



This bulletin inaugurates (finally!) the DVD release *with English subtitles* of *Gilles Deleuze's L'Abécédaire*, an “ABC primer” of the philosopher’s lifework via eight hours of dialogue with his ex-student, sometime co-author, and kindred spirit Claire Parnet. The conversation was filmed in 1988–89 by Pierre-André Boutang at Deleuze’s apartment in Paris, soon after Deleuze was diagnosed as terminally ill. He describes the situation in a brief preface, which is not entirely addressed to Parnet or the camera:

“For me, answering a question without having thought about it a bit is something inconceivable. What saves me in this is the particular condition: should any of this be at all useful, all of it will be used only after my death. So you understand, I feel myself being reduced to the state of a pure archive for Pierre-André Boutang, to a sheet of paper, so that lifts my spirits and comforts me immensely, and nearly in the state of pure spirit, I speak after my death ...”

The interview then proceeds, by turns fluid, lucid, and haphazard, through 26 subjects, one for each letter of the alphabet from A as in Animal to Z as in Zigzag. Breaking protocol, the 453 minutes of footage were serialized on France’s Arte TV channel beginning in 1994, a year before Deleuze’s death. It was overdubbed for German TV around the same time, and the complete original released on VHS in 2001, then on DVD in 2004. Excerpts now circulate freely on the Internet.

In 1999, a complete English translation was made by Charles J. Stivale, a Professor of Literature at Wayne State University, who also released an abridged account of the interview on his website, as well as the book *Gilles Deleuze's ABC's* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). His translation subtitles the new 3 x DVD set *Gilles Deleuze From A to Z*, published by Los Angeles-based Semiotext(e).

The text here is drawn from a twice-folded sheet that accompanies the new release. Originally titled “Everything about Gilles Deleuze and Nothing about Gilles Deleuze,” it is a short account of *L'Abécédaire's* backstory by Boutang (very much the third character in the ABC story), who co-produced the work together with Parnet. His recollections are assembled from an interview conducted on February 5th, 2004, by Hervé Aubron, Jun Fujita and Cyril Neyrat, first published in the February issue (no. 25) of the journal *Vertigo* the same year. It was translated into English by Noura Wedell.

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Cover image: stills from “Z as in Zigzag”

I met Claire Parnet in May 1969, on the set of a TV show with Maria Callas. It was a pretty complicated show, so the set was off-limits ... Callas asked me who an old man was, taking pictures on the sly. I told her it was Cartier-Bresson, who represented for photography what she did for music ... And then I noticed a young woman, and asked around what she was doing there. She was a friend of Guy Seligmann, the director of the show. We spoke, saw each other again, started having dinner at Claire's mother's house ... And then I discovered she knew Deleuze. Not that I have many obsessions, but I figured it would be good to film something with him. I didn't quite know what. I told Claire, she spoke to Gilles about it, who must have said something like "yeah, yeah, yeah ... well, no ... we'll see." It lasted for 20 years. Whenever I'd see Claire, I'd tell her: "Don't forget to tell Gilles that I'm still interested, and that we can do it whenever he wants." And when I'd run into Gilles, I figured it was part of my role to remind him, even if he always said no. It became a kind of joke.

And then one day, I asked Claire again to bring up the project with Gilles. She was late getting to his house, and told him that she was with me. And Deleuze said: "We should try to do something." I didn't take part in the discussion they had about the format of the interviews. That happened between the two of them. I think Claire had the idea to use the alphabet, to avoid the biographical interview, or the pedagogical synthesis. And that was that: we said we'd start shooting. There were no TV channels involved, as usual in television when something is interesting. And we had this agreement with Deleuze that we would only broadcast the recordings posthumously. So the idea was: we rely on ourselves, we shoot and see what happens. I was working for the TV channel France 3, and I didn't have a production company, so I needed a structure. Guy Seligmann is an old friend, we had made the film about Sartre with Astruc together (*Sartre by Himself*, 1976). So I just notified him that the Deleuze project was nominally under the umbrella of Sodaperaga, his production company. I could borrow film crews because I was shooting *Océaniques* at the time.¹ I would try to wrap up in the morning what we were supposed to do in a day, and then we'd go over to Deleuze's apartment.

Since we were using a lot of film, we did need some money. One day I met a generous donor who asked me how much I needed. I told him that if I wanted to do it well, I'd need 500,000 French francs (roughly \$100,000).

The rich man looked at me as if insulted by the mention of such a small sum. With that experience in mind, I started shooting. I borrowed some money from my bank, using that very rich man as a guarantor, who of course never gave anything. There is someone, though, whom I should thank. I explained to him that I was finishing Deleuze, that I wanted to shoot Levinas and that TV channels weren't interested. He handed over 500,000 francs from his ministerial budget. It was (French Minister of Culture at the time) Jack Lang. He has been criticized quite a lot, but he did things like that, which is something his successors have never done.

