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REVIEWS

A PORTRAIT OF THE PHILOSOPHER AS AN OLD MAN

GILLES DELEUZE FROM A TO Z, GILLES DELEUZE (2011)

Gilles Deleuze in interview with Claire Parnet, Semiotext(e), New York, DVD set, Dir., Pierre-Andre Boutang, French with English subtitles trans., Charles J. Stivale, run time 453 minutes, ISBN: 1584351012, £23.72

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It was with some excitement that I agreed to review this eight-hour series of interviews with Gilles Deleuze, organized thematically around the letters of the alphabet. Although I have myself been reading – and writing on – Deleuze for many years now, I had not, despite YouTube, actually heard or seen Deleuze talk – in the flesh as it were. In fact, Deleuze, for myself, had never really been located in the figure – or *face* – of the man. Perhaps this is simply because when I first started reading him there were no readily available images (just as there was no especially easy way of accessing films or recordings). My ‘image’ – such as there was one – was then somehow more diagrammatic, even machinic. To continue in this Deleuzian vein, Deleuze himself operated more as a probe-head than as an incarnation of the faciality machine (and its concomitant production of typical subjectivity) that he and Felix Guattari themselves write against in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Hence, again my excitement that taking on this review would involve overcoming a strange disjunction – itself Deleuzian – between words and images, but also between a conceptual persona and a real person.

So, first impressions? Deleuze, the man, comes over as a charismatic and compelling mixture of joy and sadness. The former – ‘Joy’ – has its own ‘entry’ in the series of interviews, with Deleuze expounding on the delight to be had in ‘fulfilling ones power of acting’. I will return to this central, recurring – and Spinozist – motif of joy below. It’s difficult for me to know for sure whether the accompanying sadness is, in fact, really Deleuze’s – or is, as it were, my own – at seeing and hearing Deleuze now, at last, as an old man. Certainly one does get the sense that Deleuze is somehow saying goodbye in the spliced together films (each of which lasts twenty minutes or so), evidenced not least by the many moments in which he premises his remarks by reminding his interviewer – Clare Parnet – and, I think, himself as well, that the film will be posthumous. The themes of the interview also – as I will also go into a little more below – are of a life lived; indeed, they are a reflection *on* a life that can only be truly made towards its end (and, as we know, Deleuze committed suicide shortly after the filming ended). In this, the philosophical content of these films very much echoes Deleuze’s final work, signed also with Guattari’s name, *What is Philosophy?* (1991), with its own thesis on the question of its title being something that can only truly be asked at the twilight of a philosopher’s life.

This sadness aside Deleuze also comes across as a deeply human and self-effacing individual. Honest, open – but also sharply attuned to what, he feels, is important to reflect on and what he sees as irrelevant. The latter, as well as much of contemporary popular culture (especially the media), includes the individual circumstances of a life – its actualization in a state of affairs as it were. The former – the important stuff – in contrast, being what we might call the ‘life’ of thought (again, I will return to this). That said we do in fact get many reflections on the circumstances of Deleuze’s life. Indeed, there is a lot of biographical material here that will be of interest to Deleuzians, for example, about Deleuze’s childhood and especially his various inspirational mentors, even Masters, to whom he apprentices himself (before his apprenticeship to the more familiar names of Nietzsche, Bergson, and, especially, Spinoza). Indeed, for this particular viewer it is often these biographical details that are the most compelling. Deleuze also comes over as an incredible pedagogue, able to outline his conceptual archive with impressive clarity and with many elucidating and sometimes surprising examples. In this, there is something similar to Michel Foucault – who, in fact, elicits one of the most moving moments of the interviews (again, more on this below) – insofar as the interview format allows Deleuze, like it did Foucault, to develop his strictly philosophical ideas in relation to a large amount of instances from contemporary culture and society. In this mobilization of examples the series of interviews would themselves be appropriate to a pedagogical situation especially insofar as Deleuze’s solo philosophical works – this is less true of the works co-written with Guattari – seldom wander from a certain sparse and difficult conceptual trajectory. To choose just one of the more surprising examples amongst many: a discussion of tennis, and especially the different styles of play of Bjorn Borg – a kind of aristocratic

proletarian – and John McEnroe becomes an opportunity to flesh out many key Deleuzian themes around invention and experimentation.

