Research article

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Photopoetics: *Sisyphus Outdone*, the Apostrophal Subject and the Elusive Image

Abstract: In *Sisyphus Outdone* (2012), Nathanaël's particular tribute to Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the reader faces a challenging hybrid text in which the verbal and visual dimensions intermingle to produce an idiosyncratic type of narrative. Fragmentary, elliptical, a web of quotations, dictums, and meditations on the difficult condition of the individual in the current image-saturated scenario of the first decades of the 21st century, the text manages to propose a rigorous reflection upon crucial aspects of representation from History and temporality, to the Subject now, photography, catastrophe theory, architecture, failure and translation, among the most salient. *Sisyphus*, I suggest, exhibits a strategic photopoetics which operates as a self-reflective mechanism contributing to the persistence of an impermanent liminal subject and to the (re)production of textuality and the proliferation of voices against silence.

Keywords: photopoetics, apostrophal, Nathanaël, Sisyphus, elusive image

In *Sisyphus Outdone* (2012), Nathanaël's[1] meditations on writing, photography, and the dissolution of the self, are timely reflections that lead the reader into the complex maze of a text that opens up to philosophy, psychoanalysis, architecture, catastrophe theory, music and the post(post)modern impulse so pervasive in the Humanities for several decades now (Nealon). This extremely rich and fragmentary text, speaks to us in many voices and weaves a tightly knit tissue of references, thoughts and quotations that demand a certain "staging" and take the blank space of the page as a platform for the construction and performance of different scenarios foregrounding the positive and negative sides of ground and figure, context and content, tabula rasa and palimpsest, the inner and outer realities of a split subject which emerges in solitude confronting her own destiny.

A sustained meditation on the subject bound to death,[2] and whose precarious existence is constantly under the imminent threat of death, *Sisyphus Outdone* encapsulates a series of questions and concerns

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1 Nathanaël (1970– Montreal; formerly known as Nathalie Stephens) is a writer, literary translator and a teacher at SAIC (School of the Art Institute of Chicago). She has published widely in both English and French, and her highly experimental texts oscillate across genres questioning, in a post-postmodernist vein, writing, the self, the notion of authorship, and the boundaries of language and thinking. Her philosophical meditations and creative ventures make us aware of the complexities of living in between cultures, languages, and conflicting views on life, identity, sexuality, art and the environment. Her most recent books are, *Feder* (2016), *L'Heure limicole* (2016), *Passolini's Our* (2018), *D'Un geste décidé* (2018) and *Hatred of Translation* (2019). Nathanaël currently resides in Martinique.

2 Philosophically and psychoanalytically the central issue of death and the death drive has been tackled from many different perspectives in the recent history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the work of Sartre, Foucault, Cioran, Norman O. Brown, to Freud, Lacan, Klein, Laplanche, and Eckhart Tolle, there is a wide range of approaches to this fundamental question. In *Sisyphus Outdone*, Nathanaël investigates and responds to death from core readings such as those by René Thom, Simone de Beauvoir, Blanchot, Derrida and Paul Celan.

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which reverberate with larger epochal issues that situate us on the cognitive and emotional threshold towards new modes of production and relations, new sensitivities made up of unprecedented ways of "sensing" the subject (Butler, *Senses of the Subject*). Since it is in and through the senses that *Sisyphus Outdone* takes us unawares, and shocks us with the intensity and iterative force traversing the text from beginning to end.

In this piece, it is my contention that Nathanaël, weaves a subtle photopoetics expanding the camera lens to include the "catastrophal" in everyday existence (associated to mathematician René Thom's catastrophe theory), failure (Halberstam), and problems with translation (her own fragile status as living in between languages and writing within this maze). On a more hopeful note, she also envisions alternative futures beyond the gender binary. I will attempt to address one of the text's central queries, how can the dispossessed and alienated liminal subject in neoliberal capitalism become a less alienated and marginalized individual producer, in her turn, of goods, and of life for the workforce, and take the future in her own hands? How can we subvert the use of photos—in themselves, commercial operations—and narratives that allegedly uphold the subject (subjected as she is to discourse) and concurrently promote exploitation and permanent waste of life and nature? With Nathanaël's texts, and in a meditation upon liminality and change, upon existence under erasure (Derrida 61), I aim at approaching photopoetics as a strategy for life and for textual (re)production in a late post(post)modernist scenario in which finance capitalism (Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital") and the instantaneity of its flows precludes agency and obliterates difference.

Nathanaël's textual strategies for survival end up in the creation of an alternative and gradually de-alienated liminal subject. In her important work on the recuperation of lost memories, specifically of photographer Claude Cahun's (1894-1954) opus, and in her own traversing the space of repetition, iteration and transformation in *Sisyphus Outdone* (2012)—her particular tribute to A. Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942)—, Nathanaël, as well as other inspiring writers and artists from her generation (Caroline Bergvall, 1962-; Miriam Reyes, 1970-; Staceyann Chin, 1972-), weaves a subtle photopoetics expanding the camera lens to include what has been rendered invisible in everyday experience, through a reflection on the imperceptible both in watching and in hearing, here re-focused through the lens of a complex composition. *Sisyphus Outdone* performatively enacts what it otherwise enunciates: through a visual ruse, the subject is both present and absent, audible and silenced, watchful and unaware. Whereas the text expands to include life and death, the ethics of the voice and the right to silence, it also undoes itself in its blanks, non sequiturs and interruptions, which arrest movement and prevent completion.

