

The Unarchivable Archive

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Abstract

In 1975-76, Gilles Deleuze's seminars at Vincennes University were filmed by a student, Marielle Burkhalter, as part of her Master Project "Filming thought in its becoming". Though only a few hours of the footage remain, this unofficial archive was the starting point of *Facs of Life* (2009), a feature film between documentary and fiction that artists and filmmakers Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson made in collaboration with some of the students who attended the courses and who appear in the videos. The present text sketches a narrative of the filmmaking process and of Deleuze's experimental pedagogy, interrogating the potentialities of the video archive as an unarchivable force that can be continually reactivated and the role cinema can play in revealing lost or invisible events in the history of thought. The artists conclude with some remarks on another such event, a long-lost science-fiction screenplay written by Félix Guattari during the 1980s, *Un amour d'UIQ*, that they discovered at IMEC archives and that formed the basis of their subsequent film, *In Search of UIQ* (2013), part of a multi-form project around potential cinema, *UIQ (the unmaking- of)*, that included the publication of Guattari's screenplay in different languages.

Keywords

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Still from *Facs of Life*, courtesy the artists

Over the years we've spent a long time in archives. Drawn to forgotten or silenced histories, gaps, holes in the record. *Not this, not that*. An archive does something to time. It is never simply a question of the material traces it contains, nor the ways in which these can be selected, presented, reactivated, recategorized, deconstructed or reassembled. An archive also consists of what it does not itself contain, what persists in its lacunae or as yet lies dormant, like a sleeper agent. A space of dreaming, sleepwalking, visitation, possession, contamination, its rooms populated by ghosts and revenants. Crossing the threshold of an archive, you enter an interzone between the living and the dead, production and potential, official history and molecular forms of life that have been forgotten, repressed, excluded or cancelled.

For us, it all began with something that couldn't find a place in the official archives and that transformed our notion not only of what an archive could *be* but of what it could *do*. Some twenty years have now passed since we sat down in front of our small TV set – the first and last one we ever bought – with the curtains drawn, to watch the surviving 16 hours of video footage of Gilles Deleuze's seminars at Vincennes, but we still find ourselves going back, again and again, to visit that overcrowded, smoke-filled room.

Shot by Marielle Burkhalter with the help of some comrades as part of her Masters project "Filming thought in its becoming", the videos were broadcast on RAI TRE's late night program *Fuori Orario*, at what was a pretty dark time in Italy. A disastrous education reform had just been bulldozed through parliament by the second Berlusconi regime, so simply being able to witness the leisurely autonomy Deleuze and Guattari enjoyed at Vincennes in testing out new ideas and building up concepts – not to mention that of the students, who could pick up what they needed or what interested them most

for their own projects – already seemed like some kind of science-fiction utopia beamed down from another planet. This was 1975-76, the years when Deleuze and Guattari had just begun working on *Mille Plateaux*, and watching those unedited video archives we were caught up in the potency of the time-machine, as key concepts such as faciality and molecular multiplicities gradually took shape from an assortment of mismatching bits and scraps in the gray fog of Gitanes and Gauloises.

For a number of reasons, Marielle's archives had languished in obscurity for decades before Enrico Ghezzi and the *Fuori Orario* team, after screening the footage at the Vento del Cinema Film Festival on the island of Procida, decided to expose the unedited rushes to the jittery light of after-midnight insomnia and delirium. Deemed barely presentable on account of so-called technical defects, the footage seemed like a bizarre audio-visual notebook surviving in the limbo between private memory and historical archive.

Deleuze himself had apparently begun to edit Marielle's videos into a finished film but was unable to secure post-production resources to complete the project, which received a single screening in a Paris cinema before disappearing completely. Or so the legend goes. What would have become of the film Deleuze hoped to make from these images is anyone's guess. But in its *workless* state, what became visible to us was the very movement of his thought as it flitted mercurially from black holes to the Vinteuil sonata to catastrophe theory to Tristan and Isolde, Chrétien de Troyes and Josef von Sternberg, selecting from each the component that would serve the machine.

