

COLLISION

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The Missed

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss Zineb Sedira's two-screen video projection "Saphir" in relation to the landscape which Hélène Cixous has called the "the immense landscape of the trans-, of the passage." My non-conclusive text explores the acts of transition taking place on the dual screen of Sedira's video work. The work – filmed in the harbour area of Algiers – forms a multifaceted visual narrative of departures and arrivals. Within this narrative an intriguing choreography develops between two solitary characters, a man and woman, who never meet but nonetheless, step by step, mutually perform a ritualistic dance. "Saphir" – which borrows its name from a French colonial hotel – is filled with ambiguities that evoke the landscape described by Cixous. Contemplating its topography, I become involved in Cixous's bodily word world. "Passage" is what she calls part of this landscape, but it is also a word. It is a password which when split in two in the French language becomes ill-behaved and unwise. But could the word, I ask, also lead to a wise step (*un pas sage*)? And where do the steps danced by Sedira's man and woman lead?

KEYWORDS

Zineb Sedira, video art, Hélène Cixous, landscape, passage

COLLISION

Zineb Sedira's "Saphir" and Hélène Cixous' "landscape of the *trans-*, of the passage"

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Encountering Zineb Sedira's two-screen video projection "Saphir" (2006), I sense the presence of the landscape that Hélène Cixous has called the "the immense landscape of the *trans-*, of the passage."¹ It is a strong yet delicate presence of a topography resisting absolute definition. This landscape does not set everything adrift, but is a vast terrain where knowing and not knowing reside side by side, where that which can and that which cannot be decided share space. According to Cixous, the factors of instability, uncertainty or what Jacques Derrida has called "the undecidable" are inseparable from human life, and one enters into the landscape of the *trans-*, of the passage, if "one remains open and susceptible to all the phenomena of overflowing, beginning with natural phenomena."² I do not know if I am open and susceptible to all the phenomena, but the landscape attracts me, and so does Zineb Sedira's video projection.

Saphir: On the dual screen, parallel flows of images speak to and of each other. Poetically they form visual vocabularies of interconnections and transitions. Background sounds of indistinct human voices, the blowing of ship sirens and traffic intermingle with the moving images. The scenes and sounds are from the harbour area of Algiers; the nearby Hotel Saphir, built by the French in the 1930's, lends its name to the video work. A solitary man overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and the port of the North African city. While at times leaning against a decaying seashore balustrade and at other times standing in front of Hotel Saphir, he watches ships come and go. The big hotel windows behind him, seeming to face the sea like eternally observing eyes, emphasise the act of looking. Inside the hotel, a woman resides in solitude. She moves through empty rooms and corridors, she has coffee and croissants, and through one of many windows she watches the harbour: arrivals and departures. One of the ships at sea is the ferry Tariq Ibn Ziyad. This ferry sails between Algiers and Marseille, but in which direction is it now heading? Is it docking or leaving?

A subtle play between human gazes and the seemingly seeing windows takes place. In his beautiful essay, "Saphir," Richard Dyer refers to the windows as "metaphorical eyes" watching the ferry. He notes how the "relationship between the land-bound hotel Saphir and the water-born [*sic*] Tariq Ibn Ziyad is developed throughout the film as the central trope for arrivals and departures."³ He also pays attention to the dialogue that develops between the sea and two lonely characters who never meet, but who every now and then appear parallel to each other on the dual screen.⁴ Intriguing choreographies evolve when the man and the woman walk in staircases. The steps seem to lead up and down without coming to a halt, a destination. The man climbs a flight of city steps, while the woman walks up and down the stairs of the hotel. At times there is the illusive suggestion that they *will* meet at some point. The stairs are, according to Dyer, used as a metonym for the notion of "transition" and the walking is, he writes, "like a ritual dance of departure and arrival between the man outside and the woman inside."⁵ But to where does this ritual stair dance between the two performers lead?