Following this introduction, this paper is divided into five sections. Section one, "Structure and Destructure," presents us with crucial questions of style and structure of the text, discussing fragmentariness among other fundamental strategies which singularize this piece. Section two, "Photopoetics I: The Apostrophal Subject," in an attempt at defining the type of subject we come across with, defines a subject in-between languages and genders, in permanent oscillation between life and death. Section three, "Photopoetics II: the threshold and the elusive image," engages with this important metaphor and addresses the corpse, the Shoah, the body and the nature of images. Section four, "Photopoetics III: Death," addresses death, the catastrophal, desire and the traumatic. Finally, section five, "Why Sisyphus?" goes back to Camus' thinking on the absurd man and Sisyphus's monumental and alienating task, and examines Nathanaël's response and proposals under the figure of a new subject.

Sisyphus Outdone: Structure and Destructure

Sisyphus consists of eight sections of unequal length and diverse internal dynamics: from section one, where major issues in the text are introduced and addressed verbally; we move to section two where two photographs occupy centre stage and the neuter (49) is introduced; section three opens with photography and "disavowal" (59), and digresses on body and space, the negative and pain, music and translation; section four speaks of replica and loss, the "self (is) in seism" (79), syncope, the wound and the subject "subjectless" (84) and "apostrophal" (89). The next section, entitled "aparté" (corresponding to a fifth

"movement") speaks about horses—two lines—and shows a larger picture, and is the shortest in the general design of the text. Section six is divided into two subsections. We find in a) after-effect and replica (95), photography and its resistant ethos (96), photographers and scholars whose work is significant (Xenakis, Ferrez, Bresson) and the "anonymity of suffering" (103); and in subsection b) photography and desire, temporality and mortality. The next section, entitled "Morendo," is one page long and tells about the carrying of a body and music. Finally, section eight culminates with a photo and is a rather lengthy speech on language and temporality (Virilio, H. Hilst, S. de Beauvoir), architecture, catastrophe theory, agony, wound, death and snapshots (121).

The text proceeds with a rhythm of replica, iteration, simultaneity and contra-replica. We can certainly hold that this structural "noise" reverberates in several dimensions within the text. Whereas the original "Aftershock" (13) is followed by stillness and we are instructed on how to look through reality (the reality of "pain" 13) and deconstruct the idea of "before", at a moment when the body in its occupation of space is troubled by "un séisme en soi" (18), we learn that the replica, "is dialogical, combative, echoic, duplicitous" (21), it exists thus in an in-between space that makes room for its complementary or its opposite. Thus, contra-replica is associated to an antiphonal quality of response which one often finds on the margins of the textual apparatus, as in the following excerpt in which the text plays with geographer Michel Lussault's ideas on "seismicity" and we read, "Un séisme en soi. A seism in [it]self. An ontology of foreclosed possibility. Of foregone eventuality. The single, perhaps even singular, certainty, is the conjuncture, in the body, living or not living, of shakenness and stillness, of tremulous seismicity. None of this is decided" (19). On the left margin, we read: "'Mais un séisme, en soi, n'est pas un phénomène social.' Michel Lussault. *L'Homme Spatial*, 20."

Iteration is probably the most conspicuous strategy in the text. Not only the photographic medium is constructed upon a sense of iteration, but also the Sisyphean task ("In the Sisyphus text, there is talk of murder," 53; "For example, I am writing Sisyphus," 67) and the subject's nomadic roaming in space and time. In the context of catastrophe theory, this translates into recursion and proceeds to developing seriality and an unbound sense of almost infinite progression. Finally, simultaneity is always present, since the text expands on a horizontal and vertical axis, in which perceptions, events, movement and stillness, occur in parallel and with no teleology: "'Now' is simultaneously 'now' and 'not now.' This may otherwise be describable as a 'catastrophe of the mind'" (120).

Among the crucial issues addressed in the text, I suggest that the body and its materiality in its phenomenological dimension, sexuality, and sexual ambiguity ("hermaphroditic," 26) must be read and constantly re-contextualized in every movement of the text: "If the body occupies a space, is the body itself not a space? Is the body occupied by the space it occupies?" (18). Very shortly, we will turn our attention to this complex conundrum.

Finally, none of Nathanaël's texts could be identified with its author without a sustained attention to style. One of the salient features of Nathanaël's writing is a constant inquiry into form. Fusion and hybridity are major elements within a post(post)modernist poetics of sorts. Fragmentation is ever present, and in *Sisyphus*, the different status of those fragments—quotations, translations from other texts, authoritative views, comments, definitions—gravitates around an apparently disconnected and a-hierarchical organization. Every one of these elements is referenced and classified according to a textual logic which finds its scholarly status on a works cited appendix, and a further section containing the texts in the original language and their translation—sometimes those translations are Nathanaël's.

