Betrayed Borders:
Double Agents and the Crisscrossing of Conflicts

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The formula "to be with us or against us" has recently acquired again the role of protagonist in certain political discourses, a regained vigour that once more brings to mind the exhausted rhetoric of Cold War polarities. The formula assumes the capacity to determine both the conflict and its participants in an oppositional scheme: with-against, us-them. The conflict is thus presented as a fixed alternative between two sides, and ordains the positions to be taken. There are no leaks in this impermeable bipolarisation achieved through words. The formula seems to be conclusive; further words are not required.

A challenge to this logic could come from a figure murmuring backstage in the theatre of bipolar conflicts: the double agent, a political actor with the ability to switch sides, to traverse boundaries. As the MI5 file of double agent Eddie Chapman asserts: "Double agents can achieve the unbelievable, they can be in two places at the same time".

But being simultaneously with us/with them, do double agents challenge or confirm the multiplication/division?

In order to examine the double agent's potential to undo the frontiers of political conflict, this essay focuses on the film *Triple Agent* (2004) and its configuration of political discussions as a battlefield. The film, written and directed by Jean-Marie Schérer (codename Eric Rohmer), recuperates this somewhat outmoded figure of the double agent in order to depict processes that betray the order of a shared space of words. A series of verbal disruptions will allow us to think of possibilities enabling different configurations of a conflict, enabling the agents to become double, triple, or else…

A Permanent Joust

What is possible at the peak of communication would be a double agent.
– Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*

With *Triple Agent*, Eric Rohmer tells the story of a couple exiled in Paris in the 1930s: Fiodor Alexandrovitch, an ex-general of the Russian Tsar, and his Greek wife Arsinoé. The film portrays Arsinoé as a housewife who increasingly suspects that Fiodor may be a double or even a triple agent. Is he a Russian monarchist, a Soviet or a fascist agent? *Triple Agent* is

a peculiar instance within the spy film genre: it is a film *without* action. The action of the film is the dialogue between the two main characters; it all happens in their shared space of words. The vocal particularities of the characters constitute the narrative undulation. There is, radically, no drama to be seen, but to be heard. It is in the volume, the speed and hesitancies of the voices, that we *see* the drama. It is not so much the bodies but the voices, in all their fragility and fluctuation, that act.

Thus, we do not see Fiodor acting as a double or a triple agent but talking about the *possibility* of being one, and trying indeed to become one while he speaks. The film both stresses and questions the capacity of words to define Fiodor as a triple agent without a distinct position in the discussions. The film is more interested in showing what the characters have to say about what they have done, than showing the act itself. Eric Rohmer is interested in filming the action of doubling an act with words, as he puts it: "My intention is not to record crude events, but the narrative someone makes of them"[1].

However, the director then introduces elements that create doubt about the competence of words to do what they say. The narrative of an event is a second-hand account subject to doubt. Rohmer thus forces the viewer to ask repeatedly: has it happened the way he or she is telling us? Are we to trust Fiodor when he affirms that he has "to take decisions affecting the balance of power in Europe and even the world"? Or are his words a delusion of grandeur? After all, is Fiodor a double agent or a mythomaniac? Since there is no final revelation in the film, the positions and strategies of Fiodor remain unexplained. The viewer is handed non-decidable alternatives to deal with, and for purposes of deduction: thus, the film opens up the possibility for the manifestation of a triple agent.

Triple Agent can be understood as a radical space of suspension; or, more cinematically, a radical space of suspense. It creates a verbal territory both crucial and volatile, a non-place enabling us to question the discursive mechanisms positioning speakers in a discussion. The film is an opportunity to think of different dynamics disrupting the rigid alternatives between words and self-assertion, between loyalty and betrayal to the borders defining our positions, to think of movements and counter-movements that enable and impede, that shape and reshape the configuration of shared spaces of words (dialogues, conversations, discussions).

The act of discussing and its implications is a recurrent motif for theorists. Contemporary thinkers, from Roland Barthes to Chantal Mouffe, have understood 'discussion' as a coded circumstance determining the position of the speakers. Discussion appears as a milieu with a certain order, imposing certain norms. Under the apparent contingency of a voiced exchange, a speaker easily becomes a tyrant. Roland Barthes describes the conversation between two actors as a "joust"[2], stressing with this term that processes of authoritarian regulation are inherent to a dialogue. This regulation is not only imposed by a scenario that dictates what is to be said, but by the material exchange of speech itself. In this sense, Barthes understands that any dialogue, on and off the stage, is always a codified dispute, a joust. Arguments are fundamentally inconsequential in terms of

their content, because what really counts are the strict boundaries of this codification. The relevance of what is said is highly predetermined by the distribution that the discussion, in its (im)material possibility, operates. Speakers are conditioned not only by a discourse (speakers are *spoken*), but also by their shared *act* of voicing. There is an unavoidable order in the exchange: you say, I reply, etc. Discussing entails this alternation; there is no *me* without *you* in a dialogue; the speakers become entangled in an intermittent opposition. Thus understood, the discussion becomes a race calling for a winner. These discussions-jousts, Barthes affirms, create "heroes of speech" who compete to win the rhetorical fight with their wits, with a proof, or commonsense remark.

