

Plastic Island revisited (Let the sun shine)

I met Felix Guattari in 1992 when I invited him to a Symposium conceived by the filmmaker Penelope Georgiou. Times and means were different, then in 1992, and I remember myself, anxiously waiting for a connection in the upstairs telephone booth of the Café de Flore, anxiously because I was altogether not too sure about my French and not too sure about the telephone number neither. I was connected, and, although the bad connection quality until today resonates in my head and my stammering as well, and though this telephone call must have come rather unexpectedly for him into this rainy February evening with nothing but a small introduction letter I had written a few weeks earlier, I was given a date and time to meet him at his house, in a small street next to rue St. Denis on one of the following days.

My task was to interest him to participate in an upcoming symposium titled Ethics and Aesthetics, which was set in a somewhat theatrical atmosphere where he would be one of the invitées besides of Karl Lagerfeld and Spike Lee (whom to invite I was pushing still into a dreaded future). Not having been part of the discussions of the theme I had a somehow diffuse understanding of the topic and a not too small contempt of the broadness, unpoliticality and spectacularity of the whole endeavour, but in preparation I spend the days up to the meeting reading Anti-Oedipe, and trying to get as much French conversation as possible, chatting up people in coffee shops, trying to speak about the book I unfortunately only had in its German translation.

The small side street of rue St. Denis in these times still had an open sewer in the middle of the street and the general medievalism of this part of Paris was enforced by the inclining 15th century houses, you can find in some streets of the inner city until today. The house had an impressive staircase, and I remember the strong smell of floor wax and the massive hand reeling. He, who Gilles Deleuze had described as the most beautiful person he had ever met, opened the door and we were invited to sit in a small side room. We were three, I had brought my best Paris friend to help me with explaining, and as it turned out to also prevent me from dragging the Anti-Oedipe out of my handbag, while we waited for Guattari who was preparing tea, by hinting out that as this had been written in 1968, there might be some more recent books, I then demonstratively would have missed. Mrs. Guattari seated himself with a table on his right side and us opposite on chairs and I started with the explanation of a concept, I had not really been giving any thought but perhaps for a day, and in retrospect would have difficulties in explaining today as well. Remembering us I wonder, that it was in these

days still considered normal politeness that one would try to speak French and not change into more convenient English. In the end he accepted to come and participate in the Symposium. And I remember when I stepped into the street, and we decided to celebrate the victory by having lunch at a nearby restaurant, how excited I was, and how happily I said to my friend: "And imagine, he actually listened to me!" To which he answered: "After all he is a psychiatrist."

But before we left, Mrs. Guattari, having found out that we were artists, showed us his art collection, especially some new prints, he had acquired just a week ago. Being in these times a fierce conceptionalist I felt somehow superior to what I, when asked about it later, used to describe as Yugoslavian Surrealism, and which I would now wish to remember better. And then he gave me his most recent book, asking before whether I already knew it, which I didn't, excusing myself by saying it was not translated (and quite relieved that I had not produced the old *Anti-Oedipe*). I forgot to ask him for a signature, – imagine!, but perhaps this was also due to the strange feeling of equality that he so readily emitted, and which, remembering the situation, I guess, was one of the traits that made for the beauty of his persona.

He died in August 1992. The symposium in October took place without him. The book he gave me was *Chaosmose*, the last of his books that was published in his lifetime. It remained untranslated into German, like many of his books do until today, until 2014 (even when some of it I translated earlier for *A.N.Y.P.*, the Berlin magazine). *Chaosmose* is about subjectivity, how as the cover text reads "to produce it, to keep it, to enrich it, to reinvent it to a permanence in the way of making it compatible with a world of changing values." While I translate this from the cover, it jumps to my eyes how many words from French can just be taken and turned into English words, englifying them. It seems as if this literality is the best way to translate their meaning. Meanwhile I don't really know what I do, when I write this text or any other in English. I am not a native speaker, and even more, I have never spent more than a month in an English speaking country. I write it in a hearsay way. Does it sound? is one of the main criteria, I try to fit my English into. The meanings of the words skip me, not the momentary meanings, not the notion that meaning for example translates into *Meinung* and that wherever I would use it, I would mean exactly this concept, but the deep imbedded historical meanings. In writing I can never be sure, if these words are still used, who would use them, and what sociological or political context they would open up for a native speaker. Every word, it seems, is a discursive risk, may turn me into a 70ies Hippie writer, a dull academician or else a Surrealist. The only thing I can refer to is the sound. I seldomly look up words in the dictionary. It doesn't really help, not even the small comments (like *fam.* for familiar or notions about geographical contexts as where words are used). If I need a word, I just wait for a word to appear on my inner writing screen. I then sometimes look it up, sometimes I again just trust the sound of it, which also lead to once writing to my UN-

HABITAT colleagues (where I used to work) that someone we wanted to get in contact with "eloped with the orange revolution", which I wanted to use as a sort of vanished into, and made their day.