In *Sisyphus*, the fragment points to an impossibility governing the generation of the text itself. In several of Nathanael's writings,[3] the relation of the fragment to the total work unfolds as a challenge to readings that would simply disregard the powerful disruption of the fragmentary. Our author engages in a literary-philosophic exploration of the relationship between language and thinking. The premise of linguistic relativity that how and what we think is dependent on the way we use language points also to the ethical dilemma of how and why we read literature.

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3 See, for example, *Absence Where As (Claude Cahun and the Unopened Book)*, 2009; *Vigilous, Reel. De-sire as Accusation*, 2010; and recently, *L'Heure Limicole*, 2016.

The text as replica and contra-replica, embedded in a dynamics of repetition, becomes an inquiry into the subject's prior history. An element of an abstract entity whose importance is all relative, the fragment is, the major feature of Nathanaël's writing. The writer has, indeed, explored the fragment at length, by bringing to its extreme the idea of the breakup of the text, and its reconstruction.

Photopoetics I: The Apostrophal Subject

In this world of appearances, the text opens with an aftershock, which later in the text recurs under the guise of "after-effect" (95). Nathanaël's engagement with postmodern philosophy and specifically with ontology is present from the start: "An ontology of foreclosed possibility" (19); "Subjectless is not without subjection" (84). By the end of section four, where the majority of the text's crucial issues are deployed, where the fundamental dictum "repetition at the heart of catastrophe" (extracted from C. Caruth's central work on trauma theory, *Unclaimed Experience*) is announced, we are told about, "The still [apostrophal] subject" (89). An explanation from classical rhetoric follows, "OED. [As explained by Quintilian, apostrophe was directed to a person present, modern usage has extended it to the absent or dead [who are for the nonce supposed to be present]" (89).

Nevertheless, there is much more to the "apostrophal" in its elliptical operation, and in English, in its allusion to condensation and contraction when a copula attempts to unite a subject and its verb or object. From the Greek *apóstrophos*, meaning eliding or turning away, we may add to Quintilian's definition above two other modalities: 1) "the omission of one or more letters in a word"; 2) "the sign used to indicate the omission of a letter or letters, and as a sign of the modern English genitive or possessive case" (*OED*).

In *Sisyphus*, we find multiple traces of the effects of the subject "out there," we know of the subject through the evidentiality of language: "In the last of language, language is subjectless. It ruins itself against an embarrassing hope for more" (38). In a contiguous fragment, one reads: "A ruined language is a language with neither subject nor object. It says nothing (or too much) of where it has been. Intimacy is, in this instance, intimation: 'La ruine nous conduit à une experience qui est celle du sujet dessaisi, et paradoxalement, il n'y a pas d'objet à cette experience'" (Lacroix, *Ruine* 52, as quoted by Nathanaël). It is all too often that we find in Nathanaël's texts this oscillation between languages. Here, French philosopher Sophie Lacroix illuminates the experience of a subject "(embedded) in ruins." In Lacroix' explanation of the rationale of her own work:

> From the test of loss to which the work of art makes us aware to the uncertainty of becoming nestled within the idea of progress, a ruin says much more than the thing that is exposed. Home to a thought for the absent, the ruin is worth as an operative "key idea" in deconstruction, in the critical function that it exerts with regard to what should remain hidden, forgotten. It thus reveals its true nature as a methodological instrument for examining a state of crisis. (*Ruine* n.p.)

Nathanaël comes to understand a subject-in-crisis at the moment of its most tenuous integration and functionality, and shows its "valence"[4] within the range of practices demanding its participation. This narrative of the subject's coming into being is preceded and followed by a series of "sensing" and "knowing" activities which may end up "undoing" (Butler, *Undoing Gender*) the subject itself, "... the 'I' comes into sentient being, even thinking and acting, precisely by being acted on in ways that, from the start, presume that nonvoluntary, though volatile field of impressionability. Already undone, or undone from the start, we are formed, and as formed, we come to be always partially undone by what we come to sense and know" (*Senses of the Subject* 11).

In *Sisyphus*, we are asked, "What does it do to one's ipseity, to say, in the first person, I am dying? Is this the equivalent of cancelling oneself out?" (32). Within this "ipseity," the subject self-reflectively operates as both index and sign as in the post-modernist critical debates on photography from the 1970s and 1980s. Susan Sontag has widely discussed the importance of taking a photograph and framing in a

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4 I am using "valence" following Fredric Jameson's crucial idea in his powerful explanation of dialectical thinking in *Valences of the Dialectic*.

double operation of selection and exclusion, "... the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 41).

In *Sisyphus*, the subject is apostrophal, elliptic, elusive, it manifests itself in and through its own absence, it is a subject whose existence is fraught with danger and anxiety, who traverses the thin line between life and death, a subject on the verge of disappearance. Along similar lines, photography, in its turn, is primarily concerned with invisibility, with what eludes presence and escapes view: "The photograph is concerned primarily with what disappears from view. In this it is a near perfect expression of desire" (105).

