

Segmentarity in W.H. Auden's The Unknown Citizen

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Abstract: Wystan Hugh Auden, an Anglo-American poet, was regarded as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. His diverse and influential body of work spans various genres and themes, reflecting the complexities and nuances of modern life. Among his notable contributions is the satirical poem *The Unknown Citizen*, which poignantly critiques the reduction of individuals to mere numbers and data under the pervasive surveillance of authorities. This poem serves as a profound commentary on the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic systems and the loss of individual identity in the face of societal conformity. In this essay, we will delve deeper into the themes presented in Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* by employing the theoretical frameworks of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly their conceptions of segmentarity, lines of flight, and related ideas as elaborated in their co-authored work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Through this lens, we aim to explore how individuals are systematically segmented and monitored in modern society. We will analyze the mechanisms through which societal structures impose rigid segmentarity on individuals, effectively stripping them of their unique identities. Furthermore, we will investigate the potential for individuals to break free from these constraints, utilizing lines of flight to escape rigid societal structures and reclaim their self-identities. This interdisciplinary approach will provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between societal control and personal autonomy in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: W.H. Auden, The Unknown Citizen, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Segmentarity

1. Introduction

Wystan Hugh Auden (21 February 1907 – 29 September 1973), as known as W.H. Auden, was an Anglo-American poet. He is renowned for the variety of themes, forms, and tones in his works. Auden was a prolific writer of prose essays and reviews on literary, political, psychological, and religious topics, and he also worked on documentary films, poetry plays, and other forms of performance. Throughout his career, he was contentious and influential. He received the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for his 1947 lengthy poem *The Age of Anxiety*, the title of which became a common phrase representing the modern era. Critical reactions to his work ranged from contemptuous to passionately affirmative. Following his death, his poems spread to a considerably larger audience via films, radio, and popular media.

Shortly after he moved to America, one of his greatest poems *The Unknown Citizen* was published in 1939. The poem was initially published in *The New Yorker* on January 6, 1940, and then in book form in *Auden's Another Time* (Random House, 1940). *The Unknown Citizen* is a parody of an elegy

to memorize a man who has died recently known only by a combination of letters and numbers, JS/07/M/378. The poem's speaker concludes that this man is nothing less than a model who never challenges or deviates from societal norms. However, through depictions of his seemingly perfect life, the poem expresses satirical and critical attitudes towards the standardization of modern society and the loss of identities of individuals. The poem is implicitly the work of a government agency at some time in the future, when modern bureaucratic trends have reached the point where citizens are known by.

To analyze *The Unknown Citizen*, we should first introduce Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari whose theories will be our solid foundation. Gilles Deleuze is a French postmodernist philosopher, and his friend Félix Guattari is a French philosopher, psychoanalyst, and social activist. They co-write *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* first published in 1980, which is a seminal work for post-structuralism and postmodernism. The book provides a comprehensive and multilayered examination of numerous philosophical, social, and cultural issues, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between capitalism and schizophrenia. It consists of a set of interconnected essays and conceptual frameworks that question standard habits of thought and provide alternative perspectives on the world. This book's most important concepts are rhizome, segmentarity, lines of flight, deterritorialization, and so on, which evaluate diverse social phenomena and systems. We will mainly adopt the concepts of segmentarity and lines of flight.

In this essay, we will have two parts: one is to introduce the main concepts like segmentarity in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* that we will use to analyze *The Unknown Citizen*; the other is to discuss how individuals in modern society are segmented both molarly and molecularly and how to think outside the square, to regain identities through rigid segmentarity, and to make creation by the help of lines of flight.

2. Conformity in *The Unknown Citizen*

When we read *The Unknown Citizen*, the first thing we notice must be the code of the marble monument erected by the government on which there is no name. The dead man seems unknown, but a set of codes still represents him. There is no description of his face, appearance, etc., all is of his "correct" life. Reports from the Bureau of Statistics show that he is a good citizen, even a "saint" because he conducts well and has no complaints. The poem begins with the lines, "He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint." setting the tone for the bureaucratic and impersonal nature of the tribute[1]. He is a good server of the Greater Community, a good worker for the factory; he pays dues; he is popular among friends; he reads newspapers and watches advertisements appropriately...he completely follows the trajectory of social standards. Auden uses a variety of statistical and official reports to describe the citizen's life, noting his conformity and compliance with societal expectations. The poem lists his achievements and behaviors, such as having the "right" number of children, buying the "right" products, and never causing trouble, all without ever revealing anything about his personal feelings, thoughts, or individuality.

Though the poem appears to praise the life of the deceased "unknown citizen," it does so only because this individual exemplified an obedient, non-questioning life. It seems that only in this way one's life is happy and successful. Through ironic depiction, Auden criticizes the reduction of human life to mere data points and the loss of personal identity in a highly regulated, surveillance-oriented society. The poem's closing lines, "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard " underscore the poem's central critique: the state's inability to measure true human experience and the inadequacy of bureaucratic metrics in capturing the essence of a person's life[1].