GENTLENESS

Gilles' apartment had two stories. We chose his large office-library on the first floor, and decided to set him up in that armchair. There was a small mirror above, and I thought it might be a good way to show Claire without showing her too much. There were two or three objects behind Gilles that I moved. All I added was the hat: I had a Magritte in mind ... At the beginning, we had no idea of the length of the project, and the reels kept building up. It was 16mm: they lasted 11 minutes, we had to remember where we were every time, reload and continue ... We were rolling, and we had to manage to get to the end. There was a cameraman, a boom operator, and a third guy doing lights, a kind of electrician. I hid in a corner where I could communicate with Claire and the cinematographer at the same time.

When you do this kind of thing, you are prey to the usual panic, that the battery or magneto/generator dies. Nothing like that happened. The atmosphere was gentle, pleasant. It was thanks to Deleuze, to his infinite courtesy. Things went well during that shooting, and even, to say it simply, there was a feeling of suspended grace, the three technicians immediately understood what they needed to do. It's true that I had shaken them up a bit. I'd told them it was like a diamond, that they should realize how lucky they were, that many people would pay to be in front of Deleuze when he was speaking. We had the right along with the privilege, and we had to be conscious of that. We needed to be extremely sensible, not invasive, and useful. As it happened, everyone was there, exactly attuned to what they needed to do. I never once had to complain. There are shoots

where the technicians slack off ... Here, they were listening, they were interested. Like everyone else, they felt very intelligent. There are a lot of people who feel very intelligent in front of the *Abécédaire*. That's one of its great qualities. When it came out on tape, people stopped me on the streets to tell me they listened to it a little every morning when they woke up. Just like I did, when I used to watch *Boudu Saved from Drowning* at one point in the mornings ...

We didn't have money to develop the film. We never saw the rushes during the shooting. The first time we saw the *Abécédaire* was when Arte gave us money to develop it, so that it would be aired as a series ... You don't have time to say much to the cameraman in that situation. I could just make these little coded signs, especially on the transitions between Gilles and Claire ... We'd spoken about it. There was a principle of gentleness. Sudden zooms were out of the question, we had to move back as if we were on rails. The technician was someone I'd worked with at length, who knew what leeway he had. As for framing, we opted for simplicity. Once we'd established that there was a relation between Gilles and Claire, we decided to keep the focus on him. Otherwise the back and forth movement might grow too insistent. We had to go gentle on the lights. Things can't be flat, but neither can you blind the person who's talking. I've filmed people who absolutely cannot stand having the idea of the lamp filament touching them. It hurts. Deleuze was the kind of person who'd have hated that ... I always want the person we're filming not to notice. The ideal situation would be to film them by day, under a glass roof, with no lights. But I don't have Méliès' studio.

There was also the wager of an impossible editing process. I told myself we wouldn't make any cuts: with Deleuze, there was no off time. We could keep the camera on him without running the risk of having an editor get pissed and say, "How do you expect me to cut this, it's going to jump." So we don't film cutaway shots, just the simplest possible. We don't make things too easy to cut. The director of *Have you seen it? Or, Readings for All*, Jean Prat, had invented the famous cutaway shot of hands: you shoot three minutes of hands to place them wherever you want ... We could have made cutaway shots of the hat ... But just to be sure I wouldn't want to use them in the edit, I never shot them. When I shoot this kind of thing, I always tell myself: in 10 or 20 years, what will people be interested

in? Seeing Deleuze's face of course. They'll be pissed if the camera moves to the hat, or if we edit in a shot while Deleuze is saying something. It's Deleuze's face that we need, what he does with his hands ... I always come back to this statement, I don't remember who said it: "The most beautiful landscape in the world is a face." I really believe that when it comes to Deleuze. And it's interesting to see how he crosses one leg over the other, the way he places his hands. The image must be cropped sometimes, delicately, when we see a little section of knee at the bottom of the screen ... There had to be everything of Gilles and nothing of Gilles.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Five years later, all we had was a developed negative and some debts. I had the crazy idea of airing the footage as a series, on *Metropolis* (a cultural show on Arte, the French-German channel for which Boutang was director of programming), which would allow us to pay for the prints. I asked Claire to talk to Gilles about it, he found it hilarious. He had this terrible thing to say: "I had said, 'after my death.' But the difference between my current state and death is not huge, so I'm not compromising much." People insulted me, Labarthe, for example, who said that slicing up Deleuze like that was shameful. If I hadn't cut him up, maybe the whole thing would still be a negative sitting in a lab ... Claire oversaw how we partitioned the series. She has complete moral and judicial rights on this object. At Arte, my German colleagues were horrified that a French philosopher was going to speak in 52 episodes of *Metropolis*. After a month, the buzz even spread to some Germans ... In Germany, it was aired without subtitles, with a voice-over, a speaker: I never watched it like that, I didn't want to suffer too much. The only thing Deleuze could have seen was this TV show version. The complete film was made after his death. I couldn't do it before that. He never saw the photocopy of this work, never saw it inscribed in its true duration. He just wrote me a little note saying that he would like it to exist as a tape ... When it aired on *Metropolis*, I figured people wouldn't be able to watch every week, that they'd be craving the video. At the time, the video publishers at Arte refused, saying it was too risky. But everyone was talking about it! I wasn't able to convince them we'd be able to sell at least as many as all those films they were publishing at the time, and that only sold

