PRZEGLĄD KULTUROZNAWCZY
NR 3 (53) 2022, s. 421–444
doi: 10.4467/20843860PK.22.028.16617
www.ejournals.eu/Przeglad-Kulturoznawczy/

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WRITING OF LIGHT OR WRITING OF SHADE? JACQUES DERRIDA ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Abstract: The article presents Jacques Derrida's reflections on photography. Although the philosopher himself declared his "lack of competence" in matters concerning visual arts and, more broadly, the image because his domain was word/text, he often spoke/wrote about the nature of the image, including the photographic one, as he was often provoked/invited to make such statements. Derrida did not create a coherent theory of the photographic image and it was never his ambition. However, scattered in several texts, his original reflections on the essence of photography – not in the commonly accepted thinking about this medium as the phenomenon of "writing of light," but rather a medium that uses a kind of "writing of shade" (or *sciagraphy*) – force us to reflect and think critically. This article presents analyses and interpretations of Derrida's texts in which the problem of photography is merely a context for broader philosophical considerations (*The Postcard*, *Memoirs of the Blind*, *Aletheia*, *Rights of Inspection*), as well as those in which photography becomes the basic material of reflection (*The Deaths of Roland Barthes*, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, *Athens, Still Remains*). Derrida's thinking (even in darkness) turns out to be worth considering as reading his "amateur" texts on photography proves that his voice can be inspiring in this field as well.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, photography, writing of light, *sciagraphy*, still

Photography as *sciagraphy*, the writing of light as the writing of shade.[1]

Visibility itself is invisible, it is thus dark, obscure, nocturnal (*dark*) and it is necessary to be blind to it (immersed in darkness, *in the dark*) in order to see. In order to be able [*pouvoir*] to see [*voir*] and to know [*savoir*]. This law of the luminous phenomenon (*phōs*) is inscribed, from the origin, in nature (*physis*). Like a story of the eye. The laws of photography are in nature;

[1] J. Derrida, *Aletheia*, "The Oxford Literary Review" 2010, vol. 32 (2), p. 171.

> they are physical laws; and to say this takes nothing away from the unheard-of event of this modern technique.[2]
>
> We would have to go back along this path all the way to the Platonic skiagraphia, and to all shadow writing – before the modern technology summarily named "photography." What is described as a play of shadow and light is already a form of writing. There is the legend of Dibutade, who sees, retains, and draws only the shadow of her lover on the wall, before this operation is itself represented by drawing: is this not already a play of light, shadow, and archive?[3]
>
> Every photograph is of the sun.[4]

I meant to be concise when writing about Jacques Derrida and his statements about photography. However, it turns out that these statements are more frequent than it may seem, taking into account numerous bibliographic lists. I was supposed to be concise, so I am trying to reduce my *writing* but Derrida's "writings" do not necessarily give in to this reduction, they tend to explode here and there with subsequent reading addresses (of his texts and of authors he refers to). Did the French philosopher read and reflect upon everything that had been written in every field related to language/word and image? I have the impression that he was very often just improvising, I think he might have not spoken about jazz, although I do not even want to check because it may turn out that somewhere on the web there is a brilliant statement by Derrida about, for example, Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* or John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*.

And I was almost right. Some time after having written the above note to the future (that is, this very) text, while reading an interesting book by Piotr Jagielski about American jazz[5] I came across information – probably obvious for Derridian scholars, but revealing for me. In 1997 Derrida conducted an interview with Ornette Coleman! The French philosopher gave dozens of interviews in his life, including the last one in which he declared: "I never *learned-to-live*,"[6] in this case, however, perhaps this one time, he played the role of an interviewer. Why did Derrida find Ornette Coleman – this one of the most important innovators of jazz, a saxophonist, composer, thinker, advocate of free jazz – interesting as an interlocutor? There were several reasons. In 1997 Coleman's concerts took place in La Villette in Paris, during one of them Derrida was reading his previously prepared text[7] on the nature of jazz improvisation

2 Ibidem, p. 172.

3 J. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, ed. with an introduction by G. Richter, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 15.

4 J. Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, Fordham University Press, New York 2010, p. 65.

5 P. Jagielski, *Święta tradycja, własny głos. Opowieści o amerykańskim jazzie*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2021, p. 191.

6 J. Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007, p. 24.

7 See: J. Derrida, *Play – The First Name*, "Genre" 2004, no. 36, pp. 331–340.

"commented" by Coleman's improvisations (Coleman was accompanied by pianist Joachim Kühn), but after a while the audience made the philosopher leave the stage. This experiment – "Derridadaism" to use the words of Geoffrey Hartman – turned out to be a complete failure. Why?

Did Derrida want to "philosophically" refer to the idea of "jazz and poetry" experiments having been developed at least since the mid-1960s? For example, in the cycle inaugurated by Joachim Berendt with the participation of Polish musicians such as Krzysztof Komeda, Zbigniew Namysłowski or Tomasz Stańko? Or perhaps the impulse was the invitation addressed to him by the jazzman. The conversation with Coleman (by the way, Derrida's peer as both were born in 1930)[8] concerned many issues: the question of understanding music (which is "non-alphabetic"), rooting (or its lack) in language (also the so-called "ebonics"), harmolodics, (media) translation, the role of composition in jazz, but above all the nature of improvisation. And it is this aspect that seems particularly interesting in relation to further parts of my considerations. Derrida's reflections on photography had certainly hallmarks of improvisation on the subjects which were not usually chosen by him, but which always challenged him as a kind of invitation to comment, to develop certain ideas, to interpret the projects presented to him. However, when he ultimately decided to undertake a "given task" he (almost) always produced original texts, inviting to co-think, invariably also provoking polemics and comments. Since what was located "outside the text" was for Derrida a kind of trip to unfamiliar areas poorly recognised by him, but for some (numerous) reasons it posed a kind of philosophical challenge he did not want to avoid, while feeling that he was speaking from the position of an "amateur." However, "amateurs" often tend to outrank professionals because they can afford to go beyond decreed templates of thinking. Yes, Derrida was not a "professional" expert on photography, but his few texts about (and around) photography – which have not been commented on in large numbers so far – deserve presentation and critical analysis.

Initially, my plans to write about Derrida's reflection on photography were to include only two publications: *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography* and *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, but it soon turned out that the number of texts possibly taken into account was growing. However, I still treated them as a kind of Derrida's "side" work, i.e. specifically understood *parerga* in his whole *oeuvre*. *Parerga* (in the literal sense) are incidental statements, margins of thoughts, notes made on the occasion of ordered texts. Yet, is it really possible to determine any *parerga* in Derrida's reflection? What was the center

[8] See: *The Other's Langue: Jacques Derrida Interviews Ornette Coleman, 23 June 1997*, "Genre" 2004, no. 36, pp. 319–329. This conversation is commented on in numerous texts, I recommend at least two: R.P. Mitchell, *Derrida, Coleman, and Improvisation*, "Journal of Curriculum Theorizing" 2018, vol. 32 (3), pp. 1–12 and S. Ramshaw, *Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event*, "Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation" 2006, vol. 2 (1), pp. 1–19.

