

What lies between

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Abstract

The present text establishes a narrative of the filmmaking process by the authors of *Facts of life*. A film developed with 18 hours of video from Gilles Deleuze's courses at the university of Vincennes (1975-76). A working material taped by Marielle Burkhalter as part of her Master Project 'film thought in its becoming'.

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Facts of Life (2009), Graeme Thomson & Silvia Maglioni, film still, courtesy of the artists.

I. The school of night

It began with the experience of watching video footage of Gilles Deleuze's courses at Vincennes. Shot by Marielle Burkhalter as part of her Masters project to 'film thought in its becoming', the video was broadcast in 2007 on *Rai Tre's* late night art cinema slot *Fuori Orario*, with repeat transmissions in the following years. Even then it was a pretty dark time in Italy. A disastrous education reform had just been bulldozed through parliament by the second Berlusconi regime, so simply being able to witness the leisurely autonomy Deleuze -and, often, Guattari) enjoyed at Vincennes in testing out new ideas and building up concepts –not to mention that of the students who could pick up what they needed or what interested them most for their own projects—already seemed like some kind of science-fiction utopia. This was 1975-76, the years when Deleuze and Guattari had just begun working on *Mille Plateaux*, and watching those 18 hours we were aware of being present at its gestation, as concepts such as *visagéité* gradually took shape from an assortment of mismatching bits and scraps in the permanently smoke-misted room.

For a number of reasons, Burkhalter's images had languished in obscurity for decades before the *Fuori Orario* team decided to expose the unedited rushes to the jittery light of after-midnight insomnia and delirium. Deemed barely presentable on account of so-called technical defects, the footage seemed like a bizarre audio-visual notebook surviving in the limbo between private memory and historical archive. The record of a sci-fi planetarium. Deleuze apparently began to edit Marielle's video into a finished film but was unable to secure post-production resources to complete the project, which received a single screening in a Paris cinema before disappearing completely.

What would have become of the film they hoped to make from these images is anyone's guess. But in its workless state, what became visible was the very movement of Deleuze's thought as it flitted mercurially from black holes to Proust to information theory to Tristan and Isolde, Chrétien de Troyes and Josef von Sternberg, selecting from each the component that would serve the concept, and equally, the importance to that movement of the participants in the seminar, whose tightly compressed bodies became the conductors of a collective libidinal headrush.

The scapegoat's anus. The face of the despot. Black holes and white walls. Mosquitos and catastrophe theory, werewolves, Moby Dick, London taxis and Virginia Woolf's molecular becomings. We soon found ourselves taking notes, as if we were actually *there* at the seminar. Huddled in our living-room in the cramped prefab shed in the Vincennes woods, with nothing to tell inside from out. Inhabiting the membrane of the time-machine.

The images were compelling, the grainy, often blurred texture of the video with its crackle and buzz and momentary blackouts, and the figures that loomed out of the grayscale in whose faces, clothes, postures, gesture you could see intimations of Eustache, late Bresson, the Rivette of *OUT 1*. What we were seeing felt like cinema waiting to happen. Where were they heading after the seminar? Where had they been the night before? Eventually we thought, let's try to find some of these characters and make a film with them. And in saying so, we were already translating ourselves into a realm somewhere between fiction and delirium.

Later we would learn how Vincennes had for a time been a subversive political laboratory, one where institutional codes, power relations and traditional practices of transmission were, if not suspended, then at least destabilized. It was possible to enroll without a high school diploma, many departments were helping *sans-papiers* students, often from countries involved in decolonization struggles, to live in France by providing false papers and other types of help. Mixed into the student body were factory workers, militants, artists, filmmakers, drug dealers, residents of alternative psychiatric institutions such as the Clinique de La Borde. Hardly anybody was thinking about finishing school, or getting a degree for their future career. It was the 1970s, the 'street' and its radical energy still pervaded the university and were visibly part of the molecular composition of Deleuze's seminar which had held us hypnotized, despite the flickering of the TV screen (and the time travel).

We made preparations and left for Paris. All we had were a couple of suitcases and the 3 VHS double-speed tapes we had recorded off *Rai Tre*. We had no idea yet what we were going to do with the material. Perhaps the simplest thing would be just to refilm the 18 hours *Pierre Menard*-style. It seemed the film was already there, there was nothing to cut and nothing to add other than maybe a letterbox frame to make it feel more like cinema. But in another sense the film wasn't over and we wanted to know how it continued beyond the walls of the classroom.

