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Between Erasure and Exposure: Intermedial Autobiography Since Roland Barthes

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In my dissertation, I investigate the trend toward intermedial representations of the self in contemporary French personal writing of an autobiographical type. The theoretical framework of my dissertation is based on notions of referentiality presented in *La chambre claire*, and in essays contemporaneous to Roland Barthes's by Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Baudrillard. As I demonstrate, they are in dialogue with it, all the while exploring the boundaries of self-representation in relation to illness and death. At the outset, an analysis of the discourses of photography in France from the 1980s to the early 2000s informs my discussion of representations of an expected death in works by Alix Cléo Roubaud, Jacques Roubaud, Annie Ernaux, and Hervé Guibert. I argue that the legacy of a Barthesian conceptualization of the photograph obliges writers to rethink their stance towards representing the self. Through gestures of erasure and exposure, they create an intermedial aesthetic coupling writing, photography, and film to explore anew certain taboos concerning self and death. Intermediality opens up the notions of referentiality presented in Roland Barthes's *La chambre*

claire: note sure la photographie— the making of traces through writing, memories, and recording the body. The “intermedial” authors selected are central to a trend (begun in the early 1980s and increasingly practiced over the past thirty years) that takes advantage of visual media and writing to explore not only posing for and viewing photographs but also the taking of these images. They also examine the shifting boundaries between intimate and social spaces of the self. By bringing to light their particular poetics, my work attends to the impact of the intertwined representations of the self, illness, and death in the fields of autobiographical works and of visual studies within the academic domain of French Studies.

The dissertation of Lauren Elizabeth Van Arsdall is approved.

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INTRODUCTION

Remarking on the need to film her mother's death from terminal breast cancer, conceptual artist Sophie Calle contends, "I didn't want to miss the last word, her last smile. As I knew I had to shut my eyes to sleep, because the agony was very long, there was a risk I might not be there. I put a camera there, thinking that if she gave a jump or start, a last work, at least I'd have it on film."¹ Calle's film *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) is an eleven-minute short based on over one hundred hours of footage from the previous year made using a camera propped by the foot of her mother's bed. Exhibited at the 2007 Venice Biennale, the film plays in a loop, and as the title *Pas pu saisir la mort*, or "Couldn't Capture Death" suggests, it is impossible to tell when Calle's mother takes her last breath. The title also suggests that her death cannot be grasped precisely because of the "uncomfortable relation" that arises from placing us in the position of witnessing a stranger die, which is, by all standards, a private affair that here happens before our very eyes.² The camera seizes upon her mother's profile bathed in a soft light emanating from the hospital window, and within the peaceful *mise-en-scène* of the deathbed, we become both entranced and complicit in studying the video for signs of her passing, unable to tell if she is asleep, awake, or dead. In defense of the mortuary aspect of the film, Calle argues it is not about aggression or intrusion; rather, as she claims, the film pays homage to her mother, a woman who, much like Calle herself, loved being the center of attention.³

¹ See Angelique Chrisafis, "Interview: He Loves Me Not." *The Guardian*. 15 June 2007.

² See Anneleen Masschelein, "Capturing the Last Moments: Recording the Dying Body at the Turn of the 21st century." *Image and narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2013): 122-40.

³ See also Marcelline Block, "Unburied Mothers: The Death of the Maternal in Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* and Sophie Calle's *Pas pu saisir la mort*." *The Many Ways We Talk About Death in Contemporary Society*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2009, and Rosalind Krauss's *Under Blue Cup*. Boston: MIT Press, 2011.

Calle's film is both a commentary on the invisibility of grief and an important part of a long history of thanatography, or works that attempt to represent death; it is also a narrative project about the artist and her subject. Subsequently, she engages one of the oldest tropes of the autobiographical genre—her mother's death causes her to contemplate her own mortality, and thus, mourning becomes not only the organizing principle but also the impetus for future projects that explore love, life, and travel.⁴ *Pas pu saisir la mort* touches upon a provocative side of autobiography (that involves images) in contemporary France that, as Shirley Jordan observes, “plays with photography's propensity to position us as intimates, privy to what only those closest to the autobiographical subject would normally see: the grain of the skin, a pile of soiled clothes, the uninspiring contents of a cupboard, a slept-in bed” or in this case, the death of Calle's mother.⁵ Detractors decried the sentimentality of the installation, characterizing it as opportunistic and yet another example of Calle “selling solipsism as social commentary”—this time rather distastefully by turning her grief into an artwork for public display.⁶ These polarizing reactions are old hat in the history of the reception of her work, which is typically conveyed either as “wacko or wearying.”⁷ Jean-Michel Rabaté, a critic who viewed her installation at the Venice Biennale, remained ambivalent when asked if he was upset by the “sick exploitation of personal bereavement to make art” as a kind of bad pathos, or “bathos,” only to conclude that he could neither construct his own narrative around the film nor “sublimate [her] pain.”⁸

⁴ Calle embarks on a journey to Berck and Lourdes in *Où et Quand?* Arles: Actes Sud, 2009.

⁵ See Shirley Jordan, “Marie NDiaye: énigmes photographiques, albums éclatés” *Marie NDiaye: l'étrangeté à l'œuvre*, Ed. Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan. Lille: Presses Septentrion, 2011. 65-82.

⁶ See Daphne Merkin, “I Think Therefore I'm Art,” *New York Times*. 19 October 2008. She also hints at Calle's unpopularity among male art critics.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 88-93.

Furthermore, as Calle implies by the title, the film is a failed attempt to capture death's moment, which takes on new meaning considering that watching the video proved to be a more emotional experience than recording the footage. Calle's belated reaction surprises her, as she notes in an interview, "It was only when *Pas pu saisir la mort* was installed and I went to look at it that I realized that this was my mother, and that I started to cry."⁹ By offering a visual trace of the deceased, the video confirms for Calle that her mother is no longer physically present: the experience of watching the video makes the realization of death even more concrete than the lived experience of seeing her mother dying.

As *Pas pu saisir la mort* demonstrates, there is something deeply unsettling (even intolerable) about capturing a real death versus a fictional one.¹⁰ We are confronted with deaths on screen all the time (television, movies); however, the actual act is more disturbing. André Bazin contends that "the representation of a real death is [an] obscenity [...] We do not die twice," explaining that love, like death, is something to be experienced, not to be documented by the camera.¹¹ Bazin denounces filming real deaths because it invites a casual approach to images that violates a sacred moment, thus rendering it reproducible *ad infinitum*. The shock of seeing a real death on screen comes from the mortiferous effect of the medium that is in turn doubled by the real vanishing of that life on camera. In a process in which life abandons the body, transforming it into a corpse, photography additionally turns its subject into a tangible object to be contemplated belatedly, as a "double" death effect of showing dying with photography and film.

⁹ See Louise Neri, "Sophie Calle," *Interview Magazine*. Accessed 26 April 2015.

¹⁰ See Jennifer Malkowski, "*Dying in Full Detail*": *Mortality and Duration in Digital Documentary*. Berkeley: Escholarship, 2011.

¹¹ "Death Every Afternoon," 1958. *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark Cohen. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003: 30.

As the authors studied in this dissertation reveal, death is a marker of autobiography's "hard limits": they encode it as unrepresentable. Attempts at representing one's mortality (which is different from representing one's own death—an impossible feat) work as a productive tool for thinking through a poetics of self-exposure and self-erasure, and such gestures highlight how photography and film make meaning by negotiating the interstices between erasing and exposing. This process hardly conforms to traditional notions of self-representation. Works like Marie NDiaye's *Autoportrait en vert* or Camille Lauren's *Cet absent-là* focus on photographs that do not always show the author's body.¹² The authors discussed in this dissertation not only erase the body from view but also imagine their death using photographs (and in one example film). Their work also stands apart from autobiographies about loss that involve family albums as in George Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and Hélène Cixous's *Photos de racines*, and from visual travel narratives that reach across time and space as in Leïla Sebbar's *Journal de mes Algéries en France*, J.M. Le Clézio's *L'Africain*, and Alain Mabanckou's *Lumières de Pointe-Noire*.¹³ The key distinction here is the representation of death. Because one can never be witness to one's own death, the stagings created with photography, and to an extent, film, that I examine in this dissertation change the temporality of the writing process since viewing one's self as dead *avant la lettre* enables the author to ponder, radically, the finality of his or her demise. Consequently, these contemporary thanatographies raise questions about the difficulties of representing the self as they also cast aspersions on photography's referential power. Many of

¹²See *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, eds. Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell, and Ann Miller. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, and *Littérature et photographie*, eds. Liliane Louvel, Danièle Méaux, Jean-Pierre Montier, and Philippe Ortel, Rennes: Presses universitaires Rennes, 2008.

¹³ George Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Paris: Denoël, 1975; Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Photos de racines*, Paris: Des Femmes, 1994; Leïla Sebbar, *Journal de mes Algéries en France*, Paris: Bleu Autour, 2005; J.M. Le Clézio's *L'Africain*, Paris: Gallimard/Mercure de France, 2004; Alain Mabanckou, *Lumières de Pointe-Noire*, Paris: Seuil, 2013.

the thanatographies are not only traces because they document a moment in time but also are photographs *of* traces, which makes them into a source of meta-reflection on photographs as certificates of absence and presence.

Lenses and Mirrors

These autobiographical works studied here that treat death through photography, writing, and film leading up to Sophie Calle's *Pas pu saisir la mort* from 2007 borrow from Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, and are thus deeply indebted to its content in a dialogic way—written both alongside and against it, despite the thirty odd years separating the publication of *La Chambre claire* and the showing of *Pas pu saisir la mort*. This dissertation is concerned with accounting for the constellation of theoretical inquiry about visual autobiography involving photography and film from 1981 to the early 2000s.

The three case studies of autobiography—Jacques Roubaud, Annie Ernaux, and Hervé Guibert—explored demonstrate a unifying aesthetic clustered around aspects of autobiographical acts that are intermedial and grounded in erasure/exposure. The term ‘intermedial’ refers to the numerous media modes used to represent the narrative (text, photography, and film), recognizing that media do not exist as separate entities in isolation from each other; furthermore, the term ‘intermedial’ describes how these authors use multiple media to explore intermediate states: between living and dying.¹⁴ The term “intermedia” can be traced as far back as 1812 when it was coined by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and it was revived almost a century and a half later during the Fluxus art movement in the 1970s. Intertextuality resonates with intermedia; however, the latter does not confine itself to the text, rather it is concerned with how images recall other

¹⁴ Merriam-Webster defines “medium” from Latin *medius* for “middle” as a “means of conveying something,” as in Marshall McLuhan’s remark “the medium is the message,” *Understanding Media*, London: Routledge, 1964.

images and the connection points between media. Several categories have been theorized by critics.¹⁵ The synthetic kind, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, conveys a “revolutionary and utopian attitude [...] of monomedia” over the hegemony of a singular form.¹⁶ The transmedial type traces the connection between scopic trends in one medium and a later medium, as in painting and later image-making devices like photography and film; ontological builds from Friedrich Kittler’s thesis that new forms emerge in connection to older ones, and even though they often use metaphors that recall the outmoded technology, which accounts for the automobile being called a “horseless carriage” and photography being called “writing with light,” they do not always make the former technologies obsolete.¹⁷ In transformational intermediality, the representation of one medium by another occurs with a series of references. This type most closely characterizes the selected autobiographies in this study because of the nesting of one medium within the other, in addition to the frameworks of transformation (a photograph of a written text that then is referenced by accompanying words on the page).¹⁸

Intermediality also brings up the intermediary status of any autobiographical act in relation to others. ‘Interpersonal’ describes how they enlist a collaborator to narrate the self. Jacques Roubaud cures his aphasia caused by the death of his wife, Alix Cléo Roubaud, by writing about her photographs in *Quelque chose noir* (1986); Annie Ernaux’s lover Marc Marie becomes her co-author in *L’usage de la photo* (2005); and Hervé Guibert finds an analog for the representation of his ailing body in the bodies of his elderly aunts in the video-diary *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* (1992). He also relies on an editor to make the final post-mortem cut of his film.

¹⁵ See Jens Schröter, “Four Models of Intermediality,” *Travels in Intermedia[lity]: Reblurring the Boundaries*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷ See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

¹⁸ Schröter, 23.

The interpersonal dimension occurs both out of necessity (because of a premature death of the writer in one instance) and out of formal considerations. The interpersonal draws attention to the caretaker and witness roles that connect each author to another person, mirroring the coupling of photography and writing, photography and film, and writing and film in these works.

And finally, the ‘erasure’ and ‘exposure’ announced in the title refer not only to the exhibitionist, gimmicky quality of post-modern autobiography as a game of hide-and-seek between the “real subject” and the construction of the “author” but also to the latent process of a photograph’s development, whose image, rather than be revealed instantly, is deferred until it emerges as a full image. Likewise, language allows the author to hide within their own creation, while at the same time revealing the self. ‘Erasure’ encapsulates the process of writing as revision and working through in order to represent, and also refers to the stamping out of the subject. These autobiographies refuse conventional self-portraiture: many of the autobiographies studied either do not show the author’s body or use another’s body to visualize their bodily experience. As we shall see, ‘exposure’ is the counterweight to this process of erasure, and each author here will negotiate it in his or her manner, as we shall see. Jacques Roubaud, as the editor of his deceased wife Alix Cléo’s photographs and writings, must decide which details of their intimate life to include without betraying the intimacy they shared. At the same time, the process of editing her work—rewriting, reworking, reliving—that functions as the frame story for composing *Quelque chose noir* is a way to purge the pain caused by her premature death. His editing and writing process thus entails a judicious negotiation of erasure and exposure. Annie Ernaux withholds any photographs of her body in *L’Usage de la photo*—we only see her clothes. The task of exposure created by this erasure of the body falls to writing, as the reader learns in full detail about her experience of chemotherapy in the texts. Hervé Guibert’s overarching theory of the image uses erasure, initially, to raise uncertainty about the dependability of photographs.

