

Our Automated Lives: An Interview with Denis Podalydès

Bernard Stiegler

Transcribed and translated by Nicholas Chare, Marcel Swiboda and Nicole Tremblay¹

On Improvisation in the Theatre

Denis Podalydès (DP): I adore achieving that feeling of freedom which involves a total mastery and a total letting go, at the same time. [Cut]. Because repetitions create a kind of mechanical quality [*mécanique*], an automation that permits you a relative security so that, Diderot says it, the problem is not to perform it once but twice, three times, ten times, and often amateurs don't recognize this difficulty precisely because amateurs perform once or twice with a feeling of amazement, a feeling of Wow! But professional actors perform with a feeling of repetition, even of saturation, because of the number of performances. An actor who performs four hundred times has a feeling not even of automation, but of total alienation, a loss of self during a scene and a just-being-this-thing-that-performs. It's a feeling I've also known. It's an awful feeling. So to say you're

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¹ All notes have been added by the translators. We are grateful to Daniel Ross for his advice regarding aspects of this translation.

automatized... In fact, the pleasure of performing arrives when you go beyond that contradiction between the taste of the first time, the taste of discovery and the feeling of being free—in a prescribed way—and you explode! Even, at times I love to, I do it often, I totally forget the *mise-en-scène*, I don't... I'm casual with that. I'm insolent. I'm even... I deliberately forget the stage directions. I don't care at all. Because the stage directions are of no interest. The effects are of no interest. It's the setting behind that, the story that runs behind that in the heads of the audience and the actors, and the encounter that happens that very evening. [Cut]. But to achieve this sort of capability, it's true that you have to have banked a lot, to have worked a lot. For me, improvisation is, in fact, never a first stab. But an actor's capacity to go beyond the template provided by the stage directions is, for me, crucial.

Questions and Comments on Improvisation

Bernard Stiegler (BS): I have a theory on this matter, which is that there is only improvisation.

DP: There is...

BS: ...only improvisation.

DP: There is only improvisation?

BS: It's idiotic. It's good. [*C'est con, c'est bon.*]. It's always improvisation. So I'm inspired a little by what [Jacques] Derrida said. Derrida, who, moreover, had a disastrous meeting with a jazzman, Ornette Coleman, who has since died.² It was a disaster, that meeting... It was, in fact, a non-meeting... In any case, Derrida said in that context—whether it was before or after, I can't remember, as there was a before, during and after—“Thinking is improvising”. And that's what I think. [Cut]. Obviously, or at least I say obviously, but it may not be as obvious as all that, but anyway, cautiously, I would say that probably this issue that we call improvisation barely made sense to someone such as [Denis] Diderot. Because I think that for us, for we the people of what is now the twenty-first century, what we call improvisation is an idea born in the twentieth century. It's

² The meeting Bernard Stiegler refers to took place at the Paris Jazz Festival, La Villette, on July 1st, 1997. Ornette Coleman (1930-2015) invited Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) to appear on stage with him and perform a reading. The audience objected to Derrida's inclusion in the performance and started to whistle in protest, eventually booing him off the stage. The text Derrida performed is available in English. See Derrida (2004b). A series of interviews were also conducted between Coleman and Derrida surrounding this event. For translated extracts see Derrida (2004a).

a cultural artefact that was engendered through an opposition between improvised music and musical notation, and, in my opinion, it was even a product of the culture industry.³ I'm not sure [Michel] Portal would agree with me—Portal, who improvises a lot, and who has things to say about musical improvisation—when I say that I maintain, and will maintain during the festival, that Portal clearly improvises when he plays [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart.⁴ If he didn't improvise, well he'd become what many people think Diderot said of the actor or the artist in general, namely a machine that always repeats the same thing. And that's clearly not what Diderot said, as you yourself demonstrate very well. But, on the other hand, I nevertheless think that the logical outcome of this reading that we share of Diderot, namely that actors do *not* repeat the same thing each evening (that's Diderot) has as a consequence, I believe, that, in one way or another, they always improvise.

Automatization, Calculation and Disautomatization

BS: I think that when Diderot discusses actors, he assumes that if the actor is not capable of becoming automated, he cannot do his job. And I think that obviously, in reality, as you say very clearly, Diderot does not erase sensitivity but he brings it in later.⁵

DP: Yes.

