

Neuterre 1972 H. C. Cixous, Barthes, and the Potentialities of the Neutral

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Abstract

This essay reconsiders Hélène Cixous's *Neutre* (*Neuter*) alongside Roland Barthes's seminar on *The Neutral* from the angle of their different relation to time, futurity, and non-linear potentials of time. Both works address futurity in non-teleological terms, to bifurcate in the direction of other, queerer versions of time as developed in Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* (Aion versus Chronos) and, more recently, in De Toleda *et al.*'s *Potentialités du temps*. Both texts address an 'à venir' rather than a future. With greater insistence on Cixous's *Neutre* in French and in translation, this article attempts to show how in post-Blanchot fashion, Cixous and Barthes call for a 'people to come', for a *peuple*, for a new or *neu-* multilingual tongue, some of whose syllables can be heard, before their time, in *Neuter* and *The Neutral*.

Keywords: *neutral/neuter, Cixous, Barthes, Nanterre, post-structuralism, temporality, potentials of time, Deleuze, people to come*

*The neutral, the neutral, how strangely this sounds for me.*¹

*The future will belong to the subjects in whom there is something feminine.*²

Less than a decade after 1968, Hélène Cixous and Roland Barthes both shifted into neutral, in two independent shifts marked in 1972 by the publication of Cixous's volume titled *Neutre*, not translated into English until 2004, and, in 1977-78, of Barthes's lecture course at the Collège de France, unpublished in France until 2002 and in English translation until 2005.

Barthes's *Neutral*, a collection of lecture notes from which he extemporized in front of his audience, assembles a series of flickering figures, concepts or traits (such as tact, silence, weariness, *epoche*, the shimmer, the androgyne, etc.) which operate as stand-ins, place-markers for an elusive notion engineered to 'baffle paradigm'³ and to resist binaries. While close to the thematics of mourning found in the later Barthes, the flickering notion of the neutral does not mark an oppositional shift from live to 'neutral'⁴ – from the hot wire of 1968 to colder currents carried along a return path to earth. In his introduction to the seminar, Barthes makes it clear that 'the Neutral – my Neutral – can

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), x, 71 (see also xxi).

² Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 14.

³ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 6.

⁴ The technical equivalent of a gearbox in neutral position in French is *point mort*.

refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states [...]. To outplay the paradigm is an ardent, burning activity.’⁵ At the end of each of Barthes’s lectures is appended a supplement, comprised of the professor’s delayed responses to queries from the audience or questions in writing from students. The course, Barthes insists, must be taken for what it is (and is not): a cursory and ‘cursorial’ event in progress – as something ‘*en cours*’.

An equally cursory, open-ended quality marks Hélène Cixous’s *Neutre*. Untold as much as told, its narrative belongs to a deferred and discrete temporality made of discontinuous emergences, sudden jumps and lurches ahead of its time: on one of its last pages, in which is inserted the volume’s 1972 publication date, one comes across what could be read as a programmatic report on the melting of polar ice caps: ‘*Du Sud il voit à travers les mers le Nord paternel défaire ses glaces.*’ (‘From the south it sees across the seas the paternal north undo the ice.’)⁶ In the same passage appears a variation on Barthes’s *Degree Zero* (which fails to pass the test of translation): ‘*Au Degré Zéro: le Sujet s’il veut être devra rompre ses glaces.*’ (‘At Zero Degrees: the Subject, if it wants to be, will have to break the ice.’) (*N*, 153; 126)⁷

In line with Barthes’s ‘ardent’ activity, *Neutre* is also a burning book, complete with phoenixes, a holocaust, hot ashes, and two final chapters brought to melting point, with titles playing the structuralist game of minor phonematic oppositions – also lost in translation: *La Fonte, La Ponte* (‘The Smelting’; ‘The Laying’) (*N*, 137; 116). In many ways Cixous’s *Neutre* reads, to quote Barthes’s title, as a ‘*journal de deuil*’, a mourning diary recounting, in broken words and interspersed narrative fragments, the birth and death of the narrator/non-narrator’s baby born with Down’s syndrome, and the demise of stable, conventional or normative subjects and subject matters. The untellable story is told in a language swept across by gusts of the North-North-East wind blowing in from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – inducing loss, literal confusion, code transcription failures and bugs in the fictional and chromosomal program.

Neutre occurs as a verb in the making in Cixous’s writing, a verb in the infinitive with no subject: it behaves as an underperforming, ailing and failing *naître*, inducing both a pathological birthing and a proliferative series of *neu/new* rebirths. In her preface to the French republication of *Neutre* in 1999, excerpted and quoted here from the translator’s introduction, Cixous writes: ‘*Ce livre naît, enfant, aîné, de tous mes livres, se relevant vivant de toutes mes cendres*’ (‘This book was born, child, eldest, of all my books rising living from all my ashes’) (*N*, 7-8). The generativity at work in *Neutre* is somehow lost in the translation of Cixous’s homophonic play on *aîné* (eldest), a word pregnant with the homophonic trace, in French, of what is or was born: ‘*est né*’. On the specific word ‘*aîné*’ hinges a reversible time-line, mixing the apparently opposite ends of precedence (the eldest) and generativity (‘*est né*’). Picking up an assonating syllable close to ‘*relevant*’, the accelerated beat of ‘*vivant*’ and its embedded, airy, breathing molecule (-*vant* sounding like *vent*: wind) is also lost in the rhythmically disarticulated translation ‘rising living’.