In *L'Image fantôme*, photographs taken by Guibert cannot be “seen” for one reason or another—the unfortunate circumstances of overexposure, broken apertures or springs, a fire. A decade later, exposure prevails with the film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* that bombards the viewer with images of the author’s body. This shift from erasure to exposure invites reflection on the stakes of self-representation and self-citation. As shown above, Ernaux, Guibert, and Roubaud are *inter*-connected by their shared ‘intermedial,’ ‘interpersonal,’ and ‘erased-exposed’ aesthetic. Their autobiographical gestures I analyze in the chapters to follow command attention for how they transform the weightiness of death and its incomprehensibility into an aesthetic that far from trivializing experience, pays heed to the contradictions of writing at the very limit of death.

Few studies explain what happens when the self-portrait functions less like a mirror and more like a time-travel device in which one represents a death to come, as in the intermedial autobiographies by the Roubauds, Ernaux, and Guibert.¹⁹ Tricks such as withholding a photograph intended to be visualized by the reader or revealing that the image of a death was staged, cause viewers to question the referential power of photographs or film. These media have trained us somewhat to believe, too easily, that the index is always linked to reality. In this regard, thanatographies that involve photographs are a doubled representation of mortality: photographs are *memento mori* that remind viewers of the fleeting existence of their subject, yet they are also tangible proof of that object having once existed. In a circular fashion, thanatographies attempt to represent the unrepresentable—death—by making the subject appear ghost-like, corpse-like, or moulting, as an imprint of its sitter. Using photographs to stage a thanatography jeopardizes the referential power of the photograph because the subject is pictured in the photograph as a trace. He or she does not appear as one would in a conventional

¹⁹ Michel Beaujour’s study *does* explain how self-portraits work as *memento mori*: “the trick of inserting word-pictures into a text that makes the reader believe there looms a powerful non-verbal signifier behind the verbal text.” See “Some Paradoxes of Description,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 61 (1981) 27-59. p. 32.

self-portrait or the “selfie” of the twenty-first century—before the camera ready for the close-up. Rather, the subject is represented metonymically. This nesting of index within index—trace of a trace—upsets the illustrative function of photography. Unable to point directly to the thing the text names, the subject in the photograph must gesture (indirectly) to something else. Instead of functioning as a supplement to an already completed text when an author might “add” childhood photographs to a text to act as a trigger for the writing process the photographs of thanatography have a function as a framing tool that allows the author to tame their death. These works also use thanatography by proxy: using someone else’s death to think through their own. They thus recall La Rochefoucauld’s maxim “Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement,” or “Death, like the sun, cannot be looked at steadily.”²⁰ They represent the self as a trace of a trace—photographs of things other than the self that are prone to disappearance—and thus that can only be represented as a metonym, through other means than a direct confrontation to understand absence.

Despite the three decades separating Calle’s *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) from the work that I use as a frame—Barthes’s *La chambre claire* (1980)—the majority of the criticism on autobiographies combining photography and text still draws heavily from his text.²¹ Moreover, Barthes’s reading of the photograph in *La chambre claire* as an object of longing (for his deceased mother) establishes a link between the photograph and loss that perpetuates its association with death. What might be the point of continuing to invoke the theories of photography through this “Barthesian tethering” of the photograph to death, mourning, and the

²⁰ La Rochefoucauld, “26,” *Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes morales*, 1665.

²¹ *La chambre claire* has had a far-reaching impact on the history of photography and is included in as many as fifty anthologies of photography. See James Elkins, ed. *Photography Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2007, and Liz Wells, *The Photography Reader*, New York: Palgrave, 2011 to name a few.

trace?²² The canonical status of *La chambre claire* makes it tempting to graft his readings of the photograph onto other autobiographies of this type. For example, Calle's use of 13mm cassettes in 2007 displays nostalgia for the imperfections and graininess of film, playing with the process of delay since she does not immediately know what the image looks like. This anachronistic use of media is one example of a Barthesian tethering—a final farewell to not only the type of photographs (analog) but also the discourse that attaches longing to the subject. My intervention in this dissertation is to explore moments where the relationship between photography, writing, and death breaks down into an intermedial dynamic. Within the three decades since the appearance of *La chambre claire* in 1980, Barthes's seminal book on photography has become the most well known, if not the most quoted, text on the subject.²³ This reveals a contradiction: no matter how much critics would rather turn to other sources on photography, they continue to cite his book—it still seems very current.²⁴

Barthes was not a photographer, yet his voice has become the authority on how we approach photographs, view them, and talk about their relationship to death. Part of the allure stems from the autobiographical leaning of this work that, in the first half, sets out to uncover a “history of looking” at photographs as a phenomenological exploration of photography's essence—its “ça-a-été” or “that has been” quality— yet, in the second half, retracts this aim in favor of a personal tone of mourning for his mother.²⁵ In response, many critics have undertaken

²² Shirley Jordan, “Chronicles of Intimacy: Photography in Autobiographical Projects,” 75.

²³ In an interview, Batchen explains that *Photography Degree Zero*, a collection of essays published on the thirtieth anniversary of *La chambre claire* (or *Camera Lucida*): “It was actually initiated by a feeling, which I sensed throughout my discipline, that everyone was sick to death of *Camera Lucida*. Indeed, I recently went to a conference in Madrid where at the beginning of the first day, one of the organizers stood up and said that anyone who quoted from the book would be fined.” *Artforum*, 24 August 2009.

²⁴ Many have turned to Susan Sontag, for example, whose *On Photography* is cited by Barthes in *La chambre claire*.

²⁵ See Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 15.

alternate readings of this text as a hybrid form of criticism and personal essay, a modernist experiment in fragmentary writing and viewing practices. As much recent attention has turned to the aesthetic underpinnings and theoretical impact of *La chambre claire*, it is a suitable time to look to his contemporaries for alternative understandings that do not necessarily divorce writing on photographs from the *taking* of photographs. Barthes recognizes that photographs are special because of how they annihilate themselves as a medium—“no longer a sign but the thing itself”—but he is not ready to account for photographs he might have taken of himself nor does he allocate much discussion to the photographer’s perspective.²⁶ Consequently, he and his contemporaries differ in their views on the photograph as index.

Photography is a medium so seemingly transparent and contiguous with reality that one often forgets that one is looking at a representation, not reality itself. They do such a good job of being transparent that we forget they are representations. Building on Charles Peirce’s idea of the index as a special kind of sign, Rosalind Krauss writes:

Photography is an imprint or a transfer of the real: it is a photo-chemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables... On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches.²⁷

In a similar vein, Barthes uses “ça-a-été,” or a “having-been-there” of objects, to refer to the index, likening the connection between the subject in the photograph and the viewer to a carnal, skin-like bond. Rather than focus on the bond between the subject in the photograph and the subject in real life, as Krauss’s definition of indexicality would suggest, Barthes emphasizes a double-pronged bond— between the subject pictured and the subject in real life, as well as the

²⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1980. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. 45.

²⁷ “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” *October*. 19 (Winter 1981): 3-34. p. 26.

connection between the viewer of the photograph and the former.²⁸ Subsequent discourses on the photograph have added to the above definition all the while also chipping away at the photograph's status as index (something that links the photograph to its subject as a trace or a mark of having "been there") rather than a resemblance that representational practices like painting create.²⁹

Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida all offer concurrent (and divergent) understandings of photographs that emphasize both self-exposure and self-erasure. For example, Jean-Luc Nancy's conceptualizes the photograph as a mode of exposure that reveals itself to the subject over time in a process he calls "exscription." This notion that works like an "index of identification" is made possible through writing and reading and conceived of as a means of *not* knowing the self, then recognizing it in contact with literature and art.³⁰ "Exscription" implies that representation, whether textual or visual, is a function of time—a series of encounters with images and thoughts made by the author. In a similar line of reasoning, in *The Perfect Crime* (1995) Jean Baudrillard advances that photographs are not evidence of a single trace; rather, they point to other, multiplying signs because the original environment where the photograph captured its subject is cut off by the border of the photograph and thus the photograph is an empty sign, just another form of simulacra that points to other signs. Because these circumstances of capture remain removed from the viewer, photographic images cannot imply causality with their referent and thus it is impossible to know with certainty what

²⁸ *Camera Lucida*, 5.

²⁹ See W.J.T. Mitchell's *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era*, Boston: MIT Press, 1994.

³⁰ See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Exscription," *Yale French Studies* (1990) no. 78: 47-65. p. 64, and Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's Mistaken Identity," p. 78.

happened before or afterward.³¹ A photographer himself, he also draws our attention to the distortion that the camera lens, in French called *objectif* (here Baudrillard creates a play on words between the adjective “objectif” and “l’objectif,” the camera lens), is capable of producing, arguing that a duel always take place between the object photographed and the lens in that each snapshot is a “reciprocal disappearance,” an erasure.³²

Additionally, Jacques Derrida in *Demeures, Athènes* claims that photographs are a future survivor of the spectator. One has to wonder if his full-scale interpretation of photography that attends to its multiple temporal modalities is the result of not only writing essays on photography but also working in collaboration with photographers.³³ This view of photography as a model for layered temporalities divides it into discrete units of time that in turn multiply the “here and now” of the single image: the setting up of the camera, the pressing of the shutter button, the time of development in relation to time of the photograph being viewed, and finally, the time of the viewing in relation to the time of the photograph being interpreted.³⁴ Between the taking of the image, the present moment of observation, and the future moment when it will outlive the photographer, the image multiplies these discrete units of time, as a trace. Derrida’s conception of the photograph as photo-*graphy* also opens up the supposedly referential modes of photography and text. Whereas Barthes does account for the superimposition of past and present in the photograph, he does not overtly theorize the processes of naming, describing, and contemplating. The force of Derridean thinking is that it expands the graphic part of photography

³¹ See Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Suture-Self 1995.

³² See Jean Baudrillard, “Photography, Or the Writing of Light,” trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, 2000, a083.

³³ Part travelogue, part philosophical essay, *Demeures, Athènes* consists of thirty-four of Bonhomme’s black and white photographs taken a decade before Derrida’s trip to Athens. He also wrote an afterword to Marie-Françoise Plissart’s *Droit de regards*, a narrative composed entirely of photographs.

³⁴ See Michael Naas, “‘Now Smile’: Recent Development in Jacques Derrida’s Work on Photography” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 1 (Winter 2011) 205-22.

as writing and representation to address how works combining photography and text create time lags between when the photograph was taken, viewed, and interpreted by the photographer/writer, underscoring the importance of delay and deferral to understand them.³⁵

This same process of delay and deferral is crucial to interpreting theories of photography in France, so long dominated by Roland Barthes. Shortly before his death in 1980, he made the observation that there was a kind of “theoretical boom” in photography because of the then-growing interest in the photograph as an object of critical inquiry.³⁶ As much as he continues to influence autobiographies that contain photography and text (like later ones by Jacques Roubaud, Alix Cléo Roubaud, Hervé Guibert, and Annie Ernaux), a study of the poetics of self-exposure and self-erasure would not be complete without setting aside a space for new voices within the canon of photography theory in France who critically opine on photography at the same time they turn to the self.

Characterized by analysis and affect, *La chambre claire* and the earlier *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) are a string of commentaries characterized by playfulness and melancholy. Having been published only six years apart, they form companion texts.³⁷ The first part of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* offers a simulacrum of the family album, showing portraits of his grandparents and parents, post-card snapshots of his hometown of Bayonne, and his evolution from an infant to an academic. Such fragments of existence are reproduced in photographic form, demonstrating the text’s genetic development and never ascribing a single identity to the name “Barthes.” Despite the playful pastiche of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, the sense of maternal connection—one of the most striking photographs in the text

³⁵ See Véronique Montémont “Beyond Autobiography,” 39.

³⁶ See Laurent Dispot, *Le Matin*, February 22, 1980, qtd. in Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*.

³⁷ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* (1977) has the same ludic feel.

shows the author's mother holding him in her arms when he was a child—is palpable, forming a link between this earlier text (published two years before her death) and the later text *La chambre claire* in which Barthes omits a photograph of his *mother* as a child.³⁸ Written as he grieved her death in 1977, *La chambre claire* is a requiem. If we are to consider that it can be read as a caption to one photograph (that does not appear in the space of the pages), then the entire piece hinges on the death of a loved one that influences Barthes's views toward photography and death. Photographic inter-textuality, or the strong intertextuality between *La chambre claire* and the autobiographical writings studied in this dissertation, is haunted by questions of memory, mourning, representation, and doubt over the photograph's capacity to represent.³⁹

Thanatographies like the two works cited above acknowledge the dread of seeing the self as dead. They do not display anguish over the image of their impending death; instead, they imagine it as a void using absence as the dominant aesthetic. Furthermore, the selected authors in this study investigate the duality, as Barthes sees it, of photography as “Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.”⁴⁰ In the case of autobiographies that imagine an eventual death and sometimes stage it in front of the camera, to say “This is me” becomes an almost impossible task because neither language nor photography can adequately authenticate itself.

Through a series of close readings, I show how photographs problematize self-representation, arriving at the conclusion that texts which reference photographs withheld from

³⁸ This is the famous “Winter Garden Photograph,” or “la photographie du jardin d’hiver.” Barthes writes: “la Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver, elle, était bien essentielle, elle accomplissait pour moi, utopiquement, la science impossible de l’être unique,” *La chambre claire*, 139.

