

THE DESERT ISLAND AND THE MISSING PEOPLE

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Deleuze could never have written *on* the arts. He could never have given us tools for interpreting them. Because, *contra* the procedure that interprets and explicates works, his own consists in extracting from them modes of existence. A strange project that implies that cinematographic images, literary or pictorial images are indiscernible from things of the world, from beings or bodies. Identified with phenomena or with the ensemble of what appears, the images sustained by art neither have a different status from those of other forms of experience, nor a specific perceptible matter: images are things themselves, and, as such, they only have value through the modes of life and activity that they recount to us and which they allow us to see. Such is the relation that Deleuze knotted between art and philosophy. Art is practically always invoked, but finally by never being there, or rather by being always already there as a form of life. This identification between art and life is the index that we must grasp to be up to considering—and naming—what Deleuze does with art. In effect, if Deleuze doesn't write *on* art, then of what does he speak when he appeals to Vertov, Rouch, Perrault, the Straubs? What does he do when he speaks to us of cinema? We propose the following response: he speaks to us of belief and fabulation, he manufactures giants, he recounts mythological tales, he appeals to a missing people. What is this tortuous project then, perhaps unfinished, where art, at the same time that it is caught in questions of images and signs, works more subterraneanly for the fabrication of mythical figures and for the recovery of beliefs that bind men to the world? Is it a question of a political project, of the construction of a fable, of a utopian program?

DELEUZE'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

We will grasp the absence-presence of art in Deleuze's writings, the inscription of art in a project irreducible to the interpretation of works, by means of what we could call his *practical philosophy*. By this, Deleuze understands all philosophy whose concepts are defined by the affects and percepts of which they are capable, by their capacity to produce effects on our life. It is as a function of this criterion that the import of a concept is evaluated: it must be inseparable from a set of practices. A practical philosophy therefore asks if a concept is in a position to enlarge our perception, to augment our power to resist, or of putting us on the road to beatitude. It is confounded with an ethics that Deleuze defines as a 'typology of modes of existence' or as a 'practical science of ways of being,' of which Book V of Spinoza's *Ethics* would be a fulfilment: 'there is no longer any difference between the concept and life.'¹

Given that a practical philosophy is one which is not differentiated from its object, the sense in which Deleuze could never have written *on* an art appears more clearly. His theory of cinema is nothing other than an interference between artistic practices and life practices that have become indiscernible. Witness the fact that what he retains from all the 'cinema of Christian inspiration' is a theory of choice that bears on the ways of

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being that this choice involves. Typology of modes of existence, the *ethical* cinema of Rossellini, Dreyer or Bresson, shows us more and more receptive forms of life that become emblems of the Deleuzian conception of sanctity. Irène, Gertrud or Balthazar only choose effectively when they are themselves chosen and let themselves go ‘where they are borne by hubris.’³² They choose nothing, they prefer nothing. These spiritual automata are figures close to Bartleby and all those creatures of innocence and purity that, in their non-preference, ‘only survive by becoming stone [...] and are sanctified in this suspension.’³³

It is in the monstrous preference of Ahab or in the will to nothingness of Lantier (the engineer of *La Bête humaine*) that Bartleby’s nothingness of will, Joë Bousquet’s paralysis, or Fitzgerald’s catatonic state—the crack-up that makes him write all that he can write on the fact that he cannot write—find their counterpoint. Because Deleuze distinguishes two great modes of existence that he seeks to hold together: the voice of non-choice and that of struggle and combat. Whether it is a question of the receptivity of the plant that contemplates in contracting the elements from which it proceeds or of the struggle against clichés by Cézanne and Francis Bacon, it is this tension between two great styles of life which characters, styles, and artistic practices illustrate. They show us that non-preference and struggle form the double way that leads to the invention of a ‘people to come.’

As Deleuze himself admitted, if he had not written *on* cinema but on the concepts that cinema elicits, his practical philosophy thus makes us understand that these concepts do not cease to exit their cinematographic frame. They are the routes through which a power of repetition passes that propagates itself in the world—the struggle and renewed suffering of men, their call for a new earth and for a new people. Hence, from the moment that concepts leave their cinematographic frame for the exterior world, we can free ourselves for a translation exercise: we can return his typology of images and signs to more common names, such as ‘belief,’ ‘fabulation,’ ‘earth’ or ‘people.’ This enables us to discover that such technical terms as image-memory or image-dream do not only designate artistic operations, but more commonly the insufficiency of History or of fiction for the constitution of a ‘people who do not yet exist.’ In the same way, he will bring out that a term like that of audio-visual image more commonly designates the place of this ‘lacking people,’ and which can only emerge from the disjunction of speaking and seeing that the Straubs’s *Moses and Aaron* illustrates. Other examples could be added to the list. But what is the advantage or usefulness of this exercise? What would be the good of going against the procedure that solicits Deleuze’s vast conceptual equipment to interpret works of art, and engages itself in a kind of ‘method of dramatisation’ that returns the *drama* that insists under the Deleuzian *logos* to the surface?