(of thought/thinking) in it, and what was just an occasional leap into a new territory of reflection? Probably the philosopher himself would not have been able to answer this question, but he did not avoid such challenges. He must have understood that his textuality and focus on writing also required reflection on the visual. It simply cannot be so easily rejected/abandoned, or left without an even "improvised" commentary. It is interesting that while declaring his lack of competence in relation to visual arts, the philosopher nevertheless undertook the challenges of commenting on specific works, as well as formulating thoughts regarding the visual arts. Reflections on *parergon* are, after all, the most important part of his book devoted to "truth in painting"[9] written in the late 1970s, so at least a few years before his trips into the world of reflection on photography. It is also necessary to recall one more episode from Derrida's rich activity – at the turn of 1990 and 1991 the Louvre housed an exhibition entitled *Memoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, which included 71 works selected by the philosopher from the Paris museum collection. Paintings and drawings depicting blind men and numerous self-portraits were accompanied by Derrida's essay. When preparing the exhibition the philosopher suffered from viral inflammation which caused temporary paralysis of his face and eye problems (blinking of the left eyelid disturbance). Thus, the autobiographical experience translated into a brilliant text in which the issues of vision, blindness, self-portrait were presented in relation to the texts by Charles Baudelaire and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as to biblical texts.[10] This is another proof that the issues of image(s), visuality, (in)visibility were taken up by Derrida and aroused his interest, which could also be further evidenced by his appearance in the role of "Philosopher" (specific *cameo*) in Gary Hill's video installation *Disturbance (Among the Jars)* (1988), or an introduction to the collection of Antonin Artaud's late drawings.[11]

One more proof of Derrida's diverse interests in photography should be added. In *The Postcard*, described as one of the most "literary" among Derrida's books, in the first part entitled *Envois* ("sending") written in the form of love letters to an unnamed person (a kind of satire or ironic approach to the formula of "epistolary literature"), I find the following passage:

> I fell upon two books of photographs that cost me a great deal, one on Freud, very rich, the other on Heidegger, at home, with Madame and the journalists from the Spiegel in 1968. So that there it is, back at the Hotel Victoria (that's where I called you from), I laid down to flip through

[9] J. Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1987, pp. 15–147.

[10] See: J. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1993. The book was published in a hypermedia form on a Portuguese website "Sobre A Deficiência Visual" devoted to the issues of sight and vision distortion, which is interesting in itself. See: http://www.deficienciavisual.pt/r-Memoirs-of-the-Blind-JacquesDerrida.htm (accessed: 21.02.2022).

[11] See: A. Artaud, *Dessins et portraits. Texte de Jacques Derrida et Paule Thévenin*, Gallimard, Paris 1986.

> the albums and I burst out laughing when I found that Martin has the face of an old Jew from Algiers. I'll show you.[12]

The photographs included in the books mentioned by the philosopher were taken by an outstanding portraitist Max Halberstadt (Sigmund Freud was "privately" his father-in-law) who was photographing Hamburg artists in the 1920s, but also the Jewish community, children. Derrida's comments, although in a slightly ironic tone, testify to his visual sense and ability to interpret photographic images. To close this thread, let us add that *The Postcard* (or rather *Envois*) became an inspiration for the making of a feature film entitled *Love in the Post* (2014), written[13] by Joanna Callaghan and Martin McQuillan (a literary theorist and cultural critic, expert on Derrida's philosophy), and directed by the former. But the real sensation is the fact that the film includes a never-before-seen interview with the philosopher who talks, *inter alia*, about his private "correspondence" with the spirit of Heidegger.

Why, then, did Derrida later often emphasise his "lack of competence" or interest in the visual? Perversity, modesty, orthodoxy, tendency to paradoxes? After all, only the text counts, and a semiotic understanding of the "text of culture" – for example in the interpretation of Yuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (Derrida was rather unfamiliar with their publications, but these are secondary issues) – differs significantly from philosophical deconstructionism. To this area of the "lack of competence" one can add technical, film, music, architectural and painting issues. A lot of incompetence, but also from them the philosopher can do something that attracts and fascinates. For some reasons, however, he repeatedly discussed these topics not only in interviews and conversations, but also in written texts. In an interview published in the volume *Deconstruction and Visual Arts* while speaking about the possibility of applying deconstruction methods to visual arts, Derrida claims that this is a complete misunderstanding.[14] And in the further part of this book we can find texts by authors who make various applications of Derrida's deconstructionism to theoretical divagations on architecture, painting or film, probably the most vivid example of which is the article by Gregory L. Ulmer, who incidentally a few years earlier, in 1989, published a famous book *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of*

[12] J. Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1987, p. 189.

[13] The screenplay was published along with comments and interviews with Derridian experts conducted by Martin McQuillan. See: J. Callaghan, M. McQuillan, *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida. The Screenplay and Commentary*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London–New York 2014.

[14] P. Brunette, D. Wills, *The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida* [in:] P. Brunette, D. Wills (eds.), *Deconstruction and Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 14. The conversation took place in 1990, the date being important for the subsequent presentation of Derrida's reflection on photography (as a visual practice).

Video,[15] in which grammatological strategies were used to analyse the situation of transition from print culture to image (video) culture.

Are the words of the philosopher, who claims that "It is true that only words interest me," "I love words," "So I am very much in love with words,"[16] fully justified? These doubts could be multiplied. Although when we look chronologically at Derrida's first statement about photography, i.e. an extensive "memoir" written after the death of Roland Barthes in 1980 (the French first edition was published in 1981[17]), we in fact deal primarily with a "textual" analysis of the considerations contained in *Camera Lucida*. This work is largely "philological," photography is here only a kind of pretext for reflection on concepts such as "studium," "punctum," "spectator," "mathesis singularis," but paradoxically the photography itself can be found only in the background, the philosopher comments on and interprets Barthes' views, although at the same time, without making any decisions, he poses a number of "provocative questions," as David Wills puts it. I quote a list made by Wills because it seems to illustrate well the way in which even the largely improvised ideas of the French philosopher made his readers think.

1. Can we still presume the referential specificity of photography to hold, given that "every original imprint is divided as an archive and preserves its reference"?
2. Should we understand digital photography as the radical shift it is presumed to be, or was there already in classic photography "as much production as recording of images, as much act as gaze, as much performative event as passive archivization"?
3. Don't the interventions of framing, exposure, etc., which are in play in classic photography, in fact already "modify reference itself"?
4. Isn't it the case that as soon as we accept time as a more or less calculable differentiality we have broken with a "presumed phenomenological naturalism" and are dealing with "a duration that is correlative to a technics"?
5. Doesn't that extend to perception itself – remember the 1966 Baltimore response to Serge Doubrovsky so many æons ago now ("I don't believe that anything like perception exists") – such that "we can no longer oppose perception and technics" or consider perception "before the possibility of prosthetic iterability"?
6. Doesn't a difference in light give rise to "the first possibility of the trace, of the archive, and of everything that follows from it"?
7. In every act of visual capture, from perception to new media, are we not dealing with versions of "acti/passivity", how "activity and passivity touch together or are articulated along a differential border"?[18]

[15] G.L. Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*, Routledge, New York 1989. Being asked about Ulmer's book Derrida is evasive; I cannot be sure whether he read it when stating that he is not certain he understood the author correctly, whether he sufficiently acquainted with the author's concepts that he "see it in outline," which may also mean he does not care about them at all. See: P. Brunette, D. Wills, op. cit., p. 29.