³⁹ See Ari Blatt, “The Interphototextual Dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie’s *L’usage de la photo*,” *Word & Image* 25:1 (Jan.-Mar. 2009): 46-55.

⁴⁰ *Camera Lucida*, 92.

the viewer cast light on the paradox of photographs as certificates of both presence and absence, as well as on mechanisms of self-representation. What is most salient in the examples that will be examined is that while they promise to align closely with Barthes's dictum that he himself is the "measure of photographic 'knowledge,'" the authors simultaneously use photographs (and in one case, film) to measure their knowledge of the self, and— through a negotiation of exposure/erasure—to decide how much the viewer should be able to know. In the process, they show how the insertion or deletion of photographs not only adds another layer to the narrative but can also be the impetus for writing about their death.⁴¹

Deaths Foretold: Thanatography and Ghosts

Philippe Ariès identifies a major shift within changing attitudes toward death from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, from the tame death to the invisible death.⁴² In the nineteenth century, death is tame—represented as something beautiful, exalted, and romanticized with pilgrimages to tombs, cult of memory, funeral processions, mourning attire, and the growth of cemetery mausoleum; these practices attested to death's figuration as a ritual, but its representations waned in the twentieth century. Present-day attitudes fall squarely between the the imminent/invisible death: the former creates fear because it is viewed as something violent and horrific, and the later hides dying from the public eye because it is a disturbing, ugly

⁴¹ *Camera Lucida*, 14-15. Acknowledging Barthes's claim that the *eidos* of photography is death are: Marianne Hirsch, *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997; Timothy Adams, *Light writing & life writing: Photography in autobiography*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2000; Woodward, Kathleen. "Freud and Barthes: Theorizing mourning, sustaining grief," *Discourse* (1990): 93-110, and Laura Mulvey in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London: Reaktion books, 2006.

⁴² See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver, New York: Knopf, 1981. See also Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

reminder of mortality.⁴³ As an intensely private affair, dying now occurs “behind the scenes,” and writing about it remains a somewhat taboo subject, yet one that allows the authors studied in this dissertation to visualize how death is linked to an assertion of desire.

Thanatographical gestures remind us that our own death looms on the horizon, and in this regard, photographs render this impending loss visible.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, photography conjures death while working against disappearance by providing a visible, even touchable, replica of the person; photography gestures to the future because it is a reminder that the person will eventually die and proof that they lived. Thanatography then relates to the photographic index because it also gestures to the future—a death foretold. Although “thanatography” is often used as a catch-all term to describe writings about death, it is important to highlight that the term is neither medical nor religious. The term comes from the ancient Greek word for death, *thanatos*, which is the personification of a non-violent death, a kind of peaceful surrender to its finality. Though Freud does not use thanatography, he opposes a similar idea of *thanatos*—the death drive, the desire to return to a state of non-being—to *eros*, or a life instinct that seeks sexual pleasure.⁴⁵ It has also been used in conjunction with photography and film to refer to their association with death.⁴⁶ Borrowing from this meaning of thanatography, my contribution looks at how authors write with one foot in the grave; not dying *per se* but acting with full awareness that they will die. Photographs of a faked or staged death add a surplus of meaning to writing on death—but rarely, as the ensuing chapters will show, reaffirm the life of the individual; these are not works that use death to urge the reader to put down the book they are reading to go live life to the

⁴³ Ariés, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ See Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 1.

⁴⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C.J.M. Hubback, 1922. New York: Bartleby, 2010.

⁴⁶ Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique*, 1988.

fullest. Rather, the experience of visualizing oneself as dead brings about a sense of ontological queasiness and dread, akin to Paul Valéry's uncanny encounter—"I saw myself seeing myself"—a doubling of vision.⁴⁷ The uncanny relates to a strange temporality that thanatography and photography share, as evidenced by Barthes's uneasiness about certain details within the photograph that stems from the realization that he will die. Despite the uneasy quality, this profundity of the static image is why he prefers photographs over film. Whereas cinematic images move and cannot be apprehended as an uncanny presence, the photograph offers up an image that can be seized upon.⁴⁸

In this regard, a clarification is in order between writing about one's death directly or indirectly. *Pas pu saisir la mort* is what I am calling a thanatography by proxy because Calle imagines her death through her mother's. This example is less indicative of a Freudian view of the "dead returning to haunt the living" and more of a Barthesian concept of the death foretold, or *memento mori*: he sees in the photograph of a young man sentenced to death "something that is dead" and "that is going to die," and as he looks at a photograph of his mother, he has a vision of his own mortality.⁴⁹ Inscribing one's death in autobiography entails a contradiction of language. Commenting on an Edgar Allan Poe short story, Barthes writes that "Je suis mort" is an impossible sentence because a dead "I" would not be able to utter these words, showing that pure speech can be without true reference.⁵⁰ In the short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" that Barthes analyzes, the main character is very close to death. In a scientific

⁴⁷ See Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 6.

⁴⁸ A similar idea is echoed by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* in her discussion of static versus moving images. See also Maria Walsh, "Against Fetishism: The Moving Quiescence of Life 24 Frames a Second" *Film Philosophy*, vol 10.2 (2006).

⁴⁹ American editions do not include footnotes to the texts Barthes referenced in *La Chambre claire*, but the French editions do. Here, Barthes is actually quoting Sontag.

⁵⁰ See Barthes, "Analyse textuelle d'un conte d'Edgar Poe," 1973.

experiment, he is hypnotized, and then when asked, replies that he is asleep; after, he states that he is still asleep and dying, and finally, he does not answer—he actually dies. Writing/speaking thus connects death and the self. The selected works of this dissertation investigate this limit of autobiography, enacting the figure of the “dead man/woman talking.” The temporality of thanatography, where the subject visualizes an expected death, weighs on the writer. A fitting description of these autobiographical works is the figure of haunting—and accordingly, the three chapters in the dissertation theorize the trace as a form of ghostliness. But we might envision two types of this, following a critic, Colin Davis: the specter (*le spectre*) and the phantom (*le fantôme*). Whereas the phantom returns to haunt the living, the specter is oriented toward what lies ahead, something that will happen but has yet to occur and thus, in its ability to haunt the present, “gestures toward a still unformulated future.”⁵¹ Thanatography, in the autobiographical works I consider here, cannot be a phantom. It can only be a figure of the specter that holds up the future death to the author.

The double-sidedness of the ghost is elaborated by Derrida in a discussion of haunting and its approximate homophone, ontology. Dissolving the oppositions between first time and last time, he proposes “hauntology” as a way to understand history as “repetition and first time,” using the *incipit* of the play *Hamlet* in which a spirit comes back as a dead man.⁵² Haunting is a productive tool for thinking through the temporality of the photograph and its connection to thanatography, though most scholars do not mean “specters” to be taken literally. A discussion of it allows for the replacement of being and presence with a figure “neither present nor absent, neither dead or alive.”⁵³ This intermedial quality of the specter, evidenced by the author who

⁵¹ See Colin Davis, “Hauntology, spectres, and phantoms,” *French Studies* (2005) vol. 59, issue 3: 373-79. 374.

⁵² See *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. 10.

⁵³ Davis, *ibid.*

attempts to represent his or her death, calls forth a layered temporal aesthetic. Thanatography, therefore, as I conceive it, is an account that occupies the in-between space of the specter—of a death imagined — but not recorded in real-time.

At times I will use it interchangeably with autopathography because it implies illness, the death of the other, and contemplation of one's death, although not insisting on the activism associated with it.⁵⁴ Though Guibert was more of a celebrity spokesperson for disease than Ernaux or Roubaud, all three “episodes” of illness influence the structure of the narrative: Jacques Roubaud's aphasia comes across as an impasse or prolonged pause (in response to Alix Cléo's asthma) and Ernaux's breast cancer oscillates between remission and the threat of return, and AIDs in the 1990s proceeds as a torturous countdown. Ernaux's illness is an interruption but she lives to tell the tale and returns to normal life; Roubaud witnesses his wife's death from asphyxiation, loses his own voice from the trauma, and relives the experience for years after her death; Guibert propels us into the immediacy of writing his story that accelerates with his AIDS diagnosis, as he races against the clock in a project of self-intensification.

Chapter 1 examines autobiographical erasure and exposure, and their relationship to media and death, by bringing out in works by Alix Cléo and Jacques Roubaud, two poetic genres—ekphrasis and elegy. Ekphrasis, the evocation of visual representation through verbal representation, is the figure through which Alix Cléo Roubaud's photographs and diaries inscribe her own death. Elegy, a poem composed in mourning, and commentary on her posthumous work by her husband Jacques Roubaud, explores the limit of the photograph to reconnect the mourner to the beloved. In Part I, via selections from Alix Cléo Roubaud's *Journal* of the late 1970s, a portrait of the photographer in Jean Eustache's film *Les photos d'Alix* from 1981, and

⁵⁴ See Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (1995), Thomas J. Couser's *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (1997), and Ann Hunsaker Hawkins's *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (1999). They insist heavily on the use value of the narrative as activism.

photographs in *Si quelque chose noir*, made shortly before her tragic death from a pulmonary embolism in 1983, I show that Alix Cléo fully integrated photography into her life and arts. She maintains that photographs are ultimately spectral and ask language to speak for them—despite insistence on the index, which was the dominant discourse at the time. In Part II, I invite us to consider the commentary by her husband (and the reception of her work, which emerges much like a photograph's image might emerge gradually on the paper print) as a dark room for elegy in which he develops his ideas on the photograph through her own. Part III teases out the points of resonance between *Quelque chose noir* and Roland Barthes's *Journal de deuil* and *La Chambre claire*. Roubaud's poems are not only a cathartic exercise but also a commentary on the difficulty of representing death, and it becomes clear that the poet is interested in how the photograph toys with the mourner's perception of reality and the moments the camera did not capture.

Turning to another example of intermediality and couples, Chapter 2 focuses on an autobiography from 2005 co-written by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, a journalist and her lover at the time; this work places banal photographs of their apartment (in all its quotidian disarray) in a prelude to their lovemaking, alongside descriptions of the scene written in styles ranging from the forensic to the erotic. Part I takes a long view of Ernaux's corpus and her growing tendency to insert photographs into her texts, which I call a "photographic writing style." Part II contends that *L'usage de la photo* is an atypical autopathography: the amateur aesthetic in the photographs and pared down writing style champions a mundane flatness, refusing Pierre Bourdieu's conception, as expounded in *Un Art Moyen: Les usages sociaux de la photographie*, that characterizes photography as a low-brow art. Part III is devoted to close readings of the texts and images that do not grant breast cancer center stage, thereby modifying the stakes of the project from lovemaking ritual to an exhaustive investigation of the banal as an assertion of life in the

face of death. Roland Barthes's thoughts on the photograph and George Bataille's view of eroticism also figure in reflections on the image, attended to by my close readings.

Chapter 3 considers the strategies of erasure and exposure in the work of Hervé Guibert from *L'Image fantôme* (1981), a long neglected critical essay, to the video-diary *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1992) made shortly after his diagnosis with AIDS; through a practice of self-citation, they create a fragmentary portrait of the writer/photographer. Part I focuses on Guibert's relationship to Roland Barthes, whose oeuvre has overshadowed his, in spite of the fact that they were contemporaries and both figure among the first French critics to write about photography using a personal style. Part II explores the theme of ghostliness and the cadaver in *Suzanne et Louise*, a portrait of his octogenarian aunts in *photo-roman* format, which is the basis for a morbid experiment staging a fake suicide in his video diary, *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*. This evolution confirms his growing fascination with the uncanny and his own death, illustrated by an autobiographical gesture that I call "corpsing," or an embalming of the self that exerts control over the author's portrait while desiring to reveal all. Part III is devoted to unpacking the reception of *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, its socio-political matrix, and the aesthetic stakes of a video diary that straddles many genres. This work shows that there is room for individual meaning making through a final gesture of intermediality to speak from beyond the grave.

This dissertation, then, sketches the contours and probes the limits of erasure and exposure in three case studies by analyzing how they dialogue with a canonical text on photography (and autobiography)—*La chambre claire*. It is hoped that the chapters to follow not only engage with and extend Barthes's thinking of viewing photographs, but also, since their objects of study are thanatographies, that they think through the push and pull of photography, film, and text, to explore intermediality as a new framing device for the representation of death.

CHAPTER ONE

Mourning and Memory in Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque Chose Noir* and Alix Cléo Roubaud's Photographic Writing

*Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art.*⁵⁵

-Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Jacques Roubaud's wife, photographer Alix Cléo, died of a pulmonary embolism in 1983, and following her death, he stopped writing as he suffered from aphasia, a complete loss of verbal expression, for two years; he then returned to writing to explore the interconnectedness of absence and photography. His poetry collection *Quelque chose noir* (1986) is the result of this period of mourning in which he focuses on the process of writing, structuring the experience of grief as a loop: poems circle back on each other, repeating with little variation. Both an exercise in catharsis and a commentary on unrepresentability, the poetry collection tests these limits borrowing a formal language from photography that then informs Roubaud's return to writing, creating an "intermedial language" and providing descriptions of real photographs taken by his wife and meditations on the materiality of light and shadow. The catastrophe of Roubaud's loss becomes the reference point for his life as a writer, transforming the text into a dwelling place for mourning. Yet in evoking the photographs, the poems also serve to designate the absence of his wife and often falters against the presence promised by the photograph.

⁵⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977, 15.

