

*Distracted*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publications Data

Toufic, Jalal.

*Distracted* / Jalal Toufic

p. cm.

ISBN 1-931157-04-9

Copyright © 1991, 2003 by Jalal Toufic

The first edition of *Distracted* was published in 1991 by Station Hill Press under the imprint "Station Hill Literary Editions" in collaboration with The Institute for Publishing Arts, Inc. in Barrytown, New York.

Some parts of this book can be created by others and hence may be produced by them without permissions from the author and the publisher. No part of this book may be paraphrased in any form or by any means.

Tuumba Press

Designed by Hatem Imam

*Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.*

*Distracted*<sup>1</sup>

1. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Jalal Toufic

Tuumba Press

of  $[0,1]$  has already been cut out, cutting out the middle third of the middle third has no perceivable effect... In the same way, one cuts out the middle third of *each* ninth of  $[0,1]$ , of each 27<sup>th</sup>, and so on. Note that the distribution of the number of cutouts of length exceeding  $u$  is no longer of the form  $u^{-D}$ . One finds instead that this distribution is roughly proportional to  $1/u$  (Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *Fractals: Form, Chance, and Dimension*). It is along these lines that *absent-minded* is to be understood: thinking is always taking place in the case of the distracted, including when they are absent. They therefore find the specifying expression “I have been doing some thinking lately” incomprehensible.

Though every immeasurable outstrips every measure, not every measure is adequate to unsuccessfully try to measure every immeasurable.

It is aristocratic to accept generosity. Generosity is a beginning, it cannot be a response, it cannot be responded to: it is the gratitude of the forgetful. Generosity is always towards strangers; it turns even people we know into strangers. Only thrifty people take full advantage of a situation, but to the munificent the world itself is frequently generous.

It is out of thriftiness that the majority of people want to be able to count what is given to them or that the giver be able to do so.

One can never be sure how much an idea or an ability requires in order to occur and hence how much is given generously to one.

Maxwell's wave equation for light has a *retarded solution* and an

*advanced solution*. Retarded light waves travel forward in time, while advanced waves travel backward in time. In conventional radiation theory, an atom can emit a wave of light even if the latter does not get absorbed in the future; but in the Wheeler-Feynman *absorber theory of radiation*, in order for light to be emitted, a back-and-forth movement has to happen: a half-sized retarded wave must travel from the atom to the future absorber, and a half-sized advanced wave must travel from the absorber back to the atom. If there are no absorbers in a particular region, light will not shine in that direction.

Every time I create something, I know that there is a stranger somewhere who has received it. Many a time I stopped writing, and went out with boring people who have money and time to waste: I did this most probably because there was no stranger to receive the new I might have created if he or she existed. An ethical imperative: to be available so that what has the possibility of being created can be forwarded to us rather than blocked.

The periods in his life when he failed to write were those when he lost his belief in the generosity of the world, or rather in the generosity of what in the world resists the world.

Jalal Toufic, Los Angeles

10/23/1997

Dear Réda Bensmaïa, Pawtucket, RI:

While at California Institute of the Arts, I went into the reference section of its small library to check the English release title of a French film mentioned in one of this issue's [*Gilles Deleuze: A Reason to Believe in this World*, ed. Réda Bensmaïa and Jalal Toufic, *Discourse* 20.3, Fall 1998] articles. Noticing *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, 1996, I opened its index: the film's title was the same in English. Then it occurred

to me to check for Deleuze: no mention. I then looked through the long bibliography: no mention. Two salient characteristics of mediocrity. It is self-congratulatory: it has become customary these days for those applying for a teaching position in the field of cinema studies to get in response something along the lines of “We received hundreds of applications. We are quite pleased with the very high level of many of the applicants. Such excellence portends very well for the field.” It seems one has to brace oneself for a mild dose of displeasure and a large dose of indifference as this throng of academics begin to temporarily—for a decade or two—taint with pettiness and vulgarize through countless rehash in badly written papers expressions like *becoming-animal* and *line of flight*, as they have transiently vulgarized and made ugly such beautiful words as: *other*, *nomad*, *margin*. Second, it evinces a flagrant lack of embarrassment: how otherwise to explain that thirteen years after the publication of *Cinéma 1: L'image-mouvement* and ten years after its English translation; eleven years after the publication of *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* and seven years after its translation into English, there is no mention of Deleuze, the author of these two volumes that compose the greatest work ever written in relation to cinema, either in the bibliography or in the index of *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (henceforth referred to as *Another Thoughtless Oxford Cinema Book*). Should one attribute this absence of Deleuze to Deleuze himself: as an effect of his becoming-imperceptible? While such a becoming may have been a contributing factor to this meager circulation and acknowledgment of his work, it is disingenuous to attribute the latter either fully or even largely to it. For Deleuze has a becoming-imperceptible not only for those who have opted to disregard his work, but also for those who love it. The imperceptibility of Deleuze will become both clearer and more outlandish when his work is better known. Yes, we have as yet

sensed only a minimal part of his becoming-imperceptible.