Neutre is written on an ontological and epistemological threshold – conceived as a book on the unborn/undead child, technically borne on the thin ice of late structuralism,

⁵ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 7.

⁶ Hélène Cixous, *Neutre* (Paris: des femmes, 1972), 152; *Neuter*, trans. and intr. Lorene M. Birden (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 126. Hereafter *N*, with page references first to the French original, then to the English translation when both are cited.

⁷ The translation bypasses the Barthesian (or Blanchotian) degree zero in favour of the merely thermometric sense.

yet called forth repeatedly to break its waters again in successive fits or rebirths: 1972 (first edition), 1999 (second edition), and, more recently, in 2000, in one of its latest new neuterings, in the ‘*Neuterre*’ of *The Day I Wasn’t There*. However different in format and purpose, *Neuter* and *The Neutral* occupy marginal, paradoxical positions in their respective post-1968 contexts. While retaining structuralist features, they confront other critical and philosophical horizons. Looking ahead to no Hegelian, progressive or messianic future,⁸ they confront, rather, what Cixous will later rename, in *Partie*, the ‘*fouture*’⁹ – a botched-up, queer futurity embedding an element of the ‘*foutu*’, the failing. Cixous’s time of the *neu-* or the new, her timing of the *neu-ter* is engineered to resist the positivity, the Hegelianism of progressive futurity, in order to embrace the adventive, the adventitiousness of what is *à venir*, shored up in the split formula of a to-come. Cixous’s ‘*relevant vivant*’ owes little or nothing to Hegelian *relève* or *Aufhebung*, but belongs to the queer temporality of non-linear history. Beyond the temporal framing of a date, 1972, Cixous’s text signals the ‘activation of possible futures’,¹⁰ by covering itself with ‘many sexes and effects of centuries’ (*N*, 140). Similarly, Barthes’s neutral tropism resists futurity and directionality:

The Neutral is not an objective, a target: it’s a passage. In a famous apologue, Zen makes fun of people who mistake the pointing finger for the moon it points to → I am interested in the finger, not in the moon.

*Le neutre n’est pas un objectif, une cible; c’est une traversée. Dans un apologue célèbre, le Zen se moque des gens qui prennent le doigt pour la lune qu’il désigne → je m’intéresse au doigt, non à la lune.*¹¹

The typographical arrow pointing logically forward in Barthes’s sentence is, however, multidirectional; it redirects readers back to the text, operating as the operator itself, as a graphic, textual referent beneath the deictic signifier of pointing and desiring. Its path imports futurity into the present, like the reversible arrows in Camille de Toledo’s previously quoted *Activation of Possible Futures* and their non-linear temporality.

Breaking *Neuter*’s News

One of the ways of confronting or reopening two books written under the sign of the neutral is to revisit them through the Nietzschean concept of the ‘*Unzeitgemässe*’, the concept of a counter-time or of an untimeliness. One of its redefinitions can be found in the Hélène Cixous ‘hour’ – or HC’s hour for short, as in ‘**h**andless **cl**ock’:

What time is it? is the best-known fateful question, the one we repeat then times an hour with automaton lips [...]. Something is going to happen. And we don’t know if it isn’t already, the thing, the hour, already on the way to happening, already there, a little to the left, we find

⁸ Jacques Derrida’s *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), in this respect, sounds a similar death knell, a similar ‘*déjel*’, rendered audible in the phonetic melting of the hard g in Hegel’s name into the jelly or gel of a soft g.

⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Partie* (Paris: des femmes, 1976), 86 (‘Si-Je’).

¹⁰ The phrase is borrowed from a performance by Camille de Toledo, ‘*The Potential Exhibition*’, CHTO, Leipzig, 2015. See Camille de Toledo, Aliocha Imhoff, and Kantura Quirós, *Les Potentiels du temps. Art & politique* (Paris: Manuella Editions, 2016), 186.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, 68; *Le Neutre. Notes de cours au collège de France 1977-1978*, Texte établi, annoté et présenté par Thomas Clerc (Paris : Seuil/IMEC, 2002), 101.

ourselves on a terrestrial platform, held back [...], this isn't the moon, it's the all-white face of a handless clock, and we too have an all-white, uncertain face.¹²

Cixous's commentary on Brutus' question in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* defines the concept-affect of hour in 'all-white', uncertain, neutralizing terms. The Cixousian hour is close to Gilles Deleuze's reversible conception of two-faced time which he terms the *Aiôn*: 'The hour is always not-yet and imminent.'¹³ May 1968 may also be re-read as a not-yet, its hour 'a little to the left', a moment or an event which may or may not take place again, somehow programmed in the potentialities of the month of '[m]ay'. Both a not-yet and an imminence, its all-white, uncertain colour belongs with potential time, on the neutralized face of HC's handless clock.

