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Photographic Difference: the 'Only Side of Life'

All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives
tell one story in place of another story.
(Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*)



My contribution deals with photography. I do not intend to 'photograph' the complexity of the theme (it might otherwise be a question of music, composition, counterpoint, chant, singing) offered by the Dubrovnik 2013 Seminar; I will rather take 'snapshots' of the notion of 'difference', as envisioned by the female author who, for me, acts out as the most inspiring source of 'knowledge production' within the most powerful 'critique' of contemporary times: Hélène Cixous, and the writing-thinking-photographing praxis of Deconstruction.¹

Difference, in Deconstruction, is associated with life; it is the 'eternal return', a selective principle that celebrates the feminine affirmation of life, 'a' life, one's life, in difference from all negativity and negation.² Hélène Cixous is the thinker, the writer

¹"Like photography, deconstruction is concerned, among other things, with questions of presentation, translation, *tekhné*, substitution, deferral, dissemination, repetition, iteration, memory, inscription, death, and mourning". G. Richter, "Between Translation and Invention. The Photograph in Deconstruction", in J. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature. A Conversation on Photography*, Stanford U. P., 2010(pp. xix-xx).

² Cfr. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, London, the Athlone Press, 1983, and J. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography Transference Translation*, New York, Schocken Books, 1985. In the lapse of time since these publications, difference has been constantly under attack, also by female critics. The Neo-Hegelian philosopher C. Malabou, "The eternal return and the phantom of difference", *Parrhesia*, n.10, 2010, p.28, recently asked: "What if the philosophical challenge of our epoch, prefigured by Nietzsche, was precisely to come to think without identity and without difference?"; in response to Malabou's provocation, my conviction in 'difference' is in "'Go Wonder': Plasticity, Dis/semination and (the Mirage of) Revolution" B. Bhandar and J. Goldberg-Hiller (eds.), *Plastic Materialities. Legality, Politics and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou* (Duke U.P., 2014) (forthcoming).

and the poet who nowadays interprets, in her work, this female/feminist/feminine affirmation. It is Jacques Derrida, father of Deconstruction, who assigns this role to Cixous, in his extraordinary text *H.C., c'est pour la vie*, devoted to the celebration, performing and the acting out of the 'only side of life':

The side... her side is indeed the side of life... this side, as the side of life, has the particularity of being the only side. There is not other side than this side, the side of life. There is only one side in her geography, her geophysics, and her geology. There is only one rib (*côte*) in the body, one shore on which to fix (*une côte où river*) the departing and arriving (*arrivée*) of what happens on earth/land, and it is life – life, whence everything derives and detaches itself and toward which everything comes and comes back. Life has no other, it has not other side; and all the sides, all the asides, all the sidesteppings leave their traces on the same side of the same vein.³⁴

In what follows, I will try to show Hélène Cixous's powerful re-vindication of life, her 'eternal return', her difference and the difference of her writing, in texts where she reflects on/with/through photography. This *tekhne* and art often appears in Cixous's *oeuvre*;⁵ I read here three works where her fictional/invented character, *la narratrice*, *l'auteurice* always bearing traces of the author's 'auto-hetero-biography', seems to construct her life through photography, in the vindication of life as the overcoming of all negativity and negation.⁶ "Albums and Legends"/*So Close/Index Cixous* (by the photographer Roni Horn, as interpreted by Cixous's "Portraits de Portraits. Le jour même de Roni Horn") trace different moments of Cixous's reflection on writing. First, the narration of her childhood and youth, supported by the photographs of her family albums, and extended to the 'adoption of a literary nationality', as she herself remarks in the conclusion of *Rootprints*; second, the exposition of this 'literary identity' to the desire to create a 'masterpiece', the photograph of her mother at her birthday in the uncanny 'return' of an old bathingsuit, as an action of 'reflection' that will produce extraordinary effects (her 're/turn' to Algeria, and her 'visit/ation' – in photography, more than anywhere else, it is always a question of ghosts, phantasms, *phantasmata* – to the tomb of her father) in the 'development' (to be intended in 'photographic' sense) of her life and writing; finally, photography is the art to which Cixous exposes her 'Visage', singular – her own face – but simultaneously pluralised in photos of its

³ J. Derrida, *H.C. for Life, that is to Say*, Stanford U. P., 2006, p. 39. In this complex work, the philosopher elaborates on the infinite creative performativity of Cixous's *puisse*, 'might', the verb, the noun, desire, the given grace.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, the thinker of the 'eternal return', describes the 'riddle' of his life in the division between a 'dead father' and an 'always-surviving mother'; since 2004, the date of the death of Jacques Derrida, I have lived in autobiographical division; Derrida, my 'dead father' and H. Cixous, my 'always-surviving mother', sharing their different experiences of the 'eternal return': J.D.: "... a taking side with life which I have never been able to share. I am not 'against' life, but neither am I 'for life'. This discord is at the heart of the book, and of life". H.C.: "You are against death and fiercely for life. But otherwise. Disquietedly." "From The Word to Life". A Dialogue between J. Derrida e H. Cixous", *New Literary History* (vol.37, n.1, winter 2006), p.7. "The fabulous iterative encounter' between J. D. and H. C. is a theme unapproachable within the limit of time and space I am allowed; I'd refer my reader to the work by Ginette Michaud, specifically *Battements du secret littéraire*, and "Comme un rêve...". *Lire Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous*, vol.1-2, Paris, Hermann, 2010; in English, see her "Derrida & Cixous: Between and Beyond, or What to the Letter Has Happened", *New Literary History*, vol.37, no.1, winter 2006.