BS: He desensitizes himself, so that a real sensitivity, I mean a *real* sensitivity—an ability to aim at a type or to aim at the ideal—can genuinely move. Not by way of an oversensitivity as a person who is also an actress or an actor, but by being haunted, precisely, and by using that hauntedness to revive the ghosts of others, for better or worse, ... and that, for me, is the incalculable.⁶ I think that the ghost is the incalculable. [Cut]. The theme of this festival is improvisation. And it is improvisation in the context of a widespread automatization prompted by today's worldwide digitization, which is going to be far-reaching, given that

³ For a discussion of music and the culture industry see, for example, Adorno ([1938] 1991).

⁴ Michel Portal (1935-) is a renowned French saxophonist and clarinetist. In 1969 he co-founded the free improvisation group New Phonic Art with Vinko Globokar and others. See Goldman (2014).

⁵ See Dufay and Podalydès (2012, 72). Stiegler (2017b) has engaged with another of Diderot's texts in relation to the figure of the "Amateur".

⁶ "Innumerable" would also be a possible way of translating *incalculable* given that in French the *numérique* is the digital and the *incalculable* is something resistant to digitization's numerical formatting and to its processes of discretization and quantization. The translations of Stiegler to date have tended to use "incalculable".

we are still only at the beginning of this process. The aim, as well, is to publicly encourage the idea that, if we do not place automatization in the service of disautomatization, we will not create an automatic apparatus [*dispositif automatique*] that will allow people to disautomatize themselves, which will lead to disaster.⁷ A disaster which we'll call, let's say, climate change, for example, all those kinds of things but there are many others, which—if we may use a bit of language inspired by physics—are problems of entropy. [Cut]. And today we see this becoming widespread through so-called “big data,” because algorithms that make calculations about our behaviour...⁸ Which are capable of processing your data in real time at the speed of light, many billions of datum [données]... All the servers in the world... That's what we call “big data”! They are computational models that have a formidable impact because, given that they operate at light-speed, they return to us, to our behaviour, faster than those behaviours and so they are capable of standardising them.

DP: Ah, yes. Ah, yes.

BS: And so, today, we are in the midst of an enormous automated *Audimat* [audience ratings] process.⁹ This is actually Amazon's “business model”, because it was Google and Amazon who developed it on a very, very large scale, which earns them tens of billions of dollars a year in net profits. And it is transforming the individual into an automaton, because he no longer has protention in the phenomenological sense of the term, he no longer anticipates, he no longer desires.¹⁰ He follows what the algorithms have analysed based on their retentions as if it is the desire that he should have.¹¹ And ultimately, in this situation, he is haunted not by his own ghost but by an automaton that substitutes for it. For us, that's really the context of this festival.

⁷ Stiegler (2017b) explores many of the themes he discusses in this interview (including automation, big data, and entropy) in *Automatic Society, Volume 1*.

⁸ Stiegler adopts the untranslated English term “big data”. Big data here refers to data employed in predictive analytics for uses such as marketing.

⁹ Audimat is a brand name for audience ratings in France produced by the limited company Médiamétrie. It is similar to Nielsen in the USA. In French, the word *audimat* has become synonymous with audience ratings in general.

¹⁰ Protention is a term used by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in relation to time consciousness to describe a mode of intentionality that looks forward to things to come. See Husserl (1991).

¹¹ In Husserl, retention refers to consciousness of the immediate past. In this sense, algorithms analyse what has just happened to inform what will come to be, thus constituting what Stiegler calls—à propos Husserl—examples of “tertiary retention”. Stiegler (1998) examines Husserl's understanding of retention in *Technics and Time, 1* (245-248).

DP: And this is something that we are not really conscious of? Not only do we feel automated, we feel that someone is trying to impose their own desires. There is an unwillingness [to confront it] if we are not conscious of it, if this automatization becomes enticing, “oh, don’t worry, we’ll look after everything, we’ll take care of you so well”, then, then you give in to it.

BS: Exactly.

DP: But anyway, there must surely be areas, fields of knowledge, where I’m completely automated, where I do exactly what’s expected of me without begrudging it for a second. I’m thinking precisely of technology: I’m so overtaken by it that I’ll buy exactly the thing that I was... And there I’m defenceless because I don’t know anything and I’ve got no wish to dedicate any time to it. And I’m ready to pay so that it works, so that I can go on my computer and book...and there, I’m naive, I’m stupid... There are other areas where you can’t take me for a fool. I know something and I have a particular need.

BS: Exactly.