I, thus, work straight against Plato's text critique, against what he describes as the discursive insecurity into which each text is written, insofar as the writer can never be totally assured, as in oral communication, that whatever he or she writes (even when "she" was not Plato's concern for sure) is understood by the reader in the intention in which it was written. Therefore Plato opts for an obscurantism concerning the most important or "holy" parts of the message, which can only be safely transmitted in oral communication. An advice everyone has become too familiar with since electronic communication, even when Plato was not thinking about this neither. This empty inner part of the written message is born out of a clear distrust of intersubjective means of communicating via the written word. An inability of its signifying part as to move the reader in the right direction. So opposing to this, and in the clear uncanny knowledge, that I don't really know what I write, I try to trust the sound, the ups and downs of vowels, the shortness or else the overflow of sentences, to make clear what the mood should be, in which the text should be read. Relying on the sound I trust the reader, more than I do with my words. With this sound I try to convey this inner Auslassungsstelle, the point of omission, Plato declares to be the core of every written text. (I just tried to find a translation for Auslassungsstelle – there was none, and more so the two most prominent citations of this word are from my own texts – so perhaps it doesn't even exist in German).

When this text is finished, I will hand it over to an English editor. She (and it is a she) will try to straighten it out, and I will try to fight her. She seemingly knows more about you, the reader, as she is already one of you. I know more about the intention of the text. She in the end will get to know more of me and my intentions, through the editing process, than you will have the chance to. What we will produce is generally accepted as a compromise between a readership and an author, by adding, through editing, more subjectivities into the text. It could also be called in Guattari's terms the reterritorialisation of subjectivity, my subjectivity. We will accept it, we are not all psychiatrists, and I think it needs a long training to come up with this egalitarian communication context Félix Guattari had built up around him, in which stutter, word cascades, repetitions, and redundancies are part of a message. Meanwhile a text editor will throw out the second appearance of the word appearance, and with meticulous eagerness will try to come up with a word, that says appearance but is constructed out of other letters. Materialisation, manifestation, happening, whatever.

In the same way as the before mentioned meeting in Paris is connected with floorwax and a telephone booth and its dimly lit atmosphere and the waiters pushing past on

their way to the kitchen, I can also place the moment when I heard about Guattari's death. It was the opening of the then newly built Kunsthaus Wien. It opened with a performance of Marina Abramovic. and while she was elevated to the cross, as the last picture of her biographical piece, and a large crowd, invisible as singular individuals, since it was dark and only graspable as a dark multitude, was standing in the yet unfurnished space and looking in the direction of the happening, I was approached from the side by one of the organisers of abovementioned symposium, who added to the dark picture by saying: It seems that our invited guests kick the bucket before they make it here. Which didn't really make me get what had happened, but made me immediately understand that she didn't like me. Which in the end is, what intersubjectivity is about.

But today is another day. A bright and sunny November day, with blue skies and low sun, and I am not sure whether I am going to finish that story that was about disguised malevolence and left me offended then, and pondering now, since offended shades my momentary life too often. It seems middle-aged existence is to a large extent about feeling, or being, offended and dealing with it. I heard the first time about it, when I was interviewing Martin Kippenberger. He was not middle-aged then, young more so, from my point of view now, but it was already the last decade of his life. He said; since I am so touchy these days, and I asked; offended? And he said; offended may come in. And he added; since I am all about harmony, and laughed, but then said; he sometimes wondered whatever became of this small morsel of thankfulness. The recognition of the effort. And I may understand him wrongly but it rings a bell now, and connects me not so much through a common endeavour, but through a shared weakness, which is, that we all drink too much which makes it harder, to, what Guattari said to be the core of subjectivity, stand controversy and antagonisms. I have to add that I always felt slightly intimidated in Kippenberger's company, not at ease. His was not the egalitarian conversation space, but he was a very egalitarian dancer, who made his partners look good, and even when it is boring as hell to talk with intimidated people, which it must have been for him, he let us parasite on his energy, making up for (for him) fruitless conversation through stand-up comedy.

Since I wrote the first pages I went through Guattari's book, the *Three Ecologies*, because it actually started my thinking about our rencontre, and therefore started this text. I had mistakenly thought that it was this book he had given me then, and I wanted in the first concept of this text to connect it with Guy Debord's writings, that were posthumously made into one of his last books; *La Planète malade*.