[16] Ibidem, pp. 19–20.

[17] J. Derrida, *Les Morts de Roland Barthes*, "Poétique" 1981, no. 47, pp. 269–292.

[18] D. Wills, *Reviews. Jacques Derrida, "Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography". Jacques Derrida, "Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme"*, "Oxford Literary Review" 2011, vol. 33 (2), p. 269.

The range of questions and issues is truly impressive, although Derrida mentions them as if incidentally, on the margins of his own reflections on Barthes' book on photography, as if not feeling competent to develop them, or not having the desire to do so. He sees the essence of photography (both as an art and as a specific technique, it is less important) in the possibility of combining "death and referent in the same system" and adds that

> in the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the referent, call it the intentional moment of reference (since Barthes does in fact appeal to phenomenology in this book), implies just as irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent.[19]

But the considerations include also photographs of Roland Barthes himself, those published in his unconventional autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.[20] Derrida reflects on the choice made by the author of *Camera Lucida*, recalls photos published in newspapers, he cannot detach himself from them and at the same time wonders whether they show something that Barthes tried to hide in his texts, or wanted to be "less" visible. Could it be that Barthes himself, while writing his autobiography (between August 1973 and September 1974), did not yet sense that his last book would be devoted to photography? However, this was to happen only in a few years and was a dramatic culmination of his writing activity. After his mother's death in 1977, Barthes begins his *Mourning Diary*,[21] in which ideas and clues for a future book begin to appear. The book is to be dedicated to his mother, he has to write it. It will soon turn out that this book growing out of memories, of contemplating a photograph of his mother as a little girl captured in the winter garden of Chennevières in 1898, will become one of the most unusual, phenomenological and, at the same time, meditative description of the phenomenon of photography. As is commonly known, a few months after the publication of *Camera Lucida* in 1980 Barthes was hit by a truck just after leaving a breakfast meeting at François Mitterrand's, and as a result of the accident he died after a few weeks.

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19 J. Derrida, *The Deaths of Roland Barthes* [in:] idem, *The Work of Mourning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2001, p. 53. The volume includes fourteen texts devoted to the most prominent French (except for Paul de Man who was born in Belgium) thinkers of the 20th century, that is Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Louis Marin, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard.

20 R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Macmillan Press, London–Basingstoke 1977. Marek Bieńczyk in his review (although it is not a very adequate term in this case) of this book rightly indicated that in his late works Barthes became "a dreamer of theory, increasingly more a dreamer than an analyst," M. Bieńczyk, *Eseista slalomista*, "Książki. Magazyn do Czytania" 2011, no. 3, n.p. The translator of the book adds that Barthes planned a seminar devoted to „photographs of prototypes of Proust's characters," however his sudden death put a stop to this plan. See: T. Swoboda, *Od autora do tłumacza i z powrotem. Uwagi na marginesie "Rolanda Barthes'a"*, "Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media" 2015, no. 2, p. 56.

21 R. Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 – September 15, 1979*, Hill and Wang, New York 2012.

I am looking at the photographs in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* trying to see them through Derrida's eyes. Perhaps it was then that Barthes was closer to him than during a detailed analysis of his text, perhaps it was only then that he could realise the power of photography or particular photographs in which he could see something that was absent in the texts? Perhaps the unwavering (?) belief that there is nothing but text(s) was then violated, which resulted in the fact that – despite verbal declarations in which he announced his *désintéressement* of visual arts and, more broadly, spatial arts – he nevertheless commented on non-verbal phenomena such as architecture, but also occasionally music. He even became the protagonist of a song on a debut album of the post-punk band Scritti Politti *Songs to Remember* (1982) simply titled *Jacques Derrida*.

Such "non-verbal" works, which are still in various manners narrative, include Marie-Françoise Plissart's photo story *Droit de regards*, a series of photographs by Jean-François Bonhomme published in *Athens, Still Remains* and Kishin Shinoyama's photobooks, in particular a cycle of photographs entitled *Light of the Dark* (in which the Japanese photographer portrayed the actress Shinobu Otake) analysed in the article *Aletheia*. The first of these works was published in 1985 in the renowned publishing house Editions de Minuit, and its English-language version in 1998.[22] Collaboration between the French philosopher and the Belgian artist – famous for her various photographic projects, but also for her video projects, awarded with the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2004 for the project *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (realised in cooperation with anthropologist Filip De Boeck) – was an artistic experiment in which Derrida played the role of a commentator of a photographic story consisting of black and white photographs taken by the artist.

The world created by Plissart evokes associations with the aesthetics and space resembling Alain Resnais' extraordinary film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) – "empty rooms, empty streets, empty stairs, empty (and decayed) old buildings, and somewhat empty (or maybe, better, expressionless) people,"[23] but these are only formal similarities. The story of lesbian love presented in a series of very bold photographs, extremely sophisticated in terms of aesthetics, caused a number of problems with publication of this book in an American academic publishing house. Combining the name of the outstanding philosopher with photographs which could have been, especially in the mid-1980s, a kind of moral challenge in society which despite having access to all content (for example, pornography) was simultaneously very conservative when it comes to taboo topics presented in media such as film or television (after all, the Hays Code was replaced by the Motion Picture Association film rating system only in 1968). However, these are only less important contexts. On the other

[22] M.-F. Plissart avec une lecture de J. Derrida, *Droit de regards*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1985; the English edition "relocates" the authors so that the philosopher seems a domineering figure. See: J. Derrida, *The Right of Inspection: Photograps by M.F. Plissart*, Monacelli Press, New York 1998.