Of equal importance were the participants in the seminar, whose tightly compressed bodies became the conductors of a collective libidinal headrush: the scapegoat's anus, the face of the despot, mosquitos and werewolves, Moby Dick, London taxis and Mrs Dalloway's schizoid *balades*, vampires and sorcerers... We soon found ourselves taking notes, as if we were actually *there* at the seminar. Huddled in our living-room in the cramped prefab shed in the Vincennes woods, with nothing to tell inside from out.

The archives were compelling, the grainy, often blurred texture of the video with its crackle and buzz and momentary blackouts, and the haunting, bleary-eyed characters that loomed out of the grayscale, in whose faces, clothes, postures and gestures we could see intimations of Eustache, Garrel, late Bresson. What we were seeing felt like cinema waiting to happen. Where were they heading after the seminar? Where had they been the night before? Did they get lost, or go tripping, in the woods of Vincennes? The idea came to us to move to Paris to try to find some of these characters and make, or rather "continue" the film with them. And in doing so, we were already translating ourselves into a realm somewhere between fiction, documentary and dream.

Later on, we would learn about Vincennes University and its short history as a subversive political and pedagogical laboratory, where institutional codes, power relations and traditional practices of transmission were, if not suspended, then at least destabilized. It was possible to enroll without a high school diploma, and many departments were helping *sans-papiers* students, often from countries involved in decolonization struggles, to live in France by providing false papers and other types of help. Mixed into

the student body were factory workers, militants, artists, filmmakers, drug dealers, musicians and *pensionnaires* from alternative psychiatric institutions such as the Clinique La Borde... Hardly anybody was thinking about getting anything as prosaic as a degree for a future career.

It was the 1970s, the spirit of the barricades and its radical energy, however dispersed, still pervaded the university and was visibly part of the molecular composition of Deleuze's seminar which held us hypnotized, despite the flickering of the TV screen (and the time-travel). Yet, however much we felt we inhabited it, *this space existed only on video*. It had disappeared along with the rest of the University buildings, bulldozed down in the Summer of 1980, when the students were on holiday, following which the University of Paris VIII was relocated from the woods of Vincennes to St. Denis.

So we made preparations and left for Paris. All we had were a couple of suitcases and the three double-speed VHS tapes we had recorded off RAI TRE. We had no idea yet what we were going to do with the material. Perhaps the simplest thing would be just to refilm the 16 hours *Pierre Menard*-style. It seemed the film was already there, there was nothing to cut and nothing to add other than maybe a letterbox frame to make it feel more like cinema. But in another sense, the film wasn't over and we wanted to know how it would continue beyond the walls of the classroom. And beyond those video archives.

One of the first people we found was Marielle herself. Though wary at first, she gradually warmed to our project, telling us how she had lost more than half of her original footage, which included not only Deleuze's courses but also those of Jean-François Lyotard, René Schérer and François Châtelet. After accumulating an unwieldy pile of tapes, she had decided to donate them to the archives of the new Paris VIII University. Unfortunately, the library didn't handle video and the A/V technicians said the format (3/4-inch U-matic tape) was obsolete, or in any case untreatable with the means they had at their disposal. The tapes were unceremoniously consigned to the trash. But luckily, someone tipped Marielle off and she was able to borrow a van, rush to St. Denis and save what she could. Which was how the Deleuze videos eventually found their way to *Fuori Orario*, and then to us and others like us in a diaspora of transcodes that eventually made its way, in small fragments, to YouTube.

In Paris, we rented an improbable studio next to the Eiffel Tower. Strangely it was all we could find in terms of accommodation, thanks to some false declarations a friend had made (to be able to rent a place in Paris you had to prove you had a stable job, have a guarantor or earn three times the rent). In our *flânerie* around the city, we found an old TV set abandoned in the street. Bizarrely enough, it was still working. During the night, under the Tower's glittering lights, we rewatched the seminars and began making digital close-ups of individual students from the TV screen, which we assembled in a contact sheet of (somewhat muggy) mug shots.

The project began to assume the contours of a phantom detective story, an investigation we pursued at Paris VIII, where a lot of the Vincennes professors still taught and

where we would thrust these images under their noses. We didn't get very far with this procedure. Some of those we questioned hallucinated their own presence in the pictures, a gallery of post '68 usual suspects lost in fog where it seemed everyone you knew might eventually turn up if you looked hard enough. Others recognized only the missing, the overdosed, those who had long since made their exits.