DP: But there are many areas, how could I even...how could I resist, because I don’t know anything? Even the economy, when I try to think, for example, about what is happening in Greece, I’m reliant upon a particular press, which may be deceiving me.¹²

BS: Of course, of course.

DP: And I don’t possess the means to have a measure of command over the matter, which would allow me to cast doubt. If I do, then I do it, I cast doubt, but I am doubtful and I don’t make any progress. I say to myself, maybe they’re not entirely right to say that, perhaps...

BS: But that’s exactly our concern during this festival. We responded to the requirements of the festival by suggesting a plan of workshops, a summer school, artists, musicians, actors, philosophers etcetera, but, to accompany all that, in 2015 we also suggested—and received research funding for—a text called “Manifesto and Manifestations for an Encounter between Art and Technology”. Well that’s not precisely the title but it doesn’t matter. We called it “Manifesto and Manifestations” because we think that it’s necessary to produce a manifesto in the sense that there are manifestos, the Surrealist manifesto, for

¹² Podalydès is referring to the Greek government-debt crisis or Greek Depression. A referendum relating to austerity measures (bailout measures) was held on 5th July 2015.

example, and that it's necessary to manifest in the sense, that it's necessary to manifest for Greece, for instance, or that it's necessary to carry out "demonstrations", as they say in England.¹³ Why? To say, well, yes, there is always automation, everywhere! To educate a child is to render them automatic in order to control those other automations that are the drives.¹⁴ So the problem is not to get beyond automatisms... They are always there. But they must be brought into play so that disautomatization becomes possible and that is what education presupposes, and that predicates a new politics, a new economy, industry, culture and education, and that's what we want to put up for debate.

The Actor's Uncertainty and the Spectator's Obsession

BS: Against superficial readings of Diderot, you suggest that, to start with, Diderot's problem is not to adhere to the reality of a character, but rather to produce a type and...

DP: Yes, that's very important.

BS: ... and a character who is, in fact, an ideal...

DP: Yes.

BS: And so, then, the issue is not to correspond to the perceptual truth or reality of a being [*être*], if I may put it like that, because what is at stake, is what you call—I'll come to it later—the extraordinary. It's what I call that which is out of the ordinary, in the sense that the extraordinary comes out of the ordinary. I think that what Diderot says, and it is what you say in a wonderfully clear way, is precisely—it's what I call theatre—that something happens which is the issue of [indistinct] the type or alternatively the idea. [Cut]. You also say—there's a superb phrase, which is that a character is a house that needs to be lived in, that's it.¹⁵ And that sometimes we light all the rooms, and sometimes we just live in the sitting-room, or on another day the kitchen, it's quite wonderful!

DP: Yes.

¹³ The first Surrealist manifesto, authored by André Breton (1896-1966), was published in 1924. See Breton ([1924] 2001).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the drives (or instincts as the German *trieb* is translated in the Standard Edition of Freud's works), see Freud ([1905] 1991, 39-169).

¹⁵ Podalydès says "The role is a house. Sometimes I switch on all the lights inside, sometimes I live in it less" (Dufay & Podalydès 2012, 36).

BS: It's really a space of potentiality, of possibility, where we produce something that is outside the order of the possible: the impossible, or the completely unexpected. So you say, firstly, that the actor comes to haunt this house in a particular way, in fact you don't say that, but I'm extrapolating.

DP: A ghost...

BS: But, at the same time, you say that they are themselves haunted—in fact you don't put it quite like that, I'm the one extrapolating that—and they are haunted by their lack of being, by what you call a primal nothingness.¹⁶

DP: An indeterminacy...

BS: Exactly!

DP: That's something... It's part of something I've observed over the years meeting actors and often finding in them a kind of flaw, an awful lack of identity, yes, people with generally very, very little confidence in themselves... that often those who go on to become very strong stage actors... that, on stage, a kind of energy, even a wildness...that there is in them, deep down, a really very, very significant incertitude regarding who they are, who...what they should do; how they have done it. [Cut]. We do not want to know this. And well, there you go, I've noted this, sometimes I even call it a weakness of people who lack... I love that phrase of Diderot, "how do you expect them to play all the characters when rightly they have none."¹⁷ Yet it's very cutting and very mean vis-à-vis a particular kind of actor because, also, Diderot's relation to actors is not at all clear. There is, within him, an actor who was clearly wounded, forsaken, thwarted and...¹⁸ I'm no longer sure where I was coming from... This nothingness. Yes! And that precisely this indeterminacy, which is there, will enable a quantity of stuff to come and fill the void that is there. To put it simply, one can-

¹⁶ See Dufay and Podalydès (56).

