

On Atmosphere

Peter Pál Pelbart

Department of Clinical Psychology, Pontifical Catholic University São Paulo
São Paulo, Brazil

Translation from Portuguese: Adriana Francisco

Abstract

This paper traces the work of Tosquelles, Oury and Guattari in transforming psychiatric care by reshaping the "atmosphere" of asylums. Breaking down asylum walls and hierarchies, Tosquelles sought to liberate patient expression and agency. Oury built on this through the notion of "antennas" attuned to environmental subtleties often imperceptible to clinicians. For both, transforming institutional spaces was paramount. Guattari helped reveal how such environments could foster the emergence of new subjectivities. For all three, the sustained "atmosphere" was a central concern. Building on this work, I discuss my co-founding of the Ueinz theatre group, which provides an artistic outlet for individuals experiencing psychological distress and fosters radical solidarity by empowering marginalized subjectivities. Such micropolitical interventions, I argue, are vital given the contemporary context of pervasive "normo-pathic" and pressures imposing psychic confinement.

Keywords: atmosphere, institutional psychotherapy, La Borde, psychosis, treatment

François Tosquelles, Jean Oury and Félix Guattari were responsible for a small revolution in the field of psychiatric practice in an institutional context. Despite their different styles, their common concern was the atmosphere of treatment spaces. For the three of them, it was crucial to "treat" the institution so it could care for its inpatients. Each one of them applied different terms. Whilst one used "singularity", "collective", "pathic", the other said "the open", "precariousness", "place of saying", and the third added "transversality", "a-signifying ruptures" and "agency". References ranged from Kierkegaard to Lacan, from Marx to Blanchot, from Duns Scotus to Sartre. The enemy was the situation of concentration, and the alienation it produced. This was an old institutional psychotherapy principle.

Tosquelles

Tosquelles (2021) was the first to notice the similarity between the psychiatric hospitals of his time and the concentration camps that the war had invented. Above all, it was necessary to break down walls, undo hierarchies, liberate spaces for listening and speaking, for circulation and creation. Tosquelles put this into practice in Saint Alban at the beginning of the 1940s: he brought down external walls, took apart a whole caste system, dissolved the hierarchical separation between nurses, doctors, patients, guards and cleaners, disarmed their respective corporativisms, promoted activities for inpatients outside the asylum, ensuring their survival at a time when 40 thousand psychiatric inpatients were dying of starvation due to the war and the occupation.

He came up with a “therapeutic club” – a small initiative around which inpatients produced a newspaper, worked on painting, carpentry or performed small tasks that favored exchange, expression, connection, radically transforming their situation. They were no longer seen as non-human rags who must be contained, policed and shepherded. Instead of contention or obedience, a whole system of rotation and self-management was implemented. By introducing psychoanalysis as a framework to understand institutional relations, his aim was to allow the circulation of the unconscious desires that permeate every relationship. With his combination of Marxism, psychoanalysis and surrealism, Tosquelles promoted in Saint Alban what he liked to call a permanent revolution.

Above all and always, the objective was to allow circulation in every sense, and to recognize inpatients as pilgrims whose trajectory was set as they wandered and faced the unknown—the right to vagrancy, the right to go elsewhere, to be different. Their feet read the world, with comings and goings, ins and outs. Thinking about the coexistence between those who treat and those who are treated, Tosquelles argued that the issue was not about living together—even though this was in fact happening—but about inhabiting each other. And more importantly, if until then the left-wing playbook had argued for “being conscious”, now there was an attempt to invest in the unconscious, to let it surface, and to deal with the tapestry of desire. Tosquelles went even further: one must assume one’s madness. In an interview with France Culture, he noted:

If man is not mad, he is nothing. The issue is to understand how he treats his madness. If you are not mad, how do you want someone to love you – including yourself? It doesn’t mean that if you don’t know how to be mad they will section you in a psychiatric hospital. Because the mad people that are there are those who have failed their madness. Madness is what matters for men. Lacan was serious about this... he put it better... situation, limit, freedom... it is more beautiful... If you are not mad you are lost... as you will have no access to yourself, neither will you be able to give part of yourself to someone else you love. Everyone knows that love is madness... it is not only a pleasurable madness; it also allows one to discover oneself. It is not a matter of being naked so you can see flesh, but to discover your “self”. You cannot discover yourself without madness. A madness that is for someone else. That is, if you don’t fall madly in love with an idiot like me or anyone else for that matter, madame, you will never be able to know who you are. Madness is the essence of man. If someone fails their madness, if others or oneself denies it... the denial, like in Lacan or Freud, then that’s it. It is zero. (Tosquelles, 2019)