The impression we had was that the Vincennes video archives were fundamentally unarchivable. Neither public nor private domain, unpresentable both in terms of their technical "quality" and their autonomy from institutional protocols, the rushes dwelt in a kind of limbo, a blissful identity-free zone, for which we coined the term *inarchivé* after Blanchot's idea of the *inachevé*, referring to the part of an event that constitutes its remainder, that its realization fails to account for or cannot exhaust.

Before starting to shoot our own film, *Facs of Life*, we had looked at a number of documentaries that had been made about Vincennes over the years, some openly critical of what they regarded as an "experimental ghetto" – a cunning strategic concession on De Gaulle's part which had the effect of isolating the militant student body far from the centre of Paris. Others implied that the eventual destruction of the buildings had been a punishment and an attempt to stop what the Ministry of Education perceived as an insurrectional tinderbox. As we understood from Marielle's video, Deleuze clearly viewed Vincennes's decentred isolation, and his own within its larger dynamics, as a necessary precondition for the creation and nurturing of new concepts that could resist being quickly reabsorbed and neutralized by the speed of dominant information flows.

In its raw, fuzzy, shaky "unprofessionalism", the footage of the seminars echoed this sentiment. But it is precisely this supposedly poor quality of the videos that ensures their continuing semi-clandestine status, the fact that they can only exist – or better, *insist* – outside of normal channels of distribution, whether commercial or academic. And it is perhaps for this very reason that they retain their charge, the undeniable quality of presence these images convey that has something to do with their "betweenness", the way they constitute a threshold, a liminal shadow zone of multiple dimensions, between Deleuze and his students, between revolution (1968) and restoration (the 1980s), between the University of Vincennes and its erasure from the map, between philosophy and its Outside, solitude and multitude.

This notion of betweenness was also key to the way we would make use of the archives and develop the film we had in mind. For each of the students, we soon realized, the encounter with Deleuze's thought came from a different angle, in relation to a specific life trajectory, as were our own. The thing that interested us most was the singularity of each encounter and what it would lead to, which is to say the space of relation, the space between. But how to film these spaces of relation as they evolved?

Having located around twenty people who were sitting in the video seminars around Deleuze in the smoky classroom, we eventually pared them down to around ten: a militant filmmaker, a translator, an art dealer, a composer, a former drug dealer, an urbanist, a schizoanalyst, an experimental rock musician, a photographer, a funambulist... Many of

them possessed a certain air of clandestinity that was perfect for our film. A film that would hopefully eschew representation, that would steer clear of the traps of psychology and nostalgia, that would work towards an effacement of the mechanisms of identification and faciality that dominate more conventional documentaries, and install in their place a logic and affective economy of impersonal singularities caught up in a-signifying becomings of texture, light, music, movement, fictional lines of flight: an open problematic field of virtualities which viewers could themselves actively begin to reassemble and rewire as they watched our film.

Our idea was to get to know each of the students and try to isolate some particular notion or concept that seemed to express their relation to Deleuze, to us, to life – from which we could begin to build a kind of map of their existential territory. 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. Often, we were received as though we were revenants from their past, ghosts come knocking at the door thirty odd years later, seeking news of the future.

Our approach was in part a response to Deleuze's engagement with cinema, the way he used cinema to do philosophy at the same time showing how cinema invents its own ways of thinking through image and sound: here we tried to reverse the process, to use elements of his philosophy to do cinema, to make a film whose structure and modality of perception would be rhizomatic. The challenge was to make a film in plateaus that could be viewed in a distributed, non-linear way, despite the 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 a wider application of the Chekhovian principle, cited in numerous screenplay manuals, that by placing a gun in a drawer in scene 1 you ensure someone will 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 6 to use in, say, plateau 1.

An important part of this process was attempting to dismantle the effects of faciality which cinema, and especially traditional documentaries, typically produce. 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 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? Our first instinct was to separate voices from bodies and denominate, 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.

Eventually, *Facs of Life* found its form in eight plateaus: *Inarchivé*, *Visagéité*, *Inclination*, *Echelles/Intervalles*, *Bords*, *Epuissance*, *Promenade*, *Falaise*. The idea was to construct intensive zones, distinct planes of life, questioning and experimentation that might fold upon and reconfigure each other in different 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. In making the film the question for us became that of *figuring* as opposed to representing Deleuze. We wanted to avoid the kind of “portrait of a philosopher” film that was in vogue at that moment. But Deleuze would obviously be 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, a molecular presence that perhaps more than anything else would make itself felt 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.

