

Picturing Time: Some Photographs of Lídia Jorge

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On the cover of this issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* is a photograph of Lídia Jorge taken by Luís Ramos in 1991. This photograph and others of her by the same photographer were first published in *A Imagem das Palavras*,¹ a book which featured photographs of contemporary Portuguese writers according to a set of conventions which included a portrait of the writer, the writer's study or place of work, and the region or immediate environment of the writer.

In his portrait picture, Ramos presents Lídia Jorge not once, but twice in the same photograph, both as an adult and as a child of eighteen months. This simultaneous, repetitive, and double representation of the writer was achieved with her collusion in an event staged for the occasion, much as a director might locate an actor. She holds the photograph of herself up for the viewer to inspect, pressing it towards the camera eye. More correctly, she *frames* the photograph with her hands, cupping its left edge in one hand and securing its right edge with the other. The photograph of the child is in sharp focus; the adult writer, fixed in planar recession, is blurred, and she gazes back at the spectator, her eye just grazing the top deckled edge of the photo. Underneath are the words of the title of this issue: *Lídia Jorge in Other Words/por Outras Palavras*. Image and text work here to reinforce one another in the way that the title lays claim to the photograph by giving a name to what is represented, the two Lídias. Even more, the photograph, and the discourse that circulates around it, is presented as another language, "in other words," a visual language.

There are several conventions with which the photograph plays. The most immediately striking is the commemorative photograph where a political adherent or family member carries a large photograph in a public setting either to eulogize the heroic virtues of the leader or to immortalize and mourn the dead. We think of the mothers whose children disappeared for their acts

of political resistance, marching year after year around the central plaza in Buenos Aires. Or funeral processions in India, where the deceased is honored with a photograph taken in the prime of life. Or the photographs of those killed by drunk drivers held up for all to see. Or figures who by their heroic acts, have been elevated to the status of martyrs in the service of the State. Presenting the photograph to the viewer, pressing it forward to the very front of the picture space is a visual command that requires the spectator's acknowledgment. Yet this photograph of the writer re-presenting herself as a child is commemorative only in the sense that it registers a passing of time. The child is still alive in the adult, and the location of the photograph in public space only becomes so with its publication. There is nothing here of public mourning, of parades or processions or protest, but rather a quiet sense of shuffling through the family archive and the passage of years. Picturing time is measured as a physical trace in the residue of what is left over: only a photographic record of what once was.

Childhood, it could be argued, is a physical reality located in the past. But according to a psychoanalytic model, there is no "past reality," only continuity. As Freud pointed out, there is no time in the unconscious. There is only the present, constructed all at once by past events, actual or imagined, and their effects in the present. The intervening space between Lída Jorge as adult and Lída Jorge as child is collapsed into the present. Lída as a child is Lída at eighteen months, the end of that crucial period which begins at six months when the child completes an image of the unity it will achieve and what it will become. Catherine Clement describes it as that "moment when one becomes oneself because one is no longer the same as one's mother."² Lacan, who formulated this notion, called this the "mirror phase," a concept well known in discussion of the formation of the subject. It begins somewhere between six and eighteen months and ends with self-recognition and the acquisition of language. This recognition of Freud's "body ego" emerges from the idea of a disorganized state of the body in pieces, that is to say, from a pile of fragmented parts into a bounded identity. And it is exactly this moment that the photograph records, the moment when the child will begin to speak.

When Lída Jorge was asked in an interview whether as a woman she was conscious of writing in a manner that distinguished her from other Portuguese writers, she replied that within the peculiarity, or even a certain style which is her own, she recognizes herself in the memory of the girl she once was, of

the books she read which touched her the most, and of the music and words that she was storing away. "Having been a girl must have marked my mode of expression," she told the interviewer.³ Her women are, as she describes them, powerful, invisible, subversive, and as a writer she records ("echoes" is her word) the violent changes that have taken place since she has begun to write. She does not claim her writing as that of a traditional feminist, and she does not claim to write feminist texts. Elizabeth Grosz, writing on "Feminism After the Death of the Author,"⁴ has recently reevaluated the criteria by which a feminist text is determined. The gender of the author, she claims, does not guarantee the text's position as feminist or not, and the reader can't know the author's intentions, emotions, psyche, or interiority. None of these can fix or control the meaning and inherent ambiguity of a text. Nor does the content of the text insure its status either. There can be no assumption that women are a homogeneous group, or even that they share common experience given the cultural, geographic, political, and historically diverse backgrounds from which they come. There is no particular topic, content, or issue that belongs only to women's writing. Neither the gender of the reader nor the style of the text can be claimed *a priori* as a schema or mode of classification. "Indeed," she writes, "it seems that there is no one characteristic which could ensure a text's feminist status." Instead, for a text to be regarded as feminist, it needs to make visible the patriarchal or phallogocentric presumptions that govern its contexts, and it needs to shake up and unsettle the phallogocentric equation of masculinity and humanity. New styles, new modes of analysis, and new arguments need to be generated. "Being a woman and being called Lídia," says Lídia Jorge, mark her as female and her writing as produced by a woman, but they do not mark her work as feminist texts.