five hundred or a thousand copies ... Finally, the publisher Montparnasse took on the project, and it did incredibly well (around 15,000 copies to this day). Two years after the release of the video, the wise businessman at Arte admitted he'd made a little mistake ...

A JAZZ DUO

The *Abécédaire* was filmed against a television context we couldn't stand. The other day, I ran into this wonderful quote from Jules Renard, that applies quite well to television today, but also to television at the time of the *Abécédaire*. "We no longer know how to speak today, because we no longer know how to listen. Beautiful speaking has become useless, we are summoned to speak fast so as to arrive before the answer. We never arrive. We can say whatever we want, in whatever manner, it is always cut. Conversation is a game of shears where each one cuts his neighbor's voice as soon as it grows." The quote is from 1893, and it applies quite exactly to Fogiel (a French TV and radio reporter, show host and producer) ...

Deleuze and Claire had quite a number of discussions together. Claire had probably sketched out the framework of each question, proposed different leads. After that, he thought through what he wanted to say, decided what points to make. And she knew how to ask questions ... Gilles and Claire clearly spoke the same language. They improvised like jazz musicians. Whenever a space of freedom came up, they knew it, but they also knew where they were going. The clapboard game, the game of resuming the takes ... Deleuze had assimilated the fact that each reel lasted ten minutes, that gave the rhythm. And the charm of 16 mm film is that the sound reels last longer than the images. With some people, you cut once the image stops ... You don't feel like doing that with Deleuze. You don't cut a solo in the same way, it's like jazz. If you are filming Charlie Parker, you keep the sound even if the image stops, you let it roll, because what he's doing there, he can of course do it again, but it wouldn't be the same.

Never once did he act as if he wanted to stop. Perhaps at the end, he started to feel that the game had gone on long enough ... But any signs of lassitude or annoyance are instead jokes between Claire the agitator,

and a man who knows exactly what game both of them are playing. I have a hard time imagining Deleuze really annoyed by Claire's questions ... As soon as we'd finished shooting the *Abécédaire*, his health really deteriorated. If we'd done it three months later, we might not have been able to finalize it, he might not have had the energy to carry it through to the end.

A JOKER

When he said he was becoming a "pure archive," he knew what I had in mind in doing this kind of thing. He figured that if someone had had the means and the technology necessary to do the same with Mallarmé, he would have been happy to see four hours of Mallarmé. I think, since he was interested in cinema, that he knew it was a truly original object, and that it would last. And only in that system: it is absolutely prohibited to set it down in writing, to edit a transcription.

He was a great actor of his texts. He had this wonderful knowledge of how to use his body and his silhouette. And a strong self-deprecating streak. When I was doing *Océaniques*, he had come into my office, a rat's den of sorts. A book by Hervé Bourges and Pascal Josèphe had just come out, where they explained that culture was when Mourousi spoke about a play on television, and that *Océaniques* was an example of the absolute dereliction of the intellectuals. I said to Deleuze: "Gilles, I'm sure you can mime the dereliction of the intellectual," and he performed this kind of absolutely crushed gaglike act ... It is a rare occurrence to shoot someone who's so at ease in his body, in his voice, who's completely present to what he's doing, yet at the same time maintains a distance from which he can look upon himself, and chuckle at being filmed. He's in the aquarium, he has chosen the water of his aquarium, and he does what he wants.

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1. *Océaniques*, a show which Pierre-André Boutang co-founded and produced for France 3 between 1987 and 1992, aired documentaries on subjects ranging from anthropology, philosophy, and science, to literature and art. It showcased philosophers and critics such as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Heidegger, Weil, as well as writers (Duras, Césaire, Sollers), musicians (Messiaen), and filmmakers (Godard, Cassavetes, Fellini, Bertolucci, Daney).