Photopoetics II: The Threshold and the Elusive Image

Focusing on a set of photographic practices and architectural dispositions, *Sisyphus Outdone* seems to argue that homogeneisation and standardization (procedures for quantifying change—catastrophe—, measuring seismic activity, "classifying" people—hermaphrodite, Jew...) need to be understood as a violent displacement of the subject's sovereign status. It is by recourse to what I am calling photopoetics that an apostrophal subject, a liminal subject in between languages and spaces emerges. Photopoetics is a radical practice of composition at work in several of Nathanaël's hybrid writings (*Absence Where As*, 2009; *Vigilous, Reel Desire as Accusation*, 2010; *L'Heure limicole*, 2016; *La mort de ma soeur*, 2018). In *Sisyphus Outdone*, photopoetics essentially involves a formal manoeuvre whose major thread running through the book is conceptual and revolves around the question of appearance and disappearance, both in its linguistic aspects and in its phenomenological dimension. Photopoetics is mostly constructed upon fragmentariness and superposition, upon palimpsestic operations –where a type of inscription and one or more types of writing, or an echo and (several) voices are pasted together– and procedures of excision and decomposition. The constant transformations and permutations among different elements within *Sisyphus* (subject, memory, corpse, doorway, lack) show particularly well by recourse to writing-cum-photographing. Photopoetics both makes apparent and veils what is perceived, intuited, apprehended and finally, even if provisionally, known. This is manifest in the constant play with language and photographic images, the latter are mostly superimposed up until their final dissolution (*Sisyphus Outdone* 41, 50, 93, 126). The former, due to non-semantic operations are provocative cues for perspicacious readers: "Someone carries a door through a door. This is demonstrable. / There are two doors. A door in a doorway. On this threshold, there is an absence of limits, an exacerbated falsehood of traversal." (28) In *Sisyphus*, representation becomes a synesthetic reflex in the cognitive process of decoding signs and images, leaving a shadow content of its referent.

Structurally speaking, we can argue that *Sisyphus* exhibits a structure of an acoustic echo chamber, voices and sound reverberate within a series of enclosures. Thus, for example, Section VIb addresses photography and desire (105), "unresolved temporality" (111), mortality (107) the "exergue" (110) and closes off with a musical score, Shostakhovich's String Quartet n. 8, a composition the Russian composer finished in the summer of 1960, as we are told in the appendix, "(composed) while he was visiting Dresden." Shostakovich's distress at the extent of the city's devastation was so profound that he wrote this quartet in only a few days and dedicated it to the victims of fascism and war" (145). *Sisyphus'* important engagement with the Shoah is pervasive throughout the text both in the allusions to the final solution in History and its representation in art. From early on, we are presented with Robert Häusser's photographic series "The 21 Doors of Benito Mussolini" (1983)—"from Il Duce's villa for the twenty-one years of Mussolini's rule" (18); Walter Benjamin's suicide—"The ante-chamber, for example, of the 'torturable body' Brecht attributed to WB" (29); Paul Virilio's photographs in his *Bunker Archaeology* (29); Rachel Whiteread's Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial (71), Adolf Eichmann (82), Cartier-Bresson's Dessau photos; to more dramatic allusions to the "calcined human body" (44). It is clear that both in writing and in photography, memorialization is crucial, and that "Historically speaking, our nothing is in our forgottenness" (54).

As we know, since they started to be used for recording purposes, echo chambers have always been

heavily insulated to exclude external noises, and internally anechoic, designed not to produce any internal echoes. In our text, architecture is a crucial metaphor present in a web of images such as the door (28 and ff.), threshold (28), dwelling (40), Arcades (49), amphiteatre (52), asylum (87), and finally, "architecture" itself is often invoked. We learn that architecture and photography are akin with regard to temporality, "It follows that if architecture stands against time, photography must refute it. In this do they bear a similar responsibility to the present. Their time is always faulted" (119).

Throughout *Sisyphus Outdone,* Nathanaël displays a photographic archive of opaque views produced in order to show the devastating effects of capitalism on the development of a current ethos for those invisible to History. It provides an alternative model to hegemonic cultures, one mediated through photography's capacity to standardize and type, and also by its opposite, namely, photography as a means of constructing and conceptualizing a unique and singular self. Nathanaël meditates upon the subject analysing it, as a practice in and of representation, in permanent oscillation between temporality and stasis, belonging and uprooting, life and death.

As Judith Goldman holds, a pivotal issue in the text is "language's asymmetrically yet mutually constitutive relation to the body" ("A Failed Snapshot"). In the in-between space of "inchoate[ness]" (*Sisyphus Outdone* 26) Sisyphus' subject appears at the threshold, interiority and exteriority mark the boundaries of its ground. As in Blanchot's "Literature and the right to death," we can argue that,

> [L]iterature does not confine itself to rediscovering in the interior what it wanted to abandon on the threshold. For what it finds, as the interior, is the outside which, once an exit, has now changed into the impossibility of leaving..." (50).

Thus, the not-yet-constituted-subject must traverse this threshold in order to gain a sense of itself, both in the field of language and of vision. Kaja Silverman, in her important theorization on the threshold, after Lacan's ("the mirror-image seems to be the threshold of the visible world," Écrits 3), argues that only by traversing the mirror stage, "one enters the scopic domain" (*Threshold* 3).