Is Deleuze part of world cinema? Deleuze has made it quite clear that philosophy does not reflect on cinema, artworks, and literature, but that it creates its own entities: concepts. I would add that, not being wedged in linear time, philosophical and literary creation is sometimes additionally a collaboration with past cinematic or literary or artistic works.<sup>5</sup> Complementarily, any artistic or literary work is related to the future. Not so much because its quality and validity supposedly can be judged only by whether it successfully passes the test of time—if, taking into consideration Dōgen’s time-being, we view as time a Bosnian Serb aiming his artillery at the National and University Library in Sarajevo, or a *mujahidin* fighter not making any effort to spare The National Museum of Afghanistan, then during the last decade much great Moslem art and much great Bosnian and Ottoman literary and mystical works failed to pass the test of time. Nor so much because the majority of those living in the same period in which it was created need a surplus time to catch up with and become the contemporaries of the time in which they lived. But fundamentally because it collaborates in an untimely manner with future philosophers, writers, artists, etc. Since art, literature, and film are fundamentally related to the future, what is truly amazing about an artist, filmmaker, or writer, is not the future component of his or her work, one that maintains its relevance far into the future—for that comes to him or her from his future collaborators; but that he or she is exactly of his or her time, rather than being, like the vast majority of the living, behind his/her time—how little fashionable it is to be the contemporary of one’s time: Deleuze. I feel closer to Gertrude Stein’s view in her book on Picasso: “Wars are only a means of publicizing the things already accomplished, a change,

a complete change, has come about, people no longer think as they were thinking but no one knows it, no one recognizes it, no one really knows it except the creators”;<sup>6</sup> than to Kafka’s, as reported by Gustav Janouch: “There were some pictures by Picasso... ‘He is a willful distortionist,’ I said. ‘I do not think so,’ said Kafka. ‘He only registers the deformities which have not yet penetrated our consciousness. Art is a mirror, which goes “fast,” like a watch—sometimes” (Gustave Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka* [London: Andre Deutsch, 1971], p. 143).

I find Kafka’s expression less felicitous than Stein’s although it overlaps with it, since it mixes two positions: the artist or writer as that rarity, someone who is the contemporary of his or her time, and thus who is in advance in the present over those who are living in the same period; and the artist or writer as ahead of his time.

Deleuze was not starting to collaborate when he began working with Guattari in what ended up being one of this century’s great such endeavors. He was switching modes of collaboration. For he had already collaborated with Lewis Carroll, and with Nietzsche—how much has the latter, who was “6000 thousand feet beyond man and time,” collaborated with future writers and thinkers! Nietzsche’s untimeliness will not cease in a hundred years from now, around two centuries from when he wrote in one of the notes of the preface (dated

6. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso: The Complete Writings*, ed. Edward Burns (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 62. Lyotard is critical of the notion of creation as applied to art. Such a dismissal is too general and thus abstract. Reception from the other side of the *event horizon* that forms around a trauma, or from the other side of the threshold of death, does not always prove impossible. This successful reception could only have happened by a creation this side of these thresholds: the voice-over-witness, etc. Moreover, whenever an artist (Francis Bacon), writer (Alain Robbe-Grillet), or filmmaker (David Lynch) produces a structure of radical closure, some or all the entities that appear in the latter are possibly a-historical irruptions: creations. These can be attributed to the writer, artist or filmmaker not in the sense that they were willfully and directly created by him or her, but in the sense that he or she set the structure that made their appearance out of nothing possible.

sometime between November 1887 and March 1888) of his projected *The Will to Power*: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming.” I don’t consider *Dialogues* a collaboration between Deleuze and Claire Parnet; on the other hand, I am sure that Deleuze collaborated with Francis Bacon. It is true that Deleuze’s forceful book on Bacon inflects its readers’ interpretations and viewing of that painter’s oeuvre; but it primarily affected that work in the past: it is a collaboration with Bacon, accessed by the latter through his intuition. Bacon’s work would physically not be the same without *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, 1981. Since I too have collaborated with Bacon through the section on radical closure in *Over-Sensitivity*, 1996, his work would be physically different without my book. Cinema tends to be a collaborative medium not just because most filmmakers have to work with musicians, set designers, cinematographers, actors, etc.; but additionally because being also an art form, even filmmakers or videomakers who themselves shoot their films or videos, perform in them, edit them, compose their music, and distribute them, collaborate in an untimely manner with future philosophers, writers, filmmakers, and/or artists. Deleuze has already collaborated with some of the filmmakers mentioned in his cinema book. Thus he belongs less in the bibliography of books on world cinema than in any chapter they contain that covers collaborators (cinematographer, screenwriter, etc.) and influences, therefore in their indexes. Does this sort of collaboration make it illegitimate to consider the affected filmmaker as an *auteur*? It does so as little as would Hitchcock’s collaboration with composer Bernard Herrmann and title designer Saul Bass, and his use of a Boileau and Narcejac novel, make it illegitimate to call *Vertigo* a Hitchcock film. This century of cinema has been considerably influenced by Deleuze even if not many filmmakers have read his work between 1983 (the