All this said, one does occasionally get the impression that Deleuze is ‘going through the motions’; not exactly bored by his interlocutors questions and prompts, but somehow tired – fatigued – himself by his own words. As if Deleuze is *acting* Deleuze, or, at least, rehearsing explanations that he has made elsewhere, and many times before. But then, quite suddenly, Parnet will alight on something that itself lights up the dark precursors face – a lightning flash passes across, and a broad smile appears – like the proverbial (and Carroll-Deleuzian) Cheshire cat. At these moments Deleuze’s face is transformed from care worn and, well, old, to something youthful and alive. This is a lighter, ‘airier’ Deleuze whose eyes sparkle and whose enthusiasm is catching. Indeed, in Deleuze’s own terms, an affect – a becoming-joyful – passes through him, and to us, his audience. In fact, it is just such affective moments of contact and communication that the series of interviews ends with: the ‘Zigzag’ of synapses snapping and connections being made which ‘illuminates the world’. This is the case, for example, when Deleuze’s particular pedagogical style and method – his infamous ‘Courses’ (especially those at Vincennes) – are up for discussion in one of the most revealing entries on ‘Professor’ in which Deleuze reflects specifically on his teaching career. At these moments one glimpses the excitement of what was clearly also a high point for Deleuze of his role as public Professor, with the suggestion that the ‘Courses’ existed as a kind of bloc – or ‘cube’ – of a different space-time. We also get some sobering remarks in this entry – especially pertinent to the UK situation – about the future of the University, and in particular its increasing dominance by management, and something else that Deleuze sees as intolerable: meetings. But, to return to the theme I mentioned above, it is also true that Deleuze seems to get older as the interviews progress. Perhaps this is simply, again, that he is becoming bored with the routine and the interview format (perhaps also his work being interrupted by the film crew?) but it also makes the whole somehow more poignant. As it we are physically watching the process of old age.

As far as the actual content of the interviews go Deleuze and Parnet cover an amazing amount of ground. There are, for example, ‘typical’ Deleuzian themes and ideas that are laid out – as I mentioned above – with a compelling clarity and enthusiasm. So, we have the tick and its territory – composed of just three affects (heat, light and scent) against the background of the immensity of the dark forest – making an appearance in the first, and one of the most important entries on the ‘Animal’. Indeed, the animal is a recurring theme throughout: for example, in a similar vein, we get a fascinating entry on ‘Desire’ which lays out the crucial concept of the assemblage (a kind of aggregate – or even landscape – of different elements set in motion) and of its relation to an individual (as Deleuze remarks: ‘search out the assemblages that suit you’), but also more generally to the animal and to the territory that defines it. Or, the entry on ‘Style’ – on stuttering and stammering – and the necessity of a becoming-animal for any writer (as Deleuze suggests, to write

for the animal). Indeed, this idea of writing at the limits of language, and of a similar limit between philosophy and non-philosophy (both a kind of limit point between life and death) is another recurring theme throughout.

There are also the more strictly philosophical entries and reflections. Indeed, as I mentioned above, one feels that this is the real theme of the interviews: the outlining of a philosophy but also of the life of a philosopher. So we have Deleuze, once more, outlining his concept of philosophy as itself to do with the creation of concepts, and, as such, how it is necessarily pitched against opinion. Likewise Deleuze talks of the importance of problems as opposed to questions: the latter – interrogations – being the stuff of TV interviews (and perhaps here we see Deleuze at his most implicitly sceptical about the interview format); the former – problems and their explication – being the real business of philosophy. In fact, Parnet often refers to Deleuze in a lineage of great philosophers, and although Deleuze, as I mentioned above, is self-effacing, there is a sense in which, in the interviews, he is intent on positioning himself in a philosophical tradition, and, crucially, *as* a philosopher. This is especially interesting for a viewer today in the light of a recent turn to non-philosophy in the increasingly translated work of Francois Laruelle, but also, more broadly, works as a corrective perhaps to a tendency to read Deleuze as inter and trans disciplinary, as ‘applicable’ across the humanities and away from philosophy per se (something of which this reviewer is not entirely free from blame). In fact, Deleuze himself seems to address this apparent doubling in his own take on literature, art – and the concepts of philosophy themselves, suggesting that there is a philosophical reading of these (this being the work of philosophy), *but also* a non-philosophical one (this being how artists, writers and others read philosophy). Indeed, this idea of a non-philosophical audience for philosophy is picked up more than a few times, perhaps most arresting when Deleuze talks about his encounters with surfers, ‘origamists’ and others that themselves have productively encountered his work.

In relation to this the question of literature is also a common thread throughout the interviews, not just in the many literary references pulled in by Deleuze (often novels or poems he happens to be reading at that time), but also in the understanding of literature – which has its own entry – as itself composed of conceptual persona that live out intensive states and various conceptual itineraries. Deleuze, it seems, was working on the essays that would go to make up *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993) at the time of the films, thus it is perhaps no surprise that this theme of literature as a kind of philosophy, and, indeed, of philosophy as kind of literature – a philo-fiction perhaps? – is present throughout the interview (and, indeed, might be said to pre-empt some of the ventures into theoretical-fiction that are part of the so-called ‘speculative turn’ of some continental philosophy today). Deleuze also comes over as an individual with a deep interest in the arts more generally – itself no surprise from his books – but, more specifically, with a habit of going on to see the latest shows, etc. – being ‘on the look out’, as he puts it, for something that cannot be found in the course of the everyday, or, again, in the media: a genuine encounter with an Idea.