Oury

It was by drawing on Tosquelles that Jean Oury opened the La Borde clinic. One of the most beautiful images suggested by Oury (1996) is his description of psychotic people as having “antennas”. There is no greater crime than burning the schizophrenics’ highly sensitive antennas. In fact, it would be preferable that therapists also grew their own antennas when dealing with them. It is through the antennas that multiple “constellations” can be created. A constellation is achieved through fine attunement, through elective affinities, non-compulsory conjunctions, which are made of multiple, spatial, transferential, tonal elements. A constellation opens up a new space in the mind or soul of those who take part in it. Hence the violence of grouping inpatients together by categories: age, nosography, sociological – the epileptic, the alcoholics, the schizophrenics, the agitated... This means to entirely ignore the tuning between the different antennas, the constellations that they form and the affinities they detect amongst different people.

The emergence of a constellation is only possible in an open space. In the wake of Hölderlin, Heidegger and Maldiney, Oury (2009) insisted on the importance of this notion of the Open. Regarding the close-ness that characterizes the psychotic person, it is often necessary to offer them “grafts of open-ness”. Without the Open it is not even possible to be “here”, as one must be elsewhere to be here and be here to be able to be elsewhere—it is a whole dialectic of the inside and the outside—like a Moebius strip. Open as a condition for a boundary that can define it, but a boundary that at the same time can ensure that the Open remains available, but not intrusive. Psychotics don’t like windows to be clean. They don’t want too much light. They don’t want shadows to be lit. Allowing the outside to be there, but not excessively.

Yes, each person is a boundary, a closure, but at the same time we are populated by constellations. What is the constellation of such and such? Perhaps knowing someone means to apprehend their constellation? This blurry subgroup? And when someone is, for instance, in a group, do they belong to that group entirely? What is belonging, if not something always overlaid with simultaneous layers of belonging in several constellations, here and there, a bit over here and a lot over there, almost nothing here and almost fully there? And what is it to be here if not a sort of inscription, at a time and place or platform (a bar, a newsroom, a studio, a club, a theater group), in minimal reiteration, within a logic of ritornello?

Interviewer: You have said many times that in order to do psychiatry one must start by sweeping one’s own sidewalk.

Oury: Yes, sweeping one’s own sidewalk, but also sweeping everywhere. What are the qualities of someone who works inside? He must be a street-sweeper and a builder of bridges. I’m thinking of the 400 bridges of Venice. We must sweep, what Tosquelles calls asepsis.... To try and make our presence less dangerous...it is dangerous to be piled up like this. The entire work of institutional psychotherapy is constituted of figuring out – drawing on Hippocrates’s formula – how to be the least harmful as possible. If we don’t work on the asepsis, we are necessarily being harmful only by being there. This is already very subtle as a starting point. (Oury, 1996, interview recording)

And a builder of bridges, that is, to make bridges, to make walkways that link one to another, above all, in closed, isolated forms, such as the schizophrenics, who are not enclosed, but

dispersed in their close-ness. I often say “to make grafts”, paradoxically “grafts of open-ness” to allow them to set boundaries. If there is no open-ness one cannot have boundaries, if you are closed, you are nowhere, with no possible reference.

The builder of bridges makes walkways, he works with people who are apparently more isolated; his walkways are sometimes a word, or a gesture, or something minimal. It is not about making sophisticated bridges, but simple walkways. Only a few things are necessary, this is where we see the emergence of something like “with” or “with the other”. (Oury, 1996, interview recording)

We finally arrive at what appears to be the most difficult element to treat or sustain, the ambience, the environment, the atmosphere, interwoven with subtlety, kindness, complicity, collaboration, through nuance, an indirect way of “being with” ... and, most of all, the attention to the singular, to the unwavering-ness of someone else. This is what ethics consists of: drawing on the principle that we are surrounded by desiring beings. How can we take into account each other’s unconscious and always singular desires? And what is the accountability of this ethics? Nothing is given, nothing should be automatic, nothing can be naturalized, nothing... and the desire of those who play a caring role is also there, the effective transference, the collective transference.

