

Trans Death Magic, queer death and queer escape

by Uma Breakdown

*'We can be the killers of the dead, that's the worst of all, because when we kill a dead person, we kill ourselves. But we can also, on the contrary, be the guardian, the friend, the regenerator of the dead'*¹

The author, theorist, and playwright Hélène Cixous has written extensively on death. It presides over and haunts her writing, but rarely as something negative or static. Instead, for Cixous death is generative; a catalyst, and an opportunity.

In her most influential work *The Laugh of The Medusa*, Cixous sets out death as the conditions for her proposed *écriture féminine*²;

*'By writing herself, woman will return to the body that has been confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display- the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.'*³

In *The Laugh of The Medusa*, Cixous' proposal for negating the logic of death is to write, and to multiply the kinds of writing endlessly. Rather than the death logic of a king disposed and new one crowned, Cixous proposes a proliferation of creative processes, utilising women's inexhaustible imagination to create an abundance of life/lives.⁴ In *The Laugh of The*

Medusa, breaking free of the corpse's stare is achieved by developing multiple ways of creating, in an effort to recreate ourselves not once but endlessly.

I don't like to think of death. Actually, that's not true, I think about death all the time. I feel like it is a powerful thing to own, a thing we all own – a kind of magic that crosses all species. I also feel that as transgender people we have a special and powerful connection to death.⁵ The majority of us had a doppelgänger placed in our bed at birth – its body an unliving and inert mass, its name already dead. The undead double is deployed as a source of repression, floating nearby as a disciplining reminder. Sometimes it might feel like it was speaking for us, sometimes it's just hanging there in the back of the room, its dead smile enough to shame us into keeping quiet. Then at some point, we are able to create an alternative.

That is one part of the trans death magic, deploying the inexhaustible imaginary in the presence of our nasty companion. Finding a new way to write ourselves and a new way to speak. The undead double becomes a substrate in which to grow many new things, its repressive smile gradually obscured with stems, leaves, and petals. Some of what we plant may in turn die and become more mulch, while other things may mature into organisms we could not anticipate. The repurposed doppelgänger becomes a means to unlearn the death logic of fixed state and names, and replace this with the unending outpouring of creative processes.

That's one part of trans death magic, planting seeds in a cynical corpse. Another part is that beautiful laceration we call truth.

Cixous addresses death directly in *The School of the Dead*,⁶ where she traces the endless relations between dying, and the creative processes of reading and writing. She begins with the death of her own father, her "strange and monstrous treasure", which in turn became the source of her early books, and an encounter with truth. She repeatedly returns to ideas of truth, and in particular, to the approaching truth of the person on their deathbed;

*'[It] is only at the very last page of a book that we perhaps get a chance to say what we have never said, write what we have never written all our lives, i.e., the most precarious, the best, in other words, the worst.'*⁷

The deathbed confession is both a case of having nothing left to lose, and knowing there are no more opportunities after this. It is that approach towards truth that Cixous says we need to strive for. She makes

it clear that it isn't a destination, but a coordinate. We must orient ourselves 'in the direction of truth', to do this is to 'unlie', an active creative process.⁸

It will be raw, it will be painful, but that's the process of writing, which is the process of creating the self. It's not about catharsis, or 'the terrible fate of being forgiven'⁹ that would negate and cancel out our creative act, returning the undead doppelgänger to its original position.

No, it's about the power we can draw from death, the heightened sensitivity of every encounter when approaching the truth, the things we can grow in it. That's the trans death magic.

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Recent projects include: *The Speculative Dismemberment of Agent Leon Kennedy*, Market Gallery, Glasgow; *Hinterlands*, BALTIC, Gateshead and *The Joy of Destruction*, Backlit, Nottingham.

¹ Cixous, H. (2005). *Three Steps on The Ladder of Writing* (S. Cornell & S. Sellers, Trans.). Columbia University Press. p. 13

² *Écriture féminine* loosely translates to 'woman's writing'. In reality, *écriture féminine* is more about writing with a sensitivity or capacity, rather than any fixed category, be it biological or otherwise. This is neatly expressed in Cixous' listing of Jean Genet as an exemplary writer of *écriture féminine*.

³ Cixous, H. (1976). *The Laugh of the Medusa* (K. Cohen & P. Cohen, Trans.). *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893. p. 880

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 876

⁵ I have chosen not to write in the body of this essay about the social, legal, and economic structures that increase our likelihood of death. These are real material conditions that form a necro-political mechanism whereby some lives are considered to have more value by being extinguished than by any other metric. In terms of trans lives, this obviously expands and multiplies depending on the intersection of other categories such as class, race, nationality, ability, etc.

⁶ Cixous, H. (2005). *Three Steps on The Ladder of Writing* (S. Cornell & S. Sellers, Trans.). Columbia University Press. p. 10

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45