One of the first people we met was Marielle. Though wary at first, she gradually warmed to our project, telling us how she had lost more than half of her original footage (which included not only Deleuze's courses but also those of Lyotard, Schérer and Châtelet). After accumulating an unwieldy pile of tapes, she had decided to donate them to the 'new' Paris 8 archives. Unfortunately the library didn't deal with video and the university's A/V technicians said the format (half-inch pneumatic tape) was obsolete or in any case untreatable with the means they had at their disposal. The tapes were consigned to the trash. Luckily someone tipped Marielle off and she was able to borrow a van, rush to St. Denis and save what she could. Which was how the Deleuze videos eventually found their way to Enrico Ghezzi at *Fuori Orario*, and then to us and others like us in a diaspora of transcodes that eventually made its way, in fragments, to YouTube.

In an improbable studio we had rented next to the Eiffel Tower (strangely it was all we could find in terms of accommodation, possible thanks to some false declarations a friend had made on our behalf, but considering the policing of accommodation today when finding an apartment means earning at least 3 times the rent, we were quite lucky), we began making digital close-ups of individual students from the TV screen, which we assembled in a contact sheet of (somewhat muggy) mug shots. The project began to assume the contours of a phantom police investigation, that we pursued at Paris 8 Saint-Denis, where a lot of the old Vincennes still taught and where we would thrust these images under their noses. We didn't get very far with this procedure. Some of those we questioned hallucinated their own presence in the pictures, a gallery of post '68 archetypes lost in fog where it seemed everyone you knew might eventually turn up if you looked hard enough. Others recognized only the missing, the overdosed, the suicided.

The impression we had was that the images were fundamentally unarchivable. Neither public nor private domain, unpresentable both in terms of their technical quality and their autonomy from institutional protocols, the rushes dwelt in a kind of limbo, a blissful identity-free zone, for which we coined the term *inarchivé* after Blanchot's idea of the *inachevé*, referring to the part of an event that constitutes its remainder, that its realization fails to account for or cannot exhaust.

II. From facts to *facts*

Before starting to shoot our own film we looked at a number of documentaries that had been made about Vincennes. The University was created after the events of May '68. Built as a prefabricated campus in the Bois de Vincennes, it became fully operative

in 1969. Though considered by many to be an experimental ghetto –a cunning strategic concession on De Gaulle’s part which had the effect of isolating the militant post-68 student body far from the centre of Paris– it was for a while the site of great intellectual and political ferment until 1980 when it was finally bulldozed to the ground and moved to St. Denis, in the outskirts of northern Paris.

But we weren’t interested in making another film ‘about’ Vincennes, any more than we were in making one ‘about’ Deleuze, nor even ‘about’ his students. The word ‘about’ was the problem. It was more a question of *betweenness*. For each of his students the encounter with Deleuze’s thought came from a different angle, in relation to a specific life trajectory, as was (as were) our own. The thing that interested us most was the singularity of each encounter and what would develop from it, which is to say the space of relation, the space between. How to film these spaces of relation as they evolved? Having located around twenty people who had appeared in the video images, we eventually pared them down to around ten: a militant filmmaker, a translator, an art dealer, a composer, a former drug dealer, an urbanist, schizoanalyst, experimental rock musician, photographer, funambulist, all possessed of a certain clandestinity that was perfect for the kind of film we wanted to make. A film that would hopefully eschew representation, that would steer clear of the trap of psychology and personal memories, that would work towards an effacement of the mechanisms of identification and faciality that dominate more conventional documentaries, and install in their place a logic and affective economy of impersonal singularities caught up in a-signifying becomings –becomings of texture, light, music, movement, fictional lines of flight: an open problematic field of virtualities which the audience could actively begin to reassemble and rewire as they watched. Our idea was to get to know each of the students we met and to isolate some particular idea or concept that seemed to express their relation to Deleuze, to us, to life, from which we could begin to build a kind of map of the territory. In the event we found there was a continual variation in terms of distance, affect, desire, give and take, playfulness, risk or attunement that implied or led to a different composition of elements, almost a different genre in each case. Often we were received almost as though revenants from their past, ghosts come knocking at the door, seeking news of the future.

How much of this process amounted to an attempt to translate Deleuze’s thought into cinematographic terms? Deleuze in his two cinema books discovers that cinema has its own ways of thinking, its own particular modalities of creation from which philosophy may have something to learn. Was it not equally possible therefore that cinema had something to learn from philosophy (and from Deleuze in particular) in extending its own potentials for thought? What had concepts like rhizome, deterritorialization, the body without organs, becoming animal, the *ritournelle* to offer in terms of renewing the possibilities of cinematic form and movement, cinema as a machine of perception, a modality of being? Or was it simply a question of proceeding ‘as if’ such a translation were possible?