Passage: Throughout his essay on "Saphir," Dyer emphasises the notion and state of "transition," and when I encounter this work I sense a strong yet delicate presence of the landscape described by Cixous. "Passage": it can be a part of an immense landscape, but it is also a word with many explanations and uses. My *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* from 1992 gives several definitions of this noun. The first is "process or means

of passing; transit." Three other explanations are: "liberty or right to pass through," "journey by sea or air" and "transition from one state to another."⁶ Although this is not a classification exercise aiming to match words with multilayered visual narratives, these concise descriptions point to a certain extent towards elements and actions in "Saphir." Some of them also point towards doings taking place during my encounter with the film. For instance, I first met "Saphir" in Zineb Sedira's solo exhibition *Under the Sky and Over the Sea*.⁷ The exhibition title carries a *trans-*, a passage within it and also indicates a motion through a vast landscape. This certainly nourishes my reflections.

The descriptions from the dictionary merely point towards "Saphir" and towards my encounter with it, and they do not reach all the way through. However, something happens when the lexical definitions of "passage" are followed by a remark within brackets saying: "[French: related to pass]." "Pass" can be a noun referring to a "narrow way through mountains," but in connection to "passage" the dictionary alludes to the verb "pass," of which the "most current and important sense" is given as: "move onward, especially past something."⁸ The reference to "moving past" is essential. It indicates that something, someone is involved in a doing, in an action of movement. However, the fact that the movement is said to move onward and especially past something makes me hesitate. The suggested positional direction somehow evokes ideas of a choreography fixed beforehand, that dismisses any divergent step and so must be overcome ("passed"), following perhaps a hesitation which is therefore itself significant. Also important is the reference to the French language as it reconnects me to the ideas and writings of Hélène Cixous in which words are set in motion, given bodies and are reaching through.

In one of her many essays Cixous writes: "I like the word passage. *Pas sage* (ill-behaved/unwise). All the passwords all the passing and boarderpass [*sic*] words, the words which cross the eyelid *on the interior* of their own body."⁹ As always Cixous plays with the French language, and the English translation of the essay retains her word game with *pas sage*. It could not be translated without losing its serious playfulness, so within parentheses the translator gives an explanation of the meaning that comes forth when "passage" is split right down the middle: "*Pas sage* (ill-behaved/unwise)." When reading this I cannot stop myself from trying to play with my stumbling French: I trip over *un pas sage*, I slip over a wise step. In the unruly word the unwise and wise dwell simultaneously, they

rub against each other and a landscape resisting absolute definition makes its presence known.¹⁰

The landscape of the trans-, of the passage: It is a vast terrain that can be discovered when one sensitively stays open to all phenomena of overflowing. The prerequisites for crossing its borders may seem difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil. But could it be that it is not the landscape setting up barriers and denying entrance to its grounds? Could it be that it is we who are doing this? It may be so because we are, as Cixous underlines, the ones making laws with our languages. We are the ones throwing up borders and we are "the customs officers of communication: we admit or we reject."¹¹ Language can work in an exclusive manner, but it can also be inclusive. There are, as Cixous writes, words "which cross the eyelid *on the interior* of their own body." And, I like to think, while moving through their own interiors they can also open borders for others. But how does one move along with these words? "Passage," it is a part of a landscape but also a word – a password. When split in two it becomes ill-behaved and unwise while also leading to a wise step. Are the two wordplays conflicting with each other? Do they call for opposing actions? Or must one unknowingly move along with both of them, because if one hesitates between the two, the border may close and thus obstruct the crossing? When striving for passage one has to move rapidly as, according to Cixous, "the ground will always give way, always."¹² Hesitating, the wise step may very well become a missed step.