A photograph can, however, say something about the writer in the same way that other photographs of other writers say something about their working habits, the rooms in which they write, the houses in which they live and so on. Photographs of writers writing or artists painting constitute an entire genre as familiar in painting as in literature. But they don't tell us much. Certainly they don't reveal the secrets of artistic production. A photograph of an artist at work or on holiday, as Barthes confirmed, operates on the level of myth.⁵ The writer who joins leisure with the prestige of a vocation is part of our time, a worker like the rest of us, yet also singular and different. Although he fraternizes with other workers on holiday, unlike them he doesn't cease to work. Writing is his "natural" activity; the writer is always writing, like an

involuntary secretion. No matter where the writer is (on the beach, in the country, going down the Congo, in the Algarve) the writer is still a writer. So, Barthes concludes, the photograph of a writer participating in a prosaic spectacle operates as an effort to demystify, but works in exactly the opposite direction. If she's part of everyday life, her art is even more divine. If Lúcia Jorge's simple, polished *escritório* appears to be stripped any attributes of a writer, it enables us to believe even more in the internal noise that goes into the writing. We want to elevate our artists, and we resist de-sanctifying them in the most mundane of terms, in their dress, their eating habits, or the places in which they work. What we want from photographs of writers is evidence: evidence of difference and evidence of likeness.

The other photographs in this issue taken by Luís Ramos of Lúcia Jorge draw on this genre which represents artists and daily life. But these are photographs, as I have said, that play with the very conventions in which they participate. The *escritório* is empty, with hardly enough light in its cool interior to illuminate a page. The writer walks along a stone wall that forms a backdrop. The writer digs into a coat to resist the wind. These images tell us nothing about how her texts are achieved or what is contained in them, nor should we ask them to. If there is an "effect of the real," photography's effective claim according to Barthes, it issues from the look of "non-art" and the studied spontaneity that aligns the first two of these to documentary photographs, and the third photograph to the genre of the portrait. Yet, like the others, this portrait of the writer works against the traditional sense of the genre, in this instance the sitter posed in the studio. Nor is the writer pictured with anyone else (other than herself). The social network is effaced, and the way opened for the operations of myth: the writer producing in isolation, when in fact the stories and novels of Lúcia Jorge point to a way of working that is with and through the voices of others. In *O Dia dos Prodígios* the voices of the women are woven into a relentless litany of opinion and comment: "E Macário disse... E Matilde disse... E Manuel Gertrudes disse... disse Carminha Rosa... E Jesuína Palha disse."⁶

It was precisely this location of the human subject in a network of social relations that Walter Benjamin thought was photography's smartest achievement, a point he argued in his early essay of 1931 on "A Small History of Photography."⁷ Portraits, in their early historical incarnation, could and did place the individual in the social formation according to the professions they chose or the class to which they belonged, visually legible by the dividing lines

of dress or professional attributes as in the hat the sitter wore, such as the cloth cap of the working class or the bowler favored by middle class professionals. "Stamped on the photographic portraits made during the first decade of the medium's existence," writes Rosalind Krauss, "was the aura of both a human nature settling into its own specificity...and a social nexus exposed in terms of the intimacy of its relationships" by these amateur practitioners (Hill, Cameron, Hugo) who were making portrait pictures for their friends.⁸ These intimate relationships are the stuff of Lídia Jorge's writing, the links, the voices both modern and mythical, the sense of social space that marks her work.

How we interpret the photographic portrait depends to a large extent on the photographed subject's gaze. How and where the look is directed has a bearing on what message is sent. A direct gaze into the camera eye can be considered in several opposing ways. In doing so, the subject acknowledges the presence of the photographer and the camera, but what are we to make of this? (It must be said, however, that the photographer and the camera eye aren't always synonymous. In Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story*, the filmmaker hangs his camera on his back from which vantage point it records everything that he *doesn't* see.) Film theorists take differing positions on the meaning of this gaze, with the question of voyeurism as the central issue. If the subject meets our gaze, so the argument goes, voyeuristic peeping is diminished. Or, as Christian Metz argues in relation to cinema, the return gaze can be considered as the subject's permission to be watched.⁹ Lídia Jorge not only gives us permission to look, but in her returned gaze and the offer of the photograph, she actively invites the spectator to do so.

