Gilles Deleuze's Ectoplasm

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Prologue: I is for Infidelity

This essay first emerged from a prompt to think the television series *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z* (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*) as a media object, as part of a workshop called "Mediating Gilles Deleuze" organized by Nathan Lee and Kenneth Berger at Brown University. In eight hours of interviews produced in 1988-89 by Pierre-André Boutang and screened on French television channel Arte in 1994-1995, Deleuze is interviewed by his former student and collaborator Claire Parnet following a schema that works its way through a Deleuzian alphabet from "A is for Animal" to "Z is for Zig Zag." He agreed to the project on the condition that it would only be screened after his death, and while making it he was already quite ill. In the end though, Deleuze outlived his ability to resist the supplications of Boutang and the series screened the year before he died.

As a prelude to the Brown event, the organizers screened the entirety of the television series the day before, presenting the work in a format that I have come to think of as an endurance event, that travels across long form works from Andy Warhol's *Empire* to Jacques Rivette's *Out 1* to Christian Marclay's *The Clock* but also through television series in an age of streaming and DVDs. The specific prompt—to treat the work as a media object—on the one hand produced a desire to be faithful to the object and experience of the series, and on the other hand revealed almost immediately the impossibility of sticking to that faithfulness. In the end, I

am not even entirely sure what the object is; its untimeliness in many forms (the long duration, the curious pre-post mortem of its making, its irregular rhythms of episodes and uneven individual letter section, and its necessary detours into dialogues with both the historical moment of its production, and with the flurry of work Deleuze and Guattari made at that time) makes it unruly and prone to fabulation (the technical expression of infidelity) in response to any attempt to pin down its truth value. Thus in my own infidelity I have felt a kindred spirit in this strange object. Deleuze himself almost instantly detours Parnet's prompt in "F is for Fidelity" into a long discussion of friendship as an experience of experimentation, full of comic timing and radical distrust, and situated *entre chien et loup* (that twilight hour where form cedes to fabulation), and lastly, over the love of the *délire*, the break, and mark of madness. I set out to follow the breaks to move from the exhausting rigidity of fidelity to the inexhaustible path of detour in approaching this work, born out of a long philosophical friendship with Deleuze's work and the potentials it affords.

Friendly, in fact, is how the abecedary is often characterized, above all as an introduction to the key preoccupations of Deleuze's work, for beginners or non-specialists. Boutang, the producer, noted that he received feedback from people who told him they watched a little bit of the series every day in the morning, a sort of philosophical constitutional: it's such a homely image. [1] But in "Q is for Question," Deleuze imagines what it would be like to be asked to appear on philosophical talk shows or in the news, to be asked to give his opinion on world affairs. Faithful to his loathing for the personal, he is appalled at the idea and complains: "I don't want to be on TV," precisely because of his sense that television is domesticity in its purest form. Parnet responds ironically from off camera, "Well, you will be (on television), but on the condition that it is posthumous," drawing out the uncanny temporality of the abecedary, its ability to render the familiar unfamiliar through a becoming-unhomely, into full view. Handled lightly and with humour throughout, the question of Deleuze's failing health and promised death runs through the work like a refrain. This uncanny temporality serves to undomesticate the image, returning it to the urgency of signaletic

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material – that is, what is utterable rather than what signifies – in excess of what can be extracted as a primer on Deleuze's thought. [2]

Thus one way that the abecedary as media object functions is through its ambiguous occupation of the space of the home, in the way that media content and mediums are always in a relation of immediation to their enactive ecologies. The series is set in Deleuze's apartment, though the space itself is never explored and the camera never moves. But in a different way, the series unsettles TV's domesticating occupation of our contemporary space-time. What is the work of the undomesticated in the series? And how is a process of undomestication linked vitally for Deleuze to what follows "Q is for Question," that is to say "R is for Resistance"?