date of publication of the first volume of his cinema book) and 1996, and even if not many end up reading it between now and the end of this century. To have affected, through this untimely collaboration, past artists more than future ones is another manner of being imperceptible. Since they have already heeded it, it is certainly legitimate for great filmmakers to declare that they don't read what is written on their work even by philosophers and writers—while legitimate, this attitude is unfortunate, for they are missing much; in the case of Deleuze, the utter beauty of his two volumes on cinema. Deleuze's work itself is a collaboration: with Guattari, and others, in the books the two co-authored; and with others—including possibly with Guattari—in Deleuze's own books. "The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.... We have been aided, inspired, multiplied" (*A Thousand Plateaus*)—including by future philosophers, writers, artists, scientists, etc. One knows that a collaboration with a specific contemporary writer, philosopher or artist is simply not working when our usual future collaborators no longer influence us and no new untimely collaborators take their place. Do artists and writers suffer unduly from an "anxiety of influence"? An artist cannot afford this reported anxiety of influence: he or she could not have created while having it, creation being an untimely collaboration. In *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, 1947, his canceled radio program, Artaud found himself forced to torturously collaborate with his voices; but he also collaborated in an untimely manner with Deleuze and with Deleuze-Guattari (and also with Jacques Derrida, the author of "La parole soufflée," an article in which Derrida is sometimes an untimely collaborator, sometimes a critic). It is mostly critics who, unaffected by and unaware of such an untimely collaboration, make a fuss about an anxiety of influence. A

critic, especially a journalistic one, comes after; the artwork or literary work is truly finished for him or her by the time he or she arrives on the scene. Critics and journalists, who function well under deadlines, always arrive late for such untimely collaborations. Being late for a genuine collaboration, they are left with contributing to one more fashionable, for constitutionally-late, anthology. Since they don't collaborate in an untimely manner with the artistic and literary works on which they reflect, it is understandable that they find it easy to write on commercial culture, which in the vast majority of cases is linear not only narratively but also in its mode of collaboration and influence: in it there is no need for this collaboration with the future which constitutes much of intuition. In academia and criticism, so many anthologies on a popular culture that has been reduced to and equated with commercial culture, and so little collaboration. Despite its eighty-two contributors, there is no collaboration whatsoever in *Another Thoughtless Oxford Cinema Book*. If philosophers and writers find it extremely difficult to write on commercial films and novels, it is not simply or mainly as a consequence of their negative value judgment of these works; it is fundamentally because their writings are not a reflection on films, paintings, dance and works of literature, but a collaboration with these, so that the fact that the vast majority of commercial works are linear not only narratively but also in their mode of collaboration and influence renders any untimely collaboration in them unfeasible. It is much easier for a philosopher or thinker to write in relation to Robbe-Grillet, for his work is triply non-linear: from the least unsettling and least important level, that of narration (the tedious *Pulp Fiction* remains at this level); to that of the story, i.e. of the diegetic space-time; to that of an untimely collaboration with future thinkers and writers. Robbe-Grillet, one of the most articulate

writers and filmmakers about his novels and films,<sup>7</sup> is a much more intuitive filmmaker than the majority of contemporary Hollywood filmmakers, who don't tire of repeating to us how crucial intuition is in their "creative process." If I already belong to world cinema, it is certainly far less as a result of my few videos than as a consequence of the untimely collaborations with filmmakers such as Robbe-Grillet, Lynch and Tarkovsky through *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* and *Over-Sensitivity*, as well as with Paradjanov through my coming book [Forthcoming]. I am sure I have collaborated with the latter two filmmakers although I never met them and although they died before any of my books was published. I had become so imbued with this form of collaboration by the time I was writing my third book that I had grown totally oblivious of the more obvious and discussed mode of influence, getting reminded of it with a sense of surprise on receiving a letter from performance and installation artist Carolee Schneemann in which she wrote in response to reading *(Vampires)*: "I wish you could see the piece; the influence of your 'space-time continuum' sweeps through each element of *Mortal Coils* [1994]." The consolidation of corporate monopoly over the distribution of films and books can mitigate this untimely collaboration, but it cannot stop it. The latter can be stopped by surpassing disasters, which produce a withdrawal of tradition; or by developments that lead to the destruction of the future, thus impoverishing our intuition; or by certain epochal events that create discontinuities in time. I would define epochs by whether this untimely collaboration is possible: what belongs to different epochs is what essentially