In my view, in *Sisyphus Outdone* the apostrophal subject is on its way to traversing the threshold which gives access to life and death. This complex movement is one akin to how Blanchot ("The Essential Solitude") accounts for how literary language becomes the image of language and by virtue of this operation Being is, inadvertently, shunned away. In this realm of images, the subject seems to approach itself and her "self-reflection," which reflects no one and nothing, and is not simply either a human being or a corpse, because it is impersonal and a copy of the original,

> [I]f the cadaver resembles to such a degree, that is because it is, at a certain moment, pre-eminently resemblance, and it is also nothing more .... But what does it resemble? Nothing / This is why each living man, really, does not yet have a resemblance. Each man, in the rare moments when he shows a similarity to himself, seems to be only more distant, close to a dangerous neutral region, astray in himself, and in some sense his own ghost, already having no other life than that of the return (Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary" 83-84).

Thus, in *Sisyphus*, the proximity of the apostrophal subject and the cadaver is clear and it brings us to the pervasive analogy between the subject and the corpse, and between the subject and the "subject-to-be-killed" in the concentration camps.

Throughout *Sisyphus*, Nathanael presents us with her archive of catastrophe, loss and mourning. As an expression of the moral need to make the Holocaust visible again in the works of Häuser, Virilio, Cartier-Breson and Whiteread, as well as in the disquieting quality of Umbo, Vieira da Silva, Guibert and Grospierre's crucial contribution to traversing life and death.

The extended metaphor of the subject on the verge of death finds an in-between architectural space in *Sisyphus*, traversing a door, between and *inter*-sexes, gender-less, dispossessed of an image of one-self—if only a mirror image that might assuage one's desire for humanity and knowledge—, in the non-places of anonymity and silence. The text reads,

> There are two doors. A door in a doorway. On this threshold, there is an absence of limits, an exacerbated falsehood of traversal. What possibility exists in the space occupied by two doors enters into the body as foreclosure and eventuality" (*Sisyphus* 28).

> The door is always open. This might be History's proviso. An inhospitable hospitality. Suspect and ill at ease (*Sisyphus* 38-9).

This unclassifiable body announced in the interstices of sections and sites, is at times alive—"ontologically speaking, the self is in seism" (79), "It is the body of a person who is not dead. There is evidence, however, of decomposition" (115)—at times, dead, occluding our knowledge, "Whether the post scriptum is [also] a postmortem" (69).

What I am calling photopoetics in *Sisyphus Outdone* is a practice of writing traversing the verbal and the visual which uses techniques of citation, appropriation and (technical) manipulation, the idea of copy-without-original, and a predominant idea of repetition—usually "réplique" in the text (15 ff.). Nathanaël visualizes a new understanding of the subject, defined not by emotional depths but by her media surfaces, by her response to the media machines of photography. These photographs, appear to exceed any signification that can be attributed to them by current theories of photography. Several of these images are serial: how they are seen is dependent on who is doing the looking and under what conditions of "seeing." And for photopoetics to be successful "seeing photographically" is crucial. In Celia Lury's view, contemporary subjectivity is constituted in the after-life of the photographic act, she argues for a prosthetic culture in which "the subject as individual passes beyond the mirror stage of self-knowledge, of reflection of the self, into that of self-extension, what Barthes calls 'the advent of myself as other'" (3).

I would like to suggest we may also understand Sisyphus's apostrophal subject as an outcome of the "expository society" —a current concern with both exposure and exhibition (Harcourt) and the "poor" image (Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image"). It is a subject at the threshold of her own becoming. In critic and visual artist Hito Steyerl's view, the poor image is inherently dynamic, susceptible to forces beyond itself, impermanent and fallible. This is intrinsic to the nature of the digital image: as it can be easily manipulated —through editing software, filters, …— and is subject to glitches and corruption, it also allows for a certain amount of flexibility. Through manipulation and abstraction, images like the ones appearing in *Sisyphus* contain a certain space for experimentation, transformation and freedom. Nathanaël's work at this point is inspiring as to the multiple ways in which the rigidity of social identity categories can be challenged through the poor image. As Hito Steyerl, argues,

> The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation./ In short: it is about reality. ("Poor Image" 9).

Steyerl locates contemporary art as a representative of the collapsing of time and space of the contemporary moment ("Duty Free Art" 9-10).

In photopoetics, both writing on image production and questioning the image is what is at stake. The text invokes with nostalgia analogic photography in its materiality, and the fragility and impermanence of its duration in time. Using digital photography, and techniques for alteration and manipulation, we can no longer be certain of, as it were, the *effet de réel* of photography, "the pure and simple 'representation' of the 'real', the naked relation of 'what is ' (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning; this resistance confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*..." (Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* 146).