What Deleuze defines as the third synthesis of time differs from the two most common conceptions of time, taken either as a chronology, as the linear time of *chronos*, or as the accelerated, opportunistic time of *kairos*. Deleuze's hour involves becoming, the time of an event which is not the time of history:

I became more and more aware of the possibility of distinguishing between becoming and history. It was Nietzsche who said that nothing important is ever free from a 'nonhistorical cloud.' [...] What history grasps in an event is the way it's actualised in particular circumstances; the event's becoming is beyond the scope of history. [...] Becoming is not part of history; history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become', that is, to create something new.¹⁴

The creation of something new is, paradoxically, conditioned by repetition – by the splitting and jamming of chronology, rendering possible the existence of several times simultaneously. Beneath the experimental, broken surface of *Neuter*, something is becoming anew, a 'neu' or 'new' force held within the folds of an inactual, neutered temporality. The inactual, to import Deleuze's use of the Nietzschean term, is precisely what can be retranslated as actuality, as what exists *in actu* – what is able to act.¹⁵ Its operative mode is to occur in fits and starts, to jump forward and keep escaping, in the form of 'escaping texts' such as *Neuter*. This particular text escapes the analyst, resists his or her efforts 'to hold the text back by the tails of its silk cape: the impassioned rogue escapes, it leaves its cape in the master's hands.' (*N*, 78) Similarly, Barthes's writing leaves its cape in the hands of readers attempting to immobilize it. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* ends on the addition of a hand-written note belonging to a strange counter-time – 'et après?' – the time of a 'not yet' which is also an imminence.¹⁶ It points in two directions at once: towards the textual manuscript in its authorly, nascent format, and to the imminent time of reading and annotating readerly texts. The temporality of *The Neutral* looks back, similarly, both to *Writing Degree Zero* and to the text to come – the 'all-white', uncertain text of *Camera Lucida*.¹⁷

¹² Hélène Cixous, 'What is it o'clock? or The door (we never enter)', trans. Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, with a foreword by Jacques Derrida and a new preface by the author (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 59.

¹³ Cixous, 'What is it o'clock?', 62. See also Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 63 ff.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 170-1.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 94-5.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 191.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).

The Neutral generates a form of escaping time made of fits and starts, as the 23 pieces or seminar sessions it is made of stop just one step short of the 24 poses within which the fragments of *Camera Lucida* will later be framed, in two virtual film rolls of 24 exposures each. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze describes as ‘agonizing’ what he calls the third synthesis of time, the time of empty middles, of ‘always and at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen’.¹⁸

Route 1966

Cixous’s *Neuter* may be read as a dual-time piece, as a medley of symptoms or tell-tale signs of structuralism on the one hand, to the effect that it could pass off as a late Baltimore manifesto complete with axes, paradigms, grids, schemes, spatial effects, letters under erasure, equations, purloined or stealthy letters, fragments from Poe, an analyst and a Lacanian subject – of all terms, the one which triggered off heated critical debates between Derrida and Lacan at the Baltimore 1966 conference. As Jean-Michel Rabaté notes in *The Future of Theory*, ‘the calculable or incalculable nature of the subject remains [...] the crucial divide in these discussions.’¹⁹ And yet, on the other hand, *Neuter* also resists dating, by becoming a force of repetition and redeployment in the corpus to come – or the coming corpus. It will insist, haunt the sound track and the narrative of later works, most audibly in *The Day I Wasn’t There*, in which the Mongolian child gives way to a people and to a syllabic language sung in chorus to the broken chords of ‘–an! –an!’, embedding a syllable found in a number of (French) titles from *Dedans* to *Manhattan* and *Jour de l’an*.²⁰

Cixous’s *Neuter* is contemporaneous with Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* (1969) and with her own 1971 introduction to the bilingual edition of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark*, a key paratext which quotes Deleuze’s structuralist book in its opening paragraph. Programmatically titled ‘*le blanc*’ (the white or blank), Cixous’s introduction to Lewis Carroll provides part of the power-loom on which *Neuter* will be engineered a year later. Cixous comments the adventure of Alice as follows: ‘*on est pris entre feu et neige*’ (‘one is caught between fire and ice’),²¹ in a paradigmatic opposition also found in near-similar terms in *Neuter*, whose narrative follows a comparable trajectory towards the ‘degree zero’ of writing – in this case a literal, thermal shift from Holocaust to sherbet, from ashes to ice cream. Pawns and queens on a black and white chessboard, as if imported straight from Carroll, figure in the early pages of *Neuter*. A ‘cape’ also occupies a prominent position in Cixous’s introduction to Carroll, in the prolonged etymological section on ‘*échappement*’ and on the old French verb ‘*escaper*’: to run while leaving one’s cape in the hands of the assailant.²² Thus, as Cixous writes in her introduction to Carroll, the reader becomes a ‘*lecteur-poursuivant*’, a reader in pursuit ‘who almost catches the escaping text, but never quite’.²³ In *Neuter*, as mentioned previously, something insistently ‘escapes the subject’ (*N*, 62). As the son

¹⁸ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 63.

¹⁹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 40.

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, *The Day I Wasn’t There*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 36.

²¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass/De L’autre côté du miroir*, bibliographical notice and bibliography by Jean Gattégno, intr. Hélène Cixous, trans. Henri Parisot (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1971), 23.

²² Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 19.

²³ Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 19.

escapes, what remains is a ‘cape’ – and not, as one finds in the following translation, a ‘scape’:

*J'en reviens à la malheureuse victime du code génétique.
J'arrive juste au point crucial où elle va $\frac{se}{me}$ poser la question du Sujet-fantôme: qu'est-ce
qui reste d'un fils qui n'est ni humain, ni animal ni autre ni dieu ni mort ni perdu ni vivant
mais réel concret? Le ~~fils~~ échappe. Reste la chappe:*

I return to the unfortunate victim of the genetic code.