[23] J. Amado, *Right of Inspection: Jacques Derrida*, https://www.krabarchive.com/ralphmag/rightinspectionV.html (accessed: 21.02.2022).

hand, the Japanese edition faced quite different problems: since the photographs in Plissart's story are regulated by the logic of Western alphabetical "reading" (from left to right), it turned out that not only the text but also "the photographs were untranslatable,"[24] in the Japanese edition the order was lost. Derrida commented on it as follows:

> Western writing and right-to-left, vertical progression of Japanese, and the fact that a similar linearity of gazes occurs both within a photograph and from one photograph to the next, it was not possible to reproduce the photographs in the "correct" order in the Japanese text. In fact, the publisher reversed the original order of the photographs, but that only confused Japanese readers, because the gazes still failed to match from one photograph to the other. What I called the text's untranslatability therefore became a fact in Japanese.[25]

A photographic novel, a photo story, a visual story – written or visualised – by means of nearly three hundred still photographic frames published on ninety-nine pages – deals with the issues of queer fiction, transgenderism, lesbian love, non-obvious sexual and identity roles. The photos taken by Plissart are perfectly composed, they seduce with their power of a single frame but they simultaneously create a storyboard of an unrealised film. This is where their biggest strength lies, in what we do not see between successive frames/shots, in what they only suggest, but do not say explicitly. These empty spaces liberate the imagination of the viewer/reader in a special way. What happened at that unexposed moment? Why do we see something and do not see something else? This story is governed by a specific logic of visual storytelling which creates not only a kind of mystery, but also moves aside the rules of narrative and fictional obviousness. That is why it acts with such force and encourages returns within the process of "reading." This is a significant – *nomen omen* – difference compared to "reading" a film. Today, of course, we can return to particular shots and frames, contemplate and analyse them by abstracting from the parading succession of subsequent frames (or rather digital frames). However, the essence of the film course is this very moving parade which should not be stopped. Here, this stopping and focusing attention on a static frame is the key of building a narrative.

This story is mysterious, ambiguous, showing not only physical closeness but also the sexual "practices" of women with bare pelvises, deriving visible pleasure from sexual acts – all this can shock, yet in the plot layer this story escapes interpretative unambiguity at the same time. At some point, a man appears, two girls stylised as mature women are playing chess, the visual story is increasingly moving towards building a mood of understatement and blurring the plot clarity. In an extensive and meticulous analysis of this work, Beatriz Preciado draws attention to what Derrida himself called "topo-photography," namely an extremely subtle and significant usage of specific spaces in which the story protagonists are located. The main problem arises in a seemingly simple question concerning the "genre." I have already men-

[24] P. Brunette, D. Wills, op. cit., p. 25.
[25] Ibidem, p. 26.

tioned the terms photo-novel, photographic novel – in *Droit de regards* the logic of "photographic grammar" undoubtedly rules, as Beatriz Preciado[26] puts it, so why does Derrida's extensive essay come after the photographic material?

We should begin with a remark that the language game takes place on two "generic" levels.[27] Firstly, it is about a kind of betrayal or deconstruction of a not very expressive "genre" which is photo-roman (or *roman-photo*). Secondly, we obviously deal here with a creation of tension between the gender (regarding sexual difference) dimension of dealing with the subject of non-heteronormative (lesbian) relationship of the protagonists, which of course is not so obvious in different language versions, but revolves around the concept of genre (both in French and English). By the way, it would be interesting to analyse this form of storytelling by means of still frames composed in a book version – with reference to a photographic film, for example, the classic work of Chris Marker *La Jetée* (1962) and his other projects in which photography is an immanent element of audiovisual projects, as well as to other "photographic films."[28] It seems clear that Derrida was attracted to this photo-novel because of the question of the discursive dimension of the story told outside the text, without words (that he loved so much) – which he considered a kind of challenge. In this case, photographic narrative challenges the coercion to attribute narrative aspects to forms that are dominated by textuality. A single photograph does not tell a story, even if *punctum* may be the leaven of individual "addition of content" to some particularly touching element in the photo which triggers the work of our memory moving rhizomatically through uncatalogued images deposited in various data banks, both mental and those functioning, for example, in virtual clouds.

The text written by Derrida as a form of commentary or discursive development of Plissart's photographic project is less about the photo-novel of the Belgian artist, it is more an attempt to reflect on how these photographs, forming a kind of "*suite* for the moment,"[29] depart from the formula of photography treated as a reproductive medium. It is not about reproduction in this case, and in general photography is not about reproduction (of reality) but about relationship. However, this is a specific kind of "relationship without relationship,"[30] as Derrida himself describes it when addressing the issue of the referentiality of photography. Photography as an art depends on the visible referent, what can be interpreted as an echo of Bazin's thinking about the

[26] B. Preciado, *De-Titled: Gender and the Architecture of the Double Signature in "Droit du Regards" (Romaphoto de Marie-François Plissart suivi d'une lecture de Jacques Derrida)*, "Quaderns de Filologia. Estudis Literaris" 2004, vol. 9, pp. 145–183.

[27] In the (original) French version of the text Derrida valorises the linguistic game by using the term *genre*: as a literary genre and gender identity both in sexual and cultural dimensions.

[28] See: B. Kita, *Refleksje o fotografii w twórczości Chrisa Markera*, "Przegląd Kulturoznawczy" 2019, no. 1, pp. 15–29.

[29] J. Derrida, *Excerpts from "Right of Inspection"* [in:] A.E. Hershberger (ed.), *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*, Willey Blackwell, Oxford 2014, p. 312.

[30] It was noted by Gerhard Richter. See: G. Richter, *Unsettling Photography: Kafka, Derrida, Moses*, "The New Centennial Review" 2007, vol. 7 (2), p. 158.

ontology of the photographic image, yet there are no direct references to André Bazin's classic text. However, Derrida must have known it.

Although Plissart's photo-novel is about relationships – those between the protagonists, between their bodies and between them and the space they were placed in, Derrida does not have the ambition to create his own understanding of Photography, as Roland Barthes did when being inspired by a single photo (of his mother). Derrida's work consists rather in "reading" a specific photographic project in order to extract possible meanings from it. However, his reading is largely devoid (maybe due to this "lack of competence") of addressing the formal/aesthetic dimension of this deed. And yet the originality of Plissart's work is revealed, in my opinion, primarily in this "aesthetic" or visual dimension. Although at some point the theme of photogeny appears (as a light phenomenon, which is what writing of light actually is), but only incidentally and it does not lead to any generalisations about the area where the phenomenon of aesthetic distinctiveness of photography as a medium is expressed. The stylistic epigrammaticity of Derrida's text does not facilitate understanding of his thoughts revolving around *Droit de regards* – the "right of inspection" is a derivative of the photographic gaze which, while discovering the other, at the same time weaves the other into the system of dependencies resulting from the dominance of the photographer's vision.

This dominance is based on the mechanism of a kind of "delay" (*demeure*[31]), namely a manipulation of time: the past, stopped in its flow in the photograph, and the future connected with the moment when the photograph will be viewed. Delay, used for example by guitarists, can be treated as a metaphor of viewing photographs: in a technical sense it consists in the fact that the sound extracted from the instrument (connected to a simple delay device) is repeated a specified number of times and its volume decreases over time to finally disappear. This guitar effect may be a kind of metaphorical approach to our relationship (especially now) with the photographs we view. The repetitiveness of viewing the photos we are already familiar with rather decreases over time owing to the excess inflow of new photos, as a result the memory of those earlier images fades as they are superseded from our visual memory.