¹⁷ There is no phrase corresponding precisely to this in Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* although there are passages reminiscent of it such as "On a dit que les comédiens n'avaient aucun caractère, parce qu'en les jouant tous ils perdaient celui que la nature leur avait donné [...]. Je crois qu'on a pris la cause pour l'effet, et qu'ils ne sont propres à les jouer tous que parce qu'ils n'en ont point" (Diderot [1830] 2012, 151). This has been rendered in English translation as: "It has been said that actors have no character, because in playing all characters they lose that which nature gave them [...] I fancy that here cause is confounded with effect, and they are fit to play all characters because they have none" (Diderot [1830] 1883, 64-65). Podalydès provides a similar paraphrasing of Diderot's observation (Dufay & Podalydès, 23).

¹⁸ See Dufay and Podalydès (32).

not be an actor, still less a good, a great actor, were it not for this empty space, this space of frailty, this space of indeterminacy, and, effectively, the bigger it is, the more it can lead anywhere. The person can create a kind of gasp within themselves, which can lead all the way to incarnation, and, in fact, that's not imitation.

BS: Yes. I think all the spectators are themselves inhabited by this void.

DP: Yes.

BS: And it's because of that that they're capable of feeling.

DP: Yes.

BS: In your book, you demonstrate very, very well how there are many things that ultimately link Diderot, [Louis] Jouvét and [Konstantin] Stanislavski.¹⁹

DP: Yes, which link...

BS: And I think that...

DP: ...their personalities...

BS: ...Jouvét spoke a lot about these questions of...

DP: Yes, yes, the characterless [*impersonnel*] actor.

BS: ...of the personality of the actor, but at one point you also refer to the spectator. And you refer to the spectator as being themselves—I'm not sure if you explain it quite like that, in fact, but I think that's what you say, or, anyway, it's what I understood—as being themselves haunted because you say that, at any rate, it is the spectator who makes the performance. We work a lot with that idea here. [Cut]. Something that sets us becoming and that forges a public in fact. This is how a public is made, and it's what [Gilbert] Simondon called our

¹⁹ Louis Jouvét (1887-1951) was a French actor and theatre director. Podalydès's references to the void within great actors resonates with Jouvét's belief that the best actors empty themselves of themselves, becoming hollow as if a mannequin. See Jouvét (1954). Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a Russian actor and a theorist of theatre. Dufay and Podalydès link Diderot and Stanislavski arguing that the former presages aspects of the latter's theories of acting. See Dufay and Podalydès (72).

collective individuation.²⁰ And I think that the...that what enables a performance to work, is that the author of the script—if there is one, because sometimes there are unscripted performances, but generally in theatre there is a script—the author of the script, the actors, the thespians let's say, the directors and the public, are all haunted in some way, and that's what happens to me when I see, for example, a pleasing, yes, a pleasing stage performance. I think it's that the spirit revisits. That's it! A returning [*une revenance*], yes.²¹ So I wanted to come back to the question of the ghost with you now—and, since you have played, you are playing, Hamlet—and say to you that on account of this issue of the ghost, which I think is fundamental, I think that in reality improvisation arises from the ghost: improvisation in the sense that we say that there's always an improvisation.

DP: No, that's true, we say that when there's improvisation, improvisation that, as you say, has a miraculous quality, everyone notices, it's often very moving... Essentially it's what everyone notices simultaneously without saying anything. We all know that—and we rightly know—that the ambience has changed. It's a marvelous, miraculous ambience. [Jean] Vilar called it “the miraculous afternoon”.²² The day when everything works. The play springs forth by itself and it no longer depends on the will of one or two...of an actor. It's not even necessary to mention it. Afterwards people look at each other: “What just happened!” So, really, it comes from the mind [*esprit*], because when we're exercising willpower, while we're exercising willpower and we decide to summon spirits, something has to happen as a consequence. Clearly it's not supernatural. At a stroke, there has to be a space that is sufficiently bare and sufficiently populated so that suddenly this alchemy, this thing that happens... Ah, it's so uncommon! There is so much suffering before that moment can be achieved. If you are patient, it's amazing. Yes, infinitely patient...

BS: And then what you say about that which has a primary relationship with repetition, clearly repetition in theatre is a...