I arrive just at the crucial point when it is going to ask $\frac{itself}{me}$ the subject-ghost's question: what is there left of a son who is neither human nor animal nor other nor god nor dead nor lost nor alive but real concrete? The ~~son~~ escapes. The scape remains: (N, 68; 67)

In another introductory commentary on the Queen's jam-attribution rules, Cixous describes the divisive quality of time, picking the same example as the one Deleuze had chosen to illustrate the reversibility of time-lines and the elusiveness of the present in *The Logic of Sense* – ‘jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today’.²⁴ In her introduction to Carroll, Cixous goes on to add: ‘no day will be the day of sense, although there is sense on either side of the time or reading, sense that is both promised and inaccessible.’²⁵

The concept of neutrality figures prominently in Deleuze's well-circulated 1967 essay *How Do We Recognize Structuralism?* Among the prerequisite conditions for structuralism to exist, there is, Deleuze explains, a required positionality, imposing ‘places and sites in a properly structural space’. Deleuze picks an example from genetics which resonates with matters of chromosomal positionality as they appear in H. C's *Neuter*: ‘the genes are part of a structure to the extent that there are inseparable from “loci”, sites capable of changing their relation within the chromosome.’²⁶ Deleuze goes on to give examples of games of positional displacement, such as the *jeu de furet* (hunt the slipper) in Lacan, a game which *Neuter* also translates in its recurring use of a slippery, motley *lonza*, a queer and forever escaping animal imported from Dante. A similar *jeu de furet* occurs literally in the fast-forward phonetic trail of disseminated f's in *Neutre* (before translation): a series of F/f or a barred f for *fils*, *feu*, or *oeuf*. Each becomes in turn

the moving object [*le furet*, literally the ferret; or, moving token in the *jeu de furet*, the game of hunt-the-slipper] which darts around the structure, but also the dummy-hand [*la place du mort*] that circulates in bridge. The noblest games such as chess are those that organize a combinatory system of places in a pure *spatium* infinitely deeper than the real extension of the chessboard and the imaginer extension of each piece. (*DI*, 175)

Other elements in Deleuze's mapping of the criteria of structuralism surface in Cixous's *Neuter*, in which the child with Down's syndrome occupies the place of the empty slot, the point of convergence of divergent series, the riddle object/subject or ‘great Mobile element’, the ‘object = x that is always circulating, always displaced in relation to itself. [...] the differentiating element of difference itself.’ (*DI*, 186) X, or the mobile square which ‘jumps ceaselessly’, is, Deleuze adds, the Degree Zero without which ‘nothing is possible’. Both versions of Cixous's and Barthes's *neutre*, phonetically spelt [nøtʁ] in the dominant pronunciation of (Parisian) French, embed and displace a zero phoneme, thus

²⁴ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 3.

²⁵ Cixous, *Through the Looking Glass*, 20.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 174-5. Hereafter cited as *DI*, with page references.

opening up the space of a problematic void, a place to be temporarily filled by f, s or z. In the place of a muted, downplayed, pliant and accommodating [eu] phoneme spelt Ø in the international phonetic alphabet, many things can fit in: a ‘neutered’ son, but an entire tribe or ‘*peuple*’ – a people or a peØple to come whose uncertain faces look back to 1972 while confronting at the same time the split grammar of an *à-venir*.

Future’s *Fouture*

In the layered assemblage of *Neuter*, out of its ‘polysemic cake’, non-linear time emerges: ‘one of the clevernesses of the story is its grinding and rolling together of ancient history and modernity’, the result being ‘a light bread but heavy of future meaning’ (N, 43). An uncouth future is constructed in Cixous’s *Neuter*, a future at odds with chronology, comparable to the ‘suspended time’ of Barthes’s *Neutral* and to the reversibility of time presented (without much presentness to speak of) in Camille de Toledo’s *Activation of Possible Futures*,²⁷ which aims at a ‘maximum opening of lines of possibility’ and seeks to ‘open up’ narrow angles. Cixous’s text begins with a series of epigraphs, particularly with a long excerpt from Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ in which, eerily, the proto-voice of Lacan’s is retro-futuristically audible, as if pre-recorded, pre-enacted from the future. Poe’s tale, a study in ‘analytical power’,²⁸ insistently disseminates the term ‘analyst’, thus looking ahead in the twofold direction of Lacanian analysis and of structural analysis. Poe’s narrative also uncouthly resonates with the detail of Dupin’s high-pitched voice, which happens to sound like a pre-echo, a pre-recording of Lacan’s own register: ‘his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into a treble which would have sounded petulantly but for the deliberateness and entire distinctness of the enunciation.’²⁹ Seemingly irrelevant both to Poe’s story and to Cixous’s narrative, an *objet = x* is thus being addressed to future analysts and their third ears – an audio-portrait of Lacan famed for his high-pitched moments and for numerous ‘scars of phonation’ according to Michel de Certeau, who describes them in detail as he recalls the experience of attending Lacan’s seminars.³⁰ Cixous’s choice of epigraphs introduces a form of fold, a dual temporality in *Neutre*’s 1972 narrative. The multifoliate entrance to the book – three epigraphs containing five quotations imported from Poe, Baudelaire, Saussure, Herodotus and Freud – operates as a dense threshold, a limitrophy which establishes a point of leakage between Poe’s tale and Cixous’s. *Neuter* begins by displacing its entrance doors, by stealing one of its epigraphs from Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (‘What songs the Syrens sang’), and by recycling it, stealing it as its own epigraphic moment – thus perturbing any encapsulation under a single author’s name or within the enclosed space of one single book. The five stuttering, successive *exergues* bring into the economy of the book one of the key letters of structuralism: an ex- or an x, performing at the same time as a neutral variable, as an escaping letter lifted from Cixous’s proper name, and as a random chromosome, an unruly genetic element set at large. If Cixous inhabits the space of her ‘own’ epigraphs, which side of ‘in’ or ‘out’ does the author stand or lean? Epigraphs, here, are reversible entrances – doors:

²⁷ De Toledo, Imhoff, and Quirós, 186.