Aletheia – the Greek term for "unconcealedness," "disclosure" or "revealing" – was restored to the language of modern philosophy by Martin Heidegger who reinterpreted it in his reflections on the concept of truth understood as "compelling obviousness." It is interesting that *aletheia* was treated as a concept contrary to *lethe* (a term derived from the name of the River Lethe, one of the five rivers of Hades in Greek mythology) meaning "oblivion," which can be associated with treating photography not as a form of memory, but of forgetting, clearing the memory of images

[31] It is worth remembering that *Demeure, Athènes* was the original title of the text devoted to Jean-François Bonhomme's photographies, which I discuss later in this article. This notion appears again in the title of Derrida's extensive analysis of a short literary text by Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*. See: M. Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*; J. Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000.

that were mechanically recorded and deposited in data libraries and no longer demand their current usage. Today, being "read" by algorithms, photos do not even need to be viewed by man, because they are viewed by "seeing machines." This term – *aletheia* – was used by Derrida as a title for his introduction to the series of Kishin Shinoyama's photographs of the Japanese actress Shinobu Otake, entitled *Light of the Dark* and published for the first time in Japanese magazine "Sincho" in 1993.

Already at the beginning at least two fundamental questions arise concerning Derrida's decision to undertake the task of writing this text. Firstly, it could be related to the author of these photos, that is to Kishin Shinoyama, a scandalous photographer, a real star not only in the world of photography, an author of an unforgettable photo placed on the cover of the album *Double Fantasy* (1980) by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, but also a photo (from the same 1980 photo session) on the cover of the album *Milk and Honey* (1984) published already after Lennon's death. Secondly, even more likely, it could have been conceived as a kind of entry into the Japanese market with the air of a scandal; the philosopher himself tried to build his media image in various ways, although from today's perspective this may seem very "amateurish." One more circumstance is worth adding: in 1991, a photobook of the Japanese artist entitled *Santa Fé* dedicated to the actress and model Rie Miyazawa achieved unprecedented market success and was sold in 1.5 million copies. Therefore, the choice of Shinoyama's works does not seem to be accidental, but it is actually hard to believe that Derrida was intrigued by the photos of Shinobu Otake, an actress with the status of a star in Japanese cinema, perhaps the most famous for her roles in the films of Kaneto Shindō, one of the most important and outstanding Japanese filmmakers. These photographs of the often undressed actress (close-ups of her nipples, breasts, semi-close-ups of the naked body), although interesting, can hardly be considered distinguished photographic works, while analysing them, for example, in terms of a photographic act.

Kishin Shinoyama's works often balanced on the verge of pornography, not to mention the photographer's penchant for presenting very young girls, which especially today can be interpreted in an almost paedophilic key.[32] It is interesting that, keeping the proper perspectives, we are dealing here, as was also the case of Plissart's *Droit de regards*, with very bold erotic photos which constitute an inspiration for Derrida's thinking about the nature of photography. I do not undertake the task of explaining why he was particularly interested in this type of work; perhaps, as I have already mentioned, this was simply due to the courage of those who had the idea to support themselves with the name of the outstanding philosopher in the promotion of

[32] See: K. Shinoyama, *Miwako Kakei*, Gentosha, Tokyo 2014; idem, *Mai Hosho*, Ashai Press, Tokyo 1999; idem, *Shoujokan*, Tokyo 1997 and many other photographic publications of this author which balance on the boundary between erotic and pornographic photos, or cross it. The definition of the term "pornography" should obviously be determined, but this is a completely different story. Especially if we would like to take into account differences between Western and Japanese standards (*vide*, for instance, the *hentai* phenomenon).

their own projects, which cannot be excluded. After all, the fact that Derrida sometimes undertook risky tasks can only prove his openness to intellectual challenges and willingness to experiment mentally, which often resulted in original philosophical concepts. Was that also true in this particular case?

Detached from the direct interpretation of the Japanese photographer's project, Derrida begins his interpretative work with a short but very significant statement: "The photographer left: he told the truth. It is she."[33] She, the protagonist of these photos – Shinobu Otake. Derrida looks for a key to interpret the style of these photographs, so he refers to the concept of *sciagraphy* which he tries to adapt in an interesting way to the analysis of this particular photographic cycle, as well as to photography in general. Photography interpreted as "writing of light" is a motif repeatedly undertaken, so it can be assumed that for Derrida, constantly searching for new interpretative tropes, but also following his own imperative of deconstructing stagnated thought formulas, it became a kind of theoretical challenge. In Shinoyama's photographs, Shinobu Otake often emerges from the shadow, her body is contoured from the almost black background, the photos are not always fully sharp, as if they are not about light in all its glory and power here, but rather about operating the darkness, light-shadow, or to put it bluntly – shade. Thus, the phenomenon of photography, in Derrida's view, is not primarily about "writing of light," but about "writing of shade," which can be embedded in the very distant past of visual arts. For example, Platonic rejection of *sciagraphy* as a technique and painting trend from the late 5th century BC consisted in the criticism of painting procedures that were to create a three-dimensional effect. Derrida would not be himself if he did not seek a new perspective: in this case, it seems that *sciagraphy* ("writing of shade") appears to him as an opposition to already worn out and cognitively inefficient *photography* ("writing of light"). This motif of "writing of shade" as a property of photography will return in his subsequent statements, it can be treated as a "deconstructive" thought procedure applied to the tradition of reading and writing about photography as a "medium of light" or a "light medium" whose nature (stemming from nature) made light its ally, not to say its basic ally, undoubtedly a *sine qua non* prerequisite of existence. However, the other side of this necessity may appear to be the "shade" – the brightness demands the shade not only as its complement, but also as a fundamental confirmation of the dialectic of either/or, or perhaps or/and. Light and shade complement each other, light and shade cannot exist without each other, just like photography (the phenomenon of light) cannot exist without *sciagraphy* (the phenomenon of shade).

Let us go back to Derrida's text itself: *Aletheia* is another show of the philosopher's inexhaustible ingenuity when it comes to the multiplication of philosophical games and aporias, but it seems that the analysed (?) photos definitely become secondary, perhaps almost completely absent from Derrida's textual work. He writes "beside" them, "outside" them, "above" them, although we are undoubtedly absorbed

[33] J. Derrida, *Aletheia*…, op. cit., p. 170.

by his "story." Something like philosophical improvisation begins, Derrida spins his narrative, which in the cognitive sense is not innovative (in relation to photography), it is rather a kind of *logorrhea*. This "logorrhea" is only a confirmation that the eminent philosopher, perhaps the most important thinker of the late 20th century (this is not irony, it is a kind of acceptance of the state of affairs), had an irresistible feeling that due to being cast in this role he should have an opinion on every subject. This kind of simulation of "expertise" in some specific issues (in this case photography) can be puzzling and gives food for thought – even if we are experts in Heidegger's philosophy, maybe we should not necessarily comment on… photography. But in fact, why not? Ultimately, all of us take photos and are photographed, so all of us can talk about photography.