In this poem, Auden shows a critical attitude toward the standardization of modern society that keeps telling citizens how to live a “right” life. People seem to have the right to choose how they live, but as we see in this poem, it is an illusion. Standards set by authorities tell people what to do. Moreover, all his traces of presence are transformed into electronic statistics under the government’s prevailing surveillance. During his lifetime, he is anonymous and important. After his death, there is no epitaph on his tombstone, even no name, no description of his traits or hobbies, or anything else, only a combination of letters and numbers representing him. In this sense, he is no different from others, with no self-identity. At the end of the poem, right or wrong is what matters, while freedom and happiness are less than nothing, which is impossible in a society that closely monitors its members. When identity is already lost, will life be happy or free?

3. Segmentarity in A Thousand Plateaus

3.1. Molar and Molecular Segmentarity

“We are segmented from all around and in every direction. The human being is a segmentary animal. Segmentarity is inherent to all the strata composing us[2].” We are segmented in many aspects: for work, we are segmented as a worker within the huge machine of social production; for life, we are segmented as a dweller within a community. However, we are separated from what we are in primitive times. In primitive times, binary opposition is powerful, like man and woman. However, it is generated by machines and assemblages in a more flexible way that is more complex and is not binary. As Levi-Strauss demonstrates, a dualist organization never stands on its own in this kind of society. It is modern society that functions like this. Meanwhile, so many independent circles in circular segmentarity are at the same center as different roots in a central tree. Various power centers fall into a single point, then the central power comes into being, as “apparatuses of resonance” going through all vertical power circles, which primitive society does not. In addition, in linear segmentarity, each segment has an inclination of assimilation, i.e. homogenization. The Roman Empire imposes “a linear reason of state”. It is rigid and loses inner dynamics, but it is easier to divide and code. Overall, these kinds of segmentarities belong to arborescent systems. In arborescent systems, which structuralism linguistics advocates, trees’ knots embody binary traits, roots embody the center with resonance, and branches embody sets of codes and division. Thus, Deleuze divides patterns of segmentarities into rigid ones and supple ones according to their main differences, with one arborified and the other rhizomatic, which has no fixed hierarchical knots and is of decentralization and multi-direction. The arborescent system based on binary oppositions for thousands of years features a highly rigid segmentarity and hierarchical unification and has an ultimate power center. In contrast, the rhizomatic system features fluidity, diversity, and variation in the form of a stratum.

But it is not appropriate to directly cut the cake into two parts. They are entangled and “every society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously: one molar, the other molecular[2].” Take man and woman as an example: although humans are divided into two sexes molecularly, there is still a woman like a man or a man like a woman and any other micro and molecular relations.

3.2. Lines of Flight

Deleuze holds that besides the line of rigid or molar segmentarity and lines of supple segmentarity, there are also lines of flight. Lines of flight, or “lignes de fuite” in French, refer to paths of escape that individuals or entities take to break away from established structures, systems, or modes of thought. They are the avenues through which creativity, transformation, and deterritorialization occur. In Deleuze's framework, these lines are not merely routes of escape but are dynamic processes that disrupt the status quo, leading to new forms of organization and existence.

Deleuze and Guattari's seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, elaborates on this idea extensively. They argue that social, political, and personal systems are composed of various strata or layers, which often become rigid and oppressive. Lines of flight represent the forces that escape these rigid structures, enabling new possibilities and reconfigurations. For Deleuze, these lines are inherently positive and productive, as they facilitate the continuous creation of new realities.

The concept is deeply intertwined with Deleuze's notion of deterritorialization. In this context, deterritorialization refers to the process by which established territories or realms of thought are dismantled, allowing for reterritorialization, the formation of new, more fluid territories. Lines of flight are the mechanisms driving this deterritorialization, pushing against the boundaries and constraints of traditional territories.

Like the nomads on the grasslands, lines of flight are of fluidity and agency bringing deterritorialization referring to escaping from fixed social, cultural, and other boundaries. As for central power in modern society, molecular penetration has become a way to control and surveil every unit and individual. To break through the constraint of molar or rigid segmentarity blocking and impeding, lines of flight are needed.

4. Segmentarity in The Unknown Citizen

4.1. Segmented life

In *The Unknown Citizen*, Auden portrays a man whose life is meticulously documented and categorized by various bureaucratic institutions. The poem's structure itself reflects the rigid segmentarity of the subject's life. Each line catalogs an aspect of his existence, from his employment to his consumer habits, presenting a segmented and compartmentalized view of human life.

Segmentarity, according to Deleuze, involves the division of society into distinct segments that regulate and control individuals' behavior. The poem's citizen is a model of conformity within these segments. He is described as a "saint" in the eyes of the state, a perfect embodiment of the expected norms and values[1]. His life is divided into measurable, observable units that the state can easily monitor and evaluate: he worked for Fudge Motors Inc., never caused trouble, paid his dues to the Union, and bought a newspaper every day.