²⁸ Edgar A. Poe, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), 317. This story is one of Poe’s three ‘analytic tales’.

²⁹ Poe, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, 318.

³⁰ Michel de Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 243.

In the world, there are doors. [...] ‘The door opens,’ says the language that doesn’t say ‘someone opens the door.’ [...] In the same way Time opens and closes, according to its strange magic.³¹

It is in particular through the deployment of the ‘neutral’ that Cixous’s text rides the road to Baltimore 1966, or route ’66 for short -- the mother road, the thoroughfare to structuralism and to the founding conference abroad that led to the publication of *The Structuralist Controversy*. In the volume of essays, the term ‘neutral’ occurs twice – once in Charles Morazé’s introduction to ‘cogitation’ as a collective activity, as a co-agitation leading to the neutralization of the part played by the ‘intellection’ of an individual ‘thinker’:

the phenomenon proper to cogitation depends on a kind of surface or line without thickness, or a kind of point without dimension, but which ultimately reduces considerably the part played by the personal element in invention.³²

Morazé, who later defines mathematical invention as ‘the charging of neutral signs’, adds: ‘the signs are left in their neutrality until they are charged again, and so forth.’³³ In the same volume the term ‘neutral’ returns in Jacques Derrida’s presentation, which locates in the work of Lévi-Strauss and in its respect of structurality a principle of ‘neutralization of time and history’³⁴ – a paradoxical statement in retrospect, considering that the conference was ultimately instrumentalized as a history-making landmark. On the same page, Derrida’s commentary fits the chance-ridden writing of Cixous’s *Neuter*:

the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about – and this is the very condition of its structural specificity – by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause. One can therefore describe what is peculiar to the structural organization only by not taking into account, in the very moment of its description, its past conditions: by failing to pose the conditions of the passage from one structure to another, by putting history into parentheses. In this ‘structuralist’ moment, the concepts of chance and discontinuity are indispensable.³⁵

The ‘criteria of the future’, to borrow once more Gilles Deleuze’s phrase, are found in the functioning of *Neuter* as a non-linear, fuzzy or discontinuous programming engine. *Neuter* lurches more than twenty years forward in the direction of ‘*le trouble des genres qui n’est ni l’un, ni l’autre, ni d’aucun*’ (‘the disturbance of genres which is neither the one nor the other, nor any’s’) (*N*, 68; 68),³⁶ thus incorporating a proto-*Gender Trouble* and a pre-enacted, proto-translation of Judith Butler’s 1990 book (which took fifteen years to be translated into French). Eerily, beneath the volatile ashes of the ‘future’ D. S. or *déesse* of *différence sexuelle*, a phrase also scheduled for a later date, lurks another literal body-double, another translation of two letters, D&S. What is found in *Neuter*,

³¹ Cixous, *Stigmata*, 48-9.

³² Charles Morazé, ‘Literary Invention’, in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. and intr. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 43.

³³ Macksey and Donato, 44.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Macksey and Donato, 263.

³⁵ Macksey and Donato, 263.

³⁶ ‘Disturbances of genres’ sounds like a double mistake, which misses both ‘gender’ and ‘trouble’ – two words promised to a bright future in France, in the (belated) translation of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in 2005.

belonging to no Hegelian, teleological future, signals, in the potential temporality of the *fouture*, another DS: the DS of Down's Syndrome.

Neuter happens on two sides of a divide, between the legacy of its immediate contextual structuralist milieu and the sense that nothing has arrived yet, that things, like bodies, are out of shape: it is caught between an 'event' and an 'eve' – borne in the folds of an eve, on the eve of events yet to come. As a book of eves, *Neuter* is not yet fitted with the character of Ève Cixous. The date of *Neuter*'s republication is worth stressing: whether intentionally or not, its reappearance in print bears, precisely, the date of a 'turn', the turn of this century. In 2000, Cixous opted for a new publishing house and left *Des femmes* for Galilée, thus inaugurating the new millennium with the publication of *Le jour où je n'étais pas là* (*The Day I Wasn't There*), whose narrative re-enacts that of *Neuter*. In the new opus, the Mongolian child returns with a novel voice, having in the interval become a member of a poetic people or peØple.

