

# IN[]VISIBLE CULTURE

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## Unthinkable Sex: Conceptual Personae and the Time- Image

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To most, the title of this essay will seem paradoxical. For in his two books on cinema, Gilles Deleuze never mentions the concept of conceptual personae, a central concern of Chapter Three of *What is Philosophy?* And he writes even less on questions of sexual identification. Nonetheless, my *parti pris* here is the following: To think the question of 'gender' in relation to the time-image, we must pass through conceptual personae who may become, for their part, the unthought of sexual difference.

This is an equally curious idea since conceptual personae have only an oblique relation with either characters or cinematic identification. They are *philosophical* figures. Their oblique relation to art should not be surprising since the objective of *What is Philosophy?* is to demonstrate the singularity of philosophy in its relations with art and science.

This is why Deleuze and Guattari distinguish conceptual personae from, on one hand, *aesthetic figures*, and on the other, *psycho-social* types.

Aesthetic figures are certainly close to what one might call filmic 'characters.' Constructed across the bodies and voices of actors through framing, *mise-en-scène*, and editing, aesthetic figures produce affects and perspectives or points of view, which is to say, *percepts* in the Deleuzian sense. They are inseparable from an *agencement* or assemblage comprising blocks of sign qualities, or what Deleuze and Guattari call a compositional plane.

No doubt the cinema also constructs psycho-social types through its aesthetic figures. These are social types in the sociological sense as defined by Georg Simmel and others: the stranger, the excluded, the immigrant, the city-dweller, and so forth. To think of these figures as stereotypes (for example, of masculinity or femininity, hetero- or homosexuality) is equally possible. But more precisely, the *raison d'être* of psycho-social types is to express the forces of territorialization and deterritorialization that constitute the social fields they occupy, thus defining their structure and function.

Take two examples from the films of Godard. 'Juliette' in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* or 'Nana' in *Vivre sa vie* both comprise a psycho-social type (the prostitute) expressed as aesthetic figures. These are two variations for showing how women are deterritorialized from one social field (the domestic sphere) and reterritorialized on another (the street, the hotel), and how women's bodies are territorialized by capital and so *become* commodities in response to a desire *for* commodities. The linking of tableau in *Vivre sa vie*, and the transformations in the figure of Nana from sequence to sequence, exemplify this process: Nana is deterritorialized first from a matrimonial coupling, and then from the store where she sells records. This is a sexual and economic deterritorialization that is then

reterritorialized on the streets, in hotels and cafés, and so on, all through different variations on a logic of exchange that are both semiotic and social. However, even as Nana and Juliette figure spaces for looking on and thinking about differing sociological dimensions, they nonetheless remain aesthetic figures, producing intense percepts and affects according to the logic of the time-image.

A mixture of aesthetic figures and psycho-social types, are Nana and Juliette also conceptual personae?

According to Deleuze and Guattari, aesthetic figures, psycho-social types, and conceptual personae "refer to each other and combine without ever merging" (WIP 70). Given the proper conditions, then, even film might generate a series wherein one of these figures unfolds from the others. For its part, philosophy has its own *dramatis personae* who become conceptual, thus referring more to mental territories than social or aesthetic ones. But as *philosophical* figures, are conceptual personae present in film?

In *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* Gilles Deleuze treats the cinema as a philosophical terrain. It has its two planes of immanence—the movement-image and the time-image—each with its own image of thought (organic and crystalline) and its own concepts in the form of images and signs. For Deleuze and Guattari, any philosopher who merits the name engages in a double movement: she or he creates concepts and traces their own plane of immanence or image of thought. For Deleuze, cinematic *auteurs* do the same and so are indistinguishable from philosophical authors. Both are conceptual enunciators as it were, and less a biographical function that points of singularity who map a plane of immanence through the construction of concepts. But between the creation of concepts and the mapping of a plane of immanence, "actually there is something else," write Deleuze and Guattari, "somewhat mysterious, that appears from time to time or that shows

through and seems to have a hazy existence halfway between concept and preconceptual plane, passing from one to the other." This is the conceptual persona and it is s/he "who says 'I' and launches the cogito and who also holds the subjective presuppositions or maps out the plane" (WIP 61-62, 60). This could be Descartes' Idiot or Nietzsche's Zarathustra. But each philosopher needs their conceptual personae, these fluctuating figures who express the subjective presuppositions or *ethos* of their philosophy and through their existence, no matter how inchoate or unstable, give life to concepts on a new plane of immanence, no matter how sketchy. Conceptual personae are the subjective presuppositions that map a plane of immanence. In this manner, they express qualities or perspectives that want to become-other, to deterritorialize towards another plane by constructing its concepts. To furnish a plane of immanence with its own concepts, to launch an image of thought, is also to express a will to become-other and to occupy another subjective milieu.