This translation exercise has the effect of making something in his work appear that is there from the beginning, and which runs throughout it. It allows us to discern this tortuous project—vibrant in its unfulfillment—in which the arts are held. If we take as an example the departure point of the cinematographic adventure—the material and phosphorescent world of the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*—the translation exercise makes us see that this ‘regime of universal variation’ lets itself be led back to the most common figure of the desert island. What, therefore, is this desert island for Deleuze? How is it described, how is it peopled or unpeopled? What does it represent in his work?

In *Essays critical and clinical*, the community to come is described as an ‘archipelago society’: ‘isolated and floating relations, islands and inter-islands.’³⁴ Thus in ‘Causes and reasons of desert islands,’ one of Deleuze’s very first texts, each member of this community is described as an ‘Easter Island statue.’³⁵ The community to come—the fraternal community—is therefore drawn from the legends of Easter Island and into the myths of a second birth: in the myth of the deluge, in the legend of an egg at the centre of the world, briefly, in the idea of a ‘parthenogenesis’ where paternal filiation no longer plays a role. The difficulty remains of the desertification of the island. How can the myth of the second birth, the myth of peopling, come to unpeople the island? This is what the preface to *Friday, or the limbs of the Pacific* shows us, where the figure of the desert island is confounded with the image of a world without other rendered up to the primordial elements. The emblem of the continued renaissance of the world in its perpetual combat against paternal community, the system of judgement and representation, appears as a world before or after men where mythological combats play among the Elements

of nature. The ‘Robinsonade’ is a synonym for an ‘othercide’ or of a march in the contrary direction from that of the constitution of the subject, the march towards the world of universal variation where the distinction of consciousness and its object no longer exists or already doesn’t. The world where dehumanisation is pursued right to ‘the encounter of the libido with free elements’ is just as much that where ‘consciousness ceases to be a light cast upon objects in order to become a pure phosphorescence of things in themselves.’³⁶ We recognise here the formula of the phosphorescent world that Deleuze sees also at work in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*. Which means that the materialist program of the cinematographic regime, the exceeding of human perception in the name of a vision of things of the world by themselves—this is what the mythological essence of the desert island allows us to glimpse. This type of immixture of a mythological life into the materialist program accorded cinema, this equally reveals the function of fabulation charged with reinventing a new earth and a new people.

THE FABRICATION OF GIANTS: FROM THE EPIC TO THE POLITICAL?

Vertov’s *Man with a movie camera* becomes the blazon of the materialist program that Deleuze identifies at the beginning of *Matter and Memory*. In working against the limits of human perception, the cine-eye would have replaced it with a perception of things of the world by themselves. It would be this ‘eye of things’ for which consciousness and the object are no longer but one. Nonetheless, Vertov’s oeuvre and topic present a certain resistance in relation to Deleuze’s vision. Because the vision of a free variation of images in regard to each other doesn’t permit itself to be translated by the growth of the young Soviet organism according to which each phenomenon disseminated through the world is re-bound by the same and single collective will of the struggle for communism. Vertov’s cine-journal, this ‘panorama of the world every few hours,’ would be too attached to actualities. Vertov’s ordinary life —‘life as it is’—is not the true life Deleuze seeks—the neutral and impersonal life of infra- or supra-individual singularities. It is thus necessary for him to pierce this layer of actuality to extract the virtual powers that it covers over, notably this ‘gaseous’ perception capable of allowing us to see the molecular interactions among the grains of matter-light. ‘What Vertov discovered in the actualities of life,’ Deleuze writes, ‘was the molecular child, the molecular woman, the material woman and child....’³⁷ Extracts from a state of current things, this woman and this child are no longer anything but catalysts, converters of speeds or transformers of energies that realise ‘changes out of all proportion to their own dimensions.’³⁸ The virtual must therefore conquer actuality in order that men take on a status without common measure with their own dimensions. But what does it mean, exactly, to tear men from their actuality? Is it inevitably to tear them from the ordinariness of their lives?