Zineb Sedira – born and raised in France by Algerian parents, and now living and working in London as well as in Algiers – moves between cultures and countries. She lives the multifaceted processes of the *trans-*, in the passage. She knows their forces and fragilities. She explores them in many of her works, and in "Saphir" she does it through parallel flows of images from a contemporary Algiers. It is a present that also contains a past, a past of French colonialism. It is a present hosting experiences of a brutal colonial era during which Hotel Saphir was built. Dyer notes how this majestic but decaying hotel works "as a trope for the fading of the influence of a colonial power, still present, but gradually crumbling away."¹³

In "Saphir," Sedira carefully stages a visual narrative; however the actors involved, the man and woman, do not speak but pass on the narrative through their movements, through their gazes and dance. The unspoken fact that the woman, a French actor, is daughter to a man described as a "pied noir" retrospectively adds dimensions to the story. So

does the fact that the solitary man, an Algerian actor, has lived and worked in France but has now returned to his native country.¹⁴ Departures and arrivals move in and out of each other. Directions multiply. The woman has come to her father's country of birth, a country that he, being a Frenchman, had to leave.¹⁵ She lingers in empty rooms built for passersby. Is she one of those who pass by? The man, returned from the former ruling country across the sea, stays close to the harbour. Is his return final?

Hélène Cixous – who was born in Algeria at the end of the 1930's and who, upon moving to France in 1955, "adopted an imaginary nationality which is literary nationality"¹⁶ – writes that she learned the French language in a garden from which she was on the edge of being expelled because she was a Jew.¹⁷ And she continues: "I was of the race of Paradise-losers. Write French? With what right? Show your credentials! What's the password?"¹⁸ Through her writing, Cixous seems to have found the word. However, since having found it she has not obediently settled down. Growing up in Algeria she saw "the French at the 'height' of imperialist blindness" and from this spectacle she learned everything.¹⁹ Did she learn about the importance of the "passage?" I think so. When writing about her "algeriance" she states: "the chance of my genealogy and history arranged things in such a way that I would *stay passing*."²⁰ And while passing the movements of the passage lead her to the element of writing which is "the necessity of only being the citizen of an extremely inappropriable, unmasterable country or ground."²¹

The *pas sage*, the chances of genealogies, histories and states of passing by, become part of my reflections on "Saphir" along with the film's arrivals and departures, gazes and dance. The man and the woman lead parallel existences. They both look at the sea and the ships in the harbour, but their gazes and their bodies do not meet. Yet, they are involved in a mutual choreography. I think of "pass," of the act of moving onward and above all past something. Is the ritual stair dance between the woman and the man moving in such a way? I do not know, but I know it is moving. And it moves me.

• Notes •

¹ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.

² Ibid.

³ Richard Dyer, "Saphir," in *Zineb Sedira: Saphir*, ed. Claire Grafik and Mériadek Caraës (London: Photographer's Gallery and Paris: Kamel Mennour and Paris Musées, 2006), 10.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1992 ed, s.v. "passage."

⁷ This exhibition was shown at Bildmuseet in Umeå, Sweden during the autumn of 2010.

⁸ *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "passage."

⁹ Hélène Cixous, "Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 186. Emphasis original.

¹⁰ In her writings Cixous repeatedly addresses the states of knowing and not knowing. Intriguing relations between the two states evolve, and when writing about Cixous' work, Derrida, for instance, states: "She knows without knowing." See Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 133.

¹¹ Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints*, 51.

¹² Ibid., 52.

¹³ Dyer, "Saphir," 11.

¹⁴ Zineb Sedira quoted in "Zineb Sedira in Conversation with Christine Van Assche," in *Zineb Sedira: Saphir*, ed. by Claire Grafik and Mériadek Caraës, 61.

¹⁵ Zineb Sedira uses the expression "pied-noir" to explain the situation of the actor's father, who was born and grew up in colonized Algeria. Upon Algeria's declaration of independence in 1962, a great number of French citizens had to leave for France.

¹⁶ Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints*, 204.

¹⁷ Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. by Deborah Jenson, trans. Deborah Jenson with modifications by Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B: Tauris Publishers 1996), 70.

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, "My Algeriance, In Other Words: To Depart and Not to Arrive From Algeria," in *Stigmata*, 227. Emphasis original.

²¹ Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints*, 52.

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