Now, in *Vivre sa vie* one cannot simply say that Nana is a conceptual persona. Conceptual personae are not figures of representation and so, *stricto sensu*, cannot be equivalent to a filmic character or a point of identification. So under what conditions can conceptual personae appear in relation to aesthetic figures?

First, it should be noted that conceptual personae are rare and difficult to distinguish: "the conceptual persona only rarely or allusively appears for himself. Nevertheless, he is there, and however nameless or subterranean, he must always be reconstituted by the reader" (WIP 63). Conceptual personae are sometimes rendered as proper names, but this is not a necessary condition because they comprise neither an identity nor a point of identification where, in Deleuze's formula from *The Time-Image*, Ego = Ego. They are expressive, in fact, of a will to power. Conceptual personae manifest a non-teleological movement where the subject wants to differentiate her or

himself in constructing new concepts or positions of identity that function as vectors for becoming.

For this reason, conceptual personae presuppose a very curious position of enunciation. This position is comprised of at least two points and often several. In fact, a conceptual persona is always situated *between multiple* points of enunciation. This enunciative assemblage, characterized by Deleuze in *The Movement-Image* as free indirect discourse, carries out "two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously, one of which constitutes a character in the first person, but the other of which is present at his birth and brings him on the scene [through the camera]. There is no mixture or average of two subjects, each belonging to a system, but a differentiation of two correlative subjects in a system which is itself heterogeneous" (MI 73).

The heterogeneity of the free indirect relation, what divides it from within, is the logic of the interstice or irrational interval. As I argue in *Gilles Deleuze's Time-Machine*, this is the key figure of the direct time-image, sustaining all its forms of difference. When connected through irrational intervals, the elements of any given set or assemblage are marked by incommensurable divisions that produce divergent series which can never be resolved into a synthetic whole. And in this way they express a power of falsification where difference is no longer subsumed by identity. This power connects free indirect discourse to a process where "the production of truth involves a series of operations that amount to working on a material—strictly speaking a series of falsifications. When I work with Guattari each of us falsifies the other, which is to say that each of us understand in his own way notions put forward by the other. A reflective series with two terms takes shape. And there can be several terms, or complicated branching series" ("Mediators" 126). In this way, Deleuze asserts that creation is fundamentally tied to the function of 'intercessors' which are, in fact, the progenitors of conceptual

personae. As Deleuze explains: "Whether real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, you have to form your intercessors. It's a series. If you're not in some series, you're lost. I need my intercessors to express myself, and they'd never express themselves without me: you're always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own" ("Mediators" 125, 171)

The indispensable condition for constructing conceptual personae in philosophy or film would thus be the following: to make a power of the false pass as an irrational interval between the author and the aesthetic figures he or she composes. Now it could be that the author constructs a first person discourse in relation to the camera. (But in fact this form is always already doubled since seeing and speaking, image and sound, are constituted *a priori* as separate acts.) But to express a power of the false, this discourse must pass through an intercessor that transforms it into the discourse of an other. Since they are divided from within by the differential relations of the irrational cut, the conceptual personae of the time-image can be neither individualized nor individualizing, for they do not 'represent.' They are neither figures of representation nor representative figures. At most they can be expressed across two points of enunciation, always displaced in relation to one another by the interstice that divides them as a power of the false.

To become-other, then, one needs intercessors that function as 'heteronyms' of the philosopher, whose proper name then becomes a pseudonym of the persona. In this manner, conceptual personae create a subjective multiplicity that liberate themselves from the name of the author, overflowing it as virtual forces. This is a transformation of positions of enunciation where, as Deleuze and Guattari put it,

I am no longer myself but thought's aptitude for manifesting itself and developing across a plane that

passes through me in several places. Conceptual personae have nothing to do with an abstract personification—a symbol or allegory—for they live, they insist. The philosopher is the idiosyncrasy of his conceptual personae. The destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae, at the same time that these personae themselves become something other than they are historically, mythologically, or commonly (the Socrates of Plato, the Dionysus of Nietzsche, the Idiot of Nicolas of Cusa). The conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy, on a par with the philosopher. (WIP 64, 62)

Call this a heteronomic enunciation, then, where conceptual personae function as philosophical 'shifters.' This act of enunciation is not simply performative. It intervenes, rather, between the author and her or his intercessor producing a sort of neutral or anonymous discourse. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, this is "a speech-act in the third person where it is always a conceptual persona who say 'I'. . . . In philosophical enunciations we do not do something by saying it but produce movement by thinking it, through the intermediary of a conceptual persona. Conceptual personae are also the true agents of enunciation. "Who is 'I'? It is always a third person" (WIP 64-65).