Facs of Life came out as a feature film in 2009 but its plateau-structure also opened the way to a number of reconfigurations of the material. We became interested in the formal possibilities of an exploded cinema, a radical redistribution of the components of the image, and in the idea of unmaking. The exhibitions included *blown up ! à la recherche des élèves de Gilles Deleuze*, an “eventwork” built around a temporary autonomous classroom set, where guest artists, thinkers, teachers, students and visitors were invited to creatively respond to or interact with projected sequences from the film – and *twice torn from time*, a four-screen video-installation where the plateaus could literally watch each other.

Around this period, we had another archival encounter whose science-fiction aspect this time had a real basis. After a screening of *Facs of Life*, a friend of Deleuze and Guattari gave us a tip that sent us off to the IMEC Archives in Northern France, where we discovered another lost cinema project, this time by Guattari, a script he had written in the 1980s for a sci-fi film that he wanted to direct himself. Hardly anybody knew of this project, nor did they acknowledge Félix’s desire to be a filmmaker.

Un amour d’UIQ recounts what happens when an invisible alien force from a parallel dimension – UIQ, the Infra-quark Universe – makes contact with a community of squatters and begins to desire a communicable form (a face, a body) for itself, commensurate with the world of its hosts. But this proves impossible because UIQ’s machinic subjectivity – which is capable of infiltrating human minds and bodies, communications systems and machines, even natural phenomena – lacks temporal and spatial limits and a fixed sense of identity.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Infra-quark Universe was that its problems of embodiment were also those of Guattari’s script, which went through three very different versions (respectively 1980, 1981 and 1987) and never found a stable form, nor

the means to finance such a colossal SF film. It was as though the subject of UIQ was at once too infinitesimal and too far-reaching to find an adequate frame. What struck us about the script was the way it tried to release the delirium that is constitutive of cinema from the signifying structures (story, psychology, etc.) that reinforce normative patterns of desire.

Initially, our goal was simply to publish the script in book form, but the oddness of the text and its uncertain place within Guattari's other writings, meant that the book began to take on a form of its own, one that could encompass the scope of Guattari's cinematic adventure while leaving it open to future transformation. Once again, it was the spectre of the *inarchivé* that was guiding us, in this case the worklessness of a film in limbo that could only be made by a process of mental or even physical contamination.

We felt that in order to help this delirium proliferate we had to create further "manifestations" of the Infra-quark Universe. This took various forms: an art radio piece, a series of talks and performances, a film (*In Search of UIQ*, 2013) and most recently a number of *seeances* – collective envisionings of the screenplay in different countries where we recorded people speculating on what Guattari's film might have looked like by imagining different scenes, characters, moods. This led to an exhibition, *it took forever getting ready to exist*, the central piece of which was a sound work that resulted from the seeances. The screenplay's insistence, as a kind of cinematic dark matter, would ensure a continual *unmaking* of the film, enabling others to think this universe for and between themselves without having a particular cinematic form imposed on them.

A community of "envisionaries" could perhaps counter the mechanisms of power, legitimacy, hierarchy, who knows more, who has the right or the authority to speak, that pervade in the management and diffusion of archives. Visions imply a state of non-knowledge or not yet knowing. They give rise to other forms of speech, a reaching for words, the space between them making room for the hidden or forgotten images that may arrive, creating a reception centre for the ghosts of history to encounter the living. And through the prism of the ghost, the living may encounter what is most alive in themselves and in each other.

The generative potency of the unarchivable archive is never simply the result of the encounter we have with it but with the myriad, partly undisclosed, events that traverse it. In a sense, over the years, we found ourselves moving from a film in search of a missing or dispersed collective body (the students of Vincennes) to the summoning of a collective who can give body to a missing film (*UIQ*). In both cases we invoke something that may become so small as to be practically imperceptible: the past and its losses folded up into a tiny particle yet retaining the possibility of exploding into a new universe.

To watch *Facs of Life* or organize a screening, please contact us at lesfacsolife@gmail.com

To see the first plateau please go to <https://vimeo.com/1052232324>