⁵ Probably, photography, in its *tekhne* and vision, is capable of framing/capturing/seeing the deconstructive insurgence of life in the *quick* of its emergence, in the *click* of the camera: "Deconstruction' is the gesture of thinking that permits the discovery of the quick of life under the immurements"; H. Cixous "We are already in the Jaws of the Book. InterViews", in H. Cixous – M. Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints. Memory and life writing*, New York, Routledge, 1997, p.83.

⁶ A possible 'order' of the reading I am going to offer here, is given by what is impossible to distinguish in H.C.'s poetics: *Poeuvre, l'avant-oeuvre, le hors-oeuvre, le hors-la-loi de l'oeuvre*. Cfr. J. Derrida, *Genèses, généalogies, genre e le génie. Le secrets de l'archive*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 20.

different looks, secret and luminous (photography is the graphy of *light*), indexed in a 'portrait' that is 'taken' in the very instant that it calls for a portrait of the other...⁷¹

In the literary construction of her life, H.C. approaches the specificity of the production of photographic knowledge, its persistence in space and time, its *tekhne* and art, all its (im)possible 'sides'. Initially, the photos are there for her to write their legends; then, photography is the enemy that works by 'cutting' in absolute difference from the fluidity of writing, but both photography and writing can become companions of the woman who, under the spell of a 'maternal' technology, looks for another Sight; finally, if this new Sight is destined to 'capture' a new Vision (*vue/vitesse/vision*), photography can invent its 'other' dispositif of (re)production and thus envision, in the very return of difference, the call for the other, while calling the other in...

Will this be 'a feminist critique of knowledge production'? It is the encounter with a 'poethics' (of writing, reflection, and invention/of problematization, elaboration, and transformation) that claims the difference of life in its celebration and affirmation: the birth of its figures (singular, but in connection with humanity); the birth of the *oeuvre* (along the vertiginous path of resistance, acceptance, and change); the birth of an image/imagination capable of making itself plural, thus addressing its own difference and the difference of the ones who receive it – through photography. The 'only side of life' – in H. C., photography reflects (upon) life, exposing it to the infinity of the sides (the pains of existence, the traumas of history, the binomy life-death, traversed, perhaps, with the help of *tekhne*, art, *Peintures*?)⁸ that belong to it, finally indexing its matrix – *le matricielle* – to become unconditionally hospitable of the lives of others.

Reflection/exposition/invention – these photographic traits can produce different images of 'a feminist/female/feminine critique of knowledge production', all 'eternally returning', through their infinite emanations, to the affirmation, the *anneau* and the alliance of life - with itself, its *oeuvre*, and its others:

I love what I am living and I desire what is coming. I recognize whatever comes my way to come to me, and to come back to me eternally... there is the necessity of this detour through the other in the form of the eternal return of that which is affirmed, of the wedding and the wedding ring, of the alliance.⁹

Prints of 'Strange Roots'

Omi traversed my whole life. She is a bit m,o,i,
(H. Cixous, "Albums and legends")

H.C. turns to photography in order to 'imagine' – because it will be a series of 'images' to rhythm – the experience/fiction/invention of her 'autobiography'.¹⁰ "Albums and Legends" offers a form of 'auto-hetero-biography': in a memory made of silent traces, where photos of her past (but what is really past, if not

⁷ H. Cixous, "Albums And Legends", in H. Cixous – M. Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints, cit.*; *So Close*, Polity Press, 2009; "Portrait de portraits. Le jour même de Roni Horn", in H. Cixous, *Peintures*, Paris, Hermann, 2010. I will read these texts not in their narrative complexity, but as 'snapshots' - "or paradoxical instants, (...) these impossible instants, as Kierkegaard would have said, whose decisive force interrupts but also makes possible the story and history." This is J. Derrida, "Aletheia", *Oxford Literary Review*, 32.2. 2010, p.176, when, writing on the photographic work "Light of the Dark" by the Japanese artist Kishin Shinoyama, names 'Aletheia' both (the) 'truth' (of photography) and the model Shinobu Otake – "a virgin, a fiancée, a wife, a mother between day and night", p.169.

⁸ See H. Cixous, *Peintures*, cit.

⁹ J. Derrida, *Autobiography*, cit., p.88.

¹⁰ Elsewhere, and usually, Cixous is interested into the textual weaving of 'le phylum familial'; J. Derrida, *Geneses*, cit., p.31.

‘passed through?’) stay there (*demeure*), and have always been there for the writer to know, never looking at them, that they are there, she re-visits (it is a story of ghosts and of their haunting ‘return’) her ‘strange roots’ in the *graphy* of light (*photography*) of the lives of others, the ancestors who have ‘watched over’ the development of her life, and the life of her writing.¹¹

The ‘tattered’ album of her family opens with the map of Europe and North Africa, the ‘Two Worlds’, the name of the shop run by her grandparents in Oran, the place where H.C. is exposed to a variety of languages, religions, and stories. Here she hears the legends of the nomadic Jews of Europe, recounting their journeys, lives and deaths. One of them is her maternal grandfather, the soldier, the one who leaves only a David Star on the cross (the *crocevia* of passion, the crossing of life and death) of his grave, a voice coming from the hole inscribed in history by his absent photo: “Why these tears? Because I am dead. I am so dead... the grass in disorder on my feet” (p.186). It is the first connection between H.C.’s ‘strange roots’ and the photographic album: “Such is the strange heart of the family album. The implausible origin with a spike. It pierces my chest” (p.187). Remaining “*at the heart* of the dark abyss from which it emanates”,¹² this ‘wound’ (scar/story) marks her origin, her own ‘womb’:

My life begins with graves. They go beyond the individual, the singularity... the echoes always come from the whole earth. From all the survivors (p.189)

H.C. feels that her grandfather’s grave marks the commencement of her life, on the edge of what is singular and what belongs to humanity. How can this wounded life counteract wars, destructions and traumas of history? An answer comes from her ‘other’, the grandmother Omi, the survivor who, after the death of her husband, returns to Germany, to Alsace; when the country becomes French (“These small things, these ties, are very strong weavings”, she remarks, *ibidem*), the woman obtains the ‘right’ to a double nationality passport. Her daughter Eve meets the young doctor Cixous, and life begins in Oran. There and then, even surrounded by war (so many wars!), life feels like ‘Paradise’ – full of dreams and creation, music, drawing, words games, books – soon to be translated into ‘Hell’, in the mad instant of her father’s death. Many ‘images’ are attached to this man: the saint, the model, the hospitable, generous and fraternal person, the incarnation of the Tablets of the Law, the laugh, the playfulness, and (it had always been there, but kept secret), the sick man who, avoiding holding his children in his arms, creates “uninterpretable effects of

¹¹ C. Hilfrich, “‘The Self Is a People’: Autoethnographic Poetics in Hélène Cixous’s Fictions?”, *New Literary History*, vol.37, no.1, *Hélène Cixous: When the Word is a Stage* (Winter 2006), p. 224 (the ‘quotation’ in Hilfrich’s title comes from the interview of H. C with A. Armel, “Le moi est un peuple”, *Magazine Littéraire* 409, 2002), speaks of ‘auto-ethnography’, remarking that Cixous, by restaging the authorial ‘I’ of delirious and sublime autobiography in terms that tear the convection of a single, self-authenticating subject, creates scenes of writing where “masses of distant relatives from Hungary, Russia, and the Maghreb, some ‘silenced’, others ‘cackling’... intervene directly in the set up of the ‘who-lives’ on the scene of writing. Refusing to be cast as figures to be ‘commemorated’ on that scene, they claim their right as ‘convives’ (table companions, more literally: convivors, the ones with whom we live)”, p.227. J.Derrida, *Genésis*, cit., p.16, would speak of a ‘dramaturgy of the family, of the origin, of the birth and of the filiation of the name’.

¹² J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p. 171.

distance for us” (p. 199).¹³ Two ‘images’ reflect this distance, announcing the future of his daughter’s ‘non-knowledge’– “born, no doubt, of an indecision in which desire breathes... The distance will never be surmounted between us: it is that of the day itself, of the veil and its film. Infinite renunciation: in the promise itself”¹⁴. One image frames the instant when she does not recognize her father because he is dressed as a soldier; the other image tells of the last time she sees him; he is in the clinic, silent, holding on to his last breath...

On the ‘only side of life’, however, rests survival and... photography.¹⁵ In 1955, H.C. is in France, exposed to traces of extreme racism, nationalism and colonialism. In the delay of time, she remembers what her father did, one day, on her return home:

Image: I am three years old. I have followed in the streets of Oran the Petain Youth parade. Dazzled, I go home singing ‘Maréchal here we are’. My father takes my brother (two years old) and me solemnly on his knees. He solemnly tears the photo of Maréchal Pétain that I brought back.... (p.204)

Years later, exposed to the exclusion, interdiction and deportation she experiences in France, and to the unacceptable misogyny attached to all this, H.C. is led to ‘abandon’ such painful economies of violence, and ‘adopt’ her difference through the choice/chance of a different image-imagination: “From 1955 I adopted an imaginary nationality which is literary nationality”. The ‘adoption’ is marked by the ‘optics’ of the “Photo by my friend D. L. Mohrar” (p.205): the ‘self-portrait of H.C. as a writer’...

The *Oeuvre* of the Camera

This year I was thinking all the time of Albertine, I was fascinated by this fleeting, multiplying thing, I wondered why I went back sometimes to the prisoner, sometimes to the apparition sometimes to the vanished one, sometimes to the revenant, I was swinging like a monkey from her branches, I passed along her corridors that began to resemble my corridors, her closed doors my doors... *my albertinage*... With a ridiculous sinking feeling in my soul I realize that my passion for Albertine is because of her quasi-homonymy with Algeria, I thought I was distracting myself from Algeria with Albertine. One is ignorant of what one knows, that I know it doesn’t prevent me from not knowing it. One story at the same time tells another story.

(Hélène Cixous, *So Close*)¹⁶

¹³ Distance/division/sharing – the death of her father was due to tuberculosis, opening up, in front of H.C.’s eyes, the scene of literature: Kafka, Mann, Proust, Blanchot...

¹⁴ J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.173; pp.177-78, remarks that the question of H.C.’s poetics of ‘the secret’, in difference from any ‘résignation obscurantiste’, destines knowledge *otherwise*.

¹⁵ ‘Survival’ through ‘generation’: the tale of death is followed by a section, short but happy in its ‘legend’, entitled ‘The Children’ that writes, first, of H.C. and her brother (young in Oran, sharing female and masculine possibilities, union and disunion, language and secrets, “I went through the stage of the development of a little boy. It was fortunate”, p. 202) and, then, of Anne and Pierre Francois, H.C.’s children (the ones who teach her all the time, who keep on teaching her). Their images are commented as follows: “When we are together we are four children. We are a single group. Composed of four possibilities. Who associate and dissociate – also by sexual attraction, repulsion, identification”, p.203.