Running between author and intercessor, the conceptual persona of the time-image is divided within and from itself by time. This is a plane of identity where in Rimbaud's beautiful phrase, "I am an other," that is, in the midst of becoming or self-differentiation. And this is why the conceptual persona says 'I' and not the author. But how is it possible that the subject wants or wills to become-other? That is, how can one construct a conceptual persona who calls upon the powers of the false, thus expressing a will to becoming or becoming-other?

In fact, the problem of conceptual personae is also the problem of an *Ethos* or the creation of new modes of existence. And in this respect the existential traits manifested in conceptual personae are very important because, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, "Possibilities of life or modes of existence can be invented only on a plane of immanence that develops the power of conceptual personae" (WIP 73). Conceptual personae populate those philosophies and minor arts where they function as constituting an *ethos* or style of living that does not yet exist. Still conceptual personae persist and insist as immanent forces that want this other life. And it is in this context that I want to ask: Can an ethics of sexual difference be sustained by the time-image and in the other arts? How can one create new values concerning 'gender' expressed as 'heteronyms'-positions of subjectivity or enunciation-that elude the binary logic of sexual opposition (masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexuality)? How to liberate sexual positionalities that are *unthinkable* because, no longer mastered by opposition and representation, they function as pure difference?

"To liberate difference" wrote Foucault, "we need a thought without contradiction, without dialectic, without negation: a thought that says yes to divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; a thought of the multiple-of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of self-similarity" ("Theatrum" 185, 90). When the interstice or irrational interval passes within the subject, there is no longer an identity that returns to itself, nor is there the possibility of sustaining a binary logic that opposes femininity to masculinity. This is a question of comprehending how relations of sexual *difference*, rather than opposition, are expressed through conceptual personae as constructions of the direct time-image. There are at least two possibilities which are themselves intimately related. One, operate a difference between two series, which could well be marked by sexual difference, so that they can no longer be



reduced to a binary logic or simple opposition (masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual). Or, two, affirm a force of becoming within the sexual relation itself so that it is no longer a sexual or gendered *identification*, but becomes, rather, a question of nomad identities open to new constructions of subjectivity.

Time is too short here to analyze this problem in depth. I would like to conclude however by looking at three exemplary cases that could serve as projects for future research:

1. Godard, from Anna Karina to Anne-Marie Mièville: the male author who needs feminine conceptual personae.
2. Agnès Varda: a female author who needs feminine and heterosexual conceptual personae to make false the clichés of femininity.
3. Chantal Akerman: a female author who needs conceptual personae who are both feminine and masculine (homosexual).

In the first case, we can now return to *Vivre sa vie* to consider how Nana functions as a conceptual persona for Godard. Nana is the heteronym for Godard who is no longer himself, for 'Nana' is not simply a character played by Anna Karina. Karina also functions as an intercessor for Godard. This is a collaborative work comprising seven films. However, between the period of Karina and that of Mièville, the status of enunciation changes profoundly.

Why is it that Godard returned so insistently to the problem of femininity, above all in its relation to the image and to the reduction of images, cinematic or otherwise, to the commodity form? At first this is because the woman's body is the signifier for a love or fascination with the cinema, especially the American cinema. But this is not necessarily a fetishistic desire in the psychoanalytic sense because the body of the

woman/actress hides a truth other than that of castration. Like the adored cinema, the body of the woman/actress is alienated within a capitalist system of exchange. They both function as commodities, and, in becoming an 'author,' the name of Godard is rendered as a commodity as well. Otherwise, he could not continue to make films. This is why the theme of prostitution is the insistent refrain of Godard's first period. The problem is: how to find a position from which to look at and to love (the woman/the cinema), a position that is no longer reducible to a system of exchange determined by the alienated structure of commodity fetishism? Based on a series of variations on an AB structure of repetition, what David Bordwell calls the 'parametric' narration of *Vivre sa vie* aspires to transform the very structure of exchange. This type of repetition includes equally the structure of the dialogue, that of shot/counter-shot, camera and character perspective, voice and image, but also, the relations between subject and object, those who sell and those being sold. The will of these series and variations is to liberate a new look, to multiply and vary the perspectives organized by the camera in the attempt to extract a new mode of existence for the cinema where it is possible to look and to love in a non-alienated form.