Resistance, positioned against communication or information, is at the heart of the pedagogical project that the abecedary self-consciously engages; this project bears a special relation to exhaustion as the undomestication of rest. I want to suggest that this is the work of resistance to information that for Deleuze is the hallmark of the work of art, which neither communicates nor informs, a second quality of thinking the work as media object in terms of its status as a work of art or a creative act. How might we think of the work of art in relation to such a seemingly artless work like the abecedary, devoid of formal beauty and with a curious relation to performance? At the Brown event, the abecedary was aired in a fashion that is both familiar and strange, that retains an undomesticating force of TV. Projected large like a movie in a darkened room, the series lost the medium-shot intimacy of domestic television. In the series, such consistent and homely framing is only half-heartedly broken a handful of times through what I came to think of as "pity zooms," more numerous in the beginning and practically gone by the end when the series gave itself entirely over to its artless inertness. But while at the level of scale the televisual was displaced, the marathon screening format is a mode of binge-watching, a key condition of contemporary media, facilitated by TV's migration from broadcast to devices of archiving (DVDs) and now to the ubiquitous availability of streaming content. What does it feel like to map this

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model on to the abecedary? Binging feels familiar and comfortable these days, but it also often relies on a narrative arc to activate a spectatorial impulse to persist and to modulate attentional capture. Binging wrestles with the duel demands of seriality and repetition, and the possibility/threat of skipping the dull parts. Each episode of the series opens with archival footage of Deleuze in his classroom at Vincennes before settling back into the apartment, and the question remains open about the homely nature of this televisual lesson. If distance learning displaces the classroom into the home space, what is domestically displaced as a result?

In "P for Professor," Deleuze indicates the way that an uneven condition of reception, indeed an untimely attention economy, is fully part of the pedagogical experience. Students in a classroom are not a homogenous mass but tune in and out of the lecture at different moments and with different intensities of engagement. Rather than capture the domestication of focus, he suggests that lapses of attention and the textured fabric of a classroom space-time full of variable intensities of interest are fully part of the pedagogical experience. This is one way that resistance manifests against communication or information in the art of pedagogy. Deleuze likewise emphasizes the need to stay with stupidity, by not asking the clarifying question that simply releases the information via communication. He recalls how as a professor, students would pass him notes that read "you need to clarify this point, to go over this idea again," polite attempts to re-master Deleuze's nomadic thought; these notes, he says, pleased him enormously, even though he felt no need to directly respond to the demands. An untimely exhaustion event such as screening the entire abecedary reanimates the possibility of sheer consumption that binging seems to provide. In "A is for Animal," Deleuze borrows an English word from Melville to speak to the deterritorializing, fabulatory effects of undomesticated detours: outlandish. I want to turn now to thinking the abecedary in such outlandish terms.

Part Two: The Machine in the Ghost

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In thinking the abecedary as a media form, one of my habits was to look for where content is interrupted by signaletic material, what I came to think of as Deleuze's ectoplasm. I read the series' opening orientations in those terms; that is to say, via what falls out of but also conditions the content "proper"—what deforms form. At the beginning of the series, before the first letter, Deleuze sets the context for what we are about to see in a little preamble of bemused disavowal, in which failures of sense are opportunities for a kind of playful and productive nonsense, one that keeps signaling throughout the series as a whole. In particular, he sets the tone for how the series will deal with the question of mortality, the speculative and ironic tongue-in-cheek way that Deleuze's mortality is experienced as fully lived throughout. It likewise stages the complicated time machinics of the form of the series, as Deleuze zig-zags through tenses to destabilize his presence. [3] Here is the very opening of the series, including the title credits over footage of Deleuze's 1980 classroom at Vincennes:

> You have selected as a format an ABC primer, you have indicated to me some themes, and in this, I do not know exactly what the questions will be, so that I have only been able to think a bit beforehand about the themes. For me answering a question without having thought about it a bit is something inconceivable. What saves me in this is the particular condition (la clause), 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 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, and we know well that a pure spirit if you've made tables turn. [sic] But we know as well that a pure spirit is not someone who gives answers that are very profound or very intelligent. They can be cursory. So anything goes in this: let's begin, ABC, whatever you want. (Prelude to Gilles Deleuze from A to Z)
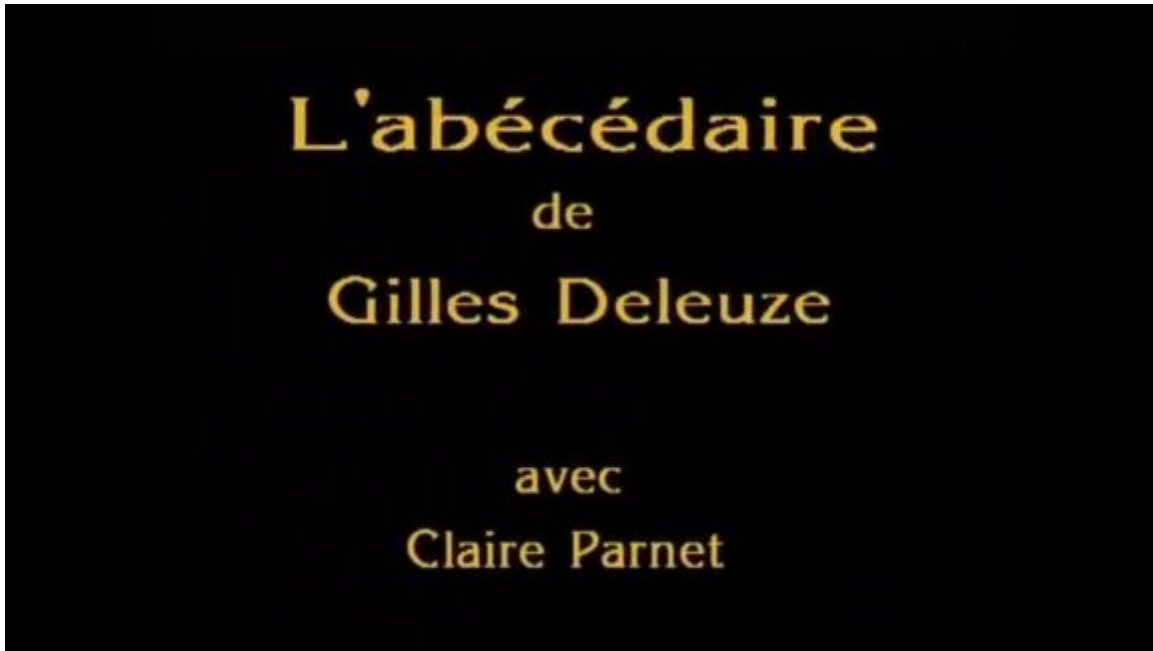
Fig. 1 Prelude to Gilles Deleuze from A to Z.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPrH0gHhRUw&feature=youtu.be

Parnet, without commentary, cuts to the chase "We begin with A and A is animal."
Answering without reflection is something new for Deleuze, it makes him
uncomfortable. But what saves and reassures him is the clause that this will only
be shown after his death, that he is speaking from beyond the grave. And in a
sentence that is often cited as what soothes Deleuze and allows him to enter the
game, he states: "I am become pure archive," finished content for Pierre-Andre
Boutang, the producer who gently nudged Deleuze for twenty years until he
finally gave in. "I am become pure archive, a blank sheet of paper": already,
Deleuze confounds content and form. Evoking the purity, the cleanliness of
writing, the receptivity of the blank page, Deleuze is figured as a living repository.
But then he turns the tables, quite literally. In my mind's eye, I think of this move
in an animated fashion, quite literally picturing a blank sheet of beautiful, thick,
white artisanal paper resting on a table, awaiting the pure line of the Japanese
drawing Deleuze cites at another moment in the series during "M is for Malady."
In a flash, it shifts form and becomes a sheet, flying into the air and settling over
Deleuze as he becomes a ghost, in a kind of gleeful and protective disguise, the

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way kids think the simple act of covering their visible bodies gives them a kind of spectral force. The pure sheet of paper becomes "pure spirit" and for a second we might be fooled into thinking of the elevated testimony of the philosopher, abstracted from the body. But no: in the speculative dimension of the "will have been," Deleuze imagines himself as unruly spirit. "We have all done enough table turning/tipping to know that a pure spirit is not someone who gives very profound or very intelligent responses."

At the start then, he considers the way that the machinic deranges sense in sound and noise, that language is interrupted for the better. Turning tables refers to the vogue for American spiritualism, and the summoning of spirits in séances who would make themselves heard, imprecisely, through raps on the wood. Spirits: what awful, even stupid, communicators! Deleuze seems to abscond from any imprecision in his thought this way: "Don't blame me, I am just a ghost." As every media scholar knows, American spiritualism found its source in the Fox sisters of Rochester New York, also home to Kodak and later, Xerox, in a confabulatory miasma of (now dead) mediums and media.