Throughout the text, photographs appear "serially" on pages 40, 50, 93 and 126. The series opens with a picture of haystacks, gradually superimposed with the writer's face as seen from the distance, and a close up of the same face with closed eyes (a bird can be seen and was previously alluded to in section II, "The bird, in this instance, which is scarcely discernible, is in a field of apparent surfaces" (42), finally the last photo, is partially veiled and subject to multiple readings. *Sisyphus Outdone* can also be read as a collection of comments on photographers' work and photography since the early twentieth century. We live in a world of images which necessarily cannot outlive their time, whether materially or immaterially (as pieces of individual and collective memory), "… the image is not separable from its degradation. Its substances are both paper and light. Thus, they are neither as they run into each other" (42). Our eagerness in this quest for new images has, no doubt, in its showing and telling, Wittgenstenian undertones, "I know what I am

looking for without what I am looking for having to exist" (65, as qtd. from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Remarks*).

Photopoetics III: Catastrophe and Death

In the eighth and last section of *Sisyphus Outdone*, the writing subject takes pains to disentangle the catastrophal—"catastrophe of the mind"(120), "theatre of the catastrophal" (120), agony (121), syncope (121)—from death (120). In a tightly condensed fragment, we grasp the relation between the theatre of the catastrophal, translation (translatability) and thinking: "A theatre of the catastrophal with its figuring of untranslatability is also in this sense a theatre of the mind. A catastrophic theatre that exceeds thought. In other words it is unthinkable" (120). The catastrophal is untranslatable and unthinkable. As we know, it comes from René Thom's theorization on catastrophe theory, designed to study discontinuous processes in which predictability is very difficult. Thom aimed at applying mathematics to biology and developed a theory for processes involving four variables which ended up yielding seven basic types of catastrophes.

In *Sisyphus Outdone*, Nathanaël thoughts and digressions on the catastrophal also appear constantly but unpredictably throughout the whole text, specifically on sections I, II, IV, VIa and VIII. *Sisyphus* opens with a telling epigraph by René Thom: "It may be possible to demonstrate the incontrovertible character of certain catastrophes, like illness or death. Knowledge will no longer necessarily be a promise of success or of survival; it may just as easily be the certainty of our failure, of our end." (139). Throughout the volume, the catastrophal is associated to "a theatre of reiterative ending" (21), "the mouth" (33), "The 'I' (might be a catastrophist)" (39), "the photograph" (43), "a failure of time" (47), "(a Schönberg musical) composition" (83), "repetition" (88), "Vladimir I. Arnold's theory" (99), "René Thom's" (117), "the mind" (120), and the "theatre of the catastrophal" (120). Catastrophe, in René Thom's theory accounts for a sudden change in state, "… a model particularly successful … not only to describe the event but also to 'explain' them" (Zeeman 65), and if we examine *Sisyphus'* major concerns, they mostly have to do with discontinuities and abrupt changes, certainly the most salient of all is the passage from life to death.

For a long time now, photography has been associated with death, with the fascination of the fragmented body and the corpse. Susan Sontag holds that "All photographs are memento mori" (*On Photography* 15) which remind audiences of their own mortality, and "this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (*On Photography* 70). *Sisyphus* situates the reader confronting death in several scenarios, which also metaphorically reverberate with the voice of a vulnerable subject, with the self in seism, with the body of a dead person, the final solution, and catastrophe. Nevertheless, the design of *Sisyphus Outdone* is constructed upon analogy: photographs are inserted within the text, creating a semantic plurality, always trying but failing again, to transcribe the pain of lack.

Sisyphus should resolve the subject's mourning, but the text is only dramatizing it. The writing then has to become in the same instance an act of exorcism by which the writer would have freed himself from her pain, and an act of memory, by which she makes the memory of the vanished subject eternal.

By formally renewing textuality, Nathanaël reveals an anxiety associated to time (past, present and future). As I mentioned before, the strategy chosen by the author to escape the pitfalls of the imaginary is that of analogy. One can identify three of them: the textual voice makes her way to the genre of the essay, in which she endeavours, for example, to distinguish between photography and language, or between photography and death; she alternates comments on photographs and reproduces a few within the text, which creates a semantic plurality within the work as a whole; and she associates scholarly and creative writing. These analogies, which use antithetical relations and values (didactic and empirical, existential and aesthetic), make of *Sisyphus* a work of the in-between which is also constantly missing its target. To insert oneself into the textual interstices to signal the difference and the uniqueness of her condition, remains, finally, incomplete: "They kill the original to, by discovering that the original was already dead" (27). Emptiness consequently becomes a condition of her existence, and even worse, it multiplies the experience of catastrophe and dislocation: "Still the mouth is catastrophal. It kisses catastrophe into the world" (33). Solitude is also an inalienable and permanent condition, "The sex of the sexes is inchoate.

Once it is born it is alone with its birth, it is without genitors, it has only its death to look forward to. ... Inchoate is hermaphroditic. What is unspoken [for]" (26).

Sisyphus allusion to Claude Cahun's, "Que me veux-tu?" (1928)[5] is a crucial turning point where this "inchoation" associated to sex and hermaphroditism appears in the midst of its undoing: "Hermaphroditic is unrecognizable. ... What do you want from me. The question asks itself. It takes painstaking pleasure from itself. It marks the world made and unmakes it" (26-7).