To acquire a stature without common measure with their own dimensions is the conquest of the collective organization of enunciation named fabulation: ‘every fabulation is a fabrication of giants.’³⁹ But would literary fabulation be different from the fabulation of the poor—from that fabulation that Deleuze opposes to fiction and which he discovers in the cinema of Sembene Ousmane, Jean Rouch or Pierre Perrault? On the one side, the writer is less an individual than a collective organization that makes speak those without speech and those who are mute—the rocks, plants and animals that Rimbaud’s visionary already took in charge. On the other side, the poor give to their fabulous beings the same status that a novelist gives his characters: from their creation, they gain a life proper to them. As Proust wanted to make his characters resemble monstrous beings that simultaneously touched on the different epochs they had lived, however different or distant they might be, Deleuze sees Dovjenko give the same stature of giants to his peasants, as to ‘legendary beings of a fabulous epoch.’⁴⁰ As Proust, he makes them take a place without measure in time, compared to the restricted place that they occupy in space. This is the case of the old man who dies serenely at the beginning of *Earth* by closing his eyes to the industrial present and taking with him an immemorial past that, in Deleuze’s eyes, remains just as much to come.

The porpoise of Perrault’s *Pour la suite du monde* is another of these monstrous beings, a giant that the fabulating function of the poor fabricates when it ‘gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster.’⁴¹ In the Ile-aux-Coudres no one remembers the origins of this porpoise-fishing that ascends, as do the

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Moai of Easter Island, to the immemorial. Its technique could only be invented by the ‘savages’ who inhabit the island in the mythical time before history. In some way, porpoise-fishing is like that water from the spring that one sees running without knowing from where it comes, and which, Louis Harvey tells us, was the bathwater of the infant Jesus. This is to say that the porpoise-fishing, as well as the hunt for the caribou of *La Bête Lumineuse*, are not only fishing or hunting. Because the porpoise or caribou are not simply beasts to be killed, but imaginings or ‘epic frescoes’: they are, following the example of this fresco named *Moby Dick*, beasts to recount and to turn into legend [*legender*]. It is in this creature, which men’s talk transforms into legend—in this being ‘as white as snow and spotless’—that the inhabitants of the Ile-aux-Coudres deposit their beliefs and hopes. It is that which will speak for the America of those who have no speech. What then does it matter, Deleuze will add, if its mythological life can only be rediscovered in a New York aquarium: extracted from its spatio-temporal coordinates, the porpoise is a monster capable of living a life that is its own, it is an autoreferential Entity or a monument of resistance.

Does not the Ile-aux-Coudres remind us that this fabrication of Entities that is fabulation is torn with difficulty from its mythological origin? In opposing fabulation to fiction, Deleuze wants to make it something other than it is in Bergson: he wants to change the faculty of imagination that consolidates societies by fabricating gods in a collective enunciation that would have the immediate value of a political organization. But the act of fabulation, as act of resistance, should always be torn from a state of things as one extracts an intensive quality or an eventual power. Which means that this speech act that wants to be political doesn’t stop being an act capable of creating myth: ‘an act of myth or fabulation which creates the event, which makes the event rise up into the air, and which rises itself in a spiritual ascension.’¹²

In his preface to Diderot’s *La Religieuse*, what the young Deleuze called a ‘mythical object’ was nothing other than the object become independent of its creator. This mythical character that produced a becoming between the mystifying and the mystified by exchanging the terms of this relation—the creator himself becoming the mystified insofar as he sees himself reinvented by the created being—is what Deleuze would later call the autoreferential status of all creation or the auto-positing of what holds itself in self. What Deleuze rediscovers in Perrault’s monsters, in the porpoise that men’s talk transforms into an Entity, is therefore this mythical character of legendary beings thanks to which they come in their turn to reinvent those that have created them.

When the hunters of *La Bête lumineuse* wait for a moose, what they await in silence is the arrival ‘of an unbelievably luminous and fabulous being.’ They await the arrival of a ‘god’ who will manifest in moments of grace or love that have occurred during a retreat into the forest which the men leave greater. Because, for them, knowing what the hunt is, is above all knowing what it is to be a man. The moose is nothing other, in fact, than the revelation of love by which men discover and reinvent themselves. When they put on their hunting boots, as Perrault writes, it is to be able to turn themselves into legend through talk or to create a type of fable which they recount in order to re-begin themselves.¹³ They raise their life to the height of their odes and poems to tear it from banality and everyday misery, and to conquer thus the power of frequenting their own imaginary. It is this conquest that the gesture of pulling on the hunting boots crystallises.

