This is night work
Meanderings around *Facs of Life* (a film between Deleuze and his students)❦

Silvia Maglioni & Graeme Thomson∗

It began with the experience of watching video footage of Deleuze's courses at Vincennes. Shot by Marielle Burkhalter, the video was broadcast three years ago on Rai Tre's late night art cinema slot "Fuori Orario". It was even then a pretty dark time in Italy. A disastrous education reform had just been bulldozed through parliament by the second Berlusconi government, so simply witnessing the leisurely autonomy Deleuze (and Guattari) enjoyed at Vincennes in building up concepts and trying out new components, and the students in picking up what they needed or what interested them most for their own projects, seemed already a blast of fresh air.

It was 1975-76, the years when the pair had begun working on *Mille Plateaux*, and watching those 18 hours we were aware of being present at the principal site of its construction, as concepts such as visagéité gradually took shape from a miscellany of bits and scraps in the permanently smoke-fugged room. In the absence of clearly defined images, what became visible was the very movement of Deleuze's thought as it passed 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 of that movement of the participants in the seminar, whose tightly compressed bodies became conductors of a collective libidinal headrush.

"There's always a difference between what I say and what I do, and in Vincennes there's a difference between what we say and how we live – we are always in contradiction!" – a student cries out to Deleuze in 1975.

The scapegoat's anus. The face of the despot. Black holes and white walls. The mosquito-whale and Moby Dick. London taxis and Virginia Woolf's molecular becomings. We soon found ourselves taking notes, as if actually there at the seminar. But equally compelling were the images, 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, or the Rivette of *Out 1*. What we were seeing felt like cinema waiting to happen. Fully fledged characters began to emerge out of the blur of faces. Where were they going after the seminar? Where had they been before? So we said to ourselves, let's try to find some of these characters and make a film with them. And in saying that, we were already translating ourselves into a mode somewhere between fiction and delirium.

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Deleuze on visagéité: from the face of the despot to the scapegoat's anus.

Facs of Life contact sheet.

We made preparations and left for Paris. Like that. All we had were a couple of suitcases and the 3 VHS double-speed tapes we had recorded off the TV. We had as yet no idea what we were going to do with the material. Perhaps the simplest thing would be just to refilm the 18 hours Pierre Ménard-style. It seemed that the film was already there, there was nothing to cut and nothing to add other than maybe a letterbox frame for the cinema feel. But we wanted to know how the film would continue outside the classroom.

Silvia began by making digital close-ups of individual students from the TV screen, which we turned into a contact sheet of (rather muggy) mug shots. The project began to assume the contours of a police investigation, an investigation we took to Paris 8 Saint-Denis, where a lot of the old Vincennois still taught and where we thrust our images, many barely identifiable as human faces, under their noses. "Have you seen this woman? Do you recognize anyone in the picture?" We didn't get very far with this procedure. Some of those questioned hallucinated their own presence in the images, a gallery of post '68 types where it seemed everyone you knew could eventually be found.

Then we met Marielle, who was a bit wary at first, but who gradually warmed to our project and told us that she had actually lost more than half of her original tapes (which included not only Deleuze's courses but also those of Jean-François Lyotard, René Schérer, François Châtelet). Stuck with an unwieldy mass of tapes, she had wanted to donate them to the Paris 8 archives, but the library didn't deal with video and the technicians at the audio-video centre, declaring the format (half-inch pneumatic tape) obsolete and untreatable with the means they had at their disposal, consigned the tapes to the trash. Luckily someone tipped her off and Marielle was able to rush to Saint-Denis with a borrowed van and save some of them. 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 pixel-mash diaspora that eventually made its way to YouTube.

The story added historical weight to an impression we had of the images being fundamentally unarchivable. Belonging neither to the public nor private domain, unpresentable in terms both of their technical quality and the autonomy from institutional protocols they represented, the rushes existed in a kind of limbo that held something in reserve, akin to Agamben's limbo of the unbaptised, who had supposedly forgotten God (substitute history, modernity)

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before God had forgotten them, and thus dwelt in a kind of blissful identity-free zone, for which we coined the term *inarchivé* (after Blanchot's idea of the *inachevé*), which seemed to us a better word than Derrida's more destructive notion of the 'unarchived.'

We eventually managed to find around twenty people who appeared in the video images, and then pared them down to a dozen who seemed particularly sympathetic to the kind of film we wanted to make. A film that would 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 which dominate more commercial documentary making, 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 that constituted an open problematic field of virtualities which the audience could actively begin to reassemble and rewire as they watched.