¹⁶E. Marder, “Dark Room Readings: Scene of Maternal Photography,” *The Oxford Literary Review*, 32.2 (2010), interprets the legacy of Proust in the recent writing by Cixous who, the scholar posits, insists on considering photography as a declared ‘enemy’, “actively and violently opposed to the life given by writing”, p.253. For Marder, Cixous’s production is set in a

The writer H.C. looks for her *oeuvre*, which elsewhere she calls ‘Littérature’, “Toute-puissance-autre”.¹⁷ In *So Close* (*Si près*, in French, sounds as ‘cypress’, the instance of mourning, at the same time, the natural ‘element’ that celebrates the continuation of life beyond the grave), she searches for the event of writing under the spell of the graphy of light. Her *fiction* starts with the ‘mental photograph’ of her mother at her 90th birthday, wearing an old bathing suit, which, that day, strangely and unexpectedly, ‘returns’ to the family scene. It is an imaginary photo that accompanies the arrival of the sentence/s:

“I would perhaps be going to Algiers” (p.6);

“I want to go see Papa’s tomb” (p.32)

These sentences are not ‘orders’ but instincts, hypotheses, desires – “a frail and tiny small trembling of the heart, the ghost of desire more than a formulation of thought” (p.32) – that require time to ‘develop’. In their delays or ‘intervals’, they trace back the return of H.C. to the impossible ‘letter’ she has been unable to write to her ‘other’, Zohra Drift.¹⁸ At the same time, in the development of the story, they bring back the ‘trace’, the original ‘wound’ from where language springs. Another sentence “I was born in Algeria” (p.45) arrives to let her be caressed by the ‘*genie de la langue*’, that is, by the infinite return of the lexemes of ‘birth’, which marks, together, a conception and a creation:

If I say to you *Né* (born), I say to the Telephone, what is it?

It seems to me we’ve already talked a lot about this, you say.

It can be all sorts of things, obviously. *Né* or *Née*, masculine or feminine? Or *Nez*, nose? Or *Nais*, first – or second-person present singular of the verb *naître*, to be born. Since it’s a monosyllable. The little words are the most pregnant with possibilities.

Is it a phoneme? I say – A *faune aime*? you say... A *faux nez*, a false nose I say. A nose is always a false nose.

How do you write it? *N-é* I say.

How do you write ‘Né’, I say to my mother...

I recognize that this word *Né* has haunted me for dozens of years. That’s the way it is with phantom lexemes... (pp.48-49)¹⁹

The (responsible, unforeseeable, irruptive, heteronomic, transgressive, cutting) game of traces is born, in the very instant of ‘birth’: *né/née, naître, nez, Nè...*²⁰

continuous and reflective diatribe against photography – “too powerful, too grasping, too conscious” (p.258). It is a refusal or ‘psychic disavowal’ (p.255), a desire that can be expressed only in the negative or, as it happens in *So Close*, as ‘involuntary photography’, p.259.

¹⁷In *Genèses*, cit. p.20 et passim, J. Derrida reads Cixous’s ‘adieu et salut à la Littérature’.

¹⁸“Resorting to the letter, to the letter *of* and *in* literature in Cixous’ work, proves then not to be marginal at all: the letter bears, carries along and is carried by, the *puissance* of life, it gives to think this *puissance* in this wholly other relationship of *puissance-impuissance*”. G. Michaud, “Derrida & Cixous”, cit. p. 99.

¹⁹J. Derrida, *Genèses*, cit., centres his reading of the powerful *puisse* of Cixous’s writing on the ‘g’ of genesis, genealogies, genres, and ‘generosity’.

²⁰E. Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, Fordham U.P., 2012, p.186, explains, “The narrator incessantly repeats the French phrase ‘*Je n’ai, jamais*’ (‘I have, never’). In the repetition of the auditory syllables: *je n’ai* (negation of the verb *avoir*, to have, one can hear the distant echo of an affirmation of birth (*je nais*, ‘I am born’)... Now *So Close* plays

The coincidence signs the involuntary return of/to photography.²¹ All of a sudden, *la narratrice* is exposed to an unbelievable gesture/*gestio*/gestation. She herself, who has never had a camera, who has never taken a picture, who has never desired to cut the fluidity of life and writing into ‘frames’, is determined to reach out for (in fact, ‘come close’ to) the ‘masterpiece’, the ‘portrait of her mother’ through the filming/operation/opus, *tekhne* and magic, the *mise en oeuvre* of the camera:²²

I filmed. What did I film? My mother’s will. I thought: Mama’s will and testament. Back up a little, I say. I don’t know how to see my whole mother in the little screen. Come closer? Back up? Who? Back up, I say. Another step. Now. I see my mother, it is the first time: I see and I see that I see. I see my mother in painting. I see what I have as yet never seen what I will never see. I take the camera and I paint my mother with large brush strokes, I have never seen my mother I say to myself I have never seen her so close...

I see my mother in a two-piece. I paint the body from top to bottom, then from bottom to top. I invent my mother from all sides, turn around, there is a pale blue note below, the slippers I paint the slippers, tableau: *the pale blue slippers*, they have a life, a proper life and another life.... *my mother without the slippers*, the calmest feet I have ever known, render the calm of the feet, the firmness of the big toes, that’s the secret, the strength in the big toes, I say “it’s beautiful”...

