

# Appeal to Desertion (Feminism, Surrealism, Sade, Foucault)

## An Interview with Annie Le Brun<sup>1</sup>

**Immédiatement:** In 1977, in *Lâchez tout*,<sup>2</sup> you violently took to task the feminist groups by showing that the desire for power was the motor for their engagement and their success. In 1990, in *Vagit-prop*<sup>3</sup> you saw in the neo-feminist current the same logic of identity and power. Ten years later, how do you see the discourses called “feminist”?

**Annie Le Brun:** This is a well-known tune. Because, if the current neo-feminists appear to say things that contradict the ideas advanced 20 years ago, their ideological functioning is still distressing. It’s still a matter of the same discourse, in which identity is affirmed to the detriment of individuality, with the result that the group must prevail over any other form of existence. Behind this, of course, is the same will desire to occupy positions of power.

**Q:** Have feminists such as Simon de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Badinter betrayed the engagement of people like Louise Michel or Flora Tristan?<sup>4</sup> Or do you think that, from the start, the militant feminists’ demands for identity condemned them to this demand for power?

**A:** I admire the first feminists’ refusal of the obligation to be something, their desertion of the role. And I can only feel the same way about the “negative affirmation” that fights against all imposed identities that restrict the individual. Thus what I deplore today, in all the identity movements, but especially among the feminists, is the opposite attitude. It’s as if, at some moment, the refusal of the obligation to be something was transformed into a new identity that becomes another obligation to be something. There’s the danger that any demand for

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<sup>1</sup> “*Appel à la désertion: Entretien avec Annie Lebrun [sic]*,” remarks collected by Marine Boisson and Jean Védrières, published in 2000 by *Immédiatement*. Translated by NOT BORED! 30 January 2019. Subtitle and footnotes by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> *Lâchez tout* [“Drop Everything”], Paris, Le Sagittaire, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> *Vagit-prop, Lâchez tout et autres textes*, Paris, éd. Ramsay/Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1990

<sup>4</sup> Simon de Beauvoir (1908-1986), author of *The Second Sex* (1949). Elisabeth Badinter (born 1944), a philosopher and political activist. Louise Michel (1830-1905) was an anarchist and participant in the Paris Commune. Flora Tristan (1803-1844), a militant socialist.

identity is always prey to being relayed into a desire for insertion into the social order, if not power, as well. As for women's freedom, it has no meaning if it isn't posed in the perspective of freedom for everyone.

**Q:** How do you explain this flip from a demand “to not be something” to a demand “to be something” and be recognized as such?

**A:** It is very uncomfortable to desert roles. In the struggle, if you are offered a means of sheltering yourself behind an identity that gives you the impression that you are no longer alone in confronting the world, it is very tempting. If we put aside the desire for power for a moment, it is comforting to see yourself as a member of<sup>5</sup> a group. All groups are a protection against the rest of the world.

**Q:** You display a human tendency to relieve yourself of a certain anxiety concerning the conformation of identities and well-defined roles. At the same time, don't you think that you must take account of a particular historical moment, that of a society that requires individuals to integrate themselves into it?

**A:** It is the encounter between the two dynamics that render the current situation particularly troubling. One of the principles of the world that is imposed upon us is inclusion, which did not exist before. This new form of voluntary servitude is what I call “integrated difference.” You are different? Perfect. You are recognized as such. But this recognition is tantamount to the implementation of a security cordon because it presupposes the suspension of all critique. No doubt, in the course of the prior century, too many intellectuals came to accept the ideology that they claimed to be fighting against. Even if this was too often for hardly stellar reasons, such as fatigue, the desire to be recognized, the fear of a precarious situation – and, in many cases, the reasons remain an enigma – they all gave in to a society that was hostile to them, while the particularity of our society is, on the contrary, to avoid confrontation, which inaugurates a real trivialization of servitude.

**Q:** Ultimately you are in a very Nietzschean situation. He experienced great fatigue, which he settled by choosing madness. His last letters to Turin indicate the most radical experience of modernity. He allowed himself to be burned. Very few people can tolerate the risks proper to radical positions. Isn't this an elite commitment?