There are many other surprising compatibilities – but also differences – with the contemporary scene besides the comments on art and the University. There is, for example, a fascinating entry on neurology, where we hear Deleuze eloquently championing the development of neuroscience – and, indeed, drugs – over other theories of the mind or forms of therapy, and, especially, unsurprisingly, the speaking cure of psychoanalysis. Here, as elsewhere, Deleuze explicitly positions himself against Lacan, but, perhaps more interestingly, also offers up some interesting material that might bring his conceptual work into relationship with writers like Catherine Malabou (both addressing the topic of the plasticity of the brain), but also to the ‘turn’ to neuroscience more generally within philosophy and the humanities in the interest in the work of Thomas Metzinger, or in the writings of Ray Brassier. All of this is evidence of Deleuze’s abiding Spinozsim (a kind of chemical understanding of the brain and the world), which, as I mentioned above, is a recurring theme throughout the interviews. To return briefly to the philosophical work we also get an intriguing entry on the concept of the ‘One’ with Deleuze stating categorically that philosophy, for him, is never anything to do with that latter (*contra* Alain Badiou’s reading of his work) but, rather, concerns itself with singularities – or, in Deleuzian terms, multiplicities that must be thought as having no overarching, or underpinning, principle (as Deleuze remarks: ‘always n-1’). In the entry on the ‘Left’ we are also offered a generous and inclusive, but also perceptive definition of what being on the left actually involves – simply that one has a different and wider horizon – a broader perspective as it were on the world and one’s place and role within it (this account is given in response to one of the few awkward moments between Parnet and Deleuze, when he is asked about his involvement – or non-involvement – in ’68 (the ‘revolutionary becomings’ as Parnet calls them), to which Deleuze responds by accusing Parnet of mocking him (and here we glimpse a less tolerant, more steely Deleuze) before explaining what, for him, are the more solitary, but nevertheless important becomings of a writer – or of a philosopher such as himself.

Indeed, ultimately, to say it once more, it is these more personal references – and entries – that really arrest (at least, again, for this viewer). The entry on ‘Drinking’ for example, where Deleuze’s references his own history of the latter – and the importance not of the last glass, but of the one before this (thus allowing the alcoholic to drink again the next day). Deleuze also speaks here of how – in old age – he feels he was misguided in the idea that alcohol – or any drug – was necessary for him to be able to embark on his becomings – or ‘adventures’. There is also the entry on ‘Friendship’ where, as I mentioned above, Deleuze refers to Foucault – as being somehow elemental – like ‘metal or dry wood’ – but also refuses to speak at any length about his friend and fellow traveller. Indeed, at these moments the silences speak more than words ever could and we are returned to a certain affective power of the interviews and of Deleuze’s own manner, or style of discourse. In the same entry Deleuze is drawn out by Parnet on other, one might say more intimate and everyday friendships that Deleuze has with certain individuals – and on his fidelity to them. It is here, once more, that we see a

certain warmth and humanity – as Deleuze talks about one individual in particular that he is especially close to – with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye – and about this individual's 'style' of being and how that manifests itself in what they say and do (and especially in their humour).

There are also discussions of things Deleuze does not like: travel – 'a cheap rupture' as he calls it – for example, or, simply, 'Wittgenstein' (about whom Deleuze says very little – except, cryptically, that he, and his followers, are the 'assassins of philosophy'). In this category, and more movingly, is the medical profession, which, it becomes clear in the interview Deleuze has had to have increasing dealings with because of his ill health (like Priests some of these, Deleuze suggests, are intent on the production of sadness in those in their care). Indeed, illness – and the fatigue I mentioned above – are both themes that Deleuze is incredibly open and eloquent on, bringing a Nietzschean perspective to the way in which illness itself allows a kind of perspective on 'Life' (or the 'Great Health' as Deleuze calls it elsewhere). It is this theme of an anonymous inorganic life – 'Immanence: A Life' as he calls it – that is the subject of Deleuze's last essay, and, it is also, it seems to me, the more secret theme of these interviews. For although there is a sadness here – the sadness of the philosopher in old age, close to the ending of a life – there is also this Spinozist joy in life in more general terms – in its anonymity and force – that we also find throughout Deleuze's books (and that is endlessly pitched against sadness in its various forms). How then to reconcile these two? Well, perhaps they cannot be reconciled. Any given life – at its ending – necessarily has an affective tonality different to its beginning. But, as Deleuze reminds us in the interview, in what he says and, at times, in how he says it (and again very much in a Spinozist vein) we should not judge a life by its ending, but by the moments when an individual life coincides with this larger 'Life' more generally. And this, I think, is what we are offered in these precious interviews, the watching of which feels like a privilege and an education: a selection of – and reflection on – certain moments in 'A Life' that has itself been led both philosophically and, in Spinoza's terms, ethically and authentically.

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