

Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and theatre

Or, Philosophy and its “other”^{*}

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Many critical works have already established links between Deleuze’s philosophy and art. Art became the “Other” of philosophy, using affects and percepts to understand intellectual questions. Gilles Deleuze’s thoughts about painting, cinema, literature and music had been moving towards the creation of new concepts, as well as investigations of other regions beyond the philosophic field and towards the construction of a logic of multiplicities. But, in these critical works, theatre was always curiously absent. Gilles Deleuze had already explained in *L’Abécédaire* with force and clarity his disinterest in theatre: “Theatre is too long, and too disciplined,” it is “an art that remains entrenched in the present and in daily issues, while never advancing beyond dimensions of the present.” While showing admiration for the directors Bob Wilson and Carmelo Bene, he nonetheless expressed regrets unambiguously: “To stay four hours sitting in an uncomfortable armchair, I cannot do this anymore. That alone destroys theatre for me.” Nevertheless, when we read Deleuze, theatre is everywhere present. Let us present a few examples.

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Difference and repetition is a criticism of representation. And yet, Deleuze speaks of costumes, of masks, of doubles and drama. He speaks as well of “methods of dramatization”¹ familiar to a public of contemporary theatre, of the theatre of cruelty, of Artaud’s theatre and its double, of philosophic theatre, of the theatre of the future, of the theatre of worship² (term borrowed from Kierkegaard). And finally, he sets in opposition the “theatre of representation” and “the theatre of repetition”: the theatre of repetition can produce the experience of pure forces, of dynamic lines in space which act without the intermediacy of the mind. *The Logic of sense* is a vision of Antonin Artaud.

Anti-Oedipus repeats that the unconscious does not constitute a theatre, like antique tragedy, but rather a factory, a production machine, and Deleuze forcefully denounces any form of mimesis, or imitation.

A chapter of *What is philosophy?*³ is dedicated to “conceptual personae.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that conceptual personae are true agents of enunciation that make philosophy tangible, for example Socrates in Plato, or Zarathustra in Nietzsche. Deleuze draws when necessary upon the figures of Oedipus, Ajax (both characters from tragedies by Sophocles), Don Juan, Empedocles, the Amazonian queen Penthesilea...

The second part of the book *Superpositions* (1979), written with Carmelo Bene consists of Deleuze’s “One Manifesto Less,”⁴ an essay on Bene and theatre and their relation with minor literature. The iconic figure of Richard III is presented as a “man of war”, engaged in

¹ Gilles Deleuze, “The Method of Dramatization,” *Desert Islands and other texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Mike Taormina, Semiotext(e), 2004, pp. 94 sqq.

² “Le théâtre de la foi,” in Søren Kierkegaard, *La Répétition*, 1843.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, London/New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 61-83.

⁴ The translation by Alan Orenstein can be found in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 204-222.

“becoming woman.” Bene is described as an “actor machine.” Finally, Deleuze asks the question “What is minor theatre?”

Ten years later, in 1992, Deleuze analysed four plays for television written by Samuel Beckett, in an essay entitled *The Exhausted*, as an afterword to the French translations of *Quad, But the clouds...*, *Nacht und Traume*, and *Ghost Trio*. In this essay, he continued to define the concept of “minor theatre.”

Finally, when Deleuze presented and “performed” his courses at the Université de Vincennes, he was able to demonstrate that the philosopher himself is in fact the dominant character in the philosophical drama in which philosophical thinking is in the process of development. He might begin his seminar with the ritual question: “Would you mind closing the door?”. And then, in a voice more patient and in a deeper tone, Deleuze might then articulate the concepts at stake in the drama: “And then, what does that mean?”, might become the question insistently asked. His speech becomes more increasingly rapid, until he was able to articulate the concept in a voice now more serious and even spectral. Claude Jaeglé, in his fine book, *An oratory portrait of Gilles Deleuze with yellow eyes*, speaks of a “diction of concepts.”⁵

So, whereas Deleuze does attempt to dissuade his reader from considering theatre as an art which really had importance for him, it is clear that he continues to place references to theatre everywhere.