This talking – let us emphasise: talking and not writing, as writing was Derrida's domain and element – triggered the philosopher's deeper reflections on photography (owing to Hubertus von Amelunxen and Michael Wetzel in 1992[34]). It was a kind of "enforcing" Derrida to discuss photography, as I mentioned earlier most often his reflections on this subject resulted from specific orders/invitations to address the topic, or resulted from a combination of various circumstances, they did not seem to stem from the author's own "need." Perhaps photography has a special quality which makes even "amateurs" respond to the phenomenon of recording images in the form of photos. Photography is not only able to seduce, it also has the ability to "blackmail" both those who take photos and those who view them and try to interpret Photography as a visual phenomenon invented for the purpose of representing the world. Let us quote the author who describes it as follows: "For Derrida, the 'blackmail' of photography consists of its authoritarian claim to represent the world truly, even though equally spurious claims had been made long before on behalf of writing."[35]

The above mentioned conversation is preceded by Gerhard Richter's[36] extensive essay devoted to the contexts of Derrida's statements in relation to the basic assumptions of deconstructive practices and the recall and recapitulation of the philosopher's earlier remarks on visual arts and photography. But also to an important publication entitled *Archive Fever*,[37] in which the philosopher discusses the issues of memory,

[34] The conversation was originally published in a shortened version in German. See: J. Derrida, *Die Fotografie als Kopie, Archiv und Signature: Im Gespräch mit Hubertus von Amelunxen und Michael Wetzel* [in:] H. von Amelunxen, M. Wetzel (eds.), *Theorie der Fotografie IV, 1980–1995*, Schirmel–Mosel, Munich 2000.

[35] C.D. Morris, *Derridean Blackmail in the "Big Sleep": Allegorizing the Unfixable Mirages of Photography, Film and Criticism*, "Film-Philosophy" 2015, vol. 19 (1), pp. 310.

[36] G. Richter, *Between Translation and Invention: The Photograph in Deconstruction* [in:] J. Derrida, *Copy…*, op. cit., pp. IX–XXXVIII.

[37] See: J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1996. An interesting development of the idea of an archive in relation to the phenomenon of photography and documentary materials in modern art can be found in an extensive text: O. Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument* [in:] idem, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography, New York 2007, pp. 11–51.

time, technology in the era of expansion of electronic media. This is a kind of introduction to the later dialogue on photography, in which Richter draws attention to the important issue of "translation" of the pictorial and the verbal. Derrida was constantly focused on *philologia*, namely "love of the word" in etymological and literal sense, trips to non-verbal worlds, which I have already mentioned several times, were a kind of journey to regions not very familiar to him, although for some reason he wanted to embark on them. So a question arises – not necessarily only rhetorical because, after all, I am discussing these "trips" – that Richter articulates in this way:

> Why begin a meditation on the relationship between deconstruction and photography with a consideration of the forces that place deconstruction and translation into a shared constellation of thinking and of experience? Does our reconstruction of the imbrication of deconstructive movements of thought and the idea of translation not attest to the predominantly verbal or linguistic preoccupations of Derrida's project, preoccupations in which instances of visual culture and its proliferation of images of various kinds – including, precisely, photography – do not play a key role?[38]

Could it be that these expeditions into the extratextual world are just another way of exploring the world of texts and writing? And was the reflection on images (in this case photographic) just another form of exploring the nature of the word?

As if incidentally Richter recalls that for a long time Derrida did not agree to publish photos portraying him, which seems understandable in the context of his attitude towards the primacy of an author as a producer of "texts" and not an author as someone who must certify the authorship with a pictorial image. This, however, changed in the course of time, as I have already mentioned: Derrida began to give television interviews, he also "starred" in several films, his photographs began to appear. Richter draws attention primarily to the issues that arise in the conversation: saving memory, or struggling to prevent its loss, the concept of "trace," archiving images, the problem of original and copy, spectrality appearing as the essence of photography: "The spectral is the essence of photography."[39] It reminds us of another "episode" of Derrida's writing when a few of his unlabelled comments were included in the album *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile* by the French "chronicler" of the Jewish diaspora, Frédéric Brenner.[40] This and other projects of the French photographer perfectly implement the idea of an archive described by Derrida who pointed out that archiving is a never-ending process, but perhaps even more importantly, archiving is an activity directed more towards the future than the past, although an important element of the procedures for collecting various materials is the imperative of memorisation. As Derrida says, "archive as an irreducible experience of the future […], affirmation of

[38] G. Richter, *Between Translation and Invention…*, op. cit., pp. XV–XVI.

[39] J. Derrida, *The Right of Inspection…*, op. cit., n.p.

[40] See: F. Brenner, *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*, HarperCollins, New York 2003 and http://www.fredericbrenner.com/diaspora (accessed: 1.03.2022).

the future *to come*."[41] Brenner visited more than forty countries on five continents for twenty-five years since 1978; when he began his work he thought of this project as an ethnographic activity in which he wanted to seek unity, continuity, a reference to the idea of "one nation," but it soon turned out that he found rather a break with the past, differences, distinctness. The more Jews he met, the more difficult it was for him to tell what "a Jew looks like." He gathered a huge collection of over eighty thousand photographs, only a small part of which was published in subsequent publications or was presented at exhibitions in the USA, Europe and Mexico. Next to, *inter alia*, Stanley Cavell, Carlos Fuentes, Julius Lester, Jacques Derrida also wrote commentaries to selected photographs: who but him – born in Algiers to a family of Sephardic Jews from Toledo, who spent his youth in El Biar and then settled in France – was more predestined for this?

The conversation about photography in *Copy...* begins with a question about *sciagraphy* and at the same time refers to a one-sentence mention of this phenomenon in Derrida's book *Memoirs of the Blind*. Is it once again a question of searching for an unexplored problem of describing the phenomenon of photography, or, perhaps, another attractive mental improvisation which has the nature of an intellectual and theoretical challenge? Every possible answer will probably be true. By the way, it turns out that his numerous declarations about his own "incompetences" regarding technology and visual phenomena are a subterfuge, because Derrida is aware of the technical aspects of taking pictures when he talks about framing, points of view, setting light, referring to the philosophical, but also practical idea of *Augenblick*. The motif of shade in his thinking about photography seems to be an important element in recognising the phenomenon of writing of light, which could not exist without its dialectical complement in the form of shade. What appears within the photographic frame at the same time announces or suggests what is outside the frame, it is this kind of shade that brings out hidden or obscured things to the surface of visibility. The play of (photographic) aperture is a play of revealing, but also covering our "field" of vision. Thus, writing of "shade" is not only complementary to writing of "light," but perhaps it is also a primary process that has led to the dominance of thinking about photography as a light phenomenon.

