INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAS TRUONG

Your play is called *Interview*. Can we begin by talking about this exercise?

Nicolas Truong: An interview is a unique type of conversation, published and aimed at an audience, whether it be readers, listeners, or viewers.

What makes an interview successful?

An interview is successful when a sort of revelation happens. I'm not necessarily talking about the revelation of something we didn't know, but about a truth being brought to light, a truth which can be factual or existential. The interview of an artist, for instance, is only interesting if it unveils something about one aspect of his or her creation or relationship to the world, revealing it to the public, not if it trivialises works by endlessly summarising them. When I conduct an interview in a professional setting, I'm satisfied if I have the feeling I went somewhere with my interlocutor, I went on a small journey through some unexplored land, when I didn't settle for what everyone already knows. Gilles Deleuze said that the ideal interview would be "the outline of a becoming," as if two people could come together to give birth to a truth. I think of the interview of Richard Nixon by David Frost, where the latter managed to make part of the truth about the Watergate scandal emerge. Even more so of Pasolini's last interview, "We are all in danger," which he gave to a journalist at *La Stampa*, a few hours before his murder. Together, in that long interview, they attempted to give a political and poetic description of Europe's crisis of conscience. It's a common construction, a sort of dance, of trance. If there is this journey, this discovery of a world, shared and revealed, this little something that makes you think differently, I'm satisfied as an interviewer, I feel like I succeeded. It's both precious and rare, a small event that resembles the one that can happen on the stage. That's a successful interview, one that overcomes its limits and suspends our relationship to time. Of course, I have the same sensation when I read or listen to an interview I didn't conduct and which takes me on new paths. And I have the same feeling when, at the theatre, I'm surprised by directorial choices that reveal a different vision of a play from the repertoire that I've seen dozens of times. Even if discourse in the media has been leveled down by endless chatter, the interview should be an event, an apparition of shared meaning.

You're currently creating your theatrical montage. Will you use "failed" interviews?

Of course. A failed interview—in which nothing happens, and which leads to a sort of interpersonal disaster—isn't only something you can learn from, it also makes for great dramatic material. In "Comment j'ai complètement raté mon interview avec Catherine Deneuve" ("How I completely bungled my interview with Catherine Deneuve"), published in *Il est avantageux d'avoir où aller* ("It is advantageous to have somewhere to go," POL, 2016), the writer Emmanuel Carrère explains very well how that can happen; in this particular case we have a famous author who doesn't want to act like a journalist, doesn't want to ask questions but just have a conversation with a star in order to get off the beaten track and do something unique. But precisely because he hasn't prepared enough, all he gets is banalities. But the story of this disaster is a complete success! You can have different types of failed interviews: sometimes the interviewer is only interested in his questions and doesn't listen to the answers, sometimes it's the interviewee who won't listen and follows his own train of thought or retreats into silence, refuses the interview by answering only "yes" or "no," or "that's not how I would have asked the question." There's also the "customs" interview, which can be summed up by "anything to declare?" You don't get to hear anything but what you were expecting. It's the equivalent, in the world of journalism, of the laugh track used in television shows. But failed interviews say something of the human comedy, and of our modernity. That's why I'm interested in all interviews. Those that verge on the interrogation, empathetic or aggressive ones, but also consensual ones.

Can a successful interview be considered like its own literary genre?

If you think about Marguerite Duras, who could interview an illiterate, a prison warden, François Mitterrand or Michel Platini, a 7-year-old gifted child or Georges Bataille like no one else could, it's obvious that it is. The same goes for Svetlana Alexievich, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, and who writes "voice novels," turning the interview into its own literary genre. I'm also thinking of Jean Hatzfeld or Florence Aubenas… With them, the interview achieved recognition, far from domineering interviewers, who refuse to let any silence creep into the conversation. Let's not forget that we're talking about a genre in which reality can be falsified, because the interview is by essence a deforming filter which lets you hear only "good customers," who speak fast and well, sometimes, and even often, to say nothing. The good customer is already a master of language, and corresponds to the traditional image one has of a worker, of a left-wing intellectual, of a priest, of a policeman. Remember that lorry drivers' strike whose hero was a driver called Tarzan? He was always being interviewed because he was a "perfect" subject… A cheeky smooth talker with a pin-up calendar in the cab of his lorry… But do you think that all the drivers looked like him?

There are two kinds of interviews nowadays: those that are transcribed on paper and thus reworded, and live interviews, on the radio or on television. Will you use both types of interviews?

You have to transcribe the orality of the interview if you want to publish it in print. If there's an art to the interview, there is also one to its rewriting, an expertise that allows you to reflect the orality of the thing on paper. For live interviews, you can't edit. You have to conduct the interview like a dance or a martial art fight, like an improv match or a seduction attempt, a maieutics and an interrogation. You have to risk what Michel Foucault called "the beautiful danger." You'd have to add to your categories the cinema interview, which is rarer but often fascinating. I particularly like Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), in which Marceline Loridan questions people about their everyday lives: "how do you deal with life?" It's captivating, because what you're watching is France before the rise of the systematic discourse of media. If you read the interviews, often rewritten, conducted by Marguerite Duras, it looks a lot like dialogue from a play. We'll probably end up using a very specific interview: the one Michel Foucault gave to *Le Monde*, called "The Masked Philosopher" (1980). Foucault was then very famous and asked his interlocutor to conduct an anonymous interview "*by nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard*." A beautiful way of bending the rules to give birth to truths. But would such an interview be possible nowadays, at a time when names are everything? It will be on our stage, because it is a theatre of words.

What would you say is the difference between a conversation and an interview?

I'd say that all interviews are conversations, but that not all conversations are interviews. In an interview, the intimate necessarily becomes public, which isn't the case in a private conversation. There's a kinship between the interview and the analyst's couch, the confessions box, the ethnological dialogue or the courtship of lovers, but it isn't any of those, since there's always an audience… Hence my desire for a direct address to the audience, for a theatricality that would overcome or distort the realism of the table and of this face-to-face encounter to dive straight into the words that are exchanged, the thoughts that are formed, the fight that's taking place, in order to question this dialogue of souls and the time at which it takes place.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier
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