To be sure, it is not as all certain that Godard succeeds in this project. Compare *Vivre sa vie*, for example, to the sequence in *Ici et ailleurs* where Godard and Mièville propose two different 'stories' for the same images. In one a young Arab girl recites a fiery revolutionary poem, and Godard and Mièville 'speak' two alternative readings for the same image. In the second, a young Arab woman is presented first in a 'masculine' version, narrated by Godard, as a pregnant revolutionary ready to sacrifice her son for the *intifada*. She is then revealed in a second version, re-narrated by Mièville, as an unmarried intellectual who agreed to play a role. In this film, the voice and position of enunciation of Mièville are equal to that of Godard. But it is no longer a question of two authorial voices because Mièville and Godard have become

intercessors, one for the other. This is a double enunciation that is questioned and falsified from each side, and where each position disappears within or between the two voices that say 'I' and 'you' but always as if speaking from a third place or in the third person-an anonymous and neutral voice.

Agnès Varda presents a second case: a female author who needs feminine and heterosexual conceptual personae. Most contemporary readers of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, for example, are struck by the proliferation of clichés of femininity in the film. And rightly so, for Varda's *ethos* in this film is to create a new enunciative position for the *femme-auteur* by constructing a falsifying narration from these series of stereotypes. To become-*cinéaste* in a way that is other to her (male) peers in the New Wave, Varda needs the singer-Cléo as a conceptual persona, an artistic heteronym for Varda herself. The film is full of extraordinary examples of a free indirect discourse passing between camera and character just as Deleuze describes in *The Movement-Image*. To be sure, Cléo is the double of Florence, but a double that exists as a fetishized commodity image. The problem posed by Varda is therefore: how to transform this petrified image into an image of becoming and differentiation? Note, then, how Cléo is disturbed in several sequences by how her recorded voice circulates independently of her body. The turning point in the film occurs in the strange episode where Cléo rehearses several possible new songs with her composers. Here the music of 'le cri d'amour' begins in a supposedly diegetic space, then subtly becomes non-diegetic when an orchestra joins the piano of Michel Legrand and Cléo's voice. But is the voice of Cléo direct or indirect sound? It is simultaneously her voice *and* a voice coming from elsewhere, neither direct nor indirect but surging in an indeterminate space. Afterwards, everything changes. One sees Cléo becoming-other as Varda creates a new position of enunciation for herself in relation to camera and sound.

The third case is no doubt the most interesting and the most complicated: Chantal Akerman as a feminine author whose conceptual personae are distributed across a feminine/maternal position and a masculine/homosexual one. I am thinking in particular of *News From Home*. The fascination of this film derives from the tension between a direct discourse (camera and sound) and the voice-off where Akerman reads her mother's letters. The style of this film owes much to Andy Warhol. Composed almost entirely of fixed framings of very long duration, the camera organizes a sort of detached voyeurism, an immobile stare on any-spaces-whatever and empty time. As for the letters, Akerman reads the text by adopting the position of her mother, thus substituting her *voice* for a maternal *writing*. Similarly, the film itself is a belated letter addressed no longer just to her mother. In this manner, the 'news from home' is already a doubled and displaced communication traveling in two directions—from Brussels to New York and back again—where 'home' becomes a fluctuating locality whose placement is unclear. This passage between the various spaces or points of enunciation—direct and indirect discourse, voice and writing, each spatially and temporally displaced with respect to one another—produces a strange shifting between levels of discourse. The logic of the subject here is no longer one of identification. An irrational break emerges first in the voice-off (maternal writing/filial voice; the time of reception and the time of response), and then between the voice-off and the direct images and sounds of New York. Here the mother becomes a conceptual persona present in the voice but absent in space, that is doubled by another best characterized as a Warholian stare—this fluctuating presence/absence whose camera-eye presents a space in which it does not take part. The two together function as virtual intercessors, not spatially present in the film, constructing a position of enunciation that is neither that of a homosexual masculinity nor that of a maternal identification. This is the construction of a 'queer look' that is neither masculine nor heterosexual.

In each of these examples, difference functions in an interval that generates a free indirect discourse expressive of sexual difference, or perhaps a differentiating sex, that is no longer conditioned by opposition. What the direct time-image expresses is difference as a force of becoming in the midst of mapping new territories, and these territories are populated by conceptual personae.

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N.B. Italicized page numbers in the citations refer to the originating text, indicating that I have modified the translation.

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