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<sup>5</sup> The French phrase used here, *au sein de*, can also mean “in the womb of.”

**A:** The word “elite” displeases me more than the word “commitment.” This is in fact a matter of a struggle to the death with something that wants to vanquish us. I can only admire the people who are haunted by the intransigent will to not give up – for example, the Czech Surrealist painter Toyen. She left her family in Prague at the age of 17, in 1919; joined the anarchist milieu; was – along with Styrsky and Teige – a co-founder of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, where she had Breton and Éluard come in 1935. She spent the five years of the [Second World] war hiding the young Jewish poet Heisler in her apartment. Suddenly, she had to go into exile in Paris, becoming stateless in 1948 and living in very difficult circumstances, not without breaking off relations with the friends who’d become Stalinists, such as Éluard. Following all that, it is, perhaps, useless to wonder why Toyen has remained unknown and unsung. And yet she never gave up. For me, she is – along with André Breton and Benjamin Péret – one of the rare examples of someone who lived in the 20th century and did not break.

**Q:** In your writing about subversion, Breton and Surrealism seem to represent a fulcrum of resistance against the times in which we live. Isn’t this your personal pantheon, your anchor in the past and a literary tradition?

**A:** This has had a considerable importance for me. During the [beginning of the] dreary<sup>6</sup> 1960s, I was 16-17 years old and I felt at least as distant from the world that was offered to me then as I do today. Today everyone speaks of that era in an enthralled way, while it was actually characterized by the falsity of a petit-bourgeois spirit that wanted to give itself a modernist appearance. In the state of intellectual starvation and deprivation that I was in at the time, my encounter with several Surrealist books was a shock. When I found in my province of France a copy of André Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir*,<sup>7</sup> I copied it out by hand. In it, Jarry, Cros, Sade, Lacenaire, Swift and Cravan posed what I thought were essential questions about desire, meaning and thought, by reinventing them according to their own lights, while the thinkers of the moment – Sartre and Beauvoir and company – only knew how to confine an entire generation in the systematic misery [*misérabilisme*]<sup>8</sup> of their low-level functionary’s way of thinking. With the Surrealists, you could breathe, if only as a way to discover the multiplicity of the perspectives opened up by this unique attempt in the 20th century to think about Man as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> The French word used here, *sinistre*, can also mean “ominous” or “disastrous.”

<sup>7</sup> Breton’s *The Anthology of Black Humor* was published in 1940.

<sup>8</sup> A coinage by Breton: “The depreciation of reality in place of its exaltation.”

**Q:** How would you characterize these perspectives?

**A:** In the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, Breton states, “Sade is Surrealist in sadism,” which very precisely defined Sade’s genius in his mad attempt to rethink the world on the basis of his uniqueness. In fact, he suggested there what would be the richness of the Surrealist project, or – more exactly – the Surrealist constellation that allowed the people that it assembled to express the uniqueness of their rapport with the world. And this is precisely why there isn’t a Surrealist style. The important thing was that men and women could affirm, outside of any artistic criteria, what absolutely differentiated them from others. This is what people try to hide by making Surrealism into an avant-garde just like any other. But its priceless prize was to offer each person the possibility of finding in him- or herself the source of the great refusal of what is taken for granted.

**Q:** With the term “constellation” you touch upon something between the singular [individual] and the collective. We commonly believe that, when it comes to subversion, only the collective is able to carry weight where the real is concerned.<sup>9</sup> You who reject any affiliation – we don’t see you as being without any links. What connection do you make between the individual and the group?