I dragged myself a bit through the three ecologies, since what I had was firstly a pretty bad translation (which it shares with a lot of his books, and may be a sort of bad historical joke, since he, together with Deleuze in *Anti-Oedipus*, wanted to write

philosophy in a more common-place and colloquial language), and my mind kept following the paths that opened up by the choice of words the translator had decided upon. He had started a sentence with the words: In deed and truth (In Tat und Wahrheit) which is a decidedly Swiss German expression (it is noted in the Wikipedia list of Helvetisms – words that are only used in Switzerland), he once used "grad", and not the more standardized word "gerade" (for straight), which made him an Austrian, or again a Swiss, and at one point he used "knallhart" – perhaps bad-ass or tough enough, as the film by the same title was translated, which turned this word into a 90ies comic phrase. I wondered what could have been the French original for that.

Secondly I had the impression of an obvious impatience that shone through the text and made it hard to follow. I know this impatience from my own texts, it evolves, when you already want to come to your next argument, but you realise, that you have not really laid the grounds for the reader, to passage there from the last thought. So you, as writer, give it a bit of additional text, but these additional phrases would not be necessary for yourself, so it is mostly not very elegantly written. Normally you find these passages yourself, when you read the text again, and since one mostly has forgotten what one had been thinking when writing, the writer senses the impatience as the reader would, and tries to flatten out the section. Guattari seems to have been an a-la-prima writer, as far as I can distinguish from this book, writing out of a necessity, or what in current discourse is called an urgency. This urgency was directed at someone or a discursive field it seems, and due again to the strange translation of "le monde psy" into "die PSY-Welt", which only gave way to a correct understanding (at least mine) in the middle of the text, i got this quite late – until then I had thought, wondering, if he meant something esoteric, like the PSY-factor, while Guattari actually used it as a pejorative noun for everything connected to Psychology. So it took me some time to understand that he was directing it to his colleagues in psychiatry, and more so to behavioural science. By then I had already decided to read the book in a more subconscious way, trusting my perceptiveness to grasp the content out of the sound and the keywords, while still disciplining myself, when I felt my immediate thinking drifted to the exhibition, I am conceiving at the moment, or to this text, I wanted to write, and then I had to go back in the book to the sentences that were the last I consciously remembered. One of the main arguments was, that it would be better to take, *what* subjectivity had actually produced, in poetry, in music or in visual art – even when he mostly cited poetry – to see *how* it is produced, and to understand the necessity of the antagonism between nature and culture, than to refer to the second level books, scientists had been putting together about the hows and whys of the forming of subjectivity (and here again he addressed it directly at psychological science), while he admitted, that the best of these meta-texts, and there he named Traumdeutung of Sigmund Freud, could be read as an astonishing sort of modern novel.

It was through a such second level book though, Guattaris book, a very a-platonical book, because, reading it, you sense, that he not deliberately leaves out or endarkens anything, that he doesn't hint at some veiled, secret meaning, but tries to write as clearly as is possible for him – making it un-understandable at many points – at least for me – but at the same time radiating a subjectivity (or perhaps only the wish to write a modern novel as well), that I was remembered of the occasions I, during that day, had cited poems, had been using poems in everyday talk. I counted three times, including the silly poem about the killing of a fly. And I started to wonder, why you would use these manifestations of other subjectivities as an intersubjective mean, conveying a message from another subjectivity, the poet's, to enforce your own argument, or moreso to give a sort of sound to a situation, making it resonate through different times and places. Speaking in tongues, so to say. And it is somehow clear that it must be so, because another subjectivity touches yours, folding you into something that may be – again in Guattaris terms, – that may be called a supportive environment, or what Benjamin called "the protective colouring of the planet". Meaning: that it speaks your language, too. *Cette planète malade*. But I didn't read this, Debords, book.

I have also never met him. I wanted to though, and so I walked into the Gerard Lebovici bookstore in Paris, which was the closest address I could get from the Debord experts I knew. This bookstore took me by wonder, and though the elegantly dressed lady discouraged us (again we were two), advising to leave whatever letters we had there, and that no further address was to be obtained, since it wouldn't be our choice to meet him or not, I was happy to have seen it. In shelves up to the ceiling, the ten or twelve books of the situationists covered the wall, each one in hundreds of copies occupying one shelf, changing the bookstore into a sort of colour field painting installation.

Again it is a sunny day, now in January, and in between I read *La Planète malade*, or sick planet, as it is translated – and I read it in the English translation. The last sentence is: *Revolution makes the sunshine*. The sentence before this is: *Alieniated industrial production makes the rain*. The sentence before that has become famous. Since the last two sentences in my copy (which was translated by Donald Nicholson Smith, the October editor of their Situationist publications, and published supported by the French Embassy in India, where those books are sold by drug-addicted five year olds in the street, or at least this was where I got my beautiful copy of the Walter Benjamin transcripts from, paying the amount of what was printed on its original Verso cover, some nine cheap Pounds, in Rupee, which made them suddenly become the excited and happy children they seemingly could be as well, since it was by far more they would ever get on a sold book normally) – alas, since the aforementioned last two sentences are printed on another page, the page ends, and the book could as well end with: *When it*

rains, when there are clouds of smog over Paris, let us never forget that it is the government's fault.