... it’s a masterpiece... the beauty of my mother’s beauty in a bathing suit, the matchless work of my mother, the glory of the body stronger than time, a drawing whose depth surpasses the gullies of the epidermis, what is that called, when is made visible the invincible radiance of a body that has made the trip, with soul intact, without rust, without ruin, without crack, content? My mother describing herself, self-portrait of the artist with camera, I was only contemplating: “My mother as simple immortal”, I say to myself. Or else “My mother in two piece in All Simplicity”. She is on her own side (pp. 71-72)

In all her simplicity, the matrix, the maternal, *lematricielle*, her mother, our mother, the mother of humanity, is on the sidewhere “Eve takes photos. It’s thought love. She loves flowers in photos. She plants in photos”.²³ H.C.

constantly on the potential confusion between the various forms of the verb *naître* (to be born) and all the negative possibilities of the verb *être* (not ‘to be’”).

²¹The scene of the maternal affirmation is followed by a series of “instantaneous snapshots that are at the same time the movements and freeze frames of a film that turns around all the revolutions, beginning with that of day and night, of light and dark, of birth and death”. J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.176.

²²According to E. Cavada and P. Cortés-Rocca, “Notes on Love and Photography”, *OCTOBER* 116, Spring 2006, the choice of the word ‘film’ shows a singular connection: “This play between light and skin, between the photograph and emanations, can be registered in the French word for ‘film’: *pellicule*. From *pellis*, the skin, *pellicule* and ‘film’ originally have the same meaning: a small or thin skin, a kind of membrane... this etymological connection between film and skin ... suggests the relation between this ‘carnal medium’ and the photograph...”, p.26 (note 17). When it is J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.174, to wonder at the word ‘film’, he says, “I no longer know if... I love this work, thus, in the series, linked or interrupted, of a film, that is, of a thin film (*pellicule*) without history, I love this work, thus, irreplaceable, but also this young woman, entirely other and singular – and yet just any one (every other (one), the wholly other, is every (bit) other (*tout autre is tout autre*)”.

²³H. Cixous, *Osnabrück*, Paris, Des Femmes, 1999, p.37. J. Derrida, *Genèses*, cit., interprets the filiation of *rêve*, *réveil*, *événement*, *revenir*, *revenant*, and *Ève*, the originary woman and the mother of H. Cixous, in resonance with other languages; in English (which Cixous knows so well, through her readings of Joyce, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf and so many other authors), for instance, the possible sequence might be: ‘eve’, ‘even’, ‘evening’, thus becoming *rêve*, *Ève*, *événement*, *éveil* and *réveil* – the ‘awakening’ (pp.34-35). In *So Close*, the portrait of ‘Eve’ is followed by

receives the *genitrice* gift, and let it germinate in the event-to-come: after the photographic portrait of her mother, she ‘returns’ to Algeria. The decision takes place under the blessing of her own alterity (Zohra Drift appears, finally to be addressed in this sentence which was meant for her: “I am perhaps going to go to Algiers!”, p. 82) and under the spell of the technical eye of photography, the other gaze of the camera, its sleep, the dream of its pupil, its poetic *nez*:

To Ruth Beckerman

I say:

I didn’t use your camera

It followed me, it picked up scents, it was

Drawn to cracks, the secrets of the sidewalks

You will see in its story only us

Four-footed beings, propelled as we are

By the irreducible hope of a salvation,

We rolled in the dust

We turned round

In the narrow vertical ramps

While rubbing against the walls

That you will see. The faults, the tilework that floats...

...

I said to your camera, go, follow your inclination

I let it lift its nose, pick up the wind

Receive messages from below (pp.123-124)²⁴ ...

‘From below’ the camera frames the transportation (extreme mobility, movement, metaphor, ‘transfer’/‘transference’): the airport in Paris, the airport in Algiers (it will always be a question of flight and thief: *vol/voler*, and, together, the Rilkeian ‘angel’s caress of the air’). Under the camera’s other ‘eye’²⁵

the complex composition of ‘sides’, which, in relevance to the ‘only side of life’, requires an immense mobility to follow: “I have not simplicity... I am on the four sides” (p.72); “How not to be on the side of the other... I am my mother on one side on the other I am Zohra in the maze where death and life relay each other to give life. I don’t know in which life I dream” (p. 90); “On one side I am on the side of Zohra the other, on the other side, my other side of the other side, I noted in a suspense effort to reunite myself with myself, I am to the side, born to the side” (p.93); “... for one must pass from one side to the other simultaneously at the same instant then cross back from the other side to the other side...” (p. 95). J. Derrida, *Genèses*, cit., p.67, speaks of the ‘lexis, the logic and paradoxical topology’ of ‘la côte e du côté’ in the *oeuvre* of Cixous, referring also to ‘untranslability’ as the crucial question of the sexual difference of these ‘sides’.

²⁴ Here, the poem –the ‘element’ (in Latin, *elementa*, the letters, the literary ‘atoms’ of writing, and, together, the natural ‘elements’ of fire, water, earth and air) of Cixous’s language, the more general genre of all the genres, the ‘puissance génératrice de tous ses oeuvres’, as evoked by Derrida, *Genèses*, cit., p.28 – is addressed to the friend Ruth Beckerman who lends the camera to H.C., who has never possessed one, p.70.