A central gesture of inversion occurs in Cahun's photography, especially picturing the body. Here, photography becomes the privileged means for self-effacement. As it is amply known, Cahun used her body as the primary material with which to work, and in her photographs bodies appear as problematically gendered and genderless. They are clothed differently and there is no way that we can tell who is the Claude Cahun we are watching. Disrupting how the body looks like and has been traditionally represented, her photographs put gender and bodies into question, erasing the connection between the body and its personas.

The textual allusion to Guy Hocquenghem's "objectless desire" (37) and to the "[N]euter is without desire" (49), and finally to "the intellect of the sex is undecided" (80) show the textual concern with non-binary models, and an open exploration of desire as drive and representation. Here, writing does not simply refer to literary creation. Often associated with her cathartic functions, writing carries with it the hope of a reinvigoration, "Write in order not simply to destroy, in order not simply to conserve, in order not to transmit; write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of the disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks," said Blanchot (38), emphasizing here what motivates writing, "the impossible real". In addition to the hole through which the words slip and to the trauma that motivates such writing there exists another dimension in which the pain of the loss is suspended.

Writing is an extension of trauma; it keeps alive, active in memory, the memory of what was its motivation: it can only announce this original trauma and repeat it again. Indeed, the final 'revision' that the writer will impose on her work will be like a working through of the traumatic, once again the separation of the (loved) object (the book) becomes the metonymy of what is read and acknowledged as new (the Other). Writing thus becomes both a source of energy where the creative desire is alive because the writer finds there every time an Other, and a source of anxiety because, as we have just said, the final stage of writing is a re-enactment of mourning (loss) and entails a new loneliness.

Writing sends back to another dimension the sorrow of the textual voice without sublimating it: this space is infinite, and time is eternal: "Is a catastrophic failure a failure of time, a tempest unaccounted for in number or incident" (47). Like "the depression which is defined by an economic position which concerns a narcissistic organization of the void ... which resembles a simulation of the death to protect itself from the death" (Fédida 71), writing reproduces, "simulates" the presence of the absence in order to protect oneself from the harm caused by this absence. In fact, the daily writing of *Sisyphus* is perfectly correlated with this practice of immortalizing writing. Now, the dialectic between presence and absence, life and death, writing and nothingness is interpreted both as a personal need to write, a healthy cathartic need, and as the revelation of the anguish of time and death: "Mais qu'est-ce à dire qu'une souffrance sans sujet? ... Suffering without a subject may well be a pain in the place of a subject: If the concordance is still in without, then the concordance itself is obliterative in that it takes the form of a question of means: mais qu'est-ce à dire—" (84).

It is in the middle (in between) space that writing comes to be progressively exhausted. If, by not fulfilling its cathartic role, it loses this capacity and exerts an inverse action (that is to say, an involution), and becomes completely empty, "When all is said, what remains to be said is disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary)" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 33). Contrary to the solution that this quote from Maurice Blanchot gives us, that is to say the recourse to the fragment, *Sisyphus*, the monument work of Nathanaël to Camus's ideas on *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, shows an astonishing continuity regarding the constellation of ideas it tackles—the subject,

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5 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Describes Cahun's "Que me veux-tu?" (1929) as follows, "In this polycephalic self-portrait, she appears magnetically bound to her own doppelgänger in a monstrous embodiment of internal struggle." (metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/296276?exhibitionId=%7B36D81705-241D-4934-AB02-FD7C8DBBB3E5%7D&oid=296276)

catastrophe, time, replica, photography, architecture, death. On the other hand, the absence of writing reveals an obstruction to speech, preventing the words from being expressed until the final silence of this piece: "Il y a tout ce par quoi le silence arrive" (*Sisyphus* 122). The voice is witness to "A perfect wound, deeply bruised, and barely visible" (124).

If we take up Roland Barthes' crucial question, if no one really reads a photographic image in the same way, what does it really represent?, and the following comment, we realize how we may as well present an alternative to the post-modern notion of the photograph merely as another component of simulacra, or the intentional creation of an image without meaning or origin, and go back to the traditional mirror-like "effet de reel" as a means of problematizing and conceptualizing a self:

> All I look like is other photographs of myself, and this to infinity: no one is ever anything but the copy of a copy, real or mental (at most, I can say that in certain photographs I endure myself, or not, depending on whether or not I find myself in accord with the image of myself I want to give). (...) Ultimately a photograph looks like anyone except the person it represents. (Barthes, *Camera* Lucida 102)

Throughout his career, Barthes has once and again argued, "An image is, ontologically, what we can't say [anything] about: to talk about an image requires a special, very difficult art, that of the Description of images (=imaginary descriptions)" (*Preparation of the Novel* 310). At this point, we move away from ekphrasis since, to give the illusion of reality, ekphrasis resorts to the imaginary. In addition, language is always inadequate; like photography, it always fails to describe what it means. In *Sisyphus*, we read, "The photograph is concerned primarily with what disappears from view" (*Sisyphus* 105). The experience of "lostness" (52) is consequently multiplied and the pain and lack persist.

Why Sisyphus?