DP: It's creating the *templum*, you know, it's creating the *templum*, the space...²³ Wherever you are—you can create a theatrical space anywhere—it's creating an

²⁰ See Gilbert Simondon's (2007) work *L'individuation psychique et collective*. The 2007 edition includes a preface by Bernard Stiegler.

²¹ The French term *revenance* connotes a revenant, a ghost, and reinforces the idea of haunting.

²² Jean Vilar (1912-1971) was a French film and stage actor and also a theatre director.

²³ *Templum* is an Etruscan word which referred to the part of the heavens from where the augur made divinations. The Greek word derived from it refers to a parcel of land marked or demarcated as sacred to the gods. See J.S. Phéne (1893, 244).

empty space, a kind of sacred space, a space which is sacred because it has been left empty, within which something will happen. And watching, waiting, being alert, without riding roughshod over the text, the actors, or those viewing them. When you see an actor trying to get a rise out of the public, it's awful...who tries to make you laugh when you're not laughing or to scare you. And it's true that a ghost is beautiful, in the sense of the concept of the ghost itself, because it's there and it's not there. All its contradictions are held in a single part. After all, it's totally vaporous, at the same time, you can feel its presence. It's there, it's real... Anyway, I don't remember who it was who said that *Hamlet's* stroke of genius is [to raise the question] "who is guilty?" While in the original play which inspired Shakespeare, that's not present.²⁴ It starts with the ghost and that produces wishfulness: we have a yearning for ghosts. The ghost very ably embodies this wish we have that something should happen between us that surprises all of us, which takes us to that elsewhere that is a play, an imaginary thing that is at once there and not there, solid and melting away into air. For example, it's true that the ghost makes... Anyway, the reason stage directors want to put on *Hamlet* is because they are drawn by the question, "How will I make a ghost? How will we do it? How are we going to flesh it out on stage?" Brook, all Brook's theatre, addresses that question.²⁵ I will try to produce Shakespearean wonder, in a word the ghost, with nothing...

Regimes of Improvisation: Clichés and Rehearsals

BS: In music, we refer to free improvisation, which means there's no score, there's nothing. [Cut]. In the workshops, we regularly practiced... In fact, it was an exercise that Bernard Lubat made us do, whom you yourself mentioned earlier.²⁶ Ostermeier, *Phaedra*...²⁷

²⁴ William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (circa 1600) is sometimes thought to be an adaptation of an earlier play of the same name by a different playwright, possibly Thomas Kyd. See, for example, Emma Smith (2000) and Matthew Biberman (2017). There is an entry for the Ur-*Hamlet* in the *Lost Plays Database* which gives a detailed account of extant information on the play. See <https://www.lostplays.org/lpd/Hamlet>. (Accessed 19th May 2017). We are indebted to David McInnis for sharing his extensive insights regarding the Ur-*Hamlet*.

²⁵ Peter Brook (1925-) is a stage director particularly renowned for his productions of many of Shakespeare's plays.

²⁶ Bernard Lubat (1945-) is a jazz musician who principally plays the piano and the drums. Lubat has worked with Michel Portal who is also referenced in this interview. For Lubat, improvisation is a free space, an interval through which to take responsibility and imagine the day when what we do will be unforeseen. See "Improvisation according to Bernard Lubat in a few sentences", <http://www.cie-lubat.org/L-enchantier/Les-etats-generaux-de-l-improvisation> (Accessed 10th May 2017).

DP: Yes.

BS: You throw yourself into improvisation, totally free. There are instances like that. There are instances where the improvisation is prepared. That is to say you meet up, you rehearse together, you work together many times, and, finally, at a given moment, you improvise together because you know each other. At the end of the day, you rehearse even if there is no score, there is rehearsing and, sometimes, there are commonplaces, scraps of scores, or things like that. And then there is the case where, for example, I think Michel Portal would say “No, I don’t improvise when I play Mozart”, I would argue, yes you do. There is still improvisation, but it’s improvisation that is completely... It’s what I call an interpretation. For me, an interpretation is an improvisation, because if it’s not an improvisation then it’s no good, there’s no production of the extraordinary, nothing out of the ordinary. I’m very interested in these three different examples, and, thinking about it, I’m very interested in something you yourself said, which I think I’d not made note of before, which is that in reality we always play something that is already there, even when we’re improvising in a way that’s said to be totally free.

DP: Yes! Yes, yes.

BS: In fact...