The entire preamble sets up the nature of such machinic ghosts, and in Deleuze there is little patience for a romantic idea of haunting by pale shadows of former selves. While the figure of the wasted or exhausted is the figure of the creator and philosopher across Deleuze's body of work, this is always as the figure of the non-habitual exhaustion of the possible (Deleuze 1989: 209). "I am not in the habit of answering without thinking through," he demurs. But across the abecedary we witness what Andrew Murphie, thinking about media form in Deleuze and Guattari's work, calls the machine in the ghost (Murphie 1996). He traces a shift, articulated through Brian Eno, from the idea of "interaction" to that of the "unfinished idea," to insist on the machinic, and to foreground expression over signification. Tiny enactments of such disarticulated possessions (signaletic expressions) stutter this work, which has little visual interest to recommend it. Watching under the prompt of media object, we can situate the abecedary within Deleuze's understanding that the time-image "gives a body to a phantom" or to

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trace the machinic ghosts that populate what Guattari terms an ecology of the phantasm. What unites this is a sense of the productivity of haunting by such machinic ghosts, their faithlessness to origins, and their link to the work of pedagogy. In the series, Claire Parnet's relentless smoking just offscreen or reflected in the mirror behind Deleuze functions as such a disarticulated possession of Deleuze's heavy cough and his wasting. The cigarette smoke wreathes Deleuze in an ectoplasmic haze that belongs entirely to the singularity of the encounter.

The unruliness of the abecedary, its lack of domesticity, does the same. One final example to illustrate this is the felicitous accident of the film's formal poverty, the opportunistic use of the unequal length of sound and image recording medium. Shot on 16mm, the conversational flow was constantly cut by the regular rhythm of the end of the reel, and Boutang elected to keep these stutters in the film. Throughout the series, the images often starts to flicker and goes to black, while the sound carries on as Deleuze and Parnet continue the conversation in a medium with a different recording timeline. More than once we hear Deleuze finish a thought from behind the bright glow of the image once the film has run out, and the small decision to keep these materials in are not so much the hallmark of authenticity as moments of ambiguous embodiment, an untimely speaking from the beyond of the image, an *acousmêtre*, as Michel Chion puts this (Chion 1999: 15).

In *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Deleuze speculates on the potential of an emergent electronic image in a way that echoes his interest in Samuel Beckett's productions for TV, to outline a pre-technological aesthetic of asymmetrical doubling, where sound and image are disjunct. The effect of this produces an automaton that exceeds capture by any individual. In the between and exchange of Parnet and Deleuze, and in the series' unhomely and creative pedagogy, such a "non-psychological divided appearance" (the disjunction) is a means of staging the receptivity, as Deleuze terms it, of a pure speech-act (Deleuze 1989: 268). This reformulates the pure archive or blank sheet of paper we began with. Deleuze pursues the potential of the electronic image through a discussion of

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synchronization, which renders "the visible body, not now something imitating the utterance of the voice, but something constituting an absolute receiver or addressee. "Through it the image says to the sound: stop floating everywhere and come and live in me; the body opens to welcome the voice" (1989: 332). The effect of this, like the strange and persistent disjunction of temporalities that Deleuze evokes as his "escape clause" at the beginning of the series, is not an incorporation through synchronization that would stabilize relation. Instead, Deleuze argues that it produces a "pure informed person," the automaton or archive, as the one who is most open to connection and receptivity (their machinic quality). Thus "audiovision" in the series is a "relational effect"; in the abecedary, what is motivated by a certain fidelity to thought and expression opens small, arrhythmic gaps in the flow of information that produces an effect beyond pragmatic necessity. Like the signaletic that exceeds signification, or expression in excess of content, we might think of these arrhythmic interruptions as the series' stutter.

With the work of the stutter, the rappings on the table that fail to entirely communicate, we open onto an idea of possession as a minor practice in Deleuze and Guattari's sense. In the abecedary, Deleuze retreads the initiating idea, "A is for animal," over and over again, in particular working through the idea of the *analpha-bête,* the undomesticated animal as that whose sense is illegible outside of relation and contact, who deforms the distinction *entre chien et loup* and who invades friendship and familiarity with a dose of alterity.