As I have argued before, *Sisyphus Outdone* is Nathanaël's tribute to Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe.* From 1940 a new stage in the writing of Albert Camus opens that we know with the name of cycle of the absurd, and in which he would cultivate a great variety of genres: novel, essay and poetry. The books that make up this cycle are four in total, *L'Étranger* (1942), *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), *Le Malentendu* (1944), and *Caligula* (1945), all of them written in the WWII period. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, originally titled "Treatise on the Absurd," shows us how Sisyphus becomes the hero of the absurd par excellence.

After finishing *L'Étranger,* the best-known work of the production of Camus, our author, defines for the first time the absurdity in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, the essay is divided into four sections that describe an "absurd spirit". The first, "An absurd reasoning," puts us in front of the only "really serious philosophical problem" that exists in Camus' opinion, that of suicide. The central question posed by philosophy is to know if it is really worth living when the human being is a being for death. In *Sisyphus Outdone,* section IV, the concern is with epitaphs, and with the asynchrony between the time of the living and the static time of death: "Given the present, how does one address an epitaph. In keeping with notions of temporal adversity, is it out of time" (*Sisyphus* 86).

Camus' third section, "Absurd creation," is a study of Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (1872). Here Camus proposes another alternative to the absurd: the work is "the only possibility of maintaining his conscience, and of setting his limits." In short, creating is a central activity that allows us to shape our destiny. Finally, the fourth section, "The Myth of Sisyphus," shares the title with the volume. Its axis is the mythical figure of Sisyphus. Condemned by the gods to make a rock roll up the side of a mountain, Sisyphus embodies the absurd man par excellence, in particular, when he returns again and again to the point of departure. During his pause, Sisyphus undertakes the same uphill endeavour that he knows he cannot win. It is from this moment when he begins his awareness of his own destiny and acceptance of it.

Le Mythe de Sisyphe is the philosophical essay that Camus writes in direct confrontation with existentialism. We can affirm that within the cycle of the Camusian absurdity, it is the fundamental text in which our author expresses his thesis about the absurdity of existence, while the rest of the works of the period can be understood as illustrations of it: the novel *L'Étranger*, and the plays *Caligula* and *Le*

Malentendu.

The texts of the absurd reflect on the human condition in a nonsensical horizon, in which the very existence has lost its raison d'être, and continues on its way, inexorably, towards nothingness.

For Camus, the experience of the absurd is individual, performed in solitude and confronting the harsh circumstances that he has to endure. By reflecting lucidly on suffering, Camus will use three models: Greek (represented by Sisyphus), Jewish (Job) and Christian (Jesus). Our author considered Sisyphus the personification of the absurdity of human life. For Camus, "the struggle to the heights is enough to fill the heart of man," (123) although, at that authentic crossroads on whether to continue (with condemnation) or to end one's life, tragedy is played out, and so we must understand the enigmatic affirmation of Camus, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy," (123) in the key that precisely offers us at the end of his essay, referring to the tragic work, "the tragic work could be the one that, once all hope has been banished, describes the life of a happy man" (94). For Camus, to take to the extreme the consequences of an aesthetic of the Absurd is complicated, and very few intellectuals have done it, Kafka and Nietzsche are two essential thinkers whom we must reread in this sense.

Camus' Sisyphus provides a specific example of how a life can be lived to the full in the face of the highest absurdities. It could be that Sisyphus, when confronted with his future prospects of rolling the boulder up the hill could say that his job is to roll the boulder up the hill, and he will do it, just as he has done it before—he lacks any responsibility for his actions; it is outside of his control. This Sisyphus-hero allows his mind to be empty, and would not blame the gods for his condition. He could acknowledge that the gods were the ones who set up his eternal torment, but there would be a sense in which he adopted and internalized their decree. Even as he rolled the stone forever, he could not adopt the position of rebellion that Camus asserts is essential for any chance at happiness. Thus, there would be no defiance to authority.

To conclude, in a post-existentialist manoeuver, *Sisyphus Outdone* creates the conditions of possibility for the collapse of temporality in a world of simulacra, where elusive snapshots and digital images allow for the disappearance and even "de-composition" of the subject; "A photograph, as it were? Incapable of a present?" (*Sisyphus* 121); "It is the body of a person who is not dead. There is evidence, however, of decomposition" (115). Action relapses into failure, and speech dissolves into silence. This failure is probably an epochal sign, and if we go back to the "poor" and elusive images of the present, "Failure goes hand in hand with capitalism … We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique" (Halberstam 88).

This caleidoscopic sensitiveness, which operates photopoetically—and fractally, as in catastrophe—, as translation does, "In translation the broken mirror stands in for every possible mirror, though it is none of these" (*Sisyphus* 32), operates as an antiphon to Camus' *Sisyphus*. Nathanaël posits the body as asynchronous with its own burden, and a temporality fraught with catastrophe and dereliction —"To posit a temporality is a way of overlooking time" (67). Constructing and dismantling in movement and action, inverting the series of the ineluctable facts of History, the apostrophal subject revisits the past, traverses the threshold, and stutters futurity. As an "Angelus Novus" gone astray, in the midst of the storm we call progress, the voice in *Sisyphus Outdone*, unoblivious and homeless, meditates upon the "syncope" (121) which in the grammar of bodies, makes room for transformation and, as in catastrophe theory, sudden, unexpected change.

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