If Deleuze’s thought seemed to offer particularly fertile ground for rethinking cinema it was perhaps because its image was that of an infinite movement akin to the powers (or potentialities) of cinema itself, which had promised, but so rarely delivered, a

whole new doctrine of the faculties unmoored and unbound from Kant's overly rational, unified and organized subjectivity. More than anything else Deleuze's Spinozism encouraged us to think of the film as being like a body (as well as an assemblage of bodies). The process of making it would help us understand what that body was capable of. Our approach was also in part a response to Deleuze's engagement with cinema, the way he used cinema to do philosophy at the same time showing how cinema invents its own 'thought': here we tried to reverse the process, to use elements of his philosophy to do cinema, to make a film whose structure and modality of perception is rhizomatic. "Every part of a rhizome can be connected to any other part and must be". That was the challenge, to make a film that could be viewed in a distributed, non-linear way, despite the temporality of the medium, where you could pick up something from one plateau (an image, sound, phrase, object, situation or action) and plug it into another, play with it, modulate it, test its harmonics. In a way this was a wider application of the principle that by placing a gun in a drawer in scene 1 you ensure someone will use it by the end of the film. The difference was that here it was equally the audience we were inviting to pick things up, and to take the 'gun' (or whatever else) from plateau six to use in, say, plateau one.

An important part of this process was attempting to dismantle the effects of faciality which cinema typically produces. Faciality understood not simply as the production of faces, but of a machine, a system of organization, of which the face was one (but not the only) coordinate, that would engender structures of recognition and identification. What produced the machine of facialization was in fact the circuit which existed between a face, a voice, a name and a history, each of which was effectively facialized by the others. What would happen, if we took this machine apart and redistributed the components? Each would be released into an impersonal material becoming that would open it to new kinds of conjunction and disjunction with its environment, freeing the viewer's perception from the semiotic chains of expectation. Our first instinct was to separate voices from bodies and denominate, but we gradually began to vary and play with levels of synchro- or de- synchronization in a manner similar to the technique of de-phasing rhythmic patterns in minimalist music. And so the process of the film's making became like an ongoing interrogation of and experimentation with the machines (both abstract and concrete) of cinematic perception, an interrogation which passed by way of our relation with each character.

III. Filming on plateaus

Editing the film, we decided to structure it in eight plateaus, in an attempt to construct intensive zones, distinct planes of life, questioning and experimentation that might fold upon and reconfigure each other in different ways. Each of these was linked to a specific character or characters and to the problematic field they suggested to us or that mapped our encounter with them (*Inarchivé, Visagéité, Inclination, Echelles / Intervalles, Bords, Épuissance, Promenade, Falaise*).

Bords, for example, starts from Deleuze's theory of the importance of being on the border to reflect on the political question of the downscaling and standardization of education as a 'preparation' for a life of diminished horizons, and to the edges where

forms of life go on being invented, perceived from the outside as a kind of noise, the noise of what tries to tear away from the axiomatized regime of capitalism, the noise of what is torn by capital from the endless process of its becoming and offered as an end product to be ingested and surpassed. Thus we pass from the corridors and *dazibao* of Paris 8 Saint-Denis, torn between rallying calls of resistance on one hand and new forms of enslavement to precarity on the other, to the Périphérique ring road where a lone figure (a friend of Guattari we met during the shooting), distant cousin of Tati's M. Hulot, reads sections of *Anti-Oedipus* to the passing traffic, to a concert of noise music where sounds are shredded and these 'tears' of eros invent their own fleeting *jouissance*; and finally to a threshold image where the poetry of Deleuze and Guattari's desiring machines and the sweeping roar of automobiles are disjunctively synthesised in the glissandi of a black trombone.

Then, *Epuissance* expands upon the question of the border as what is left by the wayside. Here is a bestiary of animal bodies crushed by cars (photographed by a Deleuze student who in the videos is nearly always sitting at his side), pressed into unforeseen shapes of desire at the moment of death. A reading of Beckett's *Mal Vu Mal Dit* evokes the figure of the exhausted, the opening to a life after life which takes us back to Paris 8 Saint-Denis and a quartet of present-day students framed after Godard's *Un film comme les autres*, after the motor of militant discourse has been exhausted, and what remains are echoes of its gestures combined with the uncertainty and fragility of the present –a conversation that turns around a micropolitics of resistance and autonomy, while a female voice reads from Ponge's *La Fabrique du pré* on the nature of fire and organic life.