So how does an audiovisual ghost get to speak? As a mode of possession, as a radical relation, not the seizing of autonomy: Deleuze returns again and again to this theme. In the discussion of the fold, one that runs through the film, in "C is for Culture" he discusses the reception of his book on Leibniz, *The Fold*, in a way that echoes the reception of Andrei Tarkovsky's fabulated autobiographical film, *The Mirror* (1975). That film, which yokes a time travelling momentum to a dying man become "pure archive," opens with a scene of televisual stuttering:

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Fig. 2 *The opening scene of* The Mirror *(1975).*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0jJRQ89vvc

A young boy turns on a television, which takes a while to warm up. He backs away to get a better view and we lose sight of the screen. The image cuts to black and white, as a woman interviews a man with a stutter asking him to give the details of his name and where he is from. The camera pans over to him and he looks directly into the lens, he shares the information and a landscape of movement ticks and small gestures like tossing his hair animate the scene. The camera tracks back to the woman and she starts to work the space between them, using gesture and touch to create a force field of influence between their bodies. On the plain white wall behind them we see the shadow of the microphone, a spectral, mute witness anxiously absorbing the scene's information. The woman redistributes corporeal and mental energies, shifting tension from mind to hands, and then releasing it; she tells him "you will speak loudly and clearly your whole life." She puts her own voice into his body in an act of ventriloquism and suspended will: "say: 'I can speak'"! He repeats after her but she starts to double his words and he barely finishes before the scene cuts to the title credits.

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This opening ventriloquism animated by the televisual medium echoes the letters Tarkovsky got from people who wrote in response to this deeply personal and subjective film to express astonishment that he should know "their" story, to tell him "that's me!" (Tarkovsky 1986: 8). This is the mirror effect in Tarkovsky's film, which opens with the television screen so often read as a medium of hypnosis and suspended will, and then presents an enabling "embodiment" as that which is shared ambiguously between bodies, as a pure speech act that displaces the personal. The "that's me" Tarkovsky encountered is the mark that for Deleuze, distinguishes the forger from the artist's generosity as enacted through fabulation. Deleuze, like Tarkovsky had a similar encounter in response to his own work on the publication of *The Fold*, evoking a kind of pedagogy of perception. He describes receiving letters from paper folders and surfers who write to tell him: "*Votre histoire du pli, c'est nous.*" For Deleuze, this enabled a sort of productive dispossession, a relay of effects that didn't rely on communication, but a kind of shared condition, like the notes he received from his students: one way messages, table turnings. Deleuze explicitly frames these comments in the posthumous time of his "will have died." He says: "Yes, these are encounters. When I say 'get out of philosophy through philosophy,' this happened to me all the time … I encountered the paper folders … I don't have to go see them. No doubt, we'd be disappointed, I'd be disappointed, and they certainly would be." What matters instead is the fragility of the correspondence. In Tarkovsky, the authorizing gesture that allows one to speak is connection, assemblage via media and medium. This is a mode of being moved by and with a sense of possession ("your story, that's us) as a minor mode of resistance to information and communication. This minor practice of possession is one of infidelity, in the sense of faithlessness to what is in the sense of the actual, for an in-fidelity to change itself.

Part Three: Corporeal Choreographies

I want to conclude with a few thoughts on animated or dynamic form in the abecedary as a mode of exhaustion. In this work, we witness the question, also a pedagogical one, of how to let yourself be animated through exhaustion as an

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endurance event. Compulsive embodiment, like Tarkovsky's stutterer, the boy hypnotized before the TV screen or the enabling hypnotism of the women, is a mode of possession, the movement impulse of being compelled. For much of the abecadary, Deleuze speaks with a relaxed but relatively static posture. What is notable is that although his hands and head move with ease and fluidity (if not extravagantly so), his torso tends to hold still as a block. As a viewer aware of his illness, I imagine this is due to his desire to not set off coughing, though his dreadful cough occurs more and more frequently as the series goes on. His posture isn't rigid, but rather it is disjunctive, a bit like an animated figure in a cheap series where the part that doesn't move doesn't get redrawn. This changes, though, in the section "T is for Tennis" where Deleuze, who has previously spoken of the shame of being human before the television, and makes excuses for his own viewing habits under the guise of the privilege of the elderly to watch TV, is briefly caught up in a passion and his whole body moves in a new way. Choreographed by the as-if body of affect, his compulsive embodiment is but one of the multiple moments of possession that occur throughout the series, just here writ corporeally large. His body dodges and swerves, engaging the whole torso; it is as if his body is briefly borrowed not by the spirit of a player so much as by an entire attention somatechnics of sports spectatorship, between ball player, fan and social and media ecologies.