Theatre enables Deleuze to emerge from philosophy⁶, while at the same time drawing new perspectives from philosophy, even to the point of underlining the theatricality of philosophy. He said in *Negotiations*: “From Empedocles on, there’s a whole dramaturgy of thought.”⁷ Concepts become characters and tell stories.

So, it seems that theatre is one of the “Other” of the Deleuzian works neglected by critics. Theatre has a minor status, a less distinguished

⁵ Claude Jaeglé, *Portrait oratoire de Gilles Deleuze aux yeux jaunes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *L’Abécédaire*, Lettre C: “Sortir de la philosophie,” DVD, Éditions Montparnasse, 2004.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, London/New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 148.

status in comparison to the place given in his criticism to cinema, literature, and music, and it is not without surprise that we can actually remark that there has been no single publication specifically devoted to Deleuze and theatre yet.

Reasons therefore to honor the recently published work in English, *Deleuze and performance*, edited by Laura Cull and published by the Edinburgh University Press⁸, the first collection of articles on the subject. We can also note a few several chapters of Ronald Bogue’s books, for example in *Deleuze on Literature*⁹.

But the presence of theatre is inseparable from the second “Other”: Félix Guattari. Friend and alter ego, Félix Guattari permitted a dialogical configuration, which is an original variation of the philosophic dialogue in Plato. Both voices are joined or mixed in an “organization of collective enunciation.” [*agencement collectif d’énonciation*] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were two separate identities, and began together a new shaping, a new collective subjectivity. A “line of flight” [*ligne de fuite*] is created, a virtuality embodied in the meeting of Deleuzian thought and theatrical practices.

In the course of my research for the completion of my thesis, I came by chance upon six plays written by Félix Guattari between 1980 and 1990. These are not philosophical dramas, nor are they what is often referred to as “theatre with a thesis” such as in the theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre. They are rather plays inspired by *Ubu* by Alfred Jarry, inspired in turn by the theatrical experiments of dadaists and surrealists. Qualified as “chaosmic sketches,” rapidly written and in a great distance from philosophic seriousness, the plays are composed in the tones and style of daily life, and punctuated by language with childish wit. Guattari satirizes and mocks the patrons and icons of psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Mélanie Klein, Carl Gustav Jung) and of philosophy (Socrates, Lucretius), and, of course, himself. The goal of this kind of theatre is simply laughter. I give here a few examples.

⁸ *Deleuze and performance*, edited by Laura Cull and Ian Buchanan, “Deleuze Connections,” Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

⁹ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on literature*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

First example: *Le Maître de Lune*

Here a short passage drawn from *The Moon Master*, written in 1985. Félix Guattari speaks here of the concept of “individuation,” reduced to an object of ridicule by the vulgarity of the term... (It should be noted that the characters are not given names but are designated by letters and numbers.)

Three secretaries or servants in mini-jupes busy themselves with “the object little a” (a reference to the concept from the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, which stands for the unattainable object of desire). They put him on a little stool, massage him, open his shirt, wrap him in warm towels and tickle him.

B 1 *affectionately*: Say I swear! Go on, say it, I swear it, bunny!

[a]: Bunny?

B 2: And now, now that we’ve started, tell us everything. We’ve come to listen to you. [...]

B 1 *sneezing* – Nietzsche!

B 2: God bless you!

B 1: And so, we might have hoped for a little bit of individuation, [but] we didn’t dare say so... That’s what happened, right? You big jerk!

[a] *ashamed, he nods his head*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Original French text:

Trois secrétaires-soubrettes en mini-jupes s’affairent autour de (a). Elles l’installent sur un tabouret, le massent, ouvrent sa chemise, l’enveloppent de serviettes chaudes et le chatouillent.