7. If it is infelicitous to ask an artist or a writer about his or her work, and if writers' and artists' answers to such questions are never fully satisfactory, it is partly that these works are untimely collaborations with another or others unknown to the artist or writer, one or ones in whose place he or she is ill-equipped to speak.

cannot collaborate in an untimely manner. Despite the deep affinity an Iraqi poet or thinker may feel toward *Gilgamesh*, he will not have when writing on it the impression that he collaborated on its production. Despite being deeply impressed by the similarity between ancient Egyptian peasants and contemporary villagers in the vicinity of Edfu with regards to their physiognomy and the style and building materials of their dwellings, I am sure that, while making use of ancient Egyptian monuments and hieroglyphic writings in *The Night of Counting the Years*, 1968, at no point did Shādī 'Abd al-Salām feel that he was collaborating through his film with the ancient Egyptians across chronological time. While one cannot become an untimely collaborator in relation to artistic works belonging to a different epoch, one can still possibly understand and appreciate them; use them in one's work, as Armand Schwerner does with *Gilgamesh* and other Sumero-Akkadian work in his *The Tablets*; or affect their reception and interpretation as a critic. Deleuze is still a philosopher rather than a critic even in relation to other epochs, for though he cannot collaborate with them in an untimely manner, he still creates concepts in relation to them. Even when we are quite conscious of our changing views of them, we are also aware that there is something definitive about works belonging to another epoch: they are thus classics.

I presently admire the following people:

— The artist, writer, filmmaker or philosopher, by constitution intuitive.

— Their future untimely collaborators.

— And the one, seemingly modest, whose aim isn't to become a writer, a filmmaker, or an artist, but rather, with a wonderful extravagance, to incarnate *the audience implied by the artwork*. The dancer having lost the mirror-reflection on crossing the threshold to the altered realm in Agnes de Mille's "dream ballet"

for Fred Zinnemann's *Oklahoma!*, he, an audience member, could not tell, not only theoretically but also physically, not only *de jure*, but also *de facto*, that Laurey (played by Shirley Jones) was physically different from her double (performed by the ballet dancer Bambi Linn), that Curly (played by Gordon MacRae) also looked different from his double (performed by the ballet dancer James Mitchell), and that Jud and his double, both played by Rod Steiger, were physically identical. "His thing" was not to identify with and embark on the quixotic path of modeling himself on the protagonist (nothing has been as cheapened, programmed and manipulated in twentieth century culture); but to incarnate, to coincide with the audience implied by the artwork—a much more demanding endeavor. He had distanciation toward the actors and characters, but not toward the implied audience. While I despise those who remain solely empirical audience members, I admired him. He decried a widespread misrecognition that a painting, dance or literary work implies and therefore has a specific, intrinsic audience. He felt there weren't enough people who tried or are trying to make the audience "part" of the artwork not by blurring the boundary between the performers and the audience—this resulting most often in sloppy, weak pieces; but rather by filling the position of the audience implied by the artwork.

By the way, is Duras' *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Gallimard, 1991), with its "This is a book. / This is a film," part of world cinema?

There is something theatrical about Nietzsche, in that one often has the sense that he is speaking in asides: "—Ultimately, no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows.... Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events which lie outside the possibility of general or even of rare experience... In this case simply

nothing will be heard, with the acoustical illusion that where nothing is heard there *is* nothing" ("Why I Write Such Excellent Books," *Ecce Homo*).

It is part of the miracle one's hearing about it although it is what excludes witnesses—even in the guise of the one who performed it.

Divest possibility from curiosity. The vigil over possibilities has nothing to do with curiosity, as is clear in quantum physics, where an act of observation collapses the wave equation into one actuality. Quantum physics has been the branch of science that has gone furthest in acknowledging possibilities precisely because it relinquished curiosity: it can say nothing about what goes on between the source and the detection device in a measuring apparatus.

The jealousy-inducing woman includes a third in the relationship. The jealous person achieves a reactive equivalent by looking at the bystander or passerby to see in the expression on his or her face signs about what is going on *behind his back* (Munch's *Jealousy*)—not being the curious type myself, I looked at him, and not at what was eliciting his curiosity.

There is need not only for the witness position but also for the detached disposition, embodied in one who is at the site of the events but continues what he is doing without being affected by whatever is happening, poised, thus aborting the audience's identification with the characters. A play with such a character would end not with a resolution of the conflict between the hysterical antagonists in the foreground, but when either they desist from their conflictual actions and join the detached one in the background or the latter joins them.