By enacting a dialogue with a series of photographs taken by Alix Cléo, *Quelque chose noir* creates a palimpsest of memory. Though the photographs are not inserted into the body of the poems, their influence is unmistakable since the title echoes *Si Quelque chose noir* (1980/1), the title Alix Cléo chose for her photographic sequence. Jacques Roubaud removes the word “si” from the title for his poems, explaining that her death is no longer a hypothetical proposition underlined by “if.” The “si” in Alix Cléo’s title alludes to conjecture and possibility (a foreshadowing of death because in spite of having asthma, she smoked), whereas *Quelque chose noir* resonates as an incontrovertible truth. In addition, “quelque chose noir” rests on the ellipsis of the connecting preposition “de,” opening up not only the theme of absence but also a new, threatening, and possible modification of “noir” into an imagined verb, similar to “noircir”: “Something blackens,” or “If something blackens.”⁵⁶ In *Si quelque chose noir*, the “noir” refers to the extreme darkness of Alix Cléo’s photographs, and in *Quelque chose noir*, it alludes to the pervasive melancholy, or figurative darkness, of the mourner. Considered together, the poems and the photographs work together as “dark rooms,” or delivery rooms for images, that allow for a process of meaning-making, whether dealing with grief, as in the case of Jacques Roubaud, or visualizing the ever-present threat of death in the case of Alix Cléo Roubaud.

The growing notoriety of Alix Cléo’s photographic work is in large part due to her husband who published it posthumously, curating excerpts from her diary for publication and selecting photographs to accompany them. The photographs that appear alongside the text in her *Journal* from 1984 were not chosen by Alix Cléo herself, and their posthumous selection draws attention to Jacques Roubaud’s role as editor. After writing *Quelque chose noir*, he began a multivolume, branching autobiography he refers to as “Le Projet,” whose first installment is *Le Grand Incendie de Londres*. Known as a monument to the memory of his wife and Roubaud’s

⁵⁶ Of course a perfectly suitable verb in French meaning “to blacken”—*noircir*—already exists. Perhaps Alix Cléo, who was fluent in English and French, plays with the Anglicism “quelque chose de noir.”

process of mourning—“Le Projet” stands at over 2,000 pages as an ongoing, experimental autobiographical project and functions as a kind of personal archive for Roubaud. Furthermore, the parallel careers the Roubauds led and their personal lives make it difficult for critics to talk about *Quelque chose noir* without speaking about Alix Cléo as a muse. Although this view is tempting, in which her death is a morbid inspiration yet not the central theoretical lens, it does not take into account the productive dialogue between her posthumous work and that of Jacques, as he reads her *Journal* and writes *Quelque chose noir*. Roubaud acknowledges that she is a buried muse for whom he built “un tombeau,” but this would not have been his wish, and he would have much preferred to be husband of “la grande photographe,” which Héléne Giannecchini, having coordinated a show on Alix Cléo’s photographs at the Bibliothèque nationale, recognizes.⁵⁷ I join Giannecchini in her assessment of the muse view as too simplistic for a reading of mourning; if anything, Alix Cléo’s photography invites reflection on the imbrication of writing and photography, or photography as a kind of writing in her oeuvre. I trace a through line of her photographs’ impact on Jacques’s writing on and about photographs from *Quelque chose noir*— an obvious reference to her— and to the novel, *Éros mélancolique*, which touches on an elusive, shadowy woman and a photographer who unsuccessfully attempts to capture her image on film. The second half of my analysis will trace the stances of Alix Cléo and Jacques on photography through a discussion of ekphrasis, how verbal representation evokes visual representation, and its stake in elegy, the poetic mode of evoking a deceased subject.

Photography and writing intertwine closely in Alix Cléo Roubaud’s *Journal*, which covers four years of her life from 1979 to 1983, although she began keeping a journal as early as 1971. The intermediality becomes a sustained meditation on the inscription of death as a constant horizon: the *Journal* is not only a chronicle of her struggle with depression and asthma but also

⁵⁷ Héléne Giannecchini, *Une image peut-être vraie, Alix Cléo Roubaud*, Paris: Seuil, 2014, 74.

an exploration of how photography stages her death in her mind.⁵⁸ The *Journal* draws upon five notebooks organized by color: two blue notebooks: a black one from 1980; a beige one from 1981, an orange one from 1981-1982; and a purple one from 1983. According to Jacques Roubaud, who gave her papers to the Bibliothèque nationale, she wrote everyday without erasing or marking out entries. Each entry reprinted in the Gallimard edition is fragmentary: notes about trips to Cambridge and the south of France, dream summaries, and reading lists written in stream of consciousness style. It becomes increasingly clear to the reader that Alix Cléo routinely thought about her death, though not especially when prompted by the death of those around her; instead, her personal proximity to death comes from coping with the looming risk of an asthma attack, which proved to be an inevitable consequence of the couple's *poète maudit* lifestyle. She recounts her struggles with asthma—"maladie très médiocre: 800 mg d'Armophylline par jour"—and the vicious cycles of smoking and drinking she used to self-medicate.⁵⁹ The entries oscillate between French and English, attesting to her international upbringing as the child of a Canadian diplomat; they range from determined resolutions—"fini le whisky, deux halcions et du théralène, suffit: alcool: cigarettes; calmants; somnifères, etc.."—to complaints of "sleepless night no cigarettes left all smoked paper all around."⁶⁰ The threat of death is omnipresent—whether from suffocating in her sleep or from side effects of a cocktail of respiratory drugs for her asthma. In one entry composed at the Roubaud's country estate, she addresses her husband, who later becomes the editor of her diary: she writes that Jacques Roubaud will one day find her dead and will have to identify her body, as her journal entry warns him: "prépare toi à ma

⁵⁸ See Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique*, Paris: Nathan, 1983.

⁵⁹ *Journal*, 154.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 18 and 157.

mort.”⁶¹ Her struggle with depression improves considerably after *Si Quelque chose noir* and the film *Les photos d’Alix* by Jean Eustache; both make their debut in 1981. These photographs were her first art opening, or *vernissage*, and the film was shown to over a million viewers. Though the *Journal* clearly demonstrates an improvement in Alix Cléo’s outlook on her career, it also continues to explore anxieties about her health; the closing of the *Journal* demonstrates this when it visualizes her own death, beginning with the question—“Que signifie se voir déjà morte? Comment le montrer?”⁶² This provocative question leads us into a discussion of representation of dyings and the stakes of temporality in imagining a death constantly thought, referred to, and explored through photographs.

Revelations From the Dark Room

Si quelque chose noir (1980/1) is a sequence of seventeen photographs that show Alix Cléo posing naked in an empty attic with an open window, similar to compositions by Francesca Woodman, whose work was produced around the same time, though there is no textual evidence that they were aware of each other.⁶³ The room pictured evokes the *camera obscura*, the earliest image capture device that used a pin-sized hole to seize images from outside and cast them upside down as inversions on an opposing wall, like images of Alix Cléo in the room that picture her body extending into the background. Her body vacillates between a ghost-like blur and a leaden corpse: standing, reclined, walking.⁶⁴ Her multiple body positions paradoxically denote

⁶¹ *Journal*, 54.

⁶² *Ibid*, 170.

⁶³ There is a striking symmetry with Francesca Woodman’s self-portraits in *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (1981). See Peggy Phelan for a discussion of death and photography in Woodman’s oeuvre, “Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and the Image One More Time,” *Signs*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 979-1004.

⁶⁴ She experimented with the camera as an extension of her body in *Quinze minutes au rythme de la respiration*. She placed the camera on her chest; the up and down motion created a visual ripple effect evident in the final print.

stillness and movement due to methods of long exposure and double exposure that allow several images of her body to appear in the same frame. The aesthetic of blurredness refocuses the attention of the viewer; instead of engaging with the content on the level of one-to-one correspondence with an object in the world, the viewer is forced to determine the contours of the object depicted, and this effect creates a mood instead of demanding a rational response. The blur also allows the viewer to see the *mise-en-scène* of the “self as specter,” a *mise-en-scène* Alix Cléo used in order to cope with the ever-present possibility of a death. Furthermore, the seventeen photographs of *Si quelque chose noir* take on a certain rhythm, not unlike a choreographed dance, as Alix notes in a letter to her family: “Je me photographie en mouvement en ce moment: je laisse l’appareil ouvert pendant 10, 20, 30 secondes et me promène devant: au lieu de prévisualiser ma photographie, je fais un peu ce que font les peintres gestuels mais avec mon corps.”⁶⁵ The ghostly aesthetic that denotes her body’s movement and stasis is created both by long exposure at the moment of capture, and by double exposure in the darkroom.

Manipulation of the negative is part and parcel of Alix Cléo’s view of the task of the photographer; often she would destroy the negative to preserve only the prints as a trace, further underscoring the photograph as an ephemeral medium. Despite her insistence on erasing the negative—what could be considered “the original” for a photograph—when she presented *Si quelque chose noir* at the 1982 Maison des arts André-Malraux in Créteil, she hung the photographs around the gallery walls to give the effect of negatives on a film roll, with a sliver of white space between each frame. The wall text that accompanies the images of the exposition demonstrates her interest in the physical precursors to the final photographic print, drawing attention to the separation, “cet invisible bord,” between each image that frames the image.⁶⁶ The

⁶⁵ Fonds Alix Cleo Roubaud, qtd in Hélène Giannecchini, *Une image peut-être vraie. Alix Cléo Roubaud*, 130.

⁶⁶ Giannecchini, *Une image peut-être vraie. Alix Cléo Roubaud*, 139.

seventeen photographs of *Si quelque chose noir* were not displayed for the public again until 2010, when the Centre international de poésie à Marseille published the entire series in a special edition in which the accordion-style pages allow readers to relive the original experience of the photographs as a continuous strip of the photographic negative.

Si quelque chose noir is a hybrid, photo-literary work planned to be accompanied by a series of poetic captions, not just “titles.” The captions do not narrate the images as much as they list the objects pictured and their spatial arrangement to each other. Three lines composed on a typewriter accompany each photograph with “Si quelque chose noir” beginning the first line of each caption.⁶⁷ Making no attempt to name Alix Cléo or identify the place where the pictures were taken, the impersonality of the first caption focuses on the window as a source of revelation and disquiet.⁶⁸ The window is the aperture for the light penetrating the room—“source de lumière”— and a funerary monument or stele, since the window appears directly above Alix Cléo’s body pictured lying down with eyes closed, as if we are gazing upon a cross-section of a buried body.⁶⁹ The captions of the second and third photographs turn the viewer’s attention to the creation of a crypt-like mausoleum space within the room as the outlines of her body travel along the diagonal of the photograph, as if being buried alive.⁷⁰ In subsequent shots, she appears supine within the ray of light cast onto the floor from the tombstone-like window. At the midpoint of the series, the photograph shows two images of her body: one reclined in “corpse pose” and the other standing, as if she were raised from the dead, a doubling of the corpse pose: “le cadavre

⁶⁷ The structure of the text borrows its form from medieval Japanese poetry style called “rakki tai” designed to conquer a fictional demon. See *Journal*, 16.

⁶⁸ For example, “chose à la faveur du sommeil et de la fenêtre, toute chose est alors imaginable. à condition évidemment, c’est devenir inévitablement la mesure, l’enterrement.” *BnF Alix Cléo Photographies*.

⁶⁹ *BnF Alix Cléo Photographies*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 91-2.

[...] dédoublé” runs the caption.⁷¹ The second half of the photographic series occupies the white space denoted by the window with images, created through double exposure. Alix Cléo fills the monument-like window-stele with images from her childhood as she remains in corpse pose near the frame’s margins.⁷² The final photograph of the series, which shows her suspended face down over Jacques who is face up (an arrangement made possible through double exposure), bears the unsettling caption “impossible de donner, de la mort, mesure de distance correcte.”⁷³ Alix Cléo’s photographs visualize her death only to contend that assessing the distance from death is never adequate, underscoring the theme of “self as specter” in her oeuvre.

In addition to visualizing her death using the actual *mise-en-scène* of the photograph, she uses photographic metaphor to characterize her relationship to death. Whereas the daguerreotype is both a material support and the image all in one, inseparable, and irreproducible (we cannot call a daguerreotype an original because there are no copies), the negative is projected onto another support to create a print. She views the series *Si quelque chose noir* as a mirror that reverses the order of representation; instead of her real life inspiring the photographs, the photographs help her grapple with the reality of death itself. Because *Si quelque chose noir* is not a daguerreotype, linking the material surface of the medium to the subject in real life as an original (neither copy nor print), here she unveils a contradiction about visualizing her death through photographs by calling the photographic series a negative, inverting the necessary chronological order in which a negative forms the basis for a photographic series, not the other way around. She likens herself to a negative, “comme si étant mon propre négatif,” with the images of her body in corpse pose helping visualize her eventual death as a projection of an

⁷¹ *BnF Alix Cléo Photographies*, 97.

⁷² *Ibid*, 103.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 106.

original image, “je pouvais continuer à me projeter sur des écrans.”⁷⁴ In this metaphor of the negative, a vision of her death is revealed to be an essential image of her identity. As previously stated, these images take on significant poignancy for Alix Cléo because of her asthma, a chronic illness that places the sufferer in constant contact with the possibility of her death and allude to the vulnerability of exposing her body to her audience.⁷⁵ The photographs of *Si quelque chose noir* cause her to focus less on photography’s association with the past and more on its association with the future:

Je ne sais vraiment pas si la mort est un écran sur lequel je projette et rejoue le film de ma vie, ou alors l’image qui me cache le fait que je suis en vie. Vivante, je n’imagine pas morte; morte je ne verrai pas la vie [...] l’image de ma mort future projetée sur l’écran de ma mort réelle, ou alors me cachant? quoi? comment s’imaginer que la mort n’est pas une projection rabattue sur elle-même en automorphisme; comme une diapositive de la Joconde qu’on projetterait sur la Joconde même.⁷⁶

Alix Cléo maintains that photographs hide the fact that she is alive because they show her as a static image, more lifeless than offering living proof of her vivacity and her movement. With respect to the same ambivalence of representation, her interpretation of the projection of the Mona Lisa, “la Joconde,” onto the original painting reverses the order of representation because the viewer would be unable to distinguish between the original artwork and the projection of the artwork back onto the original since they correspond to each other exactly, the very definition of an auto-morphism. Likewise, when Alix Cléo views the photographs of an imagined dying, she realizes that the photographs are projections of her relationship to her own death but is unable to fully distinguish the original from the representation—“l’image de ma mort future projetée sur l’écran de ma mort réelle,” just as the Mona Lisa and an image of the Mona Lisa cast upon it

⁷⁴ *Journal*, 171.