DP: Also, it’s surprising that, when you do a completely free improvisation, you start with the worst clichés. It’s crazy. When you do... I’ve done it, a traineeship with young actors: since they’re just getting started, you ask for very basic things. A man meets a woman. How does his desire show? And then there is a purpose but it’s forbidden to him. Well, people will start by going through all the familiar ways—hyper-hackneyed—and it’s a need. You need clichés, you need familiar territory so that something can happen...

BS: Absolutely!

DP: What’s necessary is not to stick to that. And to explain to people with a great deal of kindness that you must go further, ultimately go beyond. We’ll try to find the singular [*la singularité*], now that we’ve put, because we have put...we’ve pooled our knowledge, all the savoir-faire, all the clichés, all the

²⁷ This earlier discussion does not appear to feature in the footage of the interview published online. Thomas Ostermeier (1968-) is a theatre director. He has produced *Hamlet* but not, seemingly, *Phèdre* although he hosted Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* at the Deutsche Theater Baracke (Berlin) in 1997. *Phèdre* (1677) by Jean Racine is a classic of French theatre.

routine stuff we have in our heads, we've pooled it, that's it, we've introduced ourselves in a way, we've introduced ourselves by way of commonplaces. It's normal as a way to find shared areas, areas where everyone can say—"Ah yes, that there I really recognize!" And if it wasn't a commonplace, you couldn't. If someone, straight off the bat, if someone could do that straight off the bat, something singular, but how? Completely singular. It would be crazy, it could appear crazy. But you need great courage to...or real madness. Sometimes it can be risky. I've done improvisations with people I didn't really know very well. We started intensely. There was someone who started intensely, with something extremely brutal, singularly brutal, personally it made me nervous... People were saying: "If we're starting like that, where is this going to end up?" And it was very hard after that.

BS: I think that the issue of cliché, I'll say a word, after that I'll let you, I don't want to get on your nerves, but I did want to come back to Resnais. I think that this issue obsesses Alain Resnais, and particularly, well, on the one hand everything he's said about popular culture, because he's always talking about that, cartoons etcetera.

DP: Yes, absolutely.

BS: And, in particular, *On connaît la chanson* [Same Old Song].²⁸ And for me, that was a discovery for me, that film, it completely bowled me over, because I thought I hated all those songs, I thought I hated *La vie en rose* and all that.²⁹

DP: Ah yes. But me as well. I thought that.

BS: But, in fact, when I saw the film...

DP: But I hated them when they were played over and over again on the radio. When you saw them on inane TV shows, you hated that, and then they appear at the heart of the film and finally you said to yourself, but it's actually beautiful.

BS: Wonderful!

²⁸ Alain Resnais's (1922-2014) *On connaît la chanson* was released in 1997. The film features songs by numerous popular francophone singers, including Charles Aznavour (1924-), Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972), Johnny Hallyday (1943-2017) and Édith Piaf (1915-1963), ventriloquized by actors. Stiegler (2014) has produced his own reading of this film (14-44).

²⁹ This moment in the interview is hard to hear. Stiegler appears to refer to *La Vie en rose* which was the signature song of Édith Piaf. Piaf's song *J'm'en fous pas mal* features in *On connaît la chanson*.

DP: *Résiste*.³⁰

BS: Wonderful!

DP: ...in circumstances like that, with those sort of setbacks, it becomes...and you are almost proud of those songs.

BS: Precisely! And it's full of ghosts.

DP: Yes.

BS: And of repetition [laughing] and of difference.³¹

DP: Because, because it's replayed in another...

BS: Yes.

DP: ... but it's very strange why it so bowls us over, and it's also because suddenly it's on the lips of an actor we like, in a situation, in an artistic context, which is perfectly conceived, with nothing coarse anywhere. In fact, when you pair the popular and the common, when you count on getting the better of one by the other, or when you confuse the two, it's, it's ghastly. Obviously a lot of people think that!

BS: All the...

DP: "Give them trash [*de la vulgarité*], it's what they like, those idiots."

BS: Clearly, clearly.

On Hamlet

DP: And there was another ghost who came to squeeze in: it was that of [Patrice] Chéreau, because he had created the ultimate spectral figure. It came into the courtyard on horseback, I saw it. I was leaving the national drama school...

³⁰ *Résiste* is a song made popular by the singer France Gall (1947-). *Résiste* is mimed by the character Odile [Sabine Azéma] in *On connaît la chanson*.