That offer is literally framed by the writer's hands, which surround the photograph of the child. This frame, all frames, call attention to the picture, while at the same time separating it from the world that it reproduces. The hands section off the past from the present, childhood from adulthood, and hollow out a deep space between the face of the adult and the body of the child, as though to emphasize temporal distance. In the physical gap between the two resides human memory, the sense of what was and what is, what one has become. C.S. Sherrington, writing in the nineteenth century, referred to a sixth sense to which he gave the name "proprioception," described as the individual's consciousness of the body that confirms physical identity.¹⁰ The adult memory of this child (Lídia Jorge remembering Lídia Jorge) is a physical, corporeal memory, as well as that imagined and handed down by others. Memory might be thought of as a seventh sense, as a record of antecedent

existence upon which our intellectual identity depends.¹¹

So, movement circulates between the active subject, the writer who offers the image of herself, the writer who produces meaning by writing, and the passive object of the photograph which receives the meanings constructed by the spectator in looking. Many acts inform the ways in which we see and the ways in which we remember our photographed past: projecting our own meanings onto photographs, voyeuristic looking, fantasy, and desire. In this instance, the camera doesn't present us with visual facts of the writer's life that are "simply there." Neither the photographer nor the spectator is disinterested. Each works with frames already in place to construct some particular picture according to a stock of available signs. That is why the figure of the writer framing herself adds yet another layer to available meanings.

Painters, of course, have long known the value of frames, both in the economic terms of their potential material richness and as a means of regulating the gaze. "Frame the work," Poussin commanded, so that "the gaze is contained and not scattered outside receiving other neighboring images pell-mell and confusing them with what is in the painting."¹² So as not to call attention to the frame itself, Poussin insisted that it be simple and not overly ornate. Matisse claimed that the frame was an important part of the picture in that it signaled the edge of the work, and that beyond the frame the continued movement of the picture could be implied. And Picasso, always alert to the ways in which common objects could be drafted into the service of art, looped a thick piece of rope into a frame surrounding the oval of his 1912 *Still Life and Chair Caning*, a gesture that revised the notion of the frame by using common materials that suggested the local vernacular of everyday speech. Framing is another way of controlling what is framed.

Finally, we might want to think of the role the family archive of pictures has in constituting individual memory, and how one is framed by that archive. Here is Roland Barthes, as he searches for a photograph of his mother after she died.¹³ He is searching through the archive, and he begins in this way by working "back through a life, not my own, but the life of someone I love. Starting from the last image taken of his mother before her death, he arrived, traversing three-quarters of a century, at the image of a child. He stares at what he calls "the Sovereign Good of childhood." And what he finds in her first photograph, the photograph of the child, is also the last one that he finds. Perhaps this can tell us something about our photograph of "Lidia Jorge and Lidia Jorge," about the "Sovereign Good of childhood" and its survival in the adult.

Notes

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¹ Comissariado Português Para a Europalia 91, *A Imagem das Palavras* (Lisbon: Contexto, 1991).

² Catherine Clement, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 76.

³ Stephanie d'Orey, Interview with Lídia Jorge. In this issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*.

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, "Feminism after the Death of the Author," *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 10-24.

⁵ Roland Barthes, "L'Ecrivain en vacances," *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957) 29-32.

⁶ Lídia Jorge, *O Dia dos Prodígios* (Lisbon: Publ. Dom Quixote, 1995) 96-97.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979).

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 291.

⁹ Christian Metz, "From the Imaginary Signifier," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 782-802. A full discussion of the meaning of the subject's gaze and its role in photographs of non-Western subjects can be found in Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, "The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes: The Example of National Geographic," in *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays From V.A. R. 1990-1994*, ed. Lucien Taylor, (New York: Routledge, 1994) 363-84.

¹⁰ Oliver Sachs, "The Disembodied Lady," *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Picador, 1985) 42-43.

¹¹ David MacDougall discusses the ways in which memory is translated in film dealing with historical periods in "Films of Memory," *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays From V.A.R. 1990-1994*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994) 260-70.

¹² Nicholas Poussin, Letter to Chantelou, 28 April 1639, in *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, ed. C. Jovanny (Paris: F. de Nobele, 1968) 20-21. On a discussion of the frame, see Louis Marin, "Du Cadre au décor ou la question de l'ornement dans la peinture," *Rivista di Estetica* (1982): 18-20.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 71.

Luís Ramos, "Lídia Jorge," 1990.

A Imagem das Palavras.

Comissariado Português Para a Europalia 91.

Lisbon: Contexto, 1991.



Lúis Ramos, "The Writing Room in the Algarve," 1990

A Imagem das Palavras.

Comissariado Português Para a Europa 91.

Lisbon: Contexto, 1991.



Luís Ramos, "Lídia Jorge in the Algarve,"
A Imagem das Palavras
Comissariado Português Para a Europalia 91.
Lisbon: Contexto, 1991.