⁷⁵ She compares a sitter for a photo to a patient at the doctor’s office: “prendre sa photo est comme se dérober devant le médecin,” *Journal*, 179.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Hélène Giannecchini has called this temporal connection “a future perfect endlessly ripped out” for her exhibition on Alix Cléo Roubaud at a conference at University of California Berkley Photo-Literature event March 2-3, 2015.

would be selfsame.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the passage above is from a year before her death and thus carries with it a certain belatedness because of Alix Cléo's real death January 28, 1983, as if she had anticipated it, inviting us to read her photographs in *Si quelque chose noir* and these journal entries as a prefiguration of the self as specter, pointed increasingly toward a total erasure/extinction of the self.

Expanding the Frame: A Portrait of Alix Cléo Roubaud in Film

Alix Cléo Roubaud's speculation that the photograph collapses the real death and the future death into one image anchors her practice in an overwhelming sentiment of loss that equates the photograph with the stripping away of the subject's presence. Alix Cléo adopts a spiritualist view of photography as "immaterial double," a popular view in the nineteenth century that believed the camera was capable of removing a material layer from the sitter's soul.⁷⁸ Jean Eustache's film *Les Photos d'Alix* (1980), a portrait of Alix Cléo Roubaud talking about her own photographs to the director's son Boris, demonstrates her stance on photography's capacity to represent the self, a stance that emerges from a de-centering of theoretical discourse about the photograph as an index. This cinematographic portrait of the photographer also acts as a prelude to the "self as specter" that she explores in the photographic series *Si quelque chose noir*, composed shortly after the film. The extended caption, which frames the text, resituates the image beyond the white edge of the photograph's border. In the film, she annotates each photograph that is shown, narrating how the image came to be and pointing out details that we,

⁷⁷ *Journal*, 172.

⁷⁸ See Ari Blatt's "Thinking Photograph in Film, or The Suspended Cinema of Agnès Varda and Jean Eustache" *French Forum*, vol. 36, no. 2-3 (Spring/Fall 2011): 181-200. He notes that Alix Cléo Roubaud's belief in photography as an "immaterial double" aligns closely to the "spiritualist" view of photography popular in the nineteenth century.

like Boris, a fellow spectator, do not see. In the process, the photographs become “spoken for” by Alix Cléo, creating a disconnect between her descriptions and the actual subject pictured.

In the opening clip, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the red Webster’s dictionary situated directly in between Alix Cléo and Boris— an analogy not only for the different media languages at play (how these film images help frame the still images of a photograph), but also the impasses and misunderstandings between spectator and photographer. As they flip through a stack of eighteen printed photographs, Alix Cléo telling the story and Boris interrupting occasionally to ask questions, it becomes clear that this film is not a simple exercise in storytelling techniques. Rather, it asserts a theory of photography and writing that goes against the predominant thinking in the 1980s of photographic representations as index (a trace that was so close to reality that it simply mechanically reproduced its subject through a chemical reaction of light and emulsion). Alix Cléo shows herself reformulating this discourse on the index right in front of us, as she plays with what we, as spectators, expect to see when we behold a photograph.

Description in the film *Les Photos d’Alix* operates on three levels: Boris makes an assumption about what they are viewing together: Alix Cléo usually corrects him and then asks him another question; and all the while, the camera seizes upon the photographic image for us to appraise our reading against theirs. Very rarely does the content of the photographs in *Les Photos d’Alix* conform to her descriptions. In one scene, the camera focuses on Alix Cléo and Boris looking at a photograph of a pair of boots, then moves to an overhead shot of the photograph itself. She confirms that it was taken in London in a pub (another *chambre noire*) where she had been eating lunch; she then expresses her love of the pub atmosphere because of its dark lighting, pointing out that when this photograph was taken she was developing an aesthetic that imagined her absence within the image—“ma place vide.” She then goes on to say that the unassuming pair of boots pictured is actually a portrait of two men she knows in London. Her concluding

remark, “Mais c’est très londonien,” alluding to the diffuse fogginess of the photographic border, falls flat, since, alas, Boris has never been to London. This scene draws our attention to the situational irony and personal anecdotes of the photographer that frame every photograph. Additionally, in most circumstances (though not here), the latter is undisclosed and thus inaccessible to the viewer.

In another example, Boris asks Alix Cléo to identify the location of a chair-strewn park shown in the photograph, and we learn it was taken while she was on vacation at Montfort-L’Amaury in 1979, a year before the film was made. Maurice Ravel’s home appears in the background, modified with a technique she calls “pinceau lumineux,” or a light brush that allows modification of the image as it is being exposed. This “writing” upon the image using a concentrated light source evokes Henry Fox Talbot’s expression that photography was “the pencil of nature.”⁷⁹ As Boris views the photograph, he is surprised to learn that it is not only the same negative stitched together at two different points but also that Alix Cléo sees herself in the image, although it is obvious that no figure remotely resembling her is pictured—in fact, there are no figures in the image at all. Her question, “Tu me reconnais là? Et les deux amis? Tu les connais je pense,” addressed to Boris, hinges on her idea of the photograph as an imaginary space. Boris, who says he does not know Alix’s two friends supposedly pictured in the photograph, is even scolded for not having a memory of them, as she explains that the two friends visit Boris’s father’s apartment quite often, which makes us aware of her associative memories versus those of the spectator viewing the photograph for the first time. In her vision, the empty park scene is granted fullness and meaning by her anecdote of having taken the picture there; even though she is not physically reproduced within the photograph, she is “there” because she took it.

⁷⁹ Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*. Bath: Monmouth Calotype, 1989.

Rather nonchalantly, the pair then moves on to a final photograph that Alix Cléo identifies as one she made from a trip to Fez; in response Boris comments on its meditative quality. She tells him that she showed this photograph of a magnificent sunrise to those who asked her about her trip; we learn that they were a tad surprised—after all, the photograph is of a fairly mundane bedroom that might as well be Paris, not Fez—but she insists, Fez is of course *there* in the picture, pointing to a lamp’s reflection in the mirror. Boris then assumes that the cityscape appears to the viewer through the window, but he turns out to be wrong yet again, and Alix Cléo ends this scene with the thesis that two different things – “deux choses hétérogènes”—can make a single photograph. Her idea of heterogeneity (of time and space) chips away at the idea of the index in favor of a more imaginary approach that seeks to assert movement in and out of the frame, underscored by the insertion, into the real frame of the film we watch, of a real index finger that points out details of the photographs.

Alix Cléo’s readings of her own photographs uphold Roland Barthes’s idea of the index as *ça-a-été*, or the “having-been-there” quality. Nevertheless, it is also clear from the examples above that Alix Cléo’s practice aligns more closely with an autobiographical view of the photograph similar to that of Denis Roche or Jean-Marie Gleize, whose works in the early 1980s explore how photography and literature intellectually participate in the question of photographic reproduction as a mystery or an elusive vision of experience (both within it and apart from it).⁸⁰ Alix Cléo’s reflection on her practice help us see the photograph as an object that evolves as a function of who is looking at it and when. *Les photos d’Alix* supports the idea of *mise-en-abyme* by pulling back the curtain on the creator, and stages how photographs featured in the film are framed by the verbal exchanges of Alix Cléo and Boris. In notes made for a presentation of the

⁸⁰ See Jean-Jacques Thomas, “Photographic Memories of French Poetry: Denis Roche, Jean-Marie Gleize,” *Yale French Studies- Writing and the Image Today*, ed. Jan Baetens and Ari J. Blatt, (Summer 2008): 18-36.

film to a group of students, she outlines a triangular relationship (“nous sommes trois”) between the film camera’s framing of the photographs and the verbal images constituted by her anecdotes.⁸¹ Explaining the layering of frames in *Les photos d’Alix* [“celui qui regarde une femme qui parle à un homme qui regarde les images”], Alix Cléo observes that the spectator begins to identify on many nested levels, as “spectateurs de plusieurs façons.”⁸² *Les Photos d’Alix* shows us the extent to which her photographic practice operates within an “expanded frame” and a wider understanding of the potential word-image associations of *mise en page*, pushing back on the predominance of the index as a theoretical tool for her practice of photographic writing by pointing to things that are “not there” in the image.⁸³ Furthermore, even though the film does not include a discussion of the photographs that constitute *Si Quelque chose noir*, the scenes demonstrate not only the intermedial aspect underpinning Alix Cléo’s approach to the self through her recognition of “spectral” images that are gestured to through narration, but also the interpersonal dynamic, or necessity of storytelling through the autobiographical gesture of pointing. *Les Photos d’Alix* stages the tension between self-erasure and self-exposure, linked through a new type of photographically-influenced ekphrasis.

Dying Twice: Photography and Mourning

Before turning to a discussion of the poems in *Quelque chose noir* by Jacques Roubaud that were composed in mourning for Alix Cléo Roubaud, it is important to situate the poems within a larger context, cued by the thoughts of Jacques Derrida on the loss of his friends—

⁸¹ From a speech she gave to university students (Paris VII) in 1981. “Notes pour une présentation du film de Jean Eustache, “Les photos d’Alix” à des étudiants de Paris VII Janvier 1981.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ The term “expanded frame” is borrowed from an essay by George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October*, Fall 2005, no. 114, 120-40, which makes a thought-provoking point that because we are within its expanding field, we do not know where it will take us or where it will end up.

Roland Barthes, Louis Marin, and Jean-François Lyotard, among others—and the task he identifies for mourning. Much like the aphasia Jacques Roubaud suffered, Derrida explores the difficulty of speaking when faced with the loss of a loved one, which only reinforces the importance and even the responsibility to speak as a sign of participation in the ritual of this experience as a performance, despite the difficulty of it: “il faut parler [...] afin de combattre toutes les forces qui travaillent à effacer ou à recouvrir non seulement les noms sur les tombes, mais aussi l’apostrophe du deuil.”⁸⁴ In order to speak *to* and *about* his deceased friends, he turns to citation as the most appropriate gesture since it keeps their words alive, meaning that the speech of the deceased, as it is revisited, reused, and reanimated by the living, comes to dwell within the present. Jacques Roubaud’s solution to aphasia is *Quelque chose noir* is similar to Derrida’s use of citation to keep the deceased among the living. The citations from Alix Cléo’s *Journal* and his use of her photographs not only show how he was the editor of his wife’s work (her words speak for him), but also gesture to the influence of her photographs on his composition of the poems.

Quelque chose noir—written on occasion of a real death—and the photographs of *Si quelque chose noir*—as an exploration of a death to come— are part of a constellation of contemporary French narratives intimately linking photography and mourning. A number of these narratives about mourning are also reflections on photography, emphasizing the photograph as proof of the life lived and a focal point for memory.⁸⁵ That these meta-reflections have emerged in the past decade also suggests they are a nostalgic response to changing discourses about the photograph: at exactly the moment digital photography has become the dominant mode, these narratives uphold the analog photograph as a source of ongoing critical

⁸⁴ See Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, ed. Brault and Naas. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003, 55.

⁸⁵ See Jutta Fortin, “Mourning and Photography in Contemporary French Literature,” *Modern Language Review*, July 2009, vol. 104, issue 3: 696-711.

study. The fervor of the “digital image revolution” has led many critics to predict that emulsion-based photography is on a path to extinction.⁸⁶ Far from outmoded, photography is experiencing a reappearance and reinvention, as countless works in recent decades have emerged investigating the nostalgia of vernacular photographs and their diverse role in popular culture, including family albums and scrapbooks.⁸⁷ Ironically, thus, photography as a medium is itself prone to be theorized in elegiac terms, reproducing details and things destined to disappear, its analog form experiencing obsolescence, even if it continues to be “reborn” or repurposed in novel ways.⁸⁸

A fitting starting point to investigate photography’s predisposition to elegy, Roland Barthes’s *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, written under the sign of mourning for his mother who passed away in 1977, is as much about mourning as about photography. While Barthes composed *La chambre claire*, he kept a diary of mourning from 1977 to 1979 (started just the day after his mother’s death), published posthumously as *Journal de deuil*.⁸⁹ Punctuated with questions, each dated entry was written on a notecard that Barthes kept on his desk and later became the method of organizing the fragments into a book constituting over two hundred entries. Expressing deep solitude, *Journal de deuil* attempts to define mourning by grasping at its conditioning of daily life as paralysis and flatness. He writes that the realization his mother is dead offers no consolation, “*elle n’est plus, elle n’est plus [...] c’est mat, sans adjectif—vertiginieux parce qu’insignifiant (sans interprétation possible),*” and that her death has made

⁸⁶ See The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s symposium for “the end of photography”: http://www.sfmoma.org/about/research_projects/research_projects_photography_over.

⁸⁷ See Stacey Cuttshaw’s *In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday*, Boston: Boston University, 2008.

⁸⁸ See George Baker’s forthcoming *Lateness and Longing: On the Afterlife of Photography*. See Geoffrey Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*, New York: Vintage, 2005. For the French context, see Denis Roche, *Le boîtier de mélancolie: la photographie en 100 photographies*, Paris: Hazan, 1998, and Jean-Marie Gleize, *Denis Roche: l’un écrit, l’autre photographie*, Lyon: ENS Editions, 2007. We ought to invoke a similar example of a melancholic retrospective but from film in Jean-Luc Godard’s multivolume recapitulative film *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1999).