In *Triple Agent*, Fiodor plays with the codes and habits of political discussions. He manipulates the conditions of the conversation so that doubts arise about his political commitments, but – and this is the constant question of the film – is he not deluding himself? The political discussions of *Triple Agent* are extremely rigid. The different characters comment on political events, plainly stating their mono-positions. But even if their points of view are opposed, even if there is a battle with s/words, the discussions seem clear and closed. It is a cold war, with clear-cut enemies and borders. The characters seem to show themselves by opposing each other, petrifying both their positions and their opinions. However, if these discussions are conventional, it is not only because the characters dully repeat the official discourse of their political party. It is also because Eric Rohmer treats their political opposition as a regulated joust. It is a fair distribution of the use of speech. The characters, in strict turns (one after/against another), recite their lines.

Nothing interrupts the equitable flow of the discussion. No speech malfunction disturbs the democratic rotation: no voice overlapping another voice, no disturbing silence, no doubt stuttered. Rohmer paces these discussions of the film equitably, so that all the speakers have their rightful time. There is a hushed irony (Rohmer's *touch*) underlining this conversational fair play, these strict vocal alternations. It is a verbal democracy within its borders, a respectful stagnation of words and their potential volatility. Discussions are indeed denied any capacity to change a point of view, to be a vehicle of transformation. Rather, discussions in the film invariably lead to a confirmation of one's position. In the middle of these inert discussions, Fiodor seems to be characterised as a "hero of speech". He is a very particular hero because he plays with the norm of the discussion. He plays with its capacity to fixate positions, to create oppositional roles. Scandalous, he self-consciously

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contradicts himself. He uses continuous tricks in order not to give a definitive answer about his political loyalties. As he says: "Well, let's say that I am a double agent, or even triple". With his ability to crisscross the dialectical boundaries, Fiodor is the apparent hero questioning the conventions and stereotypes of the discussion. But to what extent is his vocal game just a formulaic ambiguity? Is Fiodor actually the hero of the joust, or a shallow and refined trickster?

The discussions in *Triple Agent* happen in slow motion, as the characters seek for the appropriate words. These are not bright and quick articulations, but long and tedious ruminations. The characters chew and chew their words. In this sense *Triple Agent* differs from classical comedies with their conventions of counterthrusts and swift repartee. In the cinema of Howard Hawks or Preston Sturges, for instance, discussions are configured as jousts of wit. In their films, each witty reply is supposed to frustrate the oral adversary. Each line aspires to bring the discussion to a close. There is a run to have the last word, to have the almighty last reply. The characters seem to be in a permanent war and they fabricate replies as bombs. As Barthes comments: "[…] by the last word, I will disorganise, liquidate the adversary, inflicting upon him a (narcissistically) mortal wound, cornering him in silence, castrating him of all speech"[3]. It is the violence of the last reply, the final word, that encapsulates the potential for annihilation.

But Fiodor, the triple agent, is not the impossibly bright protagonist of a classical Hollywood comedy. Triple agents, with their crisscrossing game, are unable to bring a discussion to an end. Triple agents do not solve or decide the borders of a conflict. After a long discussion with Arsinoé, Fiodor says: "Sometimes it is wiser to be truthful than lie, so you won't be believed, don't you believe me?" With this reply he questions the sense of the discussion. With it, he makes Arsinoé doubt if what he has said all along during their talk was true or false. In this sense this reply invalidates (or not: this uncertainty is the punchline) the entire exchange. Provoking this uncertainty, Fiodor seems to be the hero of the discussion. But, the replies of the triple agent are question marks, not bombs. The triple agent is tricky rather than witty. He is good at suspending, not ending, the discussion. It is a partial victory. The peculiar last word of the triple agent is a word that will require further explanations. It is in this sense that triple agents are both successful and trapped in their own ambiguous games with words. They need more and more words to explain the duplicity of their words.

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Rohmer thus avoids giving the status of a "hero of speech" to his triple agent, Fiodor. With this non-heroic protagonist, it is difficult to have a cinematic last reply, to put an end to the scene. Without a last word, without a solution to the conflict, the borders distributing the positions in a discussion are left open for other crossings, other configurations. We can understand this negation of a last reply as a chance to problematise the resolvability of a discursive quarrel. Triple agents would not be heroes putting an end to a conflict, but actors engaged in processes of equivocation committed to unravelling and reconfiguring the distributions operated by a conflict.