**A:** This question is certainly one of the most revolutionary today. It is here that the majority catches hold of the unique and makes a knot that is even harder to untie because the question of identity doesn’t stop debasing the relationship to the Other on the model of the Same. The fact is that, with the exception of certain libertarian experiments, the majority of revolutionary groups are constituted to the detriment of the individuality of their members. It is nearly a pact: effectiveness at the cost of the loss of individuality. And the history of the 20th century shows us the criminal extremities that this can go. In fact, it is only in a perspective that recognizes the dimension of personal sensibility that the sacrifice of individuality can be avoided. Because, finally, in the name of what rationality can one justify the aberration of individuality? On the other hand, if the perceptible world exists as such, nothing permits the reduction of individuality. In this light, any functioning collective that doesn’t hold to this becomes unacceptable. At bottom, this still is and always will be the question “How to live?” which was also posed by German Romanticism with well-known intensity and to which it responded with the idea of elective

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Raoul Vaneigem’s comments in 1958 about the development of Lautréamont’s work: <http://www.notbored.org/ducasse.pdf>

affinities.<sup>10</sup> Suddenly, people joined together, outside of all social conventions, because among them there appeared and were woven together connections that allowed them to participate in a completely different form of life.

**Q:** People have often reproached Breton for being a master. Can a “constellation” survive without any master discourse, without any principle of mastery?

**A:** This is a big problem. No doubt there is, among those who refuse to go along with what exists, a desire to have a hold on the world, which explains the rapprochement between the Surrealists and the Communist Party at the end of the 1920s. Surrealism engaged in a continual balancing act between great moments, lyrical conflagrations and much less thrilling attempts at effectiveness. Nevertheless, such groups rely on the passionate relations between its members; their parity [*équilibre*] is extremely fragile, which runs the risk of sometimes needing to be restored by a master discourse. We can deplore this, but it is like the phenomenon of love. As long as everything goes well, the world doesn’t seize hold of you, the intensity of what you live makes you unattainable. In *La Route de San Romano*, Breton says, “the route of mental adventure climbs abruptly, a halt, it is immediately overrun.”<sup>11</sup> The misfortune is that, too often, the recourse to the principle of mastery is at the origin of this kind of halt. In any case, everyone can verify it: any real advance awakens forces that make it retreat. Nevertheless, if the passionate intensity takes on a collective dimension, it is extremely dangerous for the world order. This is what happened at certain moments in Surrealism.

**Q:** The Surrealists were tempted by the notion of the tabula rasa. But at the beginning of the century, one could see, where the commodity was concerned, a very violent nihilism. Hasn’t there been a vile cooptation of Surrealism in the lowest and most violent forms of today’s commodification? Isn’t making a clean slate of all imaginary genealogies the privileged mode of enslavement to the world of technology and commodities?

**A:** Certainly. Except that I don’t care for the word “cooptation” [*récupération*]. “Inclusion” seems more accurate. This is why I have paid a lot of attention to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello’s book *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*,<sup>12</sup> which shows that many elements that originally came from the Surrealists, and even more

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. the novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1809, translated into English as *Elective affinities*.

<sup>11</sup> *La Route de San Romano*, 1948, with illustrations by Maria Cerminova Toyen.

<sup>12</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Gallimard, 1999).

so from the situationists,<sup>13</sup> now serve the interests of domination. This is an important novelty that is impossible to ignore. But to return to the idea of the tabula rasa among the Surrealists: the historical context is very important. It is obvious that, at the moment that they stated their desire to have done with the Western world and its culture, the heights of ridiculousness and hypocrisy had been reached during the war of 1914. By stating “we have no talent,” those who had more than anyone else wanted to be as distant as possible from the artistic idiocy [*non-pensée*] that had served to cover or compensate for a society that was being revealed to be indefensible. The problem is that, today, this type of proposition returns to justify the lack of culture and incompetence of people who, under the pretext of “creativity,” only seek to occupy the terrain. At the same time, this enthusiasm for ignorance allows for the success of new, cynical generation of advertisers and “plastic artists” who have definitely understood what part they can play in order to live comfortably. Unable to create anything, this *nomenklatura*<sup>14</sup> imposes an essentially pleonastic form of expression. And we can reproach radical discourses, including that of the situationists, or even someone like Gilles Châtelet,<sup>15</sup> for not having seen the generalized “de-metaphorization” that accompanies this situation by leading to a loss of sensibility [*du sensible*], which none of them believed that they should care about.