Derrida would not be himself if he did not refer to the philosophical thought of his ancient ancestors in his reflections. Plato's negation of illusionism is evidently an inspiration for him, it also resembles the "legend" or story of Butades of Sicyon. According to Pliny (who used the name Dibutades in *Natural History*), Butades' daughter, on the basis of the shadow of her departing lover, drew an outline, a contour of his face on the wall, and then her father (using this "shadow") moulded his face in clay. The "physical" (sculptural) copy was thus created as a copy of the copy. But it is the shade, or darkness, that is important in this thinking. Or perhaps more precisely – it is about chiaroscuro – because Plato's negation (contestation) of the created painting

[41] J. Derrida, *Archive Fever*..., op. cit., p. 68.

images was a direct reaction to the tendency to paint a perfect, "faithful" reproduction of reality (let us recall, for example, Zeuxis of Heraclea) which was formed in the 5th century BC, it was also an opposition to the *trompe l'oeil* painting. Hubertus von Amelunxen comments in an interesting way on the issues of *sciagraphy* appearing in Derrida's reflection, this dialectical, but also simply necessary "other side" of light phenomena:

> *Sciagraphy*, a form of drawing based on the negative, divides the moment up into the moment of its loss and the moment projected into the future when it will be recalled. […] *Sciagraphy* turns the vision of light into the fixing emanation of darkness. […] Thus darkness is not just a turning away from a presence but also the "simultaneous" recollection of the light.[42]

In the course of the conversation, a number of interesting topics are discussed – from remarks on Arthur Schopenhauer as a photography lover, misconception of photography as a "chronological" medium, through Friedrich Nietzsche's famous typewriter, a reminder of why Gustave Flaubert wanted to have a photographic portrait so much, to reflections on X-rays and reference (in this context) to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, as well as references to Baudelaire and Bergson. It is interesting that Derrida draws attention to new imaging techniques (for example, of the interior of the human body), to what will soon become a "natural" feature of the development of the technology of seeing without looking, namely the "inhumane gaze," but also to video as a new medium.[43] These remarks do not form a coherent interpretation of photography as a separate medium having its own identity and a set of defining features. Derrida "thinks out loud," sometimes refers to his previous concepts concerning other media, sometimes he just tries to answer specific questions, sometimes talks about his experiences as an "actor," for example in Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance* (1983), in which the philosopher answers the question "if he believes in ghosts." In the recorded answer, he reflects on the spectrality that cannot be reduced by the rationality of modern technologies (such as photocinematography, teleperception, teleproduction, telecommunication), all this balances between seriousness and joke, an essential reflection and a casual play (at least in the twofold meaning of the word).

This is a constant circling around, next to, outside photography and it turns out that the title or subtitle of this conversation ("about photography") is to deceive the readers. If the readers expect clear and lucid theses about photography as a medium and the art of visual imaging – they might be disappointed. If, knowing Derrida, the readers expect language games, epigrammatic and aphoristic statements based on logical paradoxes – their expectations will be satisfied. Do we know anything more about photography after reading the French philosopher's reflections? Perhaps we know something else, something that invites to dialogue and discussion. Let us,

[42] H. von Amelunxen, *Photography After Photography: The Terror of the Body in Digital Space*, http://hyperart.com/lib/ph_after_ph.html (accessed: 5.03.2022).

[43] J. Derrida, *Copy…*, op. cit., pp. 38, 48.

for instance, consider his thoughts on "invention" in various contexts related to the "idea" and the "technical" aspect of photography. They are not a banal repetition of countless disputes, they bring a breath of freshness to the look of a "nouveau riche" who asks important questions, proposes a new look at old problems, such as:

> To take up this word invention, one could say that the photographic experience is situated right at the internal edge of a division that divides the two senses of the concept of invention: on the one hand, invention as a discovery or a revelation of what is already there (in the invention of the other, one discovers the other: photography takes and overtakes the other as he is, the referent, as one says, by a sort of gaze, a sort of intuition or artificial eye – that is at least what is thought or said); and then, on the other hand, invention as a technical intervention, as the production of a new technical apparatus that constitutes the other instead of simply receiving him […]. There is a concept of photography as the simple recording of the other as he was, as he appeared there, but it is immediately contaminated by invention in the sense of production, creation, productive imagination. One produces the other there where he is not; therefore I can manipulate a photograph, intervene, transform the referent: I invent him, then, in the sense in which one invents what is not there. These two concepts of invention lie at the heart of photography. All the debates to which we have referred seem to lead back to this: is photography simply the recording of the other or of the object as he or it is there, presented to intuition, independently of the photographic apparatus? Or, on the contrary, does it invent not in the sense of the discovery, the revelation of what is there, but in the sense of technical production? One invents the other there where he is not, and the two senses of invention constantly parasite off one another in the act (but one can no longer even say the photographic "act" [and anyway what is an act?]), in the operation, or let us say in the photographic experience.[44]

We should read Derrida, even with his "incompetences." Reading him makes deep sense, although it is not an easy task, it does not promise us rewards in the form of fundamental answers to tormenting questions either.

Bernard Stiegler, in his book which consists of his conversation with Derrida and of their essays, provocatively states that "*The image in general* does not exist."[45] In his profound interpretation of analogue-digital technologies and the way a distinction can be made between traditional (analogue) photography, whose domain was to certify that "this was," and analogue-digital photography, in which "perhaps this was not" – one should look for deep inspirations by Derridian thinking about the fact that there is no transcendent meaning, there are only subsequent readings and writings (of texts). I abandon these threads because, although Derrida's dialogue with Stiegler revolves around important issues concerning broadly understood teletechnology, the thread of photography in this dialogue (and in their essays) does not appear. Which is a pity because it is photography (and everything that is visual) that will soon (the philosophers' conversation took place in 1993) become the basic regulator of existence in a world that does not exist beyond the recorded (in film or photograph).

[44] Ibidem, pp. 43–44.

[45] J. Derrida, B. Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 147.

At the end of these reflections, I would like to discuss a book in which Jacques Derrida comments on (but he does much more than that), interprets (but it is not a very adequate verb in this case), writes next to or while being inspired by the photographs of Athens taken by Jean-François Bonhomme (but this statement does not touch the essence of Derrida's essay saturated with so many possible readings and prompting multiple returns and re-readings). In my opinion, this is one of Derrida's most poetic texts, perhaps because the author tries to achieve the effect of randomness of associations by imitating (of course consciously) the work of a (photo) camera when it takes something (a photo) that absolutely escapes an intentional gesture of the photographer. The photographer is just a kind of tripod for the eye of the camera needed to turn on the device, to press the shutter button, and then there is only the work of light, and of darkness.

Of course, Derrida repeats that he does not have much to say about photography, but rather does the "philo-logical" work because the love of the word drives him and forces him to verbally confront Bonhomme's photographs, and through them the mythical Greece to which he arrived so late. This mythical dimension of Athens is intertwined in the photographer's works with scenes from the life of the contemporary city. The motif of "delay," already discussed earlier, also seems to be important in thinking about photography. Perhaps that is why the philosopher himself "delayed" his visit to Greece, being aware or having intuition that he was thus prolonging his own idea of the origins, the sources of (also) his philosophical thought.[46] Jean-François Bonhomme is a character we will not find much information about, perhaps what is important for these considerations is the fact that he initially studied in film school and was interested in philosophical thought manifested in literature and cinema, moreover, his teacher at that time was Noël Burch. Perhaps a more important stage of his education came later, when he began his philosophical studies which gave him the opportunity to participate in seminars conducted by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard. This feature of his philosophical foundation seems particularly important when we look at his photographs taken over the course of fifteen years in Athens, where he repeatedly returned living in both Paris and the Greek capital.