Unseen Traitors

I am given up by traitors

I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In 1998, double agent Aldrich Ames granted an interview to CNN. He is repeatedly asked, "Why did you betray?" After some evasive replies, Ames finally answers: "At that moment I said: I am yours. I have cast myself out, and I do not belong here anymore, I belong there". What is striking in this affirmation is not so much the apparent desperate need for belonging, or the rigid duality at play between here and there, but that he does not explain his betrayal as motivated by ideology. He describes betrayal as an uprooting of his *self*. This characterisation of betrayal enables us to think that double agents do not disrupt the configuration of a conflict with their ambiguity, their doubleness, being here *and* there, with us *and* against us, but rather because of a certain erasure of their selves within the fluctuating frames of a conflict. The unreliability of double agents would not be, or not only be, the result of their double life, but of a life effacing itself. Are there not certain effacements at play in the intricate movements and counter-movements of a double game, in the permanent crisscrossing of the borders defining a conflict? And is there not in this effacement a certain ungraspable, non-measurable move? Because a double life can be unveiled, the secret can be deciphered, but what about an anonymous life that tends to reduce itself through merging with its surroundings?

As philosopher Gilles Deleuze puts it: "We [the traitors] have painted ourselves in the colours of the world"[4].

In the case of *Triple Agent*, all the *double entendres* and ambiguities that punctuate and confuse the dialogues would not only manage to create an unreliable conversational space, but also a jungle of words (the discussion). In the film there is a continuous and vocalised introspection, but rather than delineating their personae, are the characters not dissolving themselves within intricate syntactic and semantic foliage? Fiodor's dialogues in *Triple Agent* would not just be part of an ambiguous game by which he destabilises his position as a speaker creating doubts about his political allegiance. The more Fiodor plays with words,

the more he needs words to explain himself, the more effacement and erasure his self undergoes, and the more he disappears in the thick forest of speech.

Another film by Rohmer, *Pauline at the Beach* (1983), opens with a quote from the 12th-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes: "The ones who put themselves too much into words, they undo themselves". There is a relation between the endless talking of the characters and a certain de-realisation of their subject position, between their permanent vocalisation and a certain depersonalisation. Critic and filmmaker Pascal Bonitzer points at this relation when he writes that "the heroes of Rohmer have read too much and *they think they are someone else*"[5]. I would rather say that *they think they are no one else*. Rohmer's characters are not trying to supplant someone else; instead, they are impaled in their own decomposing narration of themselves. Fiodor, the triple agent, does not act as a Soviet or as a fascist, but he moves between different political positions while remaining immobilised in the solipsistic account of his triple game. This mode of paralysis induces a certain vital inertia in the double-triple agents. Their words have become a (dis)course which enables their selves to submerge, recede, disperse, vanish. Fiodor, obsessed with details and with expressing every turn of his thought, seems to be seduced by the absorbing intricacy of words. Double agents would be seducers seduced by their own speech, there would be an auto-incantatory unravelling of their betraying selves. In this sense, mimicry and deception are not merely the effective tools of double agents confirming and contradicting identities in a conflict, but practices embedded in devious protocols of strategic self-effacement.

Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet introduce in their *Dialogues* (1996) a significant distinction between two figures: the traitor and the trickster. Through this variance they define two modes of existence, with the traitor's ways configured as their favoured alternative. They define two different temporal conceptions to distinguish the traitor from the trickster. The accent on the unpredictability of betrayal supports the particular programme with which they delineate the life of the traitor who is, for Deleuze and Parnet, a subject who does not calculate what is going to happen, but someone "who no longer has any past or future". The schema of the traitor does not correspond to a plan defining an outcome in advance, but to an experimental plan that restlessly dismantles its interpretative bases. These traitors do not own the time to come. The trickster, however, is an "orderly man ordering his future". Tricksters claim "to take possession of fixed properties", "to conquer a territory", "to introduce a new order". They adopt a course of action to reach a goal. They analyse, deceive and arrange their present to tidy up their future. They would live in a state of anticipation by which present and future *belong* to them. The double agent deceiving one side of the conflict and then the other side could be considered a very refined trickster.

By contrast the traitor, inhabiting a non-regimented time, highlights an understanding of betrayal as not being ideologically or materially motivated. Betrayal is not the result of a

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calculation; traitors do not change their loyalty to one cause to embrace another one. Instead there is a fundamental uprooting of the self. In this sense, Deleuze's argument allows us to imagine a triple agent whose disruptive capacity is not caused by a mere change of loyalties, of belonging, of sides. I would argue that this recursive temporality that avoids the chronological order of a *before* and an *after* allows us to question simplistic characterisations of an economy of treason and our relation to a conflict. We could consider, for instance, that the triple agent is a loyalist and a traitor at the same time, and therefore constantly unreliable. Or rather we could consider that the triple agent is no longer trapped in the loyalty-betrayal dichotomy; that the triple agent, lost in the labyrinth of endless bluffs and counter-bluffs, has vanished in the mi(d)st of the conflict.