**Q:** In your book, *Du trop de réalité*,<sup>16</sup> you use analogies to make your points. Doesn't this form of language engage the thinking behind it?

**A:** Resting upon sensorial comprehension [*l'appréhension sensible*], analogy is the mode of thinking that suits me best. But due to this fact, being as unforeseeable as it is uncontrollable, analogy is condemned to nonexistence by the professional thinkers, for whom this kind of intuitive approach isn't a serious one. Strangely, the response to *Too Much Reality* suggests that a number of people think the opposite. For me, Novalis<sup>17</sup> is much more important than Hegel, because he is, without a doubt, the only one to dare to think about the totality without trying to master it. We tend to retain from his work only the notion of the “fragment,”

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<sup>13</sup> In “Language remains a weapon that anyone can claim,” an interview from 2009, Le Brun speaks about the Situationist-inspired graffiti from May 1968 that proclaimed “Live without dead time.” <http://www.notbored.org/language.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Russian for a class of privileged people in the Soviet Union.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Châtelet (1944-1999), a philosopher and mathematician.

<sup>16</sup> *Du trop de réalité*, published by Editions Stock in 2000. Translated as *The Reality Overload* (2008).

<sup>17</sup> The pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772-1801), a poet and philosopher.

without seeing that this is the point of departure for a strategy of non-mastery, if I can put it that way, so as to comprehend the whole. His is in fact an essentially poetic approach in which the totality is only discovered in the analogical movement that ties and unties the fragments. We have only to see the absence of pretense in the journal *Athenaeum*, to which he and his friends contributed between 1798 and 1800, to get his thinking to address itself to sensorial life [*la vie sensible*]. This form also engages his thinking, because analogy gets mixed up with a quest for the form's future. The fact that the trajectory of his little group was dazzlingly fast explains why its fire continues to burn.

**Q:** Doesn't the idea of a small group "keeping the fire alive" nourish the idea of an aristocracy?

**A:** Yes, but an aristocracy in the original sense of the word, one that has no foundation or legitimacy and cannot claim that it will last. Only a few people are capable of keeping the fire alive. But they could be anybody, a handful of individuals who, at a given moment, make sure that the horizon doesn't close up again, by maintaining a force capable of shaking things up. Look at Nietzsche: there is no approach more unique than his, but, thanks to the fire, he continues to illuminate many things for us. When someone manages to escape social representations, this allows us to see that he or she is always much more than what society wants him or her to be. In such cases, it is Apollinaire who was right: "Lose, but really lose, to leave room for the thing to be found."<sup>18</sup> In other words, without forgetting this world's enormous [*terrible*] powers of inclusion, which are capable of reintegrating madness after the cultural taxidermy has been completed. See how Rimbaud, Nietzsche and Artaud have been canonized to the very extent that their examples indicate – without one saying so – where this kind of revolt leads.

**Q:** The spectacle of madness will be exhibited to us, to dissuade any dissidence?

**A:** Yes, and in a very skillful way. Here we could speak of inclusion through exclusion. Especially since things get complicated when you are alive and you don't want to become crazy. Because, if the mental institution was, after the camps, the best weapon of the totalitarian regimes, our societies lock us up in a kind of paranoia in the event you look at them with a critical eye. In this sense, Benjamin Péret foresaw the trap set by the new swindle of the accursed poet when

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<sup>18</sup> From the poem titled "Toujours" (1917). Cf. also Annie Le Brun, *The Reality Overload* (Inner Traditions, 2008), p. 176.

he declared that it is now up to the poet to curse the world.<sup>19</sup> Which was a position, we can imagine, that was very difficult to hold in any society in which voluntary servitude has become the most shared thing in the world, inciting each person to play his or her role, even if it is resident rebel. Nevertheless, with respect to madness, and a little less dramatically, I would want to recall – thinking about Jarry or Sade – what an extraordinarily healthy weapon humor is.