Guattari

I met Tosquelles in the 1950s because I didn’t want to go to the Algerian War. That was unacceptable to me. Our choice was to defect or submit... in the end, I decided to make the easiest and most interesting decision, which was to admit myself to the Saint Alban hospital. Tosquelles welcomed me. It is a very beautiful memory. Tosquelles is amazing, a brilliant character. He is very brave; he took part in the Spanish Civil War and played a number of important roles... he developed a totally innovative experience, which has become a reference for a whole generation of people. He taught many people around him, not only psychiatrists and nurses. He was concerned with dialoguing with all sorts of people, not only nurses and patients, but also the nuns, etc. He had a great understanding of the social components that must be engaged in a project. And Tosquelles is also a great intellectual, with vast philosophical knowledge, including German, Spanish, French philosophy etc. We still haven’t grasped his entire oeuvre; this will happen gradually. (Guattari, 1985, interview)

This is also one of Félix Guattari’s major premises. He never stopped acknowledging his debt to La Borde, as well as Saint Alban.

How can individuals or groups reappropriate their sense of existence, Guattari asks, and how can they do so from an ethical, and no longer technical, viewpoint? (Guattari, 1992, p. 187) How can one provide re-singularization? How can the institution favor new types of subjectivity? The relationship with madness in these institutional environments removed “protective shields” from caregivers and the other staff, and the same happened to him when he arrived there, changing his ways of seeing and experiencing alterity, the world.

The multiplicity of studios, meetings, its cultural life, its playful and artistic initiatives allowed for the “creation of a completely different institutional song... a sort of baroque treatment of institutions, always in search of new themes and variations” (Guattari, 1992, p 189). It was from there that he was able to imagine something similar in an urban

environment, and to conceive the production of non-homogeneous subjectivities in other contexts, insisting on processual unconscious, the intersection of multiple dimensions and a gaze towards the future.

Firstly, what is the unconscious exactly? A magical world hidden in an unknown fold of the brain; a mini cinema specialized in child porn or projecting archetypal fixed plans? I see the unconscious rather as something that would spill a little everywhere around us, on gestures, everyday objects, the TV, the climate and even, or mainly, on the greatest issues of our time. Therefore, the unconscious works both inside the individuals, in their way of perceiving the world, experiencing their bodies, territory or sex, and inside the couple, the family, the school, the neighborhood, the factory, the stadium, the university... In other words, it is not the unconscious of the specialists of the unconscious, it is not an unconscious crystallized in the past, ossified in an institutionalized discourse but rather turned to the future, an unconscious whose fabric is nothing but the possible itself, the possible at the surface, at the surface of the *socius*, at the surface of the cosmos. (Guattari, 1988, pp. 10-11).

This is the premise of what he called “schizoanalysis” and his theory of “schizoanalytical cartography”, not to mention “molecular revolution”. Guattari was an unstoppable inventor of concepts that could build two-way bridges between the universe of madness and social context. That is why he put every friend or ally—be they militants, artists or philosophers—through a sort of “internship” amongst the madmen—knowing that the exchange, no matter how brief, was an unsettling but compulsory rite of passage: a “chaosmotic” crossing that would open them up to other existential dimensions.

Ueinzz

It is following on from this tradition that in 1996 I helped found a theatre group in a psychiatric environment, which quickly became autonomous from the hospital context, gaining independence. It was made up of so-called psychotics, so-called psychoanalysts, so-called psychiatrists, but also so-called artists, so-called philosophers, lives on the edge. According to its self-definition:

Ueinzz is a stage territory for those who feel the world faltering. Like in Kafka, the nausea on dry land becomes a matter of poetic and political transmutation. The group has masters in the art of clairvoyance, with evident knowledge on improvisation and neologisms, specialists in maritime encyclopedias, frustrated trapeze artists, dream hunters, interpretative actresses. There are also inventors of pidgin languages, musical incognitos, beer-drinking masters and burgeoning beings. Lives on the edge experimenting with aesthetic practices and transatlantic collaborations. A community of those with no community for a community to come (Pelbart, 2015, p. 101).

It would be impossible to fully narrate this adventure. It took place in an urban environment, rode the art circuit and launched an unprecedented collective experience in the city. It consisted of weekly rehearsals, public presentations, partnerships with other groups and artists, international trips, films, participation at documenta in Kassel, and, above all, a high intensity and extremely polyphonic group experience. Many voices came and multiplied. Multiple worlds were exchanged. Many creations emerged thanks to an open and

welcoming atmosphere that encouraged listening and offered support, a relationship with outside.

A whole path of glory and precariousness, epiphanies and collapses, subtlety and humor, care and lightness, of intimate coziness, and the brave opening of arms to the big wide world. Micropolitics, schizoanalysis, existential territory, transversality—in sum, a sort schizo-staging, that is what we called it. One feels like borrowing the most beautiful title given to La Borde, as proposed by Jean Claude Pollack and Danielle Sivadon (2013), in a different context to define a similar idea: *The Intimate Utopia*. Yes, it is in these terms that we must think about this minor experience, its power and fragility, potency and impotence, closeness and open-ness, slowness and speed, subtlety and explosion, whispering and shouting, loneliness and community, pain and ecstasy. We constantly oscillate between the bottom and the bottomless, the construction of a subjectivity and its dissolution, the work and its ruin (its unfolding).