In the poem, the unknown man is highly segmented. His life has been divided linearly into specific units: work, marriage, insurance, healthcare, etc. Every aspect is digitized and controlled by a bureau or an institution. His life is under rigid or molar segmentarity. Every bureau is a center of power. Power centers vertically resonate with one another and finally, become a centralized greater machine. It has a set of standards telling people what are supposed to do. In the poem, what political opinions he should hold, how many children he should have, and many other such things are already decided by the authorities. In every segment, the individual is fixed and hijacked by social norms and has no strength to revolt. Through segmenting, this centralized arborescent system becomes an abstract machine that over-codes and binarizes us (we have right deeds or wrongdoings) and leads us toward a society of homogenization where individuals have little freedom.

4.2. Molecular Control

We are under molecular control in mainly two ways: in one way, we gain something we want according to social norms, such as fame, wealth, friendships, etc. Like the man in the poem, he is a good worker, his standards of living are good and he is popular among his friends. In fact, what he gets are parts of means to control and to let people feel satisfied for a period of time. Friendship, wealth, fame, etc. are instrumental powers, that not only can be tools to surveil and judge others, but even making ourselves integrated as a part of the whole mechanics[3].

In another way, it molecularly controls us through fear. Part of the sense of security comes from the clear rules of binarization in modern society, relying on which we live a regular life and have a set of standards to conform. Like the unknown man, it does not matter whether he is happy, but he follows what society teaches him to do, so he is successful in every segment of social norms. And everyone around him takes responsibility for surveilling, judging, and disciplining which they themselves go through. The more we fear the judgment of others, the more rigid we become.

Through psychological control, the values molecularly creep into people's minds. This arborescent system dominates how people think, and everyone already knows and is assumed to know what it means to think[4]. Gradually individuals lose their characteristics, their tastes, their thoughts, and finally their self-identities like the unknown man. In the poem, he follows social standards for his whole life. But for his happiness and freedom, which is really what identifies him? Nobody knows. The man with no identity represents unthinking hollow modern men of conformity under the surveillance and control of central authorities.

4.3. Power of Lines of Flight and Deterritorialization

To break through, lines of flight that ruling authorities keep blocking to maintain the abstract machine of over-coding is needed. It is the desire to appear in the crack of molar systems and has the enormous power of deterritorialization[2]. In *The Unknown Citizen*, the absence of any personal or emotional detail about the citizen suggests a potential line of flight. The state knows everything about his external life but nothing about his internal experiences, desires, or discontent. This gap in knowledge highlights a space where the citizen could possess a hidden interior life, untouched by state surveillance and control. This unknown aspect of his identity could signify resistance to the totalizing grasp of the bureaucratic apparatus.

The poem's final lines pose a crucial question: "Was he free? Was he happy?" These questions imply that despite the exhaustive records and surveillance, the most essential aspects of the citizen's existence—his freedom and happiness—remain uncharted[1]. This ambiguity points to the possibility of lines of flight, where the true essence of a person's life escapes the confines of societal segmentation.

Although we are segmented and over-coded by the abstract machine, lines of flight consist of another kind of abstract machine of decoding and deterritorialization providing possibilities for change and creation. This power of deterritorialization gives us a new train of thought beyond common sense, with which we have the strength to challenge established norms and hierarchies and expand new ways to create and express. Therefore we get to know who we are and find our positions in this world.

However, we must notice that segmentarity of the modern society is a double-edged sword. To some extent, it brings us some sort of order and regularity. In *The Unknown Citizen*, the ultimate goal is not to break current orders but to think concerning differentiation beyond current modes of thinking and re-find our identities in progressing society. In the meantime, we should be on the alert for extremity that leads to despair and destruction in pursuing lines of flight.

5. Conclusion

Wystan Hugh Auden exerted a major influence on the poetry of the 20th century renowned for his versatility and technical prowess. His work spans themes of politics, love, religion, and human nature, making him relevant across various contexts. Auden's early poetry addresses social and political issues, while his later work delves into psychological and philosophical questions. His influence extends beyond poetry to plays, essays, and opera libretti, showcasing his broad cultural impact. Known for his mastery of form and style, Auden's work continues to resonate due to its profound exploration of universal themes and human experiences.

The Unknown Citizen is one of W.H. Auden's most famous poems, written in 1939. The poem is a satirical commentary on the modern, bureaucratic state and the dehumanization of individuals within it. It presents a fictional epitaph for an unnamed, ordinary citizen, referred to only by a government identification number. *The Unknown Citizen* depicts a man as a model who is always compliant with social standards and expectations, but ironically reduced to statistics and finally anonymous and insignificant. It is a true portrayal of modern men like every one of us pursuing success in common sense.

In this essay, we mainly use conceptions of segmentarity, lines of flight, etc. in their co-authored work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to analyze *The Unknown Citizen*. From the analysis above, we find that modern people are highly segmented in every aspect of modern society that is of both molar and molecular segmentarity. Values and norms of centralized authorities molecularly penetrate individuals for every word and action and set standards for them to lead a right and successful life. However, we should learn to think outside the box by lines of flight that bring the power of deterritorialization and try to create, and challenge established rules and norms to find out what we really want to live for. This is what really identifies us, I suppose.

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