In no way is this brief possession in this moment inauthentic as a copy or a shadow of actual movement; rather it is fabulated, a machinic ghost. Faced with the endurance event of the abecadary, we might all share in the exhaustion that by the end of the series is clearly visible. Exhaustion for Deleuze is not simply being tired, it is the very moment of possibility. To be exhausted is to have exhausted the possibilities of the actual, but it is this very exhaustion that opens onto the possibility for new modes of subjectivation. It brings us back to Deleuze's exhausted, signaletic spirit, where we began.

Writing on Beckett's made-for-TV images in an essay entitled "The Exhausted," Deleuze suggests that:

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The image is not defined by the sublimity of its content but by its form, that is, by its "internal tension," or by the force it mobilizes to create a void or to bore holes, to loosen the grip of words, to dry up the oozing of voices, so as to free itself from memory and reason: a small, alogical, amnesiac, and almost aphasic image, sometimes standing in the void, sometimes shivering in the open. The image is not an object but a "process." We do not know the power of such images, so simple do they appear from the point of view of the object. This is *language III,* which is no longer a language of names or voices but a language of images, resounding and colouring images. (Deleuze 1997: 159)

Can we even say that the banal and impoverished media form of the abecedary could do this kind of work? Deleuze characterizes this language III as an aporia that "will be solved if one considers that the limit of the series does not lie at the infinity of the terms but can be anywhere in the flow: between two terms, between two voices or the variations of a single voice — a point that is already reached well before one knows that the series is exhausted, and well before one learns that there is no longer any possibility or any story, and that there has not been one for a long time" (Deleuze 1997: 157-58). This mode of exhaustion is at work in the series' novel untimeliness and acousmetric dispossessions, in the face of contemporary endurance events, such as Christian Marclay's 24-hour film *The Clock* (composed occasionally of TV images as well as cinema) and a series of endurance events prompted in part by today's media deterritorializations and new mobilities that propose endurance and even exhaustion as a line of flight from the tiredness of relentless modulation of the control society. TV's seriality as a relay form, the more-to-stories as a kind of internal tension, may be one way we can think beyond communication and information to Deleuze's untimely return as unruly spirit. Isabelle Stengers, writing on "Gilles Deleuze's Last Message," proposes that:

Deleuze's last message includes what could be a pedagogy of concepts, as it conveys what made him a philosopher, the encounter that decided that his thinking life would be philosophy. It is not a question of debt at all, rather a matter of relays. It may be what

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Deleuze, at the beginning of *What is Philosophy?* called a point of non-style. Pedagogy is not faithful transmission. Plato, Descartes or Kant are not faithfully portrayed. But the impossibility or vanity of faithful transmission is not to be identifier [sic] with the freedom to grasp and steal. Stealing, or grabbing whatever you like, is not a problem as such. The problem would be to derive grabbing and stealing as a new general model, mobilizing against the dead conformity of transmission. This conformity is a ghost anyway. We certainly never know what we transmit because what is meant to be transmitted never explains its own transmission. This is what makes a relay interesting. Relay transmission implies both taking over and handing over. The take over is always a creation, but the act of handing over also requires a creation, the creation of an arrow, conveying and honouring what produced the one who hand over, and will produce others. (Stengers 2010)

The relay function Stengers addresses is a familiar way to address the work of a last message, but it also addresses an infidelity to the self, one that Deleuze enacts as an ectoplasmic pedagogy in this TV series, a joyful, table turning resistance to the dead conformity of transmission.

Notes

 [1] In an interview, Boutang recounts how "Quand c'est sorti en cassette, des gens m'ont arrêté dans la rue en me disant qu'ils en écoutaient un peu tous les matins quand ils se levaient" (Where the abecedary was released on VHS, people stopped me in the street to tell me that they watched a little every morning when they woke up" (Aubron and Boutang).

[2] The special issue of *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 4 (2012) dossier on "From Sign to Signal" contains several fine discussions of the concept of the signaletic, including Bodil Marie Thomsen, "Signaletic, Haptic and Real-time Material" and Christoph Brunner's "Immediation as Process and Practice of Signaletic Mattering."

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[3] For a discussion of the concept of time machinics see Thain 2017, chapter 4.

[4] Clip 1: Prelude to Gilles Deleuze from A to Z. The clip can be viewed at the following URL, or in the online version of this text.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPrH0gHhRUw&feature=youtu.be

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