In her own appraisal of *Neutre* in 1972, republished in 2012 alongside the English translation of Deleuze's review of her book in *Le Monde*, Cixous explained:

'*Neutre* is a system of metaphors which evoke the act of appearance [...]. I do not maintain that this type of work is readable overnight, but later on, when a large number of studies will support it. It is a pistol shot aimed at exploding all categories and overturning the limits which constitute them'.³⁷

Part of the limited number of studies and reviews of *Neuter* may have been, paradoxically, an unforeseen and unfortunate consequence of Deleuze's appraisal of the book in the summer following its publication, asking readers to 'read it fast' (*DI*, 230). Picking a relatively minor passage from *Neuter* about its characteristic writing 'by stroboscopy', Deleuze's well-meaning and enthusiastic review titled 'Hélène Cixous, or Writing in Strobe' initially aimed at clearing up a 'misunderstanding, like the idea that Cixous is an exceedingly difficult author or that her work follows the well-known trends of contemporary literature' (*DI*, 230). Deleuze's review proceeds to give examples of substitutive displacements in *Neuter*. The excerpt he picks for analysis, the famous 'strobe' quotation imported from *Neuter*, happens to contain two key terms which resurface in the last pages of *A Thousand Plateaus*, in 'The Smooth and the Striated', in the version provided by the translators of *Desert Islands*:

'The rule is simple: move from one tree to another either by exchanging the active bodies, or by exchanging the supplementary terms [...]. The movement is such that the trees by a strobe effect produce a kind of pole [*sic*] that is smooth or barely striated dark vertical cross-hatchings, the specter of generations [...].' *(DI*, 231)

An element of stroboscopy seems to have affected part of the above translation, published the same year and independently of Lorene Birden's English translation of *Neutre*: a mistaken 'pole' instead of the correct translation 'paste' has, perhaps by an effect of excessive speed and carelessness, found its way into the translation. One may note at this stage that this version includes the conceptual pairing of smoothness and striation, both terms ready to re-emerge 'later on', ready to be re-enacted in the last chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's 1981 *Thousand Plateaus*. The two version of Cixous's text follow, first in the original, then in translation:

³⁷ Introduction to Gilles Deleuze, 'Hélène Cixous or Stroboscopic Writing', trans. Martin McQuillan, *Oxford Literary Review* 24.1: 'Reading Cixous Writing' (July 2002): 203.

L'effet de mouvement est tel que par stroboscopie les arbres produisent une sorte de pâte lisse ou à peine rayée de hachures verticales foncées, spectres des générations: Papier.

The effect of the movement is such that by stroboscopy the trees produce a sort of paste, smooth or barely striped with dark vertical markings, the ghosts of generations: Paper. (N, 54; 61)

This particular passage occurs in one of the book's self-consuming or metafictional moments, when the material substance for writing, paper, is made to become both a 'referent' and a signifier in the narrative, both articulated and disarticulated in its semantic exploration of the term 'trunk', shifted at top speed from between tree-trunks, the paper-making industry, and the trunk-sized format of a child's truncated body. The result is a sense of general undoing: 'they do not know what they are, but that has no importance on this unraveled Earth. They do not know what they are running from by moonlight.' (N, 62)

In the folds of its stroboscopic bar-codes, *Neuter* produces both spectres and ghosts, in backward and forward mode. *Neuter* recurs, reawakened, in *Tombe*, whose republication in 2008 re-invites *Neuter* in its pages. Cixous's preface presents *Tombe* and *Manhattan* as contemporary twins³⁸ and states that this is equally true of *Neuter* and *The Day I Wasn't There*. The muted child from *Neuter* returns in translation in the sonorous city name Ulaanbaatar, the English name of Mongolia's capital (Oulan-Bator in French). Reverse-engineered into homophonous French, the English translation of the city name becomes, in turn, pregnant with a 'bâtard' belonging to the (re)nascent people of Down's syndrome.

Neuter resurfaces in 2014, in the opening pages of *Insurrections de la poussière*, in a long initial quotation about the making of the *Gefüllte*, the 'polysemic cake'. *Neuter* intervenes in *Insurrection* in a chapter that provides a reading of one of Adel Abdessemed's performances titled *Nafissa*,³⁹ in which the artist's body is photographed lengthwise, lifted and carried up, borne against all odds by the frail-looking arms of medium-sized Nafissa who 'doesn't let him down':

Elle ne le laisse pas tomber. Elle lui évite l'affalement. Il lévite dans ses bras comme dans un rêve.

She doesn't let him down. She evitates his falling down. He levitates in her arms as in a dream.⁴⁰

The text then weaves in a commentary on Adel's metamorphic abilities – the artist having learnt as a young child in his mother's kitchen that things can be metamorphosed into puff pastry, light enough to resist gravity. The page-long quotation from *Neuter* on how to make a light *pièce montée* is then 'stirred in': '*je fais revenir des dizaines de textes, relevant un volume d'un autre*' (I stir in dozens of other texts, spicing up one volume with another).⁴¹ The 'relevance' here implies no temporal resurrection, no *Aufhebung*: peppered with a culinary inflexion, it implies a hot-spicing technique, as well as a weight-lifting procedure. Thus, another scene is being re-played from *Neuter* – a scene in which

³⁸ Hélène Cixous, *Tomb(e)*, trans. Laurent Milesi (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 9.

³⁹ Hélène Cixous and Adel Abdessemed, *Insurrection de la poussière* (Paris: Galilée, 2014), 28.

⁴⁰ Cixous and Abdessemed, 27; translation mine.