At the heart of the film is the plateau *Inclination* and the bois de Vincennes which operates as a kind of *khôra* as well as a place of passage and return, of memory and amnesia. It is our equivalent of 'the Zone'. It is the park from *Blow Up* (the site of a crime all evidence of which has been removed), the sequoia forest from *Vertigo*, Thoreau's fugue, Watteau, Corot's depiction of Orpheus's path from the underworld, Straub's Buti and at the same time it is none of these, nor even Vincennes itself. Cinema has the possibility of inventing its own territories, which can exist nowhere else but in the image itself, places that prepare a welcome for ghosts. Reference falls away, there is nothing that can be named. Instead there are lines of desire, of suspension, of being waylaid or getting lost, there are leanings and swayings and aimless wanderings, all the inclinations to which the *sous-bois* is well disposed. But the woods are also deceptive. What appears to be the work of nature is in reality the sign of a cultural violence that has erased all trace of the University of Vincennes. Trees planted over the bulldozed campus stand as sentinels of a calculated forgetting. Not that we would wish for a monument. It is the task of the film to capture the sense of the place as a field of charged emptiness, unmoored from any sure historical or political footing but compelled to roam the terrain in an eternal return. The movement of the camera becomes that of a wounded animal in flight looking for a way out, a place to rest, perhaps to die. A line of abolition. Yet, at the same time, there is Deleuze holding onto the intolerable conditions of the overcrowded classroom, conditions that he refuses to exchange for a more comfortable lecture theatre with a dais and a microphone because, he says, of the *nature* of what he and the students are doing.

IV. From the under-wood to the infra-quark

In making *Facs of Life* the question for us became that of 'figuring' as opposed to representing Deleuze. We wanted to avoid the kind of 'portrait of a philosopher' film that was in vogue at that moment. But Deleuze would obviously be present in the film, in another sense, everywhere and nowhere, like a gas or a mist, or sometimes like a wild animal or a kind of mythical, shape-shifting entity, a molecular presence that perhaps more than anything else would make itself felt in the desire to create something new, a form, a style or rhythm of filmmaking and of thinking through film whose only ground would be the plane of consistency it manages to draw for itself.

Facs of Life came out as a film in 2009 but its plateau-structure also opened the way to a number of reconfigurations of the material. These included the creation of an eventwork, the temporary autonomous classroom *Blown Up! à la recherche des élèves de Gilles Deleuze* –where guest artists, thinkers, teachers, students and visitors were invited to creatively respond to or interact with sequences from the film– and *twice torn from time*, a four-screen installation. We became interested in the formal possibilities of an exploded cinema, a radical redistribution of the components of the image, and in the idea of unmaking.

Around this period we discovered the existence of another lost cinema project, this time by Félix Guattari, a script he had written in the 1980s for a sci-fi film that he wanted to direct himself. *Un amour d'UIQ* recounts what happens when an invisible alien force from a parallel dimension –UIQ, the Infra-quark Universe– makes contact with a community of squatters and begins to desire a communicable form (a face, a body) for itself, commensurate with the world of its hosts. But this proves impossible because UIQ's machinic subjectivity –which is capable of infiltrating human minds and bodies, communications systems and machines, even natural phenomena– lacks temporal and spatial limits and a fixed sense of identity.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Infra-quark Universe was that its problems of embodiment were also those of Guattari's script, which went through three very different versions and never found a stable form. It was as though the subject of UIQ was at once too infinitesimal and too far-reaching to find an adequate frame. What struck us about the script was the way it tried to release the delirium that is constitutive of cinema from the signifying structures (story, psychology, etc.) that reinforce normative patterns of desire.

Initially, our goal was simply to publish the script in book form, but the oddness of the text and its uncertain place within Guattari's other writings, meant that the book began to take on a form of its own, one that could encompass the scope of Guattari's cinematic adventure while leaving it open to future transformation. Once again it was the spectre of the *inarchivé* that was guiding us, in this case the worklessness of a film in limbo that could only be made by a process of mental or even physical contamination. We felt that in order to help this delirium proliferate we had to create further 'manifestations' of the Infra-quark Universe – an art radio piece, a series of talks and performances, a film (*In Search of UIQ*), and most recently a number of

seeances – collective envisionings of the screenplay in different countries – leading to an exhibition, *it took forever getting ready to exist*, that would also be the sign of a continual *unmaking-of*. The screenplay's insistence, as a kind of cinematic dark matter, would enable others to think this universe for and between themselves without having a particular filmic vision imposed on them.

In a sense we have moved from a film in search of a missing or dispersed collective body to the summoning of a collective (or collectives) who can give body to a missing film. In both cases we invoke something that may become so small as to be practically imperceptible: the past and its losses folded up into a tiny space the size of a *Calabi-Yau* manifold yet nonetheless retaining the possibility of exploding into a new universe.