⁸⁹ Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, Paris: Seuil, 2009. Antoine Compagnon calls *Journal de deuil* an “auto-analyse” about grief. See *Acta fabula*, vol. 14, n° 2, « *Let’s Proust again!* », Février 2013.

him more aware of his own mortality, having cornered him— “maintenant que Maman est morte, je suis acculé à la mort.”⁹⁰ In addition to his exploration of mourning, he does not find a suitable definition to describe his experience, as if it is too all encompassing to be a ritual that everyone goes through when they lose a loved one. Refusing the psychoanalytic and medical definitions of mourning in which, Barthes claims, the authorities deem eighteen months to be the acceptable time frame for mourning a parent, he chooses the word “chagrin,” or deep distress, sadness, and even vexation, to characterize his experience of loss.

The contradictory desires of attachment and liberation—now that his mother no longer requires his care at the bedside—come to the fore in the entry from *Journal de deuil* when we learn he has come across a stirring photograph that will become the focal point for the second half of *La chambre claire*. This photograph is an image of his mother as a child [“petite fille, douce, discrète”]; he notes his reaction to the portrait in *Journal de deuil*: “Je pleure.”⁹¹ He goes on to describe the experience of finding this photograph as a second mourning; as if the real mourning begins after he looks upon the photograph of his mother, opening a new flood of memories. This photograph, referred to in *La chambre claire* as “Photographie du Jardin d’hiver,” encapsulates his mother’s essence, but it is not reproduced in the text for fear that it would just then become another ordinary image from a family album. Nevertheless, he does go on to describe it in some detail for the reader, remarking on how this image meshes with his memory of his mother just before her death, since he cared for her as one does a child: “la Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver, elle était bien essentielle, elle accomplissait pour moi, utopiquement, la science impossible d’être unique.”⁹² Finding a “right” image of Barthes’s

⁹⁰ *Journal de deuil*, 88 and 141.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 155.

⁹² *La chambre claire*, 105-6. See also Siegfried Kracauer’s comment about historical dress, *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 60.

mother touches on how he did not lose a figure— “the Mother” as archetype— rather, he lost *his* mother.⁹³ The right image [*image juste*] allows the grieving subject to behold the essence of the beloved, to “resurrect” her some way, but this sense of comfort is fleeting because Barthes’s meditation on his mother’s photograph also elicits fear of his own death: “La seule pensée que je puisse avoir, c’est qu’au bout de cette première mort, ma propre mort est inscrite; entre les deux, plus rien qu’attendre.”⁹⁴ *Journal de deuil* is the workbook for *La chambre claire*: the texts, on the one hand, use critical discourse on photography to domesticate death, and on the other hand, use a meditation on death to fathom the meaning of a photograph.

In *Quelque chose noir*, Jacques Roubaud underscores, like Barthes, the paradox that the photograph reawakens or stirs a second mourning of the loved one. Although certain photographs remind him of Alix Cléo, they are not exactly or entirely “her.” As Roubaud intellectualizes them, reducing them to rays of light and shadow, or physical traces that could never fully convey his memories of her, his objectification of the photographs representing Alix Cléo calls into question the photograph’s referential power. This is what Barthes experienced as well, when he initially sorted through his mother’s belongings and old photographs. Scanning the photographs, he became increasingly distressed: “I had no hope of finding her [...] I was not sitting down to contemplate them, I was not engulfing myself in them.”⁹⁵ Equally distressing for both is finding a photograph that resembles a memory of a person but does not do it justice: “That’s *almost* the way she was!” claims Barthes.⁹⁶ Far from depersonalizing their subject, photographs of loved ones act as “approximations” of memory. Their powerful details “prick the

⁹³ Kracauer, 60.

⁹⁴ *La chambre claire*, 145.

⁹⁵ *Camera Lucida*, 64.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

viewer,” an element that Barthes calls *punctum*, and also make the loved one present again, if only through the material support of the paper. At the same time, the photograph cruelly reminds him that she cannot reappear in the flesh before his eyes. Elsewhere Barthes displays optimism about the photograph’s ability to link the spectator to the subject of the image and about its power to transcend the boundaries separating past and present. His views contrast sharply with Roubaud’s doubts over its “reality factor.” For Roubaud, a photograph of the deceased will never be a close substitute: it brings about the pain of loss above all else. Roubaud also suggests that memorialization is wrapped up in the future and has little to do with recalling the past since every photograph is a reminder of one’s own finitude. If, as Barthes naively claims, “every photograph is a certificate of presence,” Roubaud might add that every photograph is also a certificate of absence.⁹⁷

Roubaud and Barthes disagree regarding the power of the photograph as a material object. Despite Barthes devoting significant discussion to the act of taking a photograph, posing for a portrait, and the experience of looking at a photograph, he does not engage with the photograph as a physical, contextualized object except for the photograph of his mother (withheld from the text), which the reader learns was found in a drawer.⁹⁸ In contrast, Roubaud situates her photographs in the real space and time of their apartment, while also reanimating the image through the couple’s memories. Elsewhere Roubaud explains in simple geometrical terms that photographs are tied to a context they do not capture; they are part of a bigger picture not framed by the photographer in his or her viewfinder. Delimiting the photographer’s subject results in a predictable geometric shape: “une photographie prélève dans les images du monde un

⁹⁷ Ibid, 87.

⁹⁸ “How can one have an intelligent air without thinking of anything intelligent?” Ibid, 113.

rectangle.”⁹⁹ This rectangular border of the photograph creates a space of relation between the image and its conditions of capture, showing that the photograph is always a fragment. Roubaud’s vision of the photograph as a rectangle speaks in part to his sensibilities as a mathematician, intrigued by the geometry of squares and rectangles, and in part reminds us that photographs are always part of a bigger picture, framed by the viewfinder and often, again, in the dark room through cropping—they transform the world into a rectangle whose border creates a space of fragmentary relation, sliced out of our peripheral vision.¹⁰⁰

Roubaud’s rectangle attends to what could Jean Baudrillard has called one of photography’s paradoxes that “takes us beyond the replica into the domain of the *trompe l’oeil*” and that “through slicing of reality, its immobility, its silence, and reduction of movements” is far from an objective image, as certain discourses of the photograph as index might suggest.¹⁰¹ Roubaud’s reflections on the photograph as a fragment might at first seem to echo Baudrillard’s reading of the photograph as an object sliced out of real time, but the former does not follow the latter’s unmooring of the photograph from its referent. Through an emphasis on the border and edges of a photograph, Roubaud demonstrates that the frame has a place in thinking through the relationality of the camera lens to the subject, to the context of photographs, and to the space of the page, another rectangular surface.

Though Roubaud is more preoccupied than Barthes by the framing created by photography, he does not restore the photographs discussed to their original context through description or by inserting them into *Quelque chose noir*, as he did when acting as editor of Alix Cléo’s *Journal*. Neither Barthes nor Roubaud supply the most intensely personal photographs

⁹⁹ Jacques Roubaud, *Ciel et terre et ciel et terre et ciel*, Paris: Flohic, 1997, 59. “Prélèvement” is a medical term.

¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that not all photographs take a rectangular shape.

¹⁰¹ See Jean Baudrillard, “Photography, Or the Writing of Light,” translated by François Debrix, *CTheory*, 2000.

within the space of the text. However, they both comment on the photographs at length, creating absent centers since the photographs, around which the majority of the texts pivot, are missing. The omission of the personal photographs in each text forces commentary to assume a representational function where the image is either lacking or just plain missing. Because of the lacunae between text and image, both *La chambre claire* and *Quelque chose noir* blend criticism and affect; in both works, the spectacle of another's death, whether the mother or the wife, imparts a startling meditation on their own death—magnified by viewing a photograph.

It is important to distinguish between mourning and melancholy because both modes operate within *Quelque chose noir*. Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* broadly defines mourning as loss of self, loved one, or nation, but without loss of self-esteem. Melancholia, on the other hand, entails multiple losses, or loss after loss, and can include erosion of self-esteem and self-worth.¹⁰² Historically, melancholia has had a corporeal basis, as a symptom of illness. The term comes from Greek *melan* (black) and *khole* (bile); in ancient medical theory, an excess of black bile was thought to cause depression. This association of black bile also evokes the title *Quelque chose noir*. Melancholia does not have an immediate, discernible cause, whereas mourning does: it is a ritual to overcome the feeling of grief. *Quelque chose noir* primarily demonstrates mourning since it was composed after Alix Cleo's death, and the expression of melancholia in the poems—gloomy thoughts, wistfulness—is a secondary characteristic. Though melancholy and mourning are at the fore of *Quelque chose noir*, mania also applies. Freud suggests in *Mourning and Melancholia* that with time, melancholy passes, as does mourning, but that the two can also shift in the direction of mania.¹⁰³ This mode exceeds the capacity of grief, creating a focal point for the mourner beyond the conclusion of the mourning period. *Quelque*

¹⁰² *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogart Press, 1955: 243.

¹⁰³ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 243.

chose noir exemplifies the three conditions—mourning, melancholy, and mania—to which Freud alludes, and thus because Roubaud’s poems about his wife’s photographs are also part of a longer chain of works within his *oeuvre* that confront death and seek to untangle its associations with photography, they serve as a catalyst for a longer discussion for the intersections of photography, death, and poetry.

From Ekphrastic Dialogue to Post-mortem Commentary

Quelque chose noir belongs to two poetic traditions: ekphrasis and elegy. As examples of ekphrasis, the poems verbally describe visual representation—photographs—and as elegy, the poems neither praise nor describe the beloved in detail, rather, they engage in an intimate address. But Roubaud’s poems in *Quelque chose noir* resist both these conventions by playing with form: their terse language and visual spacing give voice to a mute object—the self-portraits/photographs by Alix Cléo—which in turn deaden their subject. Modern elegies describing photographs are far too numerous to count, as if “the photograph like the funeral poem has insinuated itself into the core of grief.”¹⁰⁴ With the addition of elegy to the photograph (a medium so imprinted with death), *Quelque chose noir* and *Si quelque chose noir* grapple with mourning and its surplus of meaning.

A consideration of *Quelque chose noir* and the issues of representation raised by it require some kind of contextualization in terms of Roubaud’s poetic oeuvre. At the intersection of several formal constraints governed by mathematical permutations and language rules, his poetry, regardless, does not preclude the expression of joy, sadness, or the poetic mood of the nineteenth century and late capitalism—*ennui*. Instead, these mathematical parameters draw

¹⁰⁴ Cheeke, *Writing For Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, 149.

attention to the function of language as a set of possibilities open to recombination, repetition, and sorting. For example, his first published poetry collection *E (Signe d'Appartenance)* (1967) is composed of twenty-nine sonnets, respecting the traditional form of an octave that introduces a problem and two tercets that present a resolution to the problem. Drawing on Roubaud's interest in mathematics, the title "E" refers to an irrational number and the symbol for a central mathematical constant that, when graphed, creates a series approaching infinity. Each sonnet recycles parts of the other sonnets in the collection, and its simple form allows him to explore potentiality—how strict adherence to poetic form leads to creativity. Roubaud belongs to Oulipo, or *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (workshop of potential literature), and his collection *E (Signe d'Appartenance)* is indicative of the group's idea of "emptying style" to show that there is no one absolute style assigned to an author but many styles—perhaps the most famous example being *Exercices de Style* by one of its founding members, Raymond Queneau, in the late 1950s.

It is important to note that Oulipo calls itself a group instead of a movement, attesting to the wide range of poets, novelists, intellectuals, and mathematicians that identify themselves as "Oulipian" (*oulipien*). Central to every Oulipian project is the notion of constraint such as the "lipogram," or writing that excludes a letter. A quintessential example would be the novel *La disparition* by Georges Perec, which does not contain the letter "e." When constraints are applied to a writing project, they transform writing into a game and an experiment. Roubaud has even developed his own formal constraints and brainstorming exercises for other poets to use: for instance, the "sardinsaure" exercise, which takes the first syllable of one animal and the second syllable of another to create a new word that becomes the subject of a short poem inspired by "des particularités des deux parents de la chimère." Another example is "QSSD-Qui se souvient de?," which generates a series of questions about memory that become the lines of a poem,

similar to a questionnaire.¹⁰⁵ These experiments with poetic constraint are inquisitive and playful, revealing Roubaud's thoughts on ingenuity. In comparison with his first poetic collection of sonnets *E (Signe d'Appartenance)* from the late 1960s and "A cinq heures du soir," a eulogy from 2012 imagining his friend's dog Lucy in a game of perpetual fetch, *Quelque chose noir* (1986) is resolutely more "free form." Totalling over one hundred pages and composed of eighty-three poems divided into nine substantial sections and a short, epilogue-like tenth section called "Rien," the prose poems of *Quelque chose noir* use parataxis, free verse, and irregular spacing.¹⁰⁶

Despite his reputation as a "mathematical" poet, Roubaud is most often studied through his theorem that "poetry is the memory of language."¹⁰⁷ Memory is a serious preoccupation for Jacques Roubaud, who approaches it as a temporal conundrum that writing helps to reveal. The simple task of putting pen to paper ("En traçant aujourd'hui sur le papier la première de ces lignes") in the opening to *Le Projet* initiates this search for meaning.¹⁰⁸ The verb "tracer" signals mark making, a process of memory that is concerned with how writing carries an element of death.¹⁰⁹ *Quelque chose noir* is the poetry collection that led Roubaud to begin *Le Projet*, which is "a work about death [that] often modulates, readily, if eerily, into a work about literature," because the writing and publications created from the daily ritual of such a vast autobiographical

¹⁰⁵ His personal page on the Oulipo website: <http://oulipo.net/fr/contraintes/sardinosaure> and <http://oulipo.net/fr/contraintes/qssd>.