⁴¹ Cixous and Abdessemed, 28; translation mine.

being ‘born’ can now retranslate into a being borne – a being carried up, in a game of counter-terrestrial portability, like Nafissa lifting up Adel’s body. There and then, Adel Abdessemed becomes a *neu* or new version of *Neuter*’s child, levitating and evitating mis-carriage or mis-carrying. The Duchampian dust in the book’s title seems, in other words, to have been blown in from the ‘*Neuterre*’ on which *Neuter* is counter-erected and disseminated.⁴²

Neuterre 1972/Nanterre 1968

Among the verbal phoenixes summoned up from *Neuter*’s ashes, a ‘*Neuterre*’ surfaces up in two occasions in the volume:

The creative act, being described as it was happening, in its very pages, is expressed in the creation of a second earth, a terra nova, a NeuTerre, neither one nor the other but not sans one nor the other, freed from the constrictions of sexuality. (*N*, 28)

Phonetically close to Nanterre⁴³ and to the 1968 student uprising it signals, the phrase is filled with many other ingredients like a ‘polysemous’ cake. As a portmanteau word, it short-circuits two wires into one – neuter and earth. *Neuterre* delineates a trans-time and a trans-topia, implying both a return to ground, to neutralization and degradation, and the delineation of another ‘space’ or spacetime that can be approached as a Deleuzian and Guattarian plateau, as an interconnected zone of resurgences, chance junctions, nodes or ‘*noeuds*’, new plug-ins. Lorene M. Birden’s translation of Cixous’s text adds, in each instance, the phrase ‘terra nova’, as if pressed to contribute an element of commentary when translation seems to come short. The phrase occurs in a context in which *Neuterre* (capitalized twice in translation for no apparent reason) brings together two ends of a living spectrum – linking the body of the narrator to her immediate earthly surround, and the failing child to the terraforming of novel ground:

Je ne puis passer par moi sans que la perte me passe, et de même pour la terre : son érosion me peine et m’érode, mais de ses débris joints à ceux que je produis s’élabore, vague, la Neuterre.

I cannot go through me without the loss going through me, and so it is for the earth; its erosion pains and erodes me, but from this debris joined to that which I produce it develops a vague terra nova, NeuTerre, (*N*, 44; 55)

Lost in translation is the *la* of ‘*la Neuterre*’, reduced here to ‘NeuTerre’ or ‘a Neuterre’ elsewhere (*N*, 28), whereas what brings it into existence in Cixous’s French is to a large extent the force of a feminine article. The earth, a major character elsewhere in Cixous, is also given a ghostly, pseudo-national, defaced name: the name of a Palestine or *pâle-estine*: ‘Where am I from, what region, or corner, of earth or culture? what pale esteen?’ (*N*, 20; 40) From Palestine, also lost in its phonetic transcription as *esteen*, one travels across boundaries at top speed to reach a tessellated milieu, the terrestrial and textual space of a metaphorical tallith – found again, later on, in *Voiles*.

⁴² Man Ray’s photograph of Marcel Duchamp’s home ‘installation’ of dust, titled *Elevage de poussière* (1920); available at <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cMa5Ad/rrgx6qj> [accessed 1st October 2017].

⁴³ A number of 1968 ghosts haunt the text of *Neutre* – here and there the ‘Lutte des classes’ (54), a ‘*papier révolutionnaire*’ (56), the ‘*refolution*’ (71), and a quotation from Karl Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (69).

The Earth, then, presents itself now as a durable but erasable parchment, a distressing surface, almost a strip, the tephilim with which I may bind my temples. [...] the effect of the earth, if not the earth itself, is immense, almost boundless, it is a reserve, a park of metaphors one thousandth of which I have yet to imagine or evoke. (*N*, 54)

On the expanse of *la Neuterre*, Cixous's 'demented semes' and 'unfathomables' (*N*, 80) encounter Barthes's own utopian or post-topian search for the *Neutral*, defined in terms which oscillate between the negative charge of what is neutralized and the potentialities of the novel, the new. Again, no dialectic approach applies:

It is a back-and-forth, an amoral oscillation, in short, one might say, the converse of an antinomy. [...] The Neutral is therefore not the third term – the zero degree – of an opposition which is both semantic and conflictual; it is (...) the second term of a *new* paradigm, of which violence (combat, victory, theater, arrogance) is the primary term.⁴⁴

Barthes's own discontinuous quest and tropisms in the *Neutral* also oscillate and inhabit a non-territorial haunt, located or dislocated somewhere between East and West, further East than Cixous's Palestine. Something happens to Barthes's own 'proper' name in the process, which opens up onto a '*pays du traduire*', the *Mitte* called forth in De Toledo's *Potentiels du temps*.⁴⁵ De Toledo's utopic manifesto demands that one 'breaks free from the enclosure of books and critical negativity':

Il faudrait s'arracher à l'enclos du livre et de la négativité critique, du refus, de l'opposition comme mode d'existence, pour faire l'expérience corporelle d'une promenade, éprouver les méandres du temps. [...] Il faudrait donc aller, venir, entre les murs [...]. Le blanc autorisait ces avenirs.⁴⁶

Breaking free from the enclosure of a proper name as well as from the enclosure of a book, Barthes's own name opens onto a territory 'of the future', onto the sort of becoming-feminine called forth in the opening pages of *A Lover's Discourse*.⁴⁷ In the feminine, Barthes's name leaks into a trans-topia: into *la barthe*, which designates a specific yet vague zone in Gascony and in the Basque country. *La* (or *les*) *barthe(s)* is a flood plain, a vast and fertile wetlands area such as the one that borders the river Adour in the South of France. *La barthe* may be one of the other addresses of Cixous's '*Neuterre*': a limitrophic zone or 'zad', a *zone à défendre* against invasive developments. A *barthe* is an ecosystem preserved for its flora and fauna – a possible or potential version of Cixous's *Neuterre*, whether for birds or for births.