B 1, *affectueux* – Dites je le jure ! Allez, dites-le donc, je le jure, allez mon gros lapin !

– Mon gros lapin ?

B 2 – Et puis, par la même occasion, dites-nous tout. On est là pour vous entendre. [...]

B 1, *éternuant* – Nietzsche !

B 2 – À la tienne !

B 1 – Alors, comme ça, on aurait voulu un petit peu d’individuation, mais on n’osait pas le dire ! C’est bien ça, hein, mon gros bêta ?

(a), *honteux, hoche la tête*.

Second example: *Socrate*

The second play is entitled *Socrates*. In Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, Socrates had already been portrayed as a ridiculous character, a Socrates who is a bum, sleeping on a pallet full of fleas trying to see the world of Ideas from close up by ascending in a basket suspended from a tree bringing him up to within a few meters of the sky where Ideas were supposed to be located. Félix Guattari, in his own manner, places the Father of all philosophers upon the stage in a most unflattering light. The plot of the play can be summarized as follows: the character called Georges claims to be Socrates. Carmen, his wife, tries to calm him down. Georges seems to be suffering from a spasm of delirium, a spell of mystical hallucination, during which he takes himself for the Greek philosopher. And at the end of the play, Georges – or Socrates – utters a cry that resembles an exquisite surrealist corpse:

After Star Wars, the Logos bomb! This is where one hundred years of Lacanism has brought us. But, as far as I know, haven’t the Saussurian “Conventions” of Geneva condemned the use of signifying gas?¹¹

Socrates is now nothing more than a schizophrenic, the herald of the terrorism of the Logos (or rationality in the extreme), detesting Lacanism and evoking the poisonous thought of Ferdinand de Saussure and connecting linguistics to the Geneva Conventions... (I remind you here that Jacques Lacan considers the unconscious to be structured as a language.) The play is largely incomprehensible, moving playfully and incessantly between intertextualities and associations of ideas of this kind.

¹¹ Original French text:

Après la guerre des étoiles la bombe à logos ! Voilà où nous auront conduits cent années de lacanisme. Mais que je sache, les conventions saussuriennes de Genève n’ont-elles pas proscrit l’usage des gaz signifiants ?

Third example: *Psyche Ville Morte*

The third play is entitled *Psyche Ghost Town*. Three groups of actors are waiting for something to happen, for a “situation” to be set in motion, so that a story may begin... The sole setting, in the middle of the stage, a tree. Beyond the likely references to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the three groups of actors seem to suggest the three components of the Freudian psyche (the id, the ego, and the super-ego¹²). The stage within the theatre is transformed into a “dialogic” exchange. Félix Guattari engages in the playful passage back and forth between the psychoanalytical stage and the theatrical stage. At a certain moment of the play, the characters attempt to intensify their “desire” by improvising a Dionysiac dance. But their attempts fail and the characters are as far removed from frenzy as before.

D: That wasn’t going too badly. And then, he had to start all over again, again and again with that same nasty stuff.

II A: Look at those jerks, they take themselves for the working class!

I A: We’ve got to come to a decision.

III A: He’s right, we’ve got to do something!

II A: What fun!¹³

So, what solution can be found to re-awaken their desire? Some of them suggest strange tricks and others propose “anti-tricks”, and still others, “binary signifying chains” [*signifiant binaire*]. Here’s another piece of the text:

¹² Such as Freud describes them in his second topic (id, ego, super-ego) trying to map the psychic apparatus.

¹³ Original French text:

D : ca marchait pas mal. Et puis, il a fallu qu’il la ramène, toujours avec ce même machin scabreux.

IIA : Regardez-les ces cons là, ils se prennent pour des prolos !

I A : Il faut prendre une décision.

IIIA : Il a raison, il faut faire quelque chose !

IIA : Quelle rigolade !

I B: You think there is a way, really? Or an anti-way? A trick, or an anti-trick?

