderating our possibly contradictory participations, the concept of the individual should be replaced by the term '*dividuation*': *dividuation* is intended to put the focus on the processual (self) *dividuation* of the person, of cultures and art works both through voluntary participation and involuntary divisions.

Dividuation describes a mobile relationship to self, an ever changing intertwining with different others which imposes the task of coordinating and interrupting the often divergent and simultaneous processes of participation. The valorisation of the *dividual* is associated with the sociopolitical endeavour to transform our multidirectional participation into inclusive participation care. It even suggests the putting together of participation potentials in '*condividual*' ensembles that combat capitalized and ecological over-exploitation. But it also encourages to reflect on an over-engagement in technological participation and in digital absorption and on the possibility of “preferring not

to do”.

The term *dividuation* is an amalgamation of the concept of *individuation* used by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon and of the concept of *dividuum/dividual* already coined by the German philosophers Novalis and Nietzsche and, as mentioned before, used by contemporary anthropologists.

The term ‘*dividual*’ is also used by Deleuze G [6] in different texts, with different affective values. In *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image* Deleuze G [6] outlines a positive understanding of the *dividual*. Speaking of films, he states that the temporal mobility of their audiovisual framings permanently modifies the captured aesthetic “ensemble”, which therefore cannot be identified as an individual expression. He reads the time-dependent filmic - and musical - articulations as transitions between varying aesthetic combinations, not “divisible or indivisible, but ‘*dividual*’” (14). The concept serves to define aesthetic practices that are usually linked to technologies and de-individuate themselves in the modes of repetition, appropriation and modification. When these practices attain an intensified variety of articulation and an opening up of post-anthropomorphic percepts and concepts through artistic implementation, this can be seen as precisely what constitutes their advantage: their de-norming and art-specific potential. Deleuze calls “*dividual*” the expression of temporally determined aesthetic heterogeneses, particularly in cinematic and musical artworks. When these practices attain an intensified variety of articulation and an opening up of their post-anthropomorphic percepts and concepts through artistic implementation, this can be seen as precisely what constitutes their advantage: their de-norming and art-specific potential. He denies that their multiplication of visual and auditory signs, sounds or voices displays a localisable and definable individuality, but nevertheless sees them as congealing into a particular, even singular expression. In his first study on cinema, Deleuze uses the term “*dividual*” to accentuate the constant changes in framing proper to certain films, whose portrayal of ever-changing audiovisual elements and ambiguous expression of affect cannot be called individual: “The affect is impersonal and is distinct from every individuated state of things; it is nonetheless singular and can enter into singular combinations or conjunctions with other affects.” He considers it important to emphasise that in spite of emerging from a variety of aesthetic factors, the expression of affect is indivisible; he also refers to the new qualities it constitutes when combining with other affects as indivisible. However, since they necessarily vary in time and in audiovisual recombination and can never be fixed, he calls them *dividual*. He conceptualises the *dividual* as an aesthetic differentiability, an undivided *dividuatedness*. This undivided *dividuatedness*, which is distinct from a notion of individual indivisibility by

virtue of its immanent variability and interwovenness with other aesthetic elements, is also attributed, by Deleuze and Guattari, to certain musical compositions, such as Luciano Berio’s compositions in which he makes tones resound in a “multiple cry, a cry of the population, in the *dividual* of the One-Crowd [7].”

In Deleuze G [8] he gives a historical date to becoming *dividual*, equating its emergence with the media technology transition from analogue to digital, from the disciplinary system to the control system of a finance-capital-occasioned continuum of inseparable modulations. The society of control imposes unending self-modellings of single persons “in a state of constant metastability”. Therefore Deleuze speaks of new subjectivation modes: “We’re no longer dealing with a duality of mass and individual. Individuals become ‘*dividuals*’ and masses become samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’” (180) The person appears as a computable information potential, whose future development is quantitatively predicted and whose financial profitability estimated.

Taking this further, I want to emphasise that the term ‘*dividuation*’ today exhibits the cultural composition or even inner contradictoriness of supposedly whole entities not only of the person. To achieve a more adequate recording of the relationship between solo and group agencies, and also of the many cultural and semiotic elements constituting a work of art or a filmic composition, it appears indispensable to reveal their character as one of participation-occasioned *dividuation*.

I understand *dividuation* today in an even more ambivalent way than Deleuze did since our self-understanding and accordingly our artistic elaboration have changed due to the refinements of the technological devices, the increased cultural hybridization, the aesthetic modes of communication and so on. *Dividuation* can still be evaluated in a positive and a negative sense very much like Deleuze did since it helps to reveal as well positive and enriching interventions, contributions or even constitutions as the often forced codifications and standardisations leading to uniform *dividuations* of persons, cultural artefacts and filmic works. The term *dividuation* asks for encompassing dissections of personal and artistic processes and their ways of appropriating and recombining cultural heritages and aesthetic choices to bring about a new and partitioned entities in Glissant’s sense.

Aesthetic Dividuations

My impression is that every art practice today is informed by digitally provided aesthetic trends, by current discourses of how to perceive oneself and certain aspects of the becoming world and of how to intervene artistically. I wonder

whether there is still a place in the world where you could find so called autochthonous works or art today. Processes of repetition and targeted adapting to a given context can be observed everywhere. And yet the artistic practices differ in their repetition and transformation intensity; artistic dividual activity embraces film remakes, polemic re-photographs, but also self-reflexive or polemic references to universalized aesthetic norms, Aristotelian dramaturgies and genre conventions like in the films of different African filmmakers.