³¹ Stiegler is here describing the film in terms that connote Gilles Deleuze's (1925-1995) book *Différence et répétition* (1968) translated as *Difference and Repetition* (1994). Stiegler has made extensive use of Deleuze's writings in some of his recent work. For specific references to *Difference and Repetition* see Stiegler (2009, 252 fn23; 2013; 2015).

a ghost was going in.³² On horseback, bolting, with the fleshy power a horse brings to a theatre stage when it's galloping. And the image is seared in my memory, the apparition has remained and we've struggled. We have a ghost that's more in keeping with the stage set, it's a gentleman's club from London in the 1970s, without much depth of field. Getting the ghost in there, it's... Our ghost, it's a little, a little pitiful, so I try to perform, to perform the enormous trauma the ghost instigates in Hamlet's mind. As if it was more than a real ghost, the triggering... the triggering of madness. Yes, I really enjoy performing... And then, for once, there's a lot of improvisation. There are even planned improvisations in the play, even textually produced from an improvised script, which then, ultimately, by dint of being improvised, produces a kind of second script. I don't, however, like it at all when the second script ends up in competition with the initial script, which is to say that it's spoken at the same vocal pitch. And I try to, to lessen it, so it's said in a, well, very much in a kind of movie-like proximity, which means that the spectator hears without hearing, which feeds the freedom of the performance but which means that it does not compete with Shakespeare's script, the faithful translation, because we're dealing with a translation too. We're still not dealing with the initial script. You always need to be mindful of that. But I take great pleasure in this. There you go! It's true that we started with that, because...

BS: I'll try to go and see it.

DP: ...because, additionally, it's a character who improvises in the play.

BS: Yes, of course.

DP: And the issue of theatre, of repetition, he makes actors repeat, he takes them back, he's really shitty [*chianté*] with them, he makes them grind out the performance inside the performance with the aim of making the king betray himself.³³ And I think that if Shakespeare put theatre at the heart of this particular play, it's because theatre, in this period, the Elizabethan period, in England, but also in Europe, was this amazing thing. The more you show theatre up as illusion, the stronger it is. They were aware of that. The more you show that the kings are there, and you show...the magician shows how he does his trick and the trick works twice as well.³⁴ That's a marvel! And they manage to tell the history of their country, in fact they say that theatre is a kind of goldmine, like in

³² Podalydès is referring here to the *Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique* which is the national drama school in Paris, France.

³³ It is unclear whether Podalydès is referring to Hamlet or Shakespeare although the distinction between the two is, perhaps, in some sense not clear cut anyway.

³⁴ The metaphor of a card trick is being used here.

Lucky Luke, you know, the oil that comes out, comes out everywhere.³⁵ There's a miraculous energy and *Hamlet* tells us that a little through the device of the ghost, a character that improvises. So all that, all the threads are linked a little. It's for that reason that it's the play of plays as well. It's the character that's the ghost of all actors.

BS: Yes, yes. And the heart of psychoanalysis too.³⁶

DP: Ah, yes.

BS: Because I think, I think, after all, that there remains... That is to say, I'm not a specialist on *Hamlet* at all, but...

DP: Ah but they're brilliant, those psychoanalytic interpretations of *Hamlet*. There are loads of them. There are even some English who, it's crazy, they take a part of a scene, say, for example, the king, you know, the play that *Hamlet* stages, which is performed before the king so that he will betray himself: it is in two parts. There's a pantomime where the act of murder is performed as pantomime...

BS: Yes.

DP: And then the same thing with a script and there's an English critic who asked himself: but why doesn't the king react starting with the pantomime? Why is it with the script? And then it was a puzzle. There's a well-known English critic, [John] Dover Wilson, and he explains that, in fact, he doesn't react because he's not the murderer.³⁷ He reacts later because it's too much... It's... He can sense something screwed up, blasphemous, and so he stops the performance but in fact the murder... it was *Hamlet* himself who committed the murder in a

³⁵ Lucky Luke is a series of comics that was the brainchild of the Belgian cartoonist Morris (1923-2001). For references to petrol see, in particular, the thirty first story of the series, *A l'ombre des derricks* [In the shadow of the oil derricks], which was first published in the comic magazine *Spirou* in 1960.