But this retreat into the forest less resembles a political assembly from whence a previously non-existent collective would emerge, than an epic whose putting-into-legend mixes itself with the real, and where the words that are pronounced suffice to overturn the history or the intimate life of individuals. The fabulating function that Deleuze discovers in Perrault’s *La Bête lumineuse*, or again in Jean Rouch’s *Moi, un noir*, does not so much contribute to the invention of a people who do not yet exist than to the discovery of new modes of life. So the Dionysiac drunkenness of these hunters who empty heart and soul with the sole aim ‘that the night be beautiful for a friend who wants it.’

The word ‘epic’ [*épopée*], like that of ‘epic fresco’ [*fresque épique*], is Perrault’s; but it is not, however, completely foreign to Deleuze’s thought. We can, notably, find it in his introduction to *La Bête humaine*. Zola, according to Deleuze, is someone who discovers the possibility of restoring the epic in his contemporary world. This

means that he discovers the possibility of restoring in the ‘modern’ world what only had a place in the world of Ancient Greece: an interlacing of innocence and crime that evades the categories implied in our representation of the voluntary or in our theory of choice—the notion of responsible action, decision, judgement, duty, debt, culpability. Lantier, the hero of the ‘modern’ epic, is only an *agent* because he is the *place* where a greater crack-up than his character exercises itself through him. It is in this sense, it seems to us, that Deleuze could see as an epic the retreat of the hunters filmed by Perrault. Following the example of the involuntary actions of *La Bête humaine*’s engineer, the words spoken by the ‘Dionysius’ of *La Bête lumineuse*—the instinctive speeches that comprise his poems of drunkenness—seem to make themselves understood despite him, leading beyond his person in a madness doubled by innocence. As with the literary Originals, he lets himself go ‘where he is borne by hubris.’

It is thus that the fabulating character, in his non-choice, becomes the place where a new language exerts itself in language. That this new language, which ‘disavows the relation of whoever speaks with those whom he addresses,’¹⁴ treats of a logic of the irrational, is what confirms the description of the fabulating character that Deleuze borrows from Serge Daney. The fabulating character is neither an interlocutor nor an interpreter nor a mediator: he is someone who takes in his charge the entire part of language ‘that does not engage.’¹⁵ In the text that he dedicates to Sembene Ousmane’s *Ceddo*, this is how Daney describes Jaraaf: he is the only one who can lie, exaggerate, flatter, or trick, where all the others are devoted to truth. Otherwise put, he is the person for whom the act of speech is neither a right nor a duty, but a game or a pleasure. A pleasure indissociable from a-signifying cries, that he pushes and make him appear, according to Daney’s formula, as ‘the “blank” that spaces the speech of others.’

On their side, and although their enjoyment in fabulating is not summed up by the power of an irrational lining of language, what the hunters of *La Bête lumineuse* and the inhabitants of the Ile-aux-Coudres show us, is, before any invention of a political people, what believing signifies. Like Dreyer’s or Bresson’s characters, they teach us to believe in love and life, in man and the world, and give us hope of one day seeing the reestablishment of their broken bond.

From the actuality of individuals, Deleuze only keeps the affects and percepts that he tears from them: such power to legend, believe or love. ‘To extract the Passion from the trial’¹⁶—to tear intensive qualities from the state of things—is the artistic task that art and philosophy share. But what are intensive qualities, such that love frees from the retreat of the hunters of *La Bête lumineuse*, sufficient to give birth to a political people? Do love or belief freed by fabulation thus have an immediately political value inasmuch as they would be forces subtracted from all power? But does not Deleuze express reservations in regard to this subtraction when he hesitates to make a place for love in the community to come, whose members remain saints or demons, statues or islands, even if their relationships are anchored in belief or in mutual trust.

OF WHAT IS EARTH THE NAME?

Faithful to the gesture that consists in extracting the Passion from the trial, Deleuze also perceives the Straub’s cinema as a ‘qualitative physics of elements’¹⁷ where combats between what the earth buries and what the wind makes rise into the air are played out. As much desert as country can be, if their cinema makes us become ‘visionaries,’ this is precisely to the extent that the earth is worthwhile for what is buried there. Such is the idea that Daney took out of Straubian pedagogy and morals: the image is ‘a tomb for the eye,’ whose content is what we do not see but which ‘looks at us’—the corpses that lie under the earth. Becoming visionary, learning to see, this would be learning to perceive the virtual, to convert the void into fullness, or the place into its other side. Seeing, as reading, is always a perception of perception: ‘a perception which does not grasp perception without also grasping its reverse, imagination, memory, or knowledge.’¹⁸ One does not read or see except when one accedes to visions made of the coalescence between the virtual and the real. And it is this crystalline coalescence of the perceived with the imagined, the remembered or the known that the Straubs’ filmography illustrates, par excellence.