The affective web that sustains experience, the desires that secure the quality of presence, the reinvention of self and of “us” through theatrical or performative matter, all of this implies an “atmosphere”, an “environment”, an “antenna”, made of kindness, hospitality, subtlety, tenderness, care and humor. But equally rough conflicts, impasses, crises, frustrations, collapses, hospitalizations, deaths. Yes, it requires a relationship with the families, with the institutions to which someone is admitted, and with the cultural institutions that are interested in our work. Alongside this, we have also had some daring initiatives: group trips to Finland, France, Germany, Portugal. Everybody goes, including the actors who are not stable. We have faced all sorts of hilarious situations that a group of mad people can trigger in the normo-pathic world, which I would classify as a sort of poetic terrorism. Less protected situations are not avoided, and the relationship with the wider world is part of this small world, which, in turn, contains several worlds.

Here is a very concrete example. It happened 24 years ago. In one of the first rehearsals that we had at Hospital-Dia, where the group emerged, the two professional theatre directors who were invited to create a play proposed to the “patients” (who we later began to call actors) a classic exercise on the different modes of communication that are available amongst living beings—some communicate with gestures, others with facial expressions and sounds. Human beings use language. They asked everyone which other language they spoke and one of the patients who used to only make indistinctive groans replied (not only immediately but also with unusual clarity and confidence): German. Everyone was surprised as no one knew he spoke German. And which word do you know in German? Ueinzz. And what does Ueinzz mean in German? Ueinzz. Everybody laughed. A language that gives meaning to itself, that rolls up on itself, esoteric, mysterious language, glossolalia. A few weeks later, the directors, inspired by the material they had collected during the exercises, proposed the following script: a nomadic troupe, lost in the chaos of the desert, travels in search of a luminous tower; on the way, they face obstacles, entities and storms. Along the journey, they see an oracle, who uses his sibylline language to indicate the direction the travelers must take. The actor to play the role of oracle was promptly selected: the man who spoke German. When asked how to get to the Tower of Babel, he had to answer: Ueinzz.

The patient quickly incorporated his character; everything matched, his dark hair and mustache, the short and round body of a Turkish Buda, his schizo-elusive demeanor, his vacant and observing eyes of someone who is in constant conversation with the invisible. However, he was unpredictable. When he was asked, “Great Oracle of Delphi, where is the

tower?” sometimes he replied with silence or with a groan, other times he said Germany or Bauru, until someone asked more specifically, “Great Oracle, what is the magic word in German?” This was when he produced the infallible Ueinzz that everyone was waiting for. The most inaccessible of patients, the one who peed in his pants and vomited on the director’s plate, was the one who had the key responsibility of telling the nomadic people how to leave behind Darkness and Chaos. After he had spoken, his magical word reverberated through the speakers placed all around the theatre, rotating in concentric circles and amplified in vertiginous echoes, Ueinzz, Ueinzz, Ueinzz.

The non-human voice, that we scorned because we didn’t listen, takes on, in the space of the theater, an extraordinary reverberation, a magic-poetic efficiency. When the play was named after the sound, we struggled to choose the spelling. The invitation said “weeinz”, the program said “ueinzz”, the poster played with all sorts of possibilities, in a Babel-like game. Today we are the Ueinzz Theater Company... we were born out of an a-signifying rupture, as Guattari would have said.

In this collective work, every bit of nonsense has a place, even or above all, when it represents a rupture of meaning. An a-signifying singularity, like that of Ueinzz, can become the focus of subjectivation, an autopoietic spark—a crystal of singularity that becomes the holder of an entirely unexpected but shareable existential productivity. It is the production of an artwork, of subjectivity, of the unconscious, of ruptures and rearrangements in the trajectory of an individual or collective existence.

Let’s move a step further. If what we have is the work of subjectivity, then on stage we have a way of seeing, feeling, dressing, moving, speaking, thinking, and also a way of acting without acting, of associating by dissociation, of living and dying, of being on stage and feeling at home at the same time, in a precarious presence, both heavy and impalpable, that simultaneously takes everything seriously and “couldn’t care less”—someone leaves in the middle of the performance by crossing the stage holding a backpack because his scene is over or someone leaves everything behind because time is up and he is about to die, or interferes in every single scene like a sweeper in a soccer match, or chats to the “prompter” who was supposed to be hidden, revealing their presence... The singer who doesn’t sing, almost like Kafka’s Josephine, the dancer who doesn’t dance, the actor who doesn’t act, the hero who faints, the emperor who doesn’t rule, the mayor who doesn’t govern—the community of those who have no community.