**Q:** So, how do we escape inclusion and keep up a disturbing discourse?

**A:** I have always stayed as far away from the system as possible. I have never had a real trade; I have only produced small works. This is, of course, a personal choice that involves some acrobatics and that you can't require of anyone else. In the same way, I don't know how I could live otherwise, even if it was at the cost of a certain precariousness. Because the fact is that they can never pay you to be free. So it seems to me that it is difficult to have a critical relationship with this world while being paid to exercise a certain power in it. These days this is, unfortunately, as much the case with intellectuals, most of whom are academics, as with the artists who increasingly seek to be subsidized. And so we needn't be surprised that intellectuals, with some exceptions, have less and less scruples about becoming justifiers of what exists, while the artists have let themselves be reduced to the role of cultural team-leaders [*animateurs culturels*]. There isn't life on one side and thought or art on the other. For me, that's the main incoherence at the origin of the current triumph of insignificance. Especially since – even if it is difficult to escape the current quartering of the intellectual and perceptible world – nothing can be invented in power's enclosures.

**Q:** Your remarks make one want to advance an opposition between Sade and Laclos<sup>20</sup> in order to distinguish a certain libertinage proper to our societies of mastery from Sade's radicalism. Nevertheless, since the triumph thirty years ago of what Gilles Châtelet called "liberal libertinage," the rebel usage of Sade seems to no longer exist.

**A:** Faced with thinking as strong as that of Sade, the majority of readers need mediators. In the past, it was Bataille, Blanchot or Paulhan;<sup>21</sup> today too often it is

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Péret, "*La parole est à Péret*" (New-York, Éditions Surréalistes, 1943).

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Ambroise Choderlos de Laclos (1741-1803), author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782).

<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille (1897-1962), a librarian and writer. Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), a novelist and philosopher. Jean Paulhan (1884-1968), a writer and publisher.



Sollers<sup>22</sup> who plays the role of intermediary, putting things on his level in order to mix them all together: Sade, Casanova, Vivant Denon. . . . And this implicitly in the name of “liberal-libertinage,” which was justly criticized by Gilles Châtelet. There remains Laclos, the political reading of whom in the 1950s – putting the character of the libertine into the master-slave dialectic – drew the reading of Sade in the same direction, that is to say, in the direction of Hegel, which is, I believe, at the origin of the neutralization of Sade that you mentioned. In any case, we can also note a kind of marginalization of Laclos, whose rigor hardly suits our era: the purity of the mathematical object that constitutes “the dangerous liaison” has no place in today’s postmodern jumble. Nevertheless, the counterpart of this purity is that Laclos blocks off the body. But Sade’s radicalism is that he makes us discover that there are no ideas without bodies and no bodies without ideas. In this perspective, the very notion of mastery loses all basis. This is what is intolerable about him and hidden from sight. A fortiori when the result is to remove from you the majority of your ideas, which isn’t very comfortable. Ideas are like little pieces of furniture around the Self. And that’s when Sade demolishes all of it, then the entire house, and leaves you to confront the world absolutely alone. A mean world, one with an uncontrollable nature, the spectacle of which makes you wonder if its excesses don’t have their equivalent in the passions that agitate us. In other words, to wonder what thought could withstand a volcano, what head could withstand desire. It is this violence, as much in us as outside of us, that Sade confronts us with. And, risking annihilation, he founded upon it his atheism, whose loftiness of view and metaphysical stature don’t fail to recall Pascal’s Wager.<sup>23</sup>

**Q:** Why was Sade able to escape the cynicism of liberal-libertinage?

**A:** Because his approach was essentially poetic, that is to say, essentially moral, in the sense that, for him, the ends are inseparable from the means. And this is, no doubt, why the poets are the ones who have spoken the best of him, whether it is Apollinaire, Breton or Desnos . . . all have found by instinct – if I can use this term in this way – a principle that is as moral as it is aesthetic, and that is illustrated by all real poetry in which the question of content and form becomes null and void. On the other hand, intellectuals and philosophers are mistaken when they seek to reduce Sade’s thought to a system, when it doesn’t stop developing as a way of thinking. Which is completely different. So, he came to think about the universe without Man at its center, for example, by advancing the idea that his

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<sup>22</sup> Philippe Sollers (born 1936), a writer and fan of a great many theorists, including Guy Debord.