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What the earth buries are the massacred corpses from which the visionary and the fabulator tear the cries, or intensive qualities, in mixing the perceived with the imagined or known. Which comes down to saying that the earth, as the figure of the desert island, remains ‘the matter of an immemorial’¹⁹; it is the name of a ‘collective soul’ where each recommencement picks up what is most remote in time, the cries and the renewed suffering of men, their always-betrayed struggles and beliefs. Put another way, the earth is the name of this ‘true interiority of time,’²⁰ which allows men to acquire the stature of giants and to touch on, at the same time, a millenarian past as on a global future. What its foundations deliver us are not therefore the image-memories of an arbitrary historical past, but much rather hallucinatory or hypnotic presences—such are the fat plates of apples at the beginning and the end of *Earth*—whose propriety is being of a past always to come or, if you like, of a future nonetheless already there.

These hallucinatory presences are freed from a non-stratified base that directly puts all in the layers of the past or all the ages of the world into communication, and that becomes, by this very fact, ‘the element of a superior justice.’²¹ At the end of the day, if the earth is the name of justice, in what does this consist? The reply can already be found in *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. The earth is nothing other than an immense molecular texture in which figures disappear ‘in order to allow a justice to prevail that will no longer be anything but Colour or Light, a space that will no longer be anything but the Sahara.’²² In a word, the earth is this element of a superior justice where ‘the Figure is dissipated by realising the prophecy: you will no longer be anything but sand, grass, dust or a drop of water...’²³

There where Daney speaks to us of a Straubian morality and sees the pregnancy of the human in all things—there is always someone who looks at us from the bottom of each image or each tomb—Deleuze sees only molecules. For Daney, if the Straubs’ cinema would be what allows us to rupture with the enchantment by which we think to see something other than the human around us, for Deleuze, every cinematographic adventure—from Vertov’s material universe to the Straubs’ desert countrysides—rests on the exact contrary.

The desert that at once separates and relates Moses and Aron is nothing other than the diagrammatic place where is sketched the place of the missing people. But this missing people, precisely, is neither a public nor a people of men. There can only be a molecular people, a phosphorescent people made of dancing grains and luminous dust that was already there at the origin of the work of art: the atomic people of the desert island whose dance merges with mythological combats among the elements of nature. The people to come, in fact, is also what was already there. Because ‘the future [*l’avenir*] is not a historical future, even a utopian one, it is the Infinite Now, the *Nûn* that Plato already distinguished from any present, the Intensive or the Untimely...’²⁴

But is this not exactly the way that Deleuze treats the opposition between the untimely and the historical, which ceaselessly returns his thought to the mythological life of the desert island, where the non-historical swarm merges with an immemorial matter, and where a true life surges up, such as was never lived? The figure of the island, the continued renaissance of the world in its perpetual combat against the system of judgement and representation, would thus be less a stage of emancipation than the place of a higher Justice or of a redemption. The desert island, the ‘holy land,’ where alone a molecular people subsists, would be this utopian community that is no longer defined by disputes and gaps thanks to which there is the political: it would be the ‘saturated community,’²⁵ ‘a Robinson of the sun on the solar isle.’²⁶

NOTES

1. G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), p. 130.
2. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 37. See also Alain Badiou's analysis of this formula in *Deleuze: 'The Clamor of Being'*, trans. L. Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), esp. p. 13.
3. Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: PUF, 1993), p. 102.
4. Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique*, p. 110.
5. Deleuze, *L'île déserte et autres textes* (Paris: Minuit, 2002), p. 13.
6. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. M. Lester with C. Stivale, ed. C.V. Boudas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 311.
7. G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 41.
8. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, pp. 40-41.
9. Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: PUF, 1991), p. 162.
10. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 40.
11. G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 145.
12. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 267. Translation modified.
13. See Perrault's text, 'Note able to serve for preface regarding the title of this film and to give my regrets for not having named it *Les Pocailles de Maniwâki*,' in *La Bête lumineuse* (Montreal: Nouvelle Optique, 1982).
14. Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, le froid et le cruel* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 19.
15. Serge Daney, *La rampe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 123.
16. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 110.
17. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), p. 298.
18. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 235.
19. Deleuze, *L'île désertes*, p. 17.
20. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 40.
21. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 111.
22. G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, trans. D.W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 27.
23. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 31.
24. Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 107.
25. See J. Rancière, 'Sens et usages de l'utopie,' in *L'utopie en questions* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2000).
26. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 302.