²⁵ In the narration of the ‘return’ to Algeria, H.C.’s writing exposes/proposes the rhythm of its relation (without relation) with photography: ““The camera is looking” (p.100); “...the camera does not see the abuses. I fall” (p.101); “...the camera was sleeping, I was with the notebook” (p.117); “While I dream, the camera sleeps”; “What I give the camera to see... what the camera cannot see” (p.119); “... your camera said no... the camera and me... your camera followed... we stayed side by side, the camera and me... it is too beautiful for me, said your camera... I will let the camera say what it saw according to its own glance” (pp.124-125).

writing is exposed – “I am writing this to my friend J.D.”, H.C. repeats more than once (p.128;129; 131) – until it reaches its address, “I wrote this letter to J.D and I mailed it from the Casbah...” (p.137). The camera then films her encounter with the outlawed scribe Hassan Naso, to whom she dictates (in order to be dictated) a love poem, receiving back from him, months later, a postcard whose stamp inscribes the image of a woman ‘behind’ philosophy,(maybe because “The muses are never far away”).²⁶On the whole, it is the camera that captures the spacing of the trace which goes, grows and shows H.C. approaching – close/very close/so close/“so dangerously... so solemnly... so gently...”²⁷ – the ‘goal’ of her life. She is in the cemetery, looking for ‘Papa’s tomb’, the grave without number or name, that, as the ghost of the event and, together, as the event of the ghost, will produce the ‘ancient’ voice from an elsewhere, the ‘rare’ voice that transports her on the other side, and there, *Là*, signs the bond – contract, link, task – of another ‘Sight’ as the ultimate celebration of life:

“...where are you? - *So close... are you? ... So close!* How you sing, and to find the laughter, the freshness, the dew, that way of moistening words, of silvering them to make them shine...And you are there. At the cypress...(pp.151-2)

Near the cypress I find myself, me who was at a loss for you, and I find you as if I was finally finding sight... I see true and I see what I see... What happens to me: seeing at last your immortality (p. 153)

I see That: but from the other side. I see everything from the other side, as in the beyond-life, beyond memory... (p.154)

“I am writing a text which is completely traversed by you” (p.156).

The traversal of experience (experience is ‘traversal’), the experimentation, and the knowledge of the other (double genitive): the journey can end here, marking H.C.’s ‘return to life’. Her ‘impression’(it will always be, and remain a question of ‘writing’) that the camera has left out the ‘salted milk’ of her tears at the embrace with her father may be true;²⁸ still, what she knows now is that photographic love, in its finitude, in the finite instant or click of its grace, in the crucial instant where everything happens, is a kind of love that, like Algeria – “my humus. My hyper funerary stele” – survives both death and life - “So as to begin again” (p.161). Yes, the affirmation of life, the Joycean yes to life is in its infinite re-commencements, because ‘life is nothing else but living death, living it for oneself and for the other and for life’...

²⁶ Writing renders the image on the stamp: “In the foreground the writer is occupied with the quill in a schoolboy’s notebook. Behind him the woman dictates the letter that the writer in truth dictates to her. He is wearing a navy blue shirt. I am wearing a yellow blouse”, p.144. See J. Derrida, *The Postcard. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987 (in particular, its cover illustration: Plato and Socrates, the frontispiece Of *Prognostica Socratis Balilesi*, a fortune-telling book).

²⁷ J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.174.

²⁸ “Aletheia, the beloved photographed one, Aletheia ready to hide or veil her vision with tears.” J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.176. In the ‘Forewarnings’ of *Dream I Tell You*, New York, Columbia U.P., p. 2, Cixous evokes ‘tears’ in relation to photography: “And then time passed. One day you can look the dead person’s photo in the face When one had just died my death, yours, jets of boiling tears kept me from seeing your face: The months of tears are past. Now I can gaze at the photo of your face without flaring up, pitiless dream.” Already in *Rootprints*, cit, p. 29, Cixous expresses her desire to take a “Photo of a dream: Dream is capable of flashes of lightning - I would like to be able to take a photo of a dream”.

'Indexing' the Visage

My shemblable my freer...

It must have been the framed desire to 'start again' that, in 2007, brings H.C. 'so close' to the loving focus of the camera of Roni Horn. In the extraordinary photographic work *Index Cixous* (followed, in the title, by the inscription 'Cix Pax', as if it entitled the 'peace', if there had ever been 'war', between the writer, the artist and the addressees),²⁹ Cixous' face is reproduced in eighty photographs (resembling the 'Oval Portrait' by E. A. Poe). Sometimes it is two faces on adjunct pages; sometimes the countenances appear in groups or (quasi-cinematic) sequences of images; sometimes a blank page is left/interrupting in-between one image and the next. Most are black and white, some are in colour. In these 'indexed' photos, resembling 'fossils' or 'ruins', H.C.'s face smiles or laughs; sometimes her eyes look outside the frame – suspended— thinking, listening, reading...³⁰

The portrait ... Often, you see her looking, as we say, out the window, thou a framed space, as on a screen.... That is the absolute secret of this book, published to cry out 'Here I am': everything will be possible on this day, this day of the night: birth, marriage, and death, promises made, promises broken. Everything remains possible, this album (the white of an album is always virginal) offer an immaculately matrix-like surface, like *kbora*, like right of inspection, for all the stories that you would like to project there, for all imaginable intrigues, 'plots' and schemes': She is the actress in them, and the subject immediately withdraws. This mortal woman has just seen herself give birth, even see herself see the day, she has just been born, she is a fiancée, a promised virgin, a mother, who will also give birth and will see herself enshrouded in her wedding flowers: all of this will happen without happening. This will happen to the future, without happening to her. In the future ³¹

Index Cixous does not present page indication, image number, or text.³² Still, it materialises/incarnates the life, the survival and *l'à-venir* of the 'book' where H.

²⁹ R. Horn, *Index Cixous: CIX PAX*, Gottingen, ger. Steidl Verlag, 2005. For a revelatory reading of Cixous's use of the syllable *si*, the phoneme or the note in *si* and in 'six', and the number 600, see J. Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, cit., p. 34, p. 65 et passim.