Interestingly, it can be observed that especially non-Western art practices increase their potentiality of dividuality, as they are frequently caught between local traditions and globalised standards and are thus forced into culturally composite invention. It is no accident that hybrid constructions from the global South that attract attention through a mix of local style tradition and borrowings from Western art languages are hyped as genuine products of artistic globalising by Okwui Enwezor and others. Today, they try to satisfy the audience's wish to be confronted to decolonial statements by artistically deconstructing colonial techniques, images and sounds while empowering themselves by aesthetically dividualizing the inherited expressions.

The last film festival in Berlin before the corona shutdown, the Berlinale 2020, presented in its Forum program an impressive amount of Black testimonies of the 1970s. Images and voices of Angela Davies, Eldrige Cleaver and many others could be seen and heard. The wonderful film of the Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo *Soleil O* which portrays African immigrants and their struggle for survival in the 1970s in the French "motherland", their search for work in Paris and their rejection are dramatized in an a varying experimental style. The film is a fantastic example of a demanding aesthetic dividuality: It adapts the film style of the French Nouvelle Vague with its effects of distancing, jump cuts and surprising audio-visual disparities in order to create a sarcastic portrayal of the French self-confident and racist attitudes of the time. At a certain moment the French inhabitants all gaggle like hen, dividualized into men-animals to which usually the African persons were devalued.

Interestingly Godard's first feature film *A bout de souffle* of 1959 was inspired by the film *Moi, un noir*, an ethofiction of 1958 directed by Jean Rouch in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. It depicts young Nigerian and other immigrants looking for work in the capital. They call themselves Edward G. Robinson, Eddie Constantine or Tarzan due to their admiration for these American cinematic characters. The film itself blurs the line between fiction and reality, narrating the dreams of these young men as idealised "movie" stars. The main character of

Godard's film performed by Jean-Paul Belmondo is created in analogy to these dreamy and jobless African city strollers and thereby introduces a dividualized new film aesthetic. Later on, the film of the Algerian filmmaker Merzak Allouache, *Omar Gatlato* of 1976, portrays once again a young man whose demeanor reminds the nonchalance of Belmondo and thereby opens up a curious aesthetic round between African and European art works and dividual cinematographic formulations.

A kind of city stroller is also the main character of Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film *Aristotle's Plot* which unfolds a cinema ballade much like Godard's film, but with an opposite intention. The city stroller is a cineast who prefers avantgarde film such as the ones of the Nouvelle Vague. He travels across African countries in order to find out what could be called African cinema. But instead of a specific style of African cinema he encounters movie goers who identify - similar to Rouch's docufiction - with movie stars such as Van Damme, Bruce Lee, Arnold Schwarzenegger and so forth.

As a self-parody of the cineast alias Bekolo, the film teaches us that African filmmakers have to adapt to Western concepts, economically enforced aesthetic formats and to narrative normings occurring between globalised film industries and TV standards worldwide. A filmmaker such as Bekolo responds to this imposition not so much by rejecting them as by appealing for aesthetic patterns to be adapted critically, to be reversed parody-fashion, and to be amalgamated with local and globalised codes so that, ultimately, different cultural affiliation can be retraced. He questions what African cinema could be considered of with respect to its Western origin and its financialization by Western countries. He develops a hilarious play with the French term cineast and its misunderstanding as silly-ass. When trying to follow the Aristotelian dramaturgy of linear development, crisis and dissolution the cineast realizes that it does not correspond to African conditions where there is nothing but not-intrigue-guided stagnation. But Bekolo not only parodies the Aristotelian and Hollywoodian film dramaturgy, but also the status of cinema in Africa and the state of mind of African movie goers, digressing on film genres such as Westerns and gangster movies which are highly appreciated in popular African movies. The only concession he makes to Aristotle at the end is that pity and fear are in fact produced in the best possible way by Africa.

We, the inhabitants of the global North, should learn from them: In a general sense, symbolic statements today should pursue the integration of different cultural statements, not opposing them to each other so much as amalgamating and differentiating them in an aesthetically or epistemologically demanding way.

In order to conclude I would like to claim that after all, we should not strive to define what a dividual aesthetic composition exactly is in order not to produce new generalised aesthetic norms. We should rather pay attention to the growing amount of cultural and aesthetic entanglements and wonder if we can shift our own perspective and aesthetic judgement. Of course the works of art are realized in divergently complex ways and not always pushed up to the kind of parodistic play and cultural critique which Hondo's film succeeds to unfold. They differ in their decision of how to moderate their dividual character and of how to accentuate the tensions between their components also in relation to other works of art. In any case, in their transculturally shared and dividual character, they are symptomatic not only of aesthetic exchanges, but also of all sorts of adaptations in the actual world going along with economic and ecological, political and technological interferences. By so doing, they open up a vast field of interrogation also of the constitution of the single person and his/her equally (non-in) dividual coherence to which the theorist is asked to respond with new concepts and new descriptions in a senseful and respectful way.

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