Deleuze and Parnet understand betrayal as an effacement of what is proper to a subject – this is the 'vanishing' at stake in their argument. The movement of the traitor would imply a process of disappearance pointing towards a non-recognisable self. Traitors would dispose of what pins them down as subjects, of what Deleuze and Parnet describe as "the hole of our subjectivity, the black hole of our Ego which is dearer to us than anything". In underlining the complexity implied in this dissolving what is proper to oneself, they affirm: "[...] it is very difficult to be a traitor (...) one has to lose one's identity, one's face in it". Betrayal would be a state in which a subject has lost what characterises him or her as a subject in a given system, what Deleuze calls "the wall of dominant significations". Betrayal would be a point in time without an after, an experiment in which the traitor inhabits non-specifically a specific place. The movement of the traitor is not an escape. Traitors do not remove themselves from their subject position to find a new place to stand, to go somewhere else, to the other side, but disappear *in situ*. Betrayal is not a "voyage into the South Seas" but rather, as Deleuze and Parnet affirm, "the acquisition of a clandestinity".

It is the imperceptibility *in situ*, silent and anodyne, that gives betrayal the potential of a rupture. Traitors are assimilated by the conflict they inhabit. It is a desertion of the self that does not imply abandonment or escape, but on the contrary, implies an insertion in the conflict itself. We could argue that betrayal is equivalent to effacing and inserting the traitor within the conflict, thus disfiguring the very field of the conflict itself. The movements and counter-movements of traitors can be understood as an unexpected refusal or, better, as the *impossibility* of taking part in an existent conflict and the roles it distributes. Thus, betrayal would be the occasion of a rupture in the operational grid that configures a conflict like a chessboard. This betrayal would be an opportunity for *other* understandings to happen, for other borders to redefine a conflict that we, as traitors, no longer recognise.

Traitors are particular heroes because they do not have pre-conceived means, nor pre-established ends. It is to this experimental hero that Deleuze and Parnet oppose the witty trickster, who plays with the existing significations of a given conflict. Tricksters would imitate an identifiable face, voice, discourse; they would occupy already existent subject positions to reach their ends. Tricksters move from one side of the conflict to the other without questioning the existing order, Deleuze and Parnet do not attribute any disruptive capacity to the tricksters' modes of imposture. They insist on distinguishing a creator-traitor

from an impostor-trickster – as they put it, "[…] the creative theft of the traitor, as against the plagiarisms of the trickster".

It would be interesting, in the context of our reflection on the film *Triple Agent,* to reformulate this explication of the figure of the trickster and grant some significance to its duplicity. In the case of *Triple Agent*, Fiodor is a self-satisfied trickster playing with ambiguous words in order not to define his political position. But are there not certain unpredictable facets in his game? Fiodor's verbal elusiveness is an act of gambling with an outcome difficult to predict (with his own and his wife's life at risk). And indeed, Fiodor and his rhetorical pirouettes are increasingly trapped in a double game needing more and more words for explication. His bet on ambiguity is going to be frustrated by this endless explanatory talk. The words he was using as a wall to hide his political role are in fact exposing him. And yet there would be another counter-movement disrupting this logic of a trapped trickster, a counter-moral twisting the film. Because is Fiodor not finally becoming, through these self-initiated traps of equivocation, the triple agent he aspired to be? Is Fiodor's talkative frustration not tending to dissolve his position as a speaker in the dialogue?

I would argue that it is in this very frustration that he attains the anonymity of a traitor. The density of meaning in the dialogues of *Triple Agent* attains at certain moments an impenetrability almost impossible to unravel. With their multiple layers of bluffs, half-lies and doubts, these intricate dialogues become extremely difficult to follow. The conversation seems not to signify anymore: it has become a screen of sounds, form without content. The voice of Fiodor, the triple agent, becomes indistinguishable from the general chorus. Fiodor would have *painted* his voice to the colours of the discussion. From frustrated tricksters to accidental traitors, triple agents connect themselves to the thickness of an anonymous murmur.

Notes

1. Pascal Bonitzer. *Eric Rohmer* (Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999, Paris), p. 11. Quote translated by Manuel Ramos Martínez.
2. Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Penguin Books, 1990, London), pp. 204-08.
3. Ibid.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues* (Flammarion, 1996, Paris), pp. 40-48. Quote translated by Manuel Ramos Martínez.
5. Pascal Bonitzer, op. cit., p. 7.

Betrayal is "the acquisition of a clandestinity"