Cixous @ la Barthes

In Cixous's mutant narrative and in its attempts to distance itself from a 'cenotaph' (*N*, 21), a number of sound effects tend to produce another music. The *récit*, metamorphosed

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 132-3.

⁴⁵ De Toledo, Imhoff, and Quirós, 192.

⁴⁶ De Toledo, Imhoff, and Quirós, 200-201. 'One should break free from the enclosure of books and critical negativity, from refusal and opposition as modes of existence, in order to experiment with one's body a walk, the meandering of time. [...] One should oscillate between the walls [...]. Blanks made the future possible.' (translation mine)

⁴⁷ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 14.

into a Cixousian bird, requires ‘*air et aile*’ – a pun also involving two letters, R and L, lost in translation:

Il ne se pose pas, il file, d'une fuite si forte si égale si douce qu'elle fait air et aile. Et de là, il est fait r et l.

It does not rest, it flies by, a flight so strong so regular so light that it makes air and loft. And from this it becomes r and f. (*N*, 22, n. 3; 42)⁴⁸

Air-borne, the bird is literally air-born – generated from two letters also disseminated in the name *Roland*. R and L return in the cryptic ‘*clairielle*’ whispered in the language of dreams further in the narrative. A portmanteau word, as well as an escaping word, ‘*clairielle*’ is one of *Neuter*’s new names for utopia – a name ‘of what gender?’ (*N*, 89-91) asks the narrator. Contrary to the view expressed by *Neuter*’s translator in her introduction ‘Making English Clairielle’ that ‘it is by the author’s declaration alone that this word takes on its meaning’ (*N*, 25), one might, rather, treat this word for what it is: for a starting word, for a word from which to start – while reminding oneself, in passing, of Barthes’s resistance to the authority of the author, and the othering principle implied in his defence of the death of the author. Close to Heidegger’s clearing or *Lichtung*, Cixous’s ‘*clairielle*’ borders on Barthes’s book to come – *La Chambre claire*, or *Camera Lucida* – the anexact twin of Barthes’s *Neutral*.

Cixous’s ‘*Neuterre*’ may thus be read as a place name as well as a date (1972) – a marker for a zone to be defended, a region with fuzzy borders requiring one or several new languages. Like the citizens or denizens of Deleuze’s people to come (‘*on écrit en fonction d’un peuple à venir et qui n’a pas encore de langage*’⁴⁹), the future inhabitants of Nanterre/Neuterre are taught, in the neutral syllables of *Neutre*, to spell or sing some of its words to the tune of a schwa: [ə]. In the effortless utterance of a schwa (a term meaning ‘empty’ in Hebrew), several languages may rub elbows in a self-translating machine. Out of *neutre* something new or *neu* may rise. Out of a schwa, traces of Cixous’s maternal tongue can re-emerge, bits and pieces of her ‘*archilangue maternelle [...], restes disparaissants des disparus schwind schwi scher sch*’.⁵⁰

In the language to come, proper names may turn common and become decapitalized, and first names – whether Cixous’s Ève, or Barthes’s Mam – may perform as the ensign-bearers of reversibility. They may, in other words, become adept at defacing clocks. Recently, yet another clock has been defaced by Adel Abdessemed in *Insurrection*: ‘The West has invented the clock. But we have time.’ (‘*l’occident a inventé l’horloge. Nous nous avons le temps.*’)⁵¹

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⁴⁸ ‘*Réel*’, the real, is also a possibility, suggested by Laurent Milesi.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 196; *Negotiations*, 143: ‘You write with a view to an unborn people that doesn’t yet have a language.’

⁵⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Correspondances avec le mur* (Paris: Galilée, 2017), 127. Or, in (my) translation: [my] ‘archmaternal tongue [...], disappearing remains of the defunct schwind schwi scher sch’.

⁵¹ Cixous and Abdessemed, 26; translation mine.

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Neutrerre 1972 H. C. Cixous, Barthes și potențialitățile neutrului

Rezumat

Acest eseu reconsideră volumul lui Hélène Cixous's *Neutre* alături de seminarului lui Roland Barthes *Le Neutre* din punctul de vedere al relației lor diferite cu timpul, futuritatea și potențialitățile non-lineare ale timpului. Ambele opere abordează futuritatea în termeni non-teologici, pentru a se bifurca în direcția altor versiuni mai bizare ale timpului care au fost teoretizate de Gilles Deleuze în *Logique du sens* (Aion versus Chronos) și, mai recent, de Toleda *et al.* în volumul *Potentialités du temps*. Ambele texte se ocupă de un viitor apropiat ('à venir') în loc să se ocupe de viitor. Insistând mai mult asupra textului lui Cixous, *Neutre* în limba franceză și în traducerea sa în engleză, articolul încearcă să demonstreze cum, dintr-o perspectivă post-blanchotiană, Cixous și Barthes aspiră la un „popor ce va veni”, noțiunea de *peuple*, aceea de limbă nouă sau de limbă nou-multilingvă, ale cărei silabe se pot auzi înainte de a apărea în *Neutre* și *Le Neutre*.