¹⁰⁶ See Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry By Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012, 14. The autobiographical bent of the poems evokes Dante's *Vita Nuova*.

¹⁰⁷ See Aleka Calsoyas, "Jacques Roubaud's Art of Memory: Metaphor's Mirrors in *Le grand incendie de Londres*" *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Fall 2004) 25-46.

¹⁰⁸ Roubaud, *Le Projet*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Derrida's version of the trace is more linked to writing, as in "Freud et la scène d'écriture" when he observes, "La route s'ouvre dans une nature ou une matière [...] et y procure l'histoire de la route et l'histoire de l'écriture. Nous pensons ici [...] au travail itinérant de la trace, produisant et non procurant sa route, de la trace qui trace, de la trace qui se fraye elle-même son chemin" *L'Écriture et la différence*, 317.

project become a reference point for the author's life.¹¹⁰ From the corporeal trace to the trace on the paper, writing, memory, and death are linked by his autobiographical projects.

Death is a limit of representation, a moment for language “on the edge of silence,” “on the verge of the invisible,” and “on the brink of closure.”¹¹¹ In this regard, Roubaud's poem “Aphasie” in *Quelque chose noir* addresses the loss of language and the impasse created when the body no longer allows for verbal expression. The poem begins with a reference to Roman Jakobson, one of the first researchers to study aphasia (a complete lack of speech); Roubaud sees it as a condition that disables the tongue (“mange la langue”).¹¹² In the first half of this twenty-line poem, chaos ensues for the poet mainly as a temporal problem, “les articulations les plus récentes partent les premières,” and a syntactical issue, “les règles du vers disparaissent une à une [...] selon un ordre aphasique.”¹¹³ However, this aphasic chaos is not violent: he compares it to a building that slowly becomes a ruin as more and more people take a brick as they pass by it, gradually dissolving it “sans le faire exploser d'un coup.”¹¹⁴ In the second half of the poem, he returns to the moment he found Alix Cléo dead, recognizing that silence was the only fitting response—as he writes, “Devant ta mort je suis resté entièrement silencieux.”¹¹⁵ The poet ought to be able to use poetry to communicate, but due to his aphasic state, is unable to do it as he always had—“je ne pouvais plus parler selon ma manière de dire qui est la poésie.”¹¹⁶ Poetry is no longer poetry for Roubaud because the primary vehicle of poetic expression, the poet's voice,

¹¹⁰ Calsoyas, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Michel Deguy, *Figurations: poèmes, propositions, études*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969, 51.

¹¹² *Quelque chose noir*, 131.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* The easiest speech patterns disappear first for him.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

is lost during his mourning period (“je n’ai pas pu parler pendant presque trente mois”).¹¹⁷ By abandoning the rules of versification and adherence to line, he maps the chaos of aphasia on the page through incomplete, trailing, and un-rhyming thoughts punctuated by white space, imparting flatness to his expression. In exploring the depths of poetic language as void (loss, failure), Roubaud’s poem on aphasia reflects on the inability to express a condition that consumes the ability to speak, thereby imitating the muteness of a photograph.

It is worth asking if Jacques Roubaud sees photography as a distinct language with the potential to allow the poet to recover his words after suffering from aphasia. In a work published two years after *Quelque chose noir*, he proposes that photography is “light writing.” Aware of the etymology of the word—it means to draw with light—he credits a scientist and mathematician, Sir John Herschel (who had introduced it to the London public in 1839), with the invention of the term, explaining photography as “écriture par, au moyen de la lumière, à la lumière.”¹¹⁸ He does not go as far as to say that it is a separate language, though he does highlight the shared visual aesthetic of black and white unifying text on the page in addition to the light and dark of photographic images—except for color process, which he ignores. He is mainly interested in how the juxtaposition of dark and light creates blind spots within the image, and how words on the page (another version of black and white) might also obscure meaning. The contrast of black and white, conceived as “la bénédiction du noir et blanc,” makes the medium special, in his view: photography’s grayscale, as a true “l’art de la lumière,” sets it apart from the pigments involved in painting.¹¹⁹ His description of photography emphasizes what Barthes would call its status as a “carnal medium,” stressing the skin-like qualities of the

¹¹⁷ *Quelque chose noir*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Roubaud, “Première digression sur les débuts de la photographie” *Du visible à l’invisible*, ed. Stéphane Michaux, Paris: Corti, 1988, 201.

¹¹⁹ *Impressions de France*, Paris: Hatier Itinéraires, 1991, 22.

photographic emulsion and paper.¹²⁰ He calls it skin-like because of its points of contact with the sitter: the light has struck the surface of both the body and the negative, with which we then make contact as a viewer of the photograph. On the contrary, writing cannot provide the same impression when it leaves a trace of its subject. Black and white photography reminds Roubaud of its unique ability to record the world, especially with respect to other forms of representation like painting, but to say that it is its own language is not a fair assessment. Though he does see photography as a form of writing, it does not have the grammar of a language; instead, it acts in co-creation with text, offering another trace, closer to reality than the word on the page.

Likewise, Alix Cléo did not view photography as a language—in fact, she was interested in how photography *cannot* be a language. Having written her thesis on *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, she was influenced by Wittgenstein’s ideas regarding languages and the category of the “unsayable.” He argues that if something is true, then it ought to be expressed in elementary statements that can be verified by scientific testing. It would be absurd, he argues, to require such proof of religious or ethical belief since religion and morals can be expressed in art and poetry; thus the “unsayable” for Wittgenstein is mysterious.¹²¹ Alix Cléo assigns photography to the category of the “unsayable” because it cannot speak, it can only represent; she contends that photography is not a language, rather it is a form of silence.¹²² Her description of the photograph’s silence accentuates the difference between written and visual representation: unable to speak for itself, the photograph needs to be explained or articulated with words, therefore the silence of the photograph readily opens it to *prosopopeia*, the rhetorical device of

¹²⁰ *Camera Lucida*, 80-81.

¹²¹ *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness with introduction by Bertrand Russell, Routledge: NY, 2011: “il y a assurément de l’indicible, il se montre c’est le Mystique.”

¹²² *Journal*, 11: “une image est une forme de silence [...] la photographie n’est pas un langage.”

giving a silent object a voice. Alix Cléo's theory of the photograph acknowledges the medium's silence but does not elaborate on the role of text to give a voice to the object.

This striking elision of the photograph from the text shared by the Roubauds makes much of the tension between verbal and visual representation, constitutive of ekphrasis—one of the oldest problems in poetry and art. The simplest definition of ekphrasis as verbal representation of visual representation would avoid any detail about the type of artwork or the type of poetry. Moreover, the classical phrase *ut pictura poesis* from Horace's *Ars poetica*—"as in paintings, so in poems"—defies any common sense thinking about what poetry does and how this is different than what a painting does.¹²³ From the outset, ekphrasis should have been doomed to fail because of "the absurdity and the unnaturalness" of writing a poem about a painting that could in some way rival or even overshadow the mastery of the visual object.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, ekphrasis has endured as a poetic genre.¹²⁵ Literary critics have historically recognized two types of ekphrasis: classical/neoclassical, which tries to give a voice to the silent object it describes, and post-modern, which is as skeptical of verbal representation as it is of the visual. From Homer to Keats, ekphrastic poems generally emphasize both the performative context of the poem and the rivalry of skill between the poet and the artist. Whereas classical and neo-classical ekphrasis "salute" the artist, post-modern ekphrasis "undermines the concept of verisimilitude itself," and its examples highlight the artifice of the poet and the artist.¹²⁶ For such examples, Mitchell outlines three categories or modes for post-modern ekphrasis draw attention to the artificiality of

¹²³ See Cheeke, *Writing For Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 11. Other traditional examples of ekphrasis that draw upon classical themes of the artist's skill include Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

¹²⁶ Cheeke, *Writing For Art*, 4. See also Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* .trans. Edward Allen McCormick, New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1984. 91-97.

any representation: ekphrastic hope (a moment when words really do help us “see” the object better than the object alone), ekphrastic synthesis (when the division between image and text is no longer an issue, instead image and text stand beside each other), and ekphrastic fear (a moment of “counterdesire” when the imagined visual seems to collapse into the real object).¹²⁷

Quelque chose noir foregrounds two out of the three categories in Mitchell’s framework for ekphrasis. When Roubaud describes a real photograph by Alix Cléo to help the viewer experience it more deeply and meaningfully, his poetry exemplifies ekphrastic hope. He also demonstrates ekphrastic fear, as we shall see in the opening poem that revisits the traumatic moment he found her dead in bed. This work refers to images *by* her, in addition to what he calls “tirages photographiques internes”—the mental images created by his memories *of* her. Because photographs are not inserted in its pages, *Quelque chose noir* does not explore the category of ekphrastic synthesis, when image and text stand beside each other.

Critics have remarked on the allusions to photography in *Quelque chose noir*, emphasizing the co-creative force of text and image, in which “les mots ne sont pas le commentaire de l’image pas plus que l’image n’est illustration des mots,” so that commentary on the image does not outweigh the image and vice versa.¹²⁸ However, the analysis cited above leaves out additional details about the type of ekphrasis present in the text and the strange temporality of displacement, delay, and deferral when analyzing a collection of poems about photographs that predict a brutal, tragic death. My analysis is more concerned with the limitations of the photograph and the limitations of the text to connote presence. To these three categories—ekphrastic hope, ekphrastic fear, and ekphrastic synthesis— a fourth type, notional

¹²⁷ See WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994: 151-82.

¹²⁸ Véronique Montémont, “Ce que l’œil dit au texte: poésie et photographie dans Jacques Roubaud et Lorand Gaspard” *LittéRéalité*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2002): p. 10.

ekphrasis, might be added that strives to visualize a death foretold. Roubaud deploys notional ekphrasis when he muses on a photograph that does not exist in the world as a real object but as a verbal snapshot that he creates, as in the trio of prose poems titled “Roman-photo,” where he imagines several alternative realities—a scenario where he died first and another in which Alix Cléo dies in old age from cancer instead of asphyxiation. This poem will be discussed in the pages to follow, but first, I will analyze the incipit of the poetry collection, which also an example of the verbal snapshots and mental images that engage in notional ekphrasis.

In the opening poem “Méditation 12/5/85,” time stamped two years after Alix Cléo’s death, the poet seeks consolation by recalling memories of his wife and reliving the horrors of discovering her dead, only to conclude that the process of meditation announced in the title cannot fill the void he is experiencing. Troubled by the image of her hand rendered other worldly and frightening by her death, the poet focuses on the blood flow beneath her skin, how it was still warm when he found her. Reinserting himself in the scene in direct address to her, he writes, “ta main pendait au bord du lit, tiède, tiède.”¹²⁹ The motif of her hand repeats—“cette image se présente pour la millième fois”— a powerful image of her death, which takes on greater significance as he focuses on the heaviness of clotted blood, her cause of death, a simple physics problem—“du sang lourd sous ta peau” and “du sang s’était alourdi au bout des doigts.”¹³⁰ These descriptions of the actual scene (and *not* a photograph) render the hand abject and disturbing because it is no longer living yet still lifelike, animated by the poetry. This image reappears in subsequent poems as a “tirage photographique interne” (in his words) functioning as a mental print of the death scene, on replay.¹³¹

¹²⁹ *Quelque chose noir*, 13.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 11.

Turning to the photographs by Alix Cléo Roubaud (from *Si quelque chose noir*) that he refers to in his poems, resemblance creates a problem for the poet: although he wants to discount the easiness of resemblance between the subject of a photograph and the actual person, he determines that death is final, a total resemblance without dispute. These themes are presented in the opening poem “Méditation du 12/5/85.” He suggests that while it is tempting to equate the photographs of *Si quelque chose noir* with an expected death, this type of thinking is pernicious to the mourner: when the photographs were taken, his wife was still alive, making a claim for how the living person in the photographs and the corpse have little in common.¹³² The real photographs from *Si quelque chose noir* that show her as a corpse mesh with the mental photographs from the previous “Méditation.” Here, Roubaud acknowledges two things: first, photographs are more powerful than other media such as painting, and second, memories crystallize through images. In the presence of a real death, he suggests, the term representation no longer applies—death is final and redundant, an impossible limit.¹³³ This realization pains the poet for its simplicity and truth—“tu [Alix Cléo] étais morte et cela ne mentait pas”—demonstrating the widely held belief in mathematics that there are multiple solutions to a problem but that the best proofs are those that are the most “elegant”: succinct, with a minimum of suppositions, which can be easily generalized.¹³⁴

Two months after “Méditation 12/5/85,” Roubaud writes “Méditation 21/7/85” in which he recalls a photograph from the series “La Dernière chambre” by Alix Cléo. In this poem, he develops the themes of the death scene presented in the first poem and echoes the experience of de-familiarization explored therein. Whereas the first meditation emphasizes the abject quality of

¹³² *Quelque chose noir*, 17.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

his wife's hand, the second meditation highlights his own place (temporally) within his wife's dying (and afterlife). It has become impossible for him to locate the exact moment of her passing. For instance, the statement “ ‘sa mort est à la fois l'instant qui précède et celui qui succède à ton regard’,” has been rendered meaningless by the photograph which collapses past and future into one image; in other words, he sees the moment of her passing retroactively in the photograph.¹³⁵ The photograph “La dernière chambre” is directly referred to by the text, but we learn that the poet has added his wife's presence in the poetic rendering of the photograph because in the actual print, there is only a picture of a bed and some shoes, layered with text typed on a typewriter. Figuratively, the poet recalibrates the contrast levels of the poetically rendered version of the photograph “La dernière chambre,” focusing on the dark details (her hair, the shadow of her leg) that would appear if Alix Cléo were to have been “added” to the image reclining in bed: “ton ventre cette fois n'était pas dans l'ombre. point vivant au plus noir. pas un mannequin. mais une morte,” a replay of the moment he found her dead in bed through a rereading and reimagining of her photograph.¹³⁶ In the closing to the poem, the poetically rendered photograph evaporates in the mind of the poet, fading to black. The photographs thus offer a visual on which to speculate, but ultimately, the moment must remain bound to his “tirages photographiques internes,” the mental images that combine memories with elements from the photographs taken by his wife in *Si quelque chose noir*.¹³⁷ This reliance on his memory of Alix Cléo is richer than the photographic images.

