



M as in Maladie

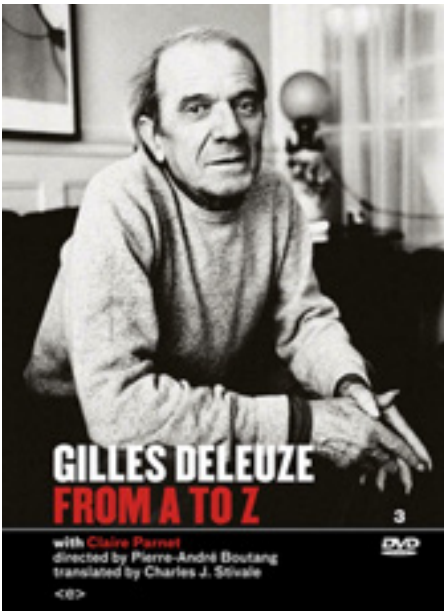
Still from *L'Ordre*, dir. Jean-Daniel Pollet, 35mm,
1973, 44 mins.

Assembled by artist and Semiotexte co-editor Hedi El Kholi as one of 24 film evenings based on videotaped conversations between Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *M as in Maladie* was presented for the first time last year at the Mandrake Bar in Los Angeles. *Gilles Deleuze A-Z* is an 8-hour work, in which Parnet prompts Deleuze to speak extemporaneously on themes triggered by 24 letters of the alphabet, except “Q” and “Z.”

The sessions were taped during the last years of Deleuze’s life, when he was terminally ill. By mutual consent, the text of the conversations would never be published, and the conversations would not be publicly screened until after his death. A giddy sense of morbidity floats through the dialogues—and most pronouncedly so in *M as in Maladie*.

Each of the dialogues lasts between 15 and 20 minutes. For each of the A-Z film evenings, El Kholi has selected (and often painstakingly translated and subtitled) a handful of rarely seen 20th century short films from Europe and North America. The films chosen by him deepen and ground Deleuze and Parnet’s almost painfully light, profound conversations. They function as narrative backstory to Deleuze and Parnet’s philosophical poetry.

In *M as in Maladie*, El Kholi shockingly chooses two films on leprosy, a disease that, since its advent in 600 BC has plagued both its sufferers and the social



Gilles Deleuze From A to Z, "M as in Maladie," video, 1988, 29 mins

imagination. Lepers, Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Madness*, were perceived (as the Jews would be later) by the 15th century church as God's own exemplars of abjection. Lepers were blessed by the priest and then dragged from the church to spend the rest of their lives in confinement.

Jean-Daniel Pollet's extraordinary documentary *L'Ordre* is narrated by an elderly veteran of a Spinalonga, a Greek island where lepers were permanently exiled in 1904 to await death and create their own society. When the lepers suddenly rebelled in 1956, they were relocated to an open hospital facility outside of Athens. When do you become a leper? the narrator asks, recalling the era of exile. When you catch the disease? No, rather, when it begins to show. ... You're denounced. Two cops arrest you ... and you're placed here. Forever in prison. Why? So you can't contaminate others. Do you believe death is contagious? ... But the new facility turns out to be a softer, even-more-alienating form of exile: Today there are no guards, no fence, with a small amount of persuasion, when you're no longer human, separation is easily achieved ... we can complain to the director. The filmmaker prepares to leave, but is stopped by this injunction:

You will soon gather your equipment and leave, but we have to remain here. Maybe you have feelings of pity. You feel sorry for us, but I think, that we're the ones who should feel sorry for you, because we may be separated by a wall, however, in the jungle of life, we found the meaning of life, here in the hell, of malady and isolation.

In their "M" conversation, Deleuze suggests to Parnet that a "weakened state of illness" might actually be favorable to those who undertake serious thought ... that a fragile state of health can be used, not to tune into one's own body, but to what lies outside of it. Fragility favors literary work and philosophy.

El Kholti's M for Maladie evening hit us like a lead bomb in Los Angeles ... the 30 or so of us who'd attended left Mandrake bar wide-eyed and stunned. So it's a pleasure to offer a reprise of 'Leper Night' a Light Industry in Brooklyn. Deleuze gave hundreds of interviews in his lifetime, but these intimate conversations give a new insight into his thought and process. Deleuze once famously wrote, "every letter is a love letter." The singularity of his relationship with the Parnet wholly informs these conversations. The two were lovers for more than a decade in the context of his long-standing marriage to Fanny Deleuze. Deleuze A-Z was his gift to Parnet, and by extension to us, as viewers.

— Chris Kraus