We looked at a lot of documentaries about Vincennes before starting shooting. A fascinating history. The University was created after the events of may '68. Built as a prefab campus in the Bois de Vincennes it became fully operative in 1969. For a while it was the site of a great intellectual and political ferment until 1980 when it was finally bulldozed down and moved to the outskirts of Paris. But we weren't interested in making another film 'about' Vincennes, no more than we were in making one about Deleuze, nor even 'about' his élèves. The word 'about' was the problem. For each person we met the encounter with Deleuze's thought had been from a different angle, in relation to a specific life trajectory, as was (as were) our own. So the thing that most interested us was the singularity of each encounter and what developed from it, which is to say the space of relation, the space between.

How to film these spaces of relation as they evolved? Our idea was to get to know each student 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 *dispositif*. 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.

At the same time the Bois de Vincennes became for us this charged emptiness, a labyrinthine receptacle for a multiplicity of phantom visitations, some more declared than others (Alice, Ariadne, Orpheus and Eurydice) all these lines of desire that had to do with the idea of suspension, of limbo, of being waylaid, of decentring, leanings and swayings, getting lost, wandering off (we had just discovered Deligny's *lignes d'erre*), all these inclinations to which the *sous-bois* was well disposed. The important thing was to create a virtual field, suggesting different possible paths, but never fully embarking on any one of them, leaving the viewer's own imaginary and desire (their own leanings) to do the work.

The site in the Bois de Vincennes where Paris 8 University once stood.

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 thought 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 a collection of bodies) and the process of making it would enable us to understand what that body was capable of.

So our construction was also in part a response to Deleuze's work 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, particularly the concepts elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 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 for us, to make a film that could be viewed in a distributed, non-linear way, despite the *einbahnstrasse* 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 just a wider application of the principle in fiction that if you place a gun in a drawer in scene 1 you know someone's going to 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. And in a way that's how the film was made. The shooting was like a non-linear road movie.

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 it seemed to us 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. But in that case what would happen to visual pleasure? Our first instinct was to separate voices from bodies and not give any names, 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.

The question of how to work as a couple gradually came into the film, partly in relation to the nature of the encounters we had with some of the élèves, and partly out of our passion for the work of other filmmaking 'couples' (Straub/Huillet, Godard/Mieville, Joreige/Hadjithomas...). But in our case this question began to fold back into the film itself. It was equally connected to the problem of the 'couple' in cinema, particularly in Hitchcock, whose *Rear Window* for many reasons became an important cog in our machine, the idea of a split couple joined along the axes of watching/doing, the real and the imaginary. We realised it was gradually becoming one of the principles of our working method, and so we decided to assume it consciously: channeling desire, anxiety and otherness along a dynamic continuum stretching from camera to figure, from outer framing to a kind of inner *mise en espace* (so there was also a bit of *Blow-up* in the mix) and therefore positioning not only Silvia as a figure, but equally the camera's presence, on a borderline between fiction and reality, real and virtual, which would then constantly feed into each other, playing off local variations in speed, light and shade, all the micro-events of a particular situation.

During the editing phase we decided to structure the film in eight plateaus, in an attempt to construct intensive zones, distinct planes

of life, questioning and experimentation that could fold upon and reconfigure each other in all kinds of 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, échelles/intervalles, bords, épuissance, promenade, falaise).

Plateau 5 for example (bords) starts from Deleuze's theory of the importance "d'être en bordure" to reflect on the political question of the downscaling and standardization of education as a 'preparation' for life, and to the edges where life goes 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 on the other, to the Paris Périphérique 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.

"On schizophrénise à la périphérie, mais non moins au centre et au milieu."

Or plateau 6 (épuissance) tackles the question of the border as what is left by the wayside. Here a bestiary of animal bodies crushed by cars (photographed by a Deleuze student who in the 1975-76 videos was always sitting on his side), are 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 idea of exhausting the possibilities of what is (les choses sont là), 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 girl reads from Ponge's *La Fabrique du pré* on the nature of fire and organic life.

"History of Organic Matter. What is fire?"

In constructing *Facs of Life* the question for us became 'figuring' as opposed to representing Deleuze. Like Deleuze we weren't interested in representation, except as a problem in itself, and we were keen to avoid the kind of 'portrait of a philosopher' film that's in vogue at the moment. But Deleuze is obviously 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. The film is saturated with his presence, though it's a molecular presence. Perhaps more than anything else, it's 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.