For the first time this book was published in 1996 in a bilingual edition (modern Greek and French) and was entitled *Athens – in the Shadow of the Acropolis*.[47] In this edition, Derrida's text was titled *Demeure, Athènes*, it was changed in the English version to *Athens, Still Remains* published (in 2010) already after the philosopher's death. By the way, the English title is not a literal translation of the French term "demeure" I have already discussed, but rather a transposition, an attempt to convey the meaning of the word that refers to both what remains (in memory) and what is subject

[46] The thread of "delay" was analysed from various perspectives by Josef Chytry in his review of the book. See: J. Chytry, *"Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme" by Jacques Derrida*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 2012, vol. 70 (3), pp. 330–332.

[47] J.-F. Bonhomme, *Athēna stē skia tēs Akropolēs / Athènes à l'ombre de l'Acropole*, Oikos, Athens 1996.

to delay. Yet, during his life very short fragments of this text were published in the book *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*[48] entitled *The Greek Delay*. It was with these photographs offered to him by Bonhomme that Derrida, as he recalled in the book, traveled around Greece, they were a kind of his guide and map at the same time: *Karameikos Cementary*, *Street of Tombs*, *Sepulcher*, *Photographer on the Akropolis*, *Statue in the Agora*, *Bouzuki Player*, *Monastiraki Market* – these are just a few of the thirty-four photos published in the book, the titles being only simple identifications of what the photos represent. However, the way these photographs inspired the philosopher no longer seems so simple and unambiguous. Maintained in an aphoristic style, and at the same time creating a certain "series," Derrida's subsequent *stills*, like Bonhomme's black and white photographs, are stretched between these two poles: black and white, and at the same time they disperse a specific "point of view," a "perspective," there is no tendency towards unambiguity and conclusion, but rather constant questions and multiplication of doubts. Someone who hoped that this probably most important Derrida's statement about photography would include a systemic interpretation of its essence – may feel disappointed.

Someone who expected that this series of photographs (and the accompanying commentary) would build a verbal and pictorial interpretation of the phenomenon of Athens – probably may also feel disenchanted. These reflections (I mean both the photographs and the text) are underpinned by one short sentence which seems to be the key to reading the whole work and at the same time imposes (as it was imposed on Derrida on July 3, 1996 near Athens) a way of thinking about photography: "We owe ourselves to death." The multitude of possibilities of reading this aphoristic remark, even for Derrida's writing, transgresses the framework of this text, so we need to treat it as directly as possible (is it really possible?), and then we could say this: we are hostages of death, we are its debtors, we must meet death, but we also owe it everything. Let us say right away that this leads us to Barthes' tropes. Derrida has already shown that the phenomenological approach of the author of *Camera Lucida* to photography not only thoroughly thought over, but also somehow accepted it.

So what does the dying/disappearing Athens, but also Athens being still alive and reborn, the Athens of Socrates, Plato, the Acropolis – that is Athens of the distant past and of modern markets and stalls, street musicians – captured in the frames of the French photographer, which, let us put it bluntly, can hardly be considered an outstanding emanation of photographic artistry – tell us about death, or about photography as a medium closely related to death? The philosopher makes his considerations while looking at Athens "through the prism" of Bonhomme's photography, but probably from the beginning of his Greek wanderings he writes another book in his head,

[48] C. Malabou, J. Derrida, *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, pp. 103–108. In this translation by David Wills the French version of subsequent twenty parts, that is *cliché*, was maintained, in the English book edition translators decided to use the term *still*. Without delving into semantic subtleties, the terms may be compared to the notion of a still image, a photograph.

his trip to Greece is not altruistic, he looks for inspiration to talk primarily about the nature of the photographic image; Greece appears here as a kind of pretext, it results from the promise to write a text for Bonhomme's album, so the situation resembles several other cases mentioned above.

So where is the essence of the photographic gaze expressed? Is it in mourning for something that is irretrievably gone and then photography can be a kind of partial compensation in the form of a fixed image of an object, a place, people who will stay with us forever although they are no longer here? They are saved by our gaze, at first when taking the picture, then in the return to seeing that gaze that is expressed in the viewing of the photographs. Are they just a surrogate for the past, or is the apparatus the machinery that carries the past to our present, making it a co-present phenomenon existing on similar rights as physical beings?

> One believes that in principle the camera – photographic or cinematographic – should capture or hold a gaze which the looking eyes cannot see. I am seen as you see me speaking, etc., seen by you or photographed by you, but with a look that I, who am alive now in the present, cannot see. And therefore when I give someone my gaze, my look, the photographed double of my look, I give him something with which I see but which I myself cannot see.[49]

The camera sees something that the eye cannot see, it is clear, but is it possible that when we view what the camera saw we can see something more than just the work of the photographer who particularly set the time, aperture, etc. so that the recorded reality would reveal itself to us as photogenic, that is, one that exceeds the threshold of literality and unambiguousness? Because the photographic medium, covering a certain part of reality, at the same time reveals something that we could never see if it had not been photographed. And here we are perhaps approaching the mystery of photography – only it can show us visible things in a way that exposes their invisible properties, because only a camera can bring them out into "day-light" (or by means of "light").

The intricate textual *stills*, like photographs, revolve again around the "delay mechanism,"[50] Derrida asks himself why he went to Greece so late, whether when using Bonhomme's photographs he did not become a hostage to the photographer's vision of these places, and then is it not the case that the photographer "is perhaps the author of this book?"[51] Probably yes, although his name is now known primarily because Jacques Derrida decided to write his "commentary" to a set of not very prominent photographs documenting "passing away" of Athens, the city dying just like dozens of other places historically important for culture and civilisation. For Derrida, it was primarily a pretext for reflections on photography, which did not result in a comprehensive or thoroughly original concept of perceiving this medium. Bonhomme's photographs themselves are simply only a drive for the reflection of the

[49] J. Derrida, *Copy*..., op. cit., p. 31.
[50] J. Derrida, Athens…, op. cit., p. 9.
[51] Ibidem, p. 35.

philosopher who even from such or on the basis of such, in fact artistically average, photos was able to create a fascinating, poetic in nature and meditative at the same time, story about photography and Athens, a story in which light is as important as shade.

Let us give the floor once again to Jacques Derrida at the end of these considerations, let him speak again and the last time:

> Let one not hasten to conclude that photography does away with words and can do without translation, as if an art of silence would no longer be indebted to a language. "After all," the tourist of photographs will say, "these images of Athens are all the more precious to me insofar as they speak to me in a universal language. If they remain untranslatable and untranslatably singular, it is because of their very universality; they show the same thing to everyone, whatever their language may be: the divine play of shadow and light in the Kerameikos Cemetery, in the Agora, the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Adrianou Street Market, the pause of a photographer before the name Persephone". No, photographs are untranslatable in another way, according to the laconic ruse of a specter or a phantasm, when this economy acts as a letter, when it succeeds in saying to us, with or without words, that we owe ourselves to death.[52]

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[52] Ibidem, p. 69.

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