³⁰ *Index Cixous* has been presented in various exhibitions (for instance, see http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/exhibitions/2005-11-05_roni-horn). Relevantly, J. Derrida "Aletheia", cit., p. 178, reflects on the word 'exposition': "...she prepares for the exhibition (*exposition*), as for ecstasy. The ex-position always comes to a standstill on the verge of ecstasy, like each of these stills. Apprehension, imminence, nothing has yet happened, nothing will ever happen, but she has already taken a step: We are in the past of this step (*pas*) toward what which is not yet and will never be – only the loneliness of photography, her loneliness, but which we can love up to ecstasy, on the verge of exhibition".

³¹ J. Derrida, "Aletheia", cit., p. 178.

³² In *Index Cixous*, the text is provided by the copyright page, by "Thanks to Helene Cixous", and by the sentence: "Photographs for the Index were taken in July & October 2003, Paris", plus a short biographical note on Roni Horn. E. Prenowitz, "Cracking the Book: Readings of Hélène Cixous" (Introduction), *New Literary History*, vol. 37, no 1, *Hélène Cixous: When the Word is a Stage* (Winter, 2006), remarks that "*Index Cixous* is in the first place a treatise on photography, interrogating the limits of photography as an art of the limit" (p. xxii), in that it is a work that problematizes the book form's 'number' (double unities, divided wholes, one-tvos), 'intentionality or indexicality', the very action of 'writing/reading' H.C.'s 'double portraits' (the conscious and the unconscious, the waking vigilance and the freedom of the dream, poetry and philosophy). If this affects the traditional idea of the 'portrait genre', it is also relevant to the question of 'difference': "They think and sing at the same time, on the same page, with song and thought each leading the other. And thus the whole questing of *difference*,

C. – “while looking at it, thus while reading it”³³ – wonders at the poetics of her friend photographer, countersigning her celebration in “Portrait de Portraits. Le jour même de Roni Horn”.³⁴ Here, Horn is evoked in her self-reflection in the photos, looking for herself in her alterity, reflecting herself in the mirror of her other. In this ‘pose’ she then exposes/proposes her gaze to the ‘Singular Plural’ of the other’s face, signing, as H.C. entitles, the ‘Autohétéroportrait de Roni Horn, en tant que Visage”. This signature marks the birth of the ‘undecidable’ (*indécis-né/indessiné*) placed in the anguish of the prenatal, wondering at the delayed time of the Messiah’s arrival. The birth of her *oeuvre* is, however, never intended to ‘capture’ the secret of the other’s visage. Perhaps, it just desires to illuminate, through photography, the ‘pearl’ of H.C.’s eyes whose luminescence and clear light will always and already reflect (on) the delayed waiting – “without horizon, this waiting that does not know what is coming to surprise her, but which she prepares herself to want, this is the imminence of the photographic act”³⁵ – for the benediction and the grace, the gift and the choreography for the arrival of the response of the other:

Et après?

Elle s’attend toujours encore à un autre You absolument singulier, imprévisible, qui viendra répondre à son cri:

Are you too many of one of my othermes?

Come! you co-me!³⁶

Conclusions

‘Vision’ is central to the production of knowledge – it is *theoria*, the privileged hierarchy of Sight, the eye in direct emanation of Reason. The construction of its episteme is crucial to a feminist critique, determinate to subvert any order and discipline (any attempt to discipline the image and imagination).

Photographic Studies; imagine a different *technique* of vision, a different graphy, a different light. Photography can produce a different vision of the relation (without relation) between the referent (what is singular and unique) and

and in particular of the relations between textuality and orality, at first glance an unlikely topic for a photo album, is here addressed through the staging of differences between the image, the voice and the text, the seeable, the hearable, and the readable” (note 24, p.xxvi). Interestingly, Prenowitz emphasizes the dual reflection of the ‘page-face’: “Indeed the page here is clearly also a face, and reading takes the form of a face-to-face encounter: ... the book’s ‘gaze’: the book looks at her as much as she looks at it” (p.xxiv).

³³J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.169.

³⁴See note 7.

³⁵J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.175.

³⁶ Implicit is the question of the ‘return’ of Hélène Cixous/Roni Horn to productive ‘non-knowledge’. J. Derrida, “The Spatial Arts”, cit., p. 21, first refers to the performative event of ‘come’: “Addressing the other, I say the ‘coming’ to the other: I say ‘come’ but I mean an event that is not to be confused with the word ‘come’... it is differential, that is to say, it is relayed through the tone and the gradations or gaps of tonality. So these gaps, this tonal differential, is evidently there, and that is what interests me”. The philosopher then explains, “It says ‘come’, but come where, I don’t know. Where this call comes from, and from whom, I don’t know... it is heterogeneous to knowledge. In order for that call to exist, the order of knowledge must be breached... the orders of determination and of knowledge must be exceeded. It is in relation to no knowledge that the call is made... This non-knowledge is the necessary condition for something to happen, for responsibility to be taken, for a decision to be made, for an event to take place” (pp. 27-28).

reference (the *studium*, the code, the system— of vision, of history, of knowledge). Would this be a vision of opposition, externality or dialectics? It might rather focus on the ‘Referential’, its metonymy, the Singular Plural it produces, the referent being unique and singular, but also writable, repeatable, the opening of/to *tekhné*, commonality, sharing... For a feminist, it might mean the necessity to ‘sign’ her own critique, knowing that, in her passion and responsibility, she is guided, directed, entrusted by alterity: autobiography/auto-hetero-biography/auto-hetero-photography (it is life and death together, in haunting interconnection, crossing, hybridizing).