II B: Maybe a trick-“truc”?

I B: You mean a “binary signifying chain”?

III B: No dirty talk, there!

I B: Anyway, he always understood everything before everyone else.

III B: Because he didn’t want to know anything...

II A: But sex, buddy, sex!

I A: Who? What?

II A: Sex, differentiation of the sexes, the moment that determines what is possible!

III A: You want me to show my ass?

I *chorus*: Ass! Give us some ass!

III 3 does a strip tease.

I C: That’s not very interesting.¹⁴

¹⁴ Original French text:

I B - Tu crois qu’il y a un truc ? un anti-truc ?

II B - Peut-être un tric-truc ?

I B - Tu veux dire du signifiant binaire ?

III B - Pas de gros mots, là-bas !

I B - De toute façon, il a toujours tout compris avant les autres.

III B - A force de rien vouloir savoir...

II A - Mais le sexe, mon vieux, le sexe !

I A - Qui ? Quoi ?

II A - Le sexe, la différence des sexes, la coupure pour casser le possible !

IIIA - Tu veux que je te montre mon cul ?

I le choeur : du cul ! On veut du cul !

Strip tease de III3

IC : C’est pas très intéressant

Fourth example: *Visa le noir tua le blanc*

Finally, the fourth extract is taken from the play: *Aimed at the black man, killed the white one*. The play is an example of internal duplication of the dramatic situation. Whereas Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, defines theatrical drama as a story which develops from point *a* to point *b*, *Aimed at the black man, killed the white one* bears on drama and its failure to happen, and it bears on non-drama. I quote a short extract:

B: Ok, do you agree?

N: Agree on what!

N: What kind of thing?

A: You hear the other guy?

B: Immediately! But finally, when I say let's agree, it's only to signify an hypothesis. I do not claim at all that something has indeed really happened.

N: That's clear, what did you mean in the final analysis? [...] That fascinates me, the idea of an event which wouldn't change anything at all.

A: Or not very much.

H: That changes everything, that business. Because between nothing at all and not very much, that makes a helluva difference!

G: That guy is going to start his routine of a post-modern explanation of the clinamen which could break down the whole system.¹⁵

¹⁵Original French text:

B : Bon, admettons !

N : Admettons quoi !

B : J'en sais rien, admettons qu'il se soit passé quelque chose !

N : Quel genre ?

A : Tu l'entends, l'autre ?

B : Tout de suite ! Mais enfin, quand je dis admettons, c'est seulement pour signifier une hypothèse. Je ne prétends aucunement qu'il se soit effectivement passé quelque chose.

N : C'est plus clair, qu'est-ce que tu as voulu dire au bout du compte ? [...] Ça m'intrigue, cette idée d'un événement qui ne changerait rien.

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There would be much more to say about two other plays: *The Affair of the Lancel Handbag* (*L'Affaire du sac de chez Lancel*) and *Night time, the End of Possibilities* (*La Nuit, la fin des moyens*). Let us just mention that *The Affair of the Lancel Handbag* is the first play written by Félix Guattari in 1979, the only political play in the tradition of the October group of Jacques Prévert. *Night time, the End of Possibilities*, is his last play, which was read at the Avignon Festival in 1990. That is a play about his childhood memories: numerous monologues drawn from his unpublished autobiography, *33.333*, revised and published with the title: *Ritournelles* (*Refrains*).

To conclude, I hope that I have stirred your curiosity by my discussion of these texts still unpublished in France, but which I hope to see them published in the near future in France, and perhaps some day in English. With regard to Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari's theatre is one of those "Others" which deserves to be studied more closely.

A... : Ou pas grand chose.

H... : C'est que ça change tout cette affaire là. Parce qu'entre rien du tout et pas grand chose, ça fait une sacrée différence !

G : Celui-là va encore nous faire le coup du clinamen de derrière les fagots et du poil du cul post-moderne capable de faire bifurquer l'ensemble du système.