I had always taken that sentence as the inclusive sort of a political message, a sentence like: "*It was murder in any case*", a sentence that hints at the necessity to not forget the landscape or the political structure in which an event is set, when discussing a detail of daily political life. But the sentence is actually based on empirical data.

The sun shone in May 68, it was smog-free, because, due to the General strike, there was a fuel-shortage, so less cars were in the street, and because of the barricades and the fighting, people tried not to move their cars anyway. Hence the revolution made the sun come through.

La Planète malade is not a book, but actually the last of four essays, compiled in a book, with which it shares the name. The essay is short, and my shying away from opening up another ecology book, and hence the two months it took me to finish this text, was actually quite unnecessary. It is a short and direct essay. Debord in this book doesn't write in a platonical way neither. He doesn't obscure his message in its core (or did he, and I didn't get it?), maybe because he trusts us, the readers, which I doubt, or maybe because he trusts language, which is possible, given the time it was published, which held some esteem for the uncoveyed (Hell, this doesn't seem to be a word, but conveyed is, so what?) political language, or maybe he was just too sick to hold back, or use whatever diplomacy would be advisable when talking to people. But then again, even when La Planète malade is a published article, he doesn't seem to talk to people, or attempt to, it seems as if he writes this text to position himself in times to come, in the future. Like something you put on a tombstone or in a bottle. And it is his last published text. (Meanwhile out of his last letter, now also published, I remember the sentence, *I am dying of a disease that you can't as you say "catch", it needs a whole life to get it.*)

So in La Planète malade he writes: "*Revolution or death! is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt: rather, it is the last word of the scientific thought of our century*". Because everything is known, and when Nikola in this Starship issue puts plastic particles as signifier, one could as well put VW's Diesel fumes, or the deeply cynical and selfish words of the BP manager after the Bluewater Horizon oil spill, "I want my old job back" in the same place. It must have been somehow bitter for Debord, to admit to have discerned so late the nature-culture dychotomy, he could have found much earlier in Marx writings (of whose translations the Situationist International in huge parts consists), as the one scientifically fool proof argument for a battle cry that

was applied before by various people to challenge class-inequality, colonialism, feminism, and the spectacle (even when he, Debord, tries to write all the former into the latter). The text hints at some alike feeling. It was the same for the people I used to work with in the beginning of the nineties. Being so uncomfortable in applying an argument that developed out of a reality in which: *Admirably accurate measurements and projections are continually being made concerning the rapid increase in the chemical pollution of the breathable atmosphere, as of rivers, streams and, already, oceans; the irreversible accumulation of radioactive waste attending the development of nuclear power for so-called peaceful purposes; the effects of noise; the pervasion of space by plastic junk that threatens to turn it into an everlasting refuse dump, etc. ,*

resulted out of the fact, that it had been taken up by reform and its spokespeople, and not by revolt. (Even when I do remember that part of the No-Future movement and its cultural expressions in the 80ies talked violently against a society that didn't give a shit about trees, Punks, and any deviant young people alike – the argument being that it included the trees!). But generally and later, this détournement of valid arguments by people Debord calls *waffling gas-bags* made this topic toxic because it breathed reform, revisionism, and conservatism. This was before Judith Butler made her claim to defend reform against revolt, which could have been an argument, wouldn't it have been read mostly on social issues. But maybe the better argument to take nature up as the principal contradiction (meaning as the main argument, why it's necessary to stop a society that fails on the whole scale while killing people as a sort of side spectacle), still lies in the old saying that paranoia is just the healthier approach to reality – and discursively contested arguments are the real valid ones (because someone fights them on the mean level of disavowing them). But Debord also writes that history has shown that facts never were arguments.

Guattari points out to a thought Isabelle Stengers, a nobel-prize winner in Biology (together with Ilya Prigogine) and Merve author has suggested. She thinks it to be indispensable to introduce a narrative element into Physics "in [die] Theoriebildung der Evolution in Termini der Irreversibilität" (in *Entre le Temps et l'éternité*). Yes, we also started to think about Sci-Fi, and Mark von Schlegell and Jakob Kolding write on it. Guattari thinks, that this will be done (creating the images, the texts, the narration) increasingly by machines, and the film-plot of Bernadette Corporation, or Ed-Stecks novel in this magazine may be examples of this. He thinks it should be claimed by

subjectivities, and I am not sure if I follow him into them as being oppositional. But I would follow him into that they should stutter or shout or be redundant or meandernd, but alas, this, I guess, shows in this text.

[Ariane Müller]