<sup>23</sup> Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) speculated on the gamble people took by believing or not believing in the existence of God.

disappearance from the universe wouldn't have more importance than the disappearance of ants. We can imagine that this type of dream isn't of great utility for the cynicism of "liberal-libertinage" and its always self-interested speculations.

**Q:** In your reading of Sade, he is a full-on atheist. But doesn't he reestablish an absolute pole under a negative form? There is a reference<sup>24</sup> to an experience of the transcendent, of the nonhuman part of Mankind, an experience of scandalous life, quite foreign to the era.

**A:** I even think that Sade is the only real atheist of consequence who has ever existed, with the extreme courage to stand alongside the void that this implies. Thus my fascination with this thinking that nothing can stop. A fascination that is proportionate to my incomprehension of any idea of transcendence. I am even refractory where this is concerned, only able to conceive of the absolute under the negative form that you mention. Especially since, for me, Man only begins to exist when he tends to be everything that he isn't. In this regard, Sade's genius was having discovered the power of negation in the shared dynamic of the imaginary and desire, both of them taking turns in a principle of excess, as natural as it is "unnatural." The grandeur of Juliette<sup>25</sup> exactly lies in wanting to double nature, in all the senses of the term. To the point of discovering form as a response to the question of the end and the means. It is useless to make it clear that this invention of a freedom that is always seeking its forms is essentially foreign to our era of voluntary servitude.

**Q:** What do you think about the current alliance between the "new radicalities"<sup>26</sup> and the intellectual current that is close to Deleuze and Foucault?

**A:** It is because the most recent radical critiques – and I'm especially thinking of situationism<sup>27</sup> – have blocked off sensorial life [*la vie sensible*], not to mention their pure and simple ignorance of the unconscious, that these "new radicalities" have turned towards Deleuze and Foucault, who at least have taken into account the part played by psychoanalysis. But it isn't any less true that both of them remain, for me, institutional thinkers, because of the place they've chosen to occupy. And this is especially true for Foucault, who – whatever you think about

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<sup>24</sup> The French word used here, *renvoie*, can also be a "return."

<sup>25</sup> Sade, *Histoire de Juliette, sa sœur* (1799).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Philippe Raynaud, *Les nouvelles radicalités : de l'extrême gauche en philosophie* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> An ideology based on some of the theories of the Situationist International, a revolutionary group that was active in Europe, England and the United States between 1957-1971.

him – embodies the thinker of inclusion for me. I would cite as proof of this the very skillful way in which he instrumentalizes Sade and Rousel, with the sole end of reducing them to examples that can be used to illustrate his theory, but not without claiming that he has the key to these difficult authors, even though he is completely wrong about the profound meaning of their respective approaches. In addition, I can really see how the death of the subject, which he has insisted on, suits the connectionist society that is in the process of imposing itself, where – as in his philosophy – human beings are no more than intersections of flows. In the same way, how can we not be struck by the fact that the structure of the rhizome, so highly praised by Deleuze and Guattari, gets mixed up so well with the currently dominant one of the network? So, if the “new radicalities” are coming together with these thinkers, that seems to me to be a sad illustration of what I call “the rationality of incoherence,” which engenders new forms of ignorance.

**Q:** Ignorance – is the term still appropriate? Fundamentally, perhaps heads like those have never been so full. Instead we have the impression that we’re facing an initiative of desensitization.

**A:** Yes, we are faced with desensitization through overload, with the annihilation of all critical spirit that goes along with it. Here it is: the cultural libertinage that is now the privilege of the strong spirit of today, the connectionist man, whose essential quality is being able to pass from one thing to another without ever truly investing himself. Isn’t it time to set against this mobilization through systematic desensitization a desertion that aims to re-impassionate life?