A photograph is always exposed/ive to/of Deconstruction. What an frame to disrupt the composition, the order, the genre, the gender, the dispositif of vision, its production, its knowledge. One photo/many clicks – number/calculation/grammar/rhetoric/erotic; you expose yourself to the technical montage, and the game opens to invention: the dis-order of the sequence, the suspension of genre, the trembling of gender. Dreams, desire, love: what it is precious is to make *oeuvre*- of reflection, exposition, and invention. In the intervals, employing the calculation of photographic delayed time *otherwise*, what is necessary is to produce *oeuvre*. A deconstructive critique of knowledge production inscribes and produces events, take the photo, many photos, other photos. In the spacing between a photo and the other, it shows the secret (the unique, the absolute singular) and its light – la *lumerie*, the *pellicule* and the film of its (re)production and sharing. This might, perhaps, createan ‘emanation’, capable, in its performative *puissance*, to affect the retina of the eye – my eye, our eyes, the eyes of the future. Another her/story, a newgraphy, other images claiming their difference as invention, the opening of the camera lens to the arrival of the other, the gift of *a different savoir* of women...

The photo-to-come

It would have been a photograph - perhaps, a series of photos, repeating ad infinitum the desire of a click, many clicks - of me as ‘a feminist critic with camera’. The composition of my ‘portrait’ would have signed my ‘singular plural’: me, just me, my blood, interiority and skin, in relation with the institutions of ‘knowledge production’ which sign my life, and the life of those with whom I enter in relation when studying (inside me) and teaching (in front of me), researching and communicating without end... In this sense, in its secret and miraculous way, the photo would have ‘given to see’ how I try, in my non-knowledge and in the production of ‘another’ knowledge, to find what suspends the genre of the texts I study and teach, how I read, write and express the ‘trembling’ of gender that deconstructs all authority ... In its way, this photo could have been reflected (upon) the dis/order, installed in the intervals, the interstices (“The interstice will have been open, like a shutter, so that photography might attest to it”)³⁷ and the inventories (I myself desire to include everything in my work - impossible synthesis! So hoped for, never reached or reachable, utopic and always failing, deconstructive in the awareness of its necessity and, at the same time, of its threatening failure) of knowledge itself. Photography could have been able to de-monstrate this, in its own ‘spacing’, through its technical dispositifs, maybe by framing or capturing life otherwise.

For example – and exemplarity is here my photo-roman’s game– by following all the ‘sides’ of my life? Might have this photo or series of photos been a photographic panopticon? In truth, it might rather have produced a ‘anti-panopticon effect’, a photographic dissemination of the eye, a pluralizing of the gaze,³⁸ framing somehow that all the sides of my life are ‘there’ to celebrate the ‘only side of life’, singular and plural at the same time. It could, thus, have made itself other from itself, perhaps ‘developing’ its relation (without relation) with the writing (with which it shares, in light, its photography - invaginated metonymy, so wonderfully ‘crystallised’ in the photographic reflections of H. Cixous) of my ‘strange roots’, of the infinity of others who have allowed and still

³⁷ J. Derrida, “Aletheia”, cit., p.172.

³⁸B. Preciado, “De-Titled: Gender and the Architecture of the Double Signature in *Droit de Regards* (Roman-Photo de Marie-Francoise Plissart suivi d’une Lecture de Jacques Derrida)”, *Quadernos de Filologia. Estudis Literaris*, vol.ix (2004), p. 176.

allow my life, my human and literary legacies. It could have taken me, then, on this side, while I search for my oeuvre³⁹ or when it is my work to (miss)guide me to the non-knowledge of what is impossible to know, and which, because of this, it seems to me/us more necessary to know. This 'guide' and this 'approach', imprinted in a writing capable of making itself 'in/time', 'so close' to the difficulties, resistances, traumas ("ecstatic opening as well as catastrophic shut down"),⁴⁰ gaps, decenterings, expulsions, experiences of exile, separations, and death(s), perhaps, might have traced all the sides of my life by 'indexing' – yes, there could have been many photos, exposed in the 'magnifying' of the details of their difference – my face, keeping its secret but revealing (in/through the eyes? luminousgraphy, photography: Barthes was inconsolable for the loss of the 'clarity' and the 'justice' in his mother's eyes) my waiting for the encounter, desiring many encounters...

What would have this photo been like, if it had produced the idea/image/eidos of what it might signify, for a 'feminist, criticizing knowledge production', in her affirmative but often solitary, uncertain, trembling, suspended life("this woman, remains unique, singularly alone, absolutely solitary, absolute... she is alone with the invisible visibility, alone with a desire for light, alone with the love of photography")⁴¹ to have received a reply to her waiting, the arrival of the other-s reflected in the photo, there, là, in its cadre and still, to be kept in memory but always repeatable – 'eternally returning' - in a future-to-come? This impossible photo would have shined (radiance/luminance) of love, femininity, and life...



DubrovnikSeminar May 2013

³⁹ The text that 'frames' my academic life is J. Derrida, "The University without Condition", in *Without Alibi*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, where the philosopher urges, in view of the creation of a new academia, for the invention of 'oeuvres'.

⁴⁰ A. Ronell, Forum "The Legacy of Jacques Derrida", *PMLA*, vol.120. No. 2 (march, 2005), p.498.

⁴¹ J. Derrida, "*Aletheia*", cit., p.171; p.176.