The three-part poem “Roman-photo” recoils from the lyric voice of the poet encountered in the “Méditation” series of poems and anchors his mourning in the rhythm of everyday life at

¹³⁵ *Quelque chose noir*, 22.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

home. Roubaud leads us on a detective story, subject matter not uncommon to the *photo-roman* genre referred to in the title of the poems, though here the term is inverted as “*roman-photo*” to emphasize the task of writing here. Having emerged in Italy in the post-war period, the *photo-roman* was a genre of paperback adaptations of American films with photographs of famous actors and well-known scenes inserted into the text, that were sold to European audiences using a very similar layout as comic books.¹³⁸ Additionally, the narrative created by Roubaud’s *photo-roman* poems has all the trappings of the opening scene of a *film noir*, and given the emphasis on *photo* in the *photo-roman*, we might expect to see images inserted in the text. However, this turns out to be a non-visual affair. The inversion of the *photo-roman* for *roman-photo* in his poems shows that the text is doing the majority of the work, that is to say the poems must produce a series of verbal snapshots. Verging on the cinematic, the short scenes range from moments of solitude and unfulfilled desires in a widower’s life to almost hallucinatory imaginings of a fulfilled desire to pick up the phone and hear his wife’s voice. To establish distance and extricate Roubaud as a poetic figure from the scenes, the poems adopt the third person to talk about memories of a woman, who we might assume is Alix Cléo given their similarities. In the first *roman-photo* example, he writes “Il y a quelqu’un, un homme [...] sa jeune femme qui est morte.”¹³⁹ In the second, he imagines this man picking up the phone and hearing his wife’s voice on the other end: “le monde où il est encore (le téléphone vient de sonner mais il n’a pas encore bougé la main pour répondre) sera oublié.”¹⁴⁰ By the third poem, he imagines a different scenario with a happier ending— the young woman dies of old age from

¹³⁸ See Jan Baetens, *Pour le photo-roman*, Brussels: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2010.

¹³⁹ *Quelque chose noir*, 51.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

lung cancer: “son dernier livre [Alix] resta inachevé.”¹⁴¹ The three poems constituting “Roman-photo” imagine the life not lived, showing how the text is able to revise his account of events and point toward a future they might have shared.

Roubaud’s brand of ekphrasis in *Quelque chose noir* leaves us wondering if the poems might stand alone, independent of Alix Cléo’s photographs. The omission of photographs raises the question of his refusal to publish the photographs alongside the poems. Like Barthes’s photograph of his mother as a child, Roubaud does not reproduce the photographs of and by Alix Cléo that hold meaning for him in the space of the page. However, unlike Barthes, who finds a photograph that encapsulates the essence of his mother as he remembers her in her final days, Roubaud never finds a photograph that reveals the essential self of Alix Cléo; instead, the poems hover in between text and image. *Quelque chose noir* reflects on the impasse of relation between text and image, yet to think of the poems without the photographic series neglects the internal logic of their composition. Roubaud invents a new term for this structure: “un biipsisme,” which riffs on the term “solipsism,” and, he explains, consists of a whole number, a singular entity like the number one, but “bougé dans un miroir” and thus reflected to reveal a double or twinned otherness, like “deux miroirs se faisant face.”¹⁴² This doubling with an opposite (or otherness) that makes it complete creates an inverted parallel.¹⁴³ Ekphrasis explores this doubled, coupled tension between verbal and visual representation: to read the poems by themselves without seeing Alix Cléo’s photographs would miss the mark since these works can only be fully

¹⁴¹ *Quelque chose noir*, 56.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

understood by the tension between death and photography.¹⁴⁴ This tension repeats, taking the form of a circle, as Roubaud returns to photographs again and again, giving titles to his poems that closely imitate the structure of a photographic series and often draw from titles Alix Cléo gave to her sequences, as in *La dernière chambre* (1973) in addition to *Si quelque chose noir*.

In creating a monumental mourning loop that repeats and reiterates a constant dialogue with his wife and her memory, Roubaud's project in *Quelque chose noir* is an extreme version of the Oulipian notion of potentiality from constraint—as a way to explore the singular as a plural notion, or two within one. Alix Cléo's photographic series *Si quelque chose noir* repeats the same caption and title with some variation; likewise, Roubaud's poems in *Quelque chose noir* can be viewed as an infinite series, “différents, inséparables,” as they circle back on each other.¹⁴⁵ For example, a pair of poems that share the title “Cette photographie, ta dernière” differ only slightly; these are iterations in which the second is a reworking of the first.¹⁴⁶ The two poems begin with the same anaphora “Cette photographie, ta dernière, je l'ai laissée sur le mur, où tu l'avais mise, entre les deux fenêtres,” but diverge, as if scattering a beam of light into two. We then fall into the gaze of the poet as it shifts within a *mise-en-abyme* structure of the room he is seated in with two windows, “entre les deux fenêtres,” to the same room pictured in the photograph with two windows, again “entre les deux fenêtres,” that frame a church just beyond the window frame. In both iterations of the poem, the poet's gaze meets that of Alix Cléo pictured in the photograph, who he says watches him as he visualizes “le moment où tu serais absente,” a kind of déjà vu in reverse, as if he has traveled back in time and sees her future death

¹⁴⁴ Marila Mariachetti, “Sur Roubaud: photographie et parole poétique” ed. Christine van Rogger-Andreucci, *Recueil en hommage à la mémoire d'Yves Alain Favre*, Centre de Recherches sur la Poésie contemporaine, Presses universitaires de Pau, 1993; p. 81.

¹⁴⁵ *Quelque chose noir*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 91 and 103.

within the image.¹⁴⁷ The second iteration of “Cette photographie, ta dernière” shows that the two poems are not only reflections on but also *of* each other. Even though the endings and beginnings are the same anaphora, the other lines of the poem, when analyzed together, reveal that the penultimate lines of one poem are the secondary lines of the other. In another example, “« Ce même c’est ta mort et le poème »,” whose title is a direct quote from Alix Cléo’s *Journal* (as seen in the *guillemets*), makes reference to the monumental windows and funereal shaped light that appear in *Si quelque chose noir*. These figures act as a kind of tomb for the photographer’s death, here transformed by the poet from a visual subject into a symbolic weight of words that become monuments like the steles pictured in her photographic series.¹⁴⁸ In a final example, the poem “Dialogue” shows that the addressee of Roubaud’s lament, as in all elegies, is not able to receive the message because she is dead. Recognizing this one-sidedness all too well, he writes: “ce poème t’es adressé et ne rencontrera rien.”¹⁴⁹ In spite of this fact, the poet presses on, imagining “l’hypothèse d’une rencontre [...] même dans la page,” monologue (purely textual and thus virtual). Within it, the poet achieves dialogue through evocation of Alix Cléo’s iconography.

Commentary on the images by and of Alix Cléo characterizes the type of ekphrasis at work in these works in mourning. Very rarely does Roubaud offer a self-portrait or a portrait in unison of the couple—his poems catch them in a space of interaction, whether it is Alix Cléo staring back at her husband through a photograph or her words appearing in the title of one of his poems. Roubaud’s commentary on his wife’s death was part and parcel of his task as editor of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 92.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 123: “les mots sont devenus comme des stèles.”

¹⁴⁹ *Quelque chose noir*, 125.

her diary, and often times, her translator.¹⁵⁰ Many of the entries were in English, and he chose to maintain it, adding a small note to these passages, which provides a French translation. He explains, “l’anglais était la langue de notre rencontre, de notre échange, de notre jouissance, de notre mariage.”¹⁵¹ This bilingualism he identifies is not limited to the languages of French and English; the notion of translation by which Roubaud characterizes their relationship—“toujours nous nous traduisons”—alludes to the idea of the couple as husband and wife, authors and photographer, and also resonates with the exchanges made between *Quelque chose noir* and *Si quelque chose noir*, as a translation of the visual into the verbal and vice versa.¹⁵² More broadly, Roubaud’s labor of love as his wife’s editor also provided him with the means to return to writing, and the notion of translation relates to the editing process since he was working between media as he sorted through her oeuvre; undeniably, this intermedial aspect of her corpus left a mark on his style. In a poem from *Quelque chose noir*, he identifies writing about his wife as a two-pronged challenge. Since she wrote about herself, his writing will never do her justice— not because he is prevented by emotional or physical reasons, but because she already so clearly expressed herself in her *Journal*. Because she left behind a rich corpus of materials, he is not as concerned about publishing the works posthumously as he is about the sadness of seeing her in the photographs but never being able to touch her again—the impossibility of physical contact that neither textual nor visual accounts will be able to recreate.¹⁵³ The omission of the personal photographs in each text forces commentary to assume a new representational function as a working through and against the image that cruelly reminds him that Alix Cléo is dead.

¹⁵⁰ See Véronique Montémont, *Jacques Roubaud: l’amour du nombre*, Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004.

¹⁵¹ *Le Grand Incendie de Londres*, 336.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ *Quelque chose noir*, 121: “ce n’est pas que j’en sois incapable par nature, mais la vérité de toi, tu l’as écrite.”

The paradox of writing loss is its vastness and magnitude—these characteristics make it hard to fill, except perhaps with commentary. But even this strategy inevitably returns to the subject of loss.¹⁵⁴ Grief, although it is a reaction to a profound absence, has a fullness of experience that constitutes a type of presence, making its emptiness significant. Roubaud’s interpretation of his wife’s work and their relationship becomes a formidable antidote to loss because *Quelque chose noir* is in constant dialogue with her oeuvre. This affective attitude and textual dynamic draws upon a theoretical concept identified by Maurice Blanchot called “l’entretien infini.”¹⁵⁵ Commentary is the most significant form of interpretation, according to Blanchot’s framework: his “l’entretien infini” refers to the process by which commentary repeats and deepens a text, refueling it with new life.¹⁵⁶ Within this view, the meaning of absence is associated with dying, which makes it impossible for the other to speak and creates a relation that “is hard to consider a relation at all [...] founded as it is upon no common ground [...] borne by a hiatus in language.”¹⁵⁷ This hiatus quality inherent in the “entretien” makes the mode of relation that would speak plural and fragmentary. Moreover, his concept of “entretien” does not imply reciprocity in which one party might echo or refute another; rather, “entretien” is an impossible dialogue:

Such, then, would be my task, to respond to speech that surpasses my understanding, to respond to it without having really heard it, and to respond to it in repeating it, in making it speak... To name the possible, to respond to the impossible. I remember that we had designated in this way the two centers of gravity of all language.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ See James Heffernan. *The Poetics of Ekphrasis From Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

¹⁵⁵ *L’Entretien infini*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 571.

¹⁵⁷ See an excellent analysis by Ann Smock, *What Is There to Say?* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, 8.

¹⁵⁸ *L’Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p.92; trans. Susan Hanson *The Infinite Conversation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 65.

The “entre” of Blanchot’s “l’entretien” would seem to imply an equal relationship of exchange. On the contrary, the “entre” is elsewhere, between neither party, which signifies an interval of decision between a “dialoguing side” and a “naming side.”¹⁵⁹ Commentary is thus a coin with two faces—“dialogue” and “naming”—characterized by opposing impulses of separation and joining all at once. This bind is indistinguishable for Roubaud as he comments on his wife’s work, since she cannot write back to him and respond to his engagement with her *oeuvre*, testifying to how their “entre” is “elsewhere”: his commentary cannot be reciprocated by Alix Cléo. In addition, his editing of her *Journal* reinforces this link between interpretation and loss against a backdrop of an impossible dialogue. His poems dramatize this double sidedness of writing as an assertion of presence and absence, of self and other, of erasure and exposure, thus making the effort to reverse, yet also repeating, almost indefinitely, the loss underscored by her death.¹⁶⁰ Roubaud’s interpretation of his wife’s *oeuvre* is a reminder of his own mortality and of the ability of commentary to revivify the writer’s task.

Together with ekphrasis, thus, elegy is the other poetic tradition *Quelque chose noir* simultaneously belongs to and challenges. In creating an “intermedial” (and interpersonal) aesthetic of mourning, *Quelque chose noir* constructs an elegy, which conveys lamentation for tragic events and covers a broad subject matter from exile to death, reflected upon in a lyrical voice of the poet. Elegy relates the individual experience of tragedy to describe mourning a lost object; likewise, ekphrasis, is a distinctive genre yet has no distinct formal or syntactic features. It is a broad category that nineteenth-century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge summarized as “[the

¹⁵⁹ See Ann Smock, *What Is There to Say?* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, 9.

¹⁶⁰ Likewise, Blanchot demonstrates that mortality creates a paradox of existence: “La mort travaille avec nous dans le monde [...] Tant que je vis, je suis un homme mortel, mais quand je meurs, cessant d’être un homme, je cesse aussi d’être mortel, je ne suis plus capable de