I cannot help but think that this is life on stage, “life on the edge”, that makes so many spectators cry with laughter. They have a strong sense that it is them, the spectators, who are the living dead, that real life is on the stage. In a context marked by the control of life (bio-power), forms of vital resistance proliferate in the most unusual ways. One of them is to literally put life on stage, not bare or naked life, according to Agamben (1995), reduced by power to a state of survival, but life in the state of variation, “minor” ways of life that inhabit our major ways of life and that on stage gain visibility as drama, even when they are tangential to death or collapse, collective hallucination or borderline-experiences. Within these restrictive parameters, theater is a device, amongst others, for a sort of experimentation that is always hesitant, uncertain, inconclusive and that makes no promises—potency of life against power over life.

Is this a therapeutic, artistic, existential or political project? We don’t even know if the word project—which is so widely used—is still applicable. Perhaps it is closer to what Fernand Deligny (2007) called an “attempt”. Deligny spent part of his life caring for autistic people

and was always against the institutionalization of his practice. An attempt can be compared to a raft. Pieces of wood loosely interconnected so when hit by a wave, the water can go through the gaps between the logs and the raft can remain floating. It is only because of this, because of this rudimentary structure, that someone on the raft can stay afloat. The raft, also according to Deligny, is not a barricade. But “we could build rafts with what was left from the barricades...” (Deligny, 1978, back cover).

Times have changed but we still have a lot to learn from these practices or this constellation of authors. Faced with the aseptic utopia that has swept the planet in this context of pandemic, with social isolation and its effects, one of the main challenges is to rescue the atmosphere of intimate utopia. I am in favor of the proliferation of spaces of mutual affect, of mutual networks of contagium, of subjective mutation and existential roaming. Following Deleuze, a long time ago, Kierkegaard's hero ran out of a restaurant screaming: “the possible, the possible, or I shall suffocate” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 131). To this plea, we can add another one, in the counterflow of the generalized normo-pathology that equally asphyxiates us: “madness, madness, or I shall suffocate”. Tosquelles talks about securing spaces where it would be possible to “assume one's madness”, rather than denying it. Intimate utopia caters for the chaos that lies at the bottom of each one of us, the many constellations that constitute us, the fragile antennas or the threads of soul with which we make a world.

Years ago, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2008) confessed: “I studied ethnology so I could run away from Brazilian society” (p. 47). Yes, an escape, but not to a European or North American city, as the Brazilian elite often likes to do, but to a world that this same society has made sure to erase, the world of Amerindians. This was his way of expressing his shame, not of being Brazilian—because being from a different country would not have been less shameful—but “perhaps this is what the feeling of belonging to a nationality really is: to have your own reasons to feel ashamed” (Viveiros de Castro, 2008, p. 47). The shame of being a man, Deleuze says. I would also add here—of being a normal man, not to say a normo-pathic man, who is voluntarily or involuntarily complicit with the death by asphyxiation of so-called minor existences. When the air is lacking, when the air is toxic, when the atmosphere is poisoned, when the great war is lost, like today, it is time to run away, not run away from the world, but to make the world run away as Tosquelles did by taking shelter in an asylum. It was from that minuscule experience that the field of psychiatry and its surroundings was de-territorialized.

It is worth noting an argument by Lazzarato: the artistic act becomes resistance as long as there is transversality between the molecular action of rupture and of composition in a specific domain and its outside. In the case of the Ueinzz Theater Company it is worth asking to what extent this minor experiment resonates with other initiatives, altering the “subjective atmosphere” of the environment. Resorting to a very current image, it is not only a matter of fighting the climate change that will eventually asphyxiate us, but also the subjective asphyxiation of the planet. As Guattari (1990, p. 55) said when defining his “subjective ecosophy”: “we must ward off, by every means possible, the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity”.

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About the author

Peter Pál Pelbart is a philosopher and an essayist. He is part of the Ueinzz Theater Company, a schizoscenic project based in São Paulo, Brazil. He writes mainly about madness, time, subjectivity and biopolitics. He published in English "Cartography of Exhaustion: Nihilism Inside Out," and has translated the works of Deleuze into Portuguese. He is a professor at Pontifical Catholic University in São Paulo.

Contact: Department of Clinical Psychology, Pontifical Catholic University in São Paulo, Email: pppelbart@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1880-0113>