³⁶ Freud, for example, discussed *Hamlet* more than once, perhaps most notably in *The Interpretation of Dreams* ([1900] 1991, 366-68, 575-76) and the circa 1905 essay "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage" ([1905] 1990, 126-27). By 1935, Freud had become one of those who believed that *Hamlet* (and the Shakespearean corpus in general) can only pseudonymously be attributed to Shakespeare and is in fact the work of another author, in Freud's case Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. We are grateful to Daniel Ross for this gloss.

³⁷ John Dover Wilson (1881-1969) was a literary scholar who focussed, in particular, on the works of William Shakespeare. He is the author of *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935).

moment of delirium when he identified himself at the same time to...and the ghost is purely Hamlet's projection.

BS: I have an interpretation of *Hamlet* that's close to that.

DP: Oh yes?

BS: I don't think that Hamlet committed the murder but I do think the mechanism of the play, if I can put it like that, is fundamental uncertainty.

DP: Ah, that is, that is...

BS: Are we therefore pledged to ghosts? The more you show the illusion, the better it works, because we are spectral.

DP: Ah yes, that's spot on.

BS: And at the same time we can never... We never really know if the murder took place.

DP: No! Because none of that is written down. And, moreover, I no longer know who it was who said so perceptively that, additionally, Shakespeare takes out the...he takes out the alibis, he takes out the justifications, there are things he intentionally leaves out... Hamlet acts crazy, in the original play, Hamlet acts crazy so he can get close to the king and kill him when he is defenceless.³⁸ He becomes, he acts crazy for a very specific motive, and we see the development of this motive. And while [Shakespeare's] Hamlet acts crazy, he gets nothing out of acting mad. He acts mad but we ask ourselves is it because he really *is* mad?

BS: Yes, of course.

DP: And so that adds uncertainty and then, that is the, he takes out the... He takes out the MacGuffins.³⁹ I mean, rather, he puts MacGuffins in. He takes out the reasons. Yes.

³⁸ We have insufficient knowledge of the Ur-Hamlet to know if madness was employed as a pretext to enable Hamlet to get close enough to the king to murder him. Podalydès's observation here is, however, true of the source for *Hamlet*, Saxo Grammaticus's (c1150-c1220) prose history of the Danes. See Grammaticus ([1216] 1979). We are once again grateful to David McInnis, this time for his detailed account of the history and literary sources of *Hamlet*.

³⁹ The term MacGuffin was popularized by Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) and describes a plot device that provides a goal for protagonists. The MacGuffin (here, Hamlet's mad-

BS: And Bergman puts it in the film *Fanny and Alexander*...⁴⁰

DP: Yes.

BS: The ghost of his father makes an impact on Alexander.⁴¹ He died on stage.

DP: And then, in Bergman, there's a recursive approach [*mise en abîme*] to Shakespeare's theatre in particular, that bowls you over, notably in that very film, with *Twelfth Night*.⁴² I was stunned by the film the first time I saw it, not knowing what would happen. Just as I was dumbfounded by *The Magic Flute*, the self-reflexivity about the spectator, you know the credits of *The Magic Flute* ...just filming faces from the audience and then the scenery, which is ultra-theatrical scenery.⁴³ You find that in *Fanny and Alexander* when they perform *Hamlet*. He deliberately makes the acting bad, for that matter, and it's wonderful at the same time. It's always the same idea, you show theatre as illusion, you show theatre is an illusion and the illusion becomes completely overwhelming.

BS: Even if it's badly performed?

DS: Even if it's badly performed!

BS: [Laughs]

DP: By way of degrees of perception of the thing, it ensures that...It's like the songs in *On connaît la chanson*, it becomes extraordinary.

BS: Yes, absolutely. OK, thank you, really, thank you very much.

DP: Thank you. What time is it? Sorry...

ness) drives the narrative but is not usually substantially explained by the narrative. See Truffaut and Hitchcock (1983, 138).

⁴⁰ Ingmar Bergman's (1918-2007) *Fanny and Alexander* [*Fanny och Alexander*] was released in 1982. The film includes multiple references to theatre and haunting.

⁴¹ In Bergman's film, Alexander sees his father who is playing the ghost in *Hamlet* collapse and die on stage.

⁴² The theatre company that features in *Fanny and Alexander* stages a production of *Twelfth Night* during the film.

⁴³ *The Magic Flute* [*Trollflöjten*] was released in 1975 and is Bergman's version of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) opera *Die Zauberflöte*. The film opens with shots of the audience listening to the opera intercut with shots of the stage décor, specifically painted backdrops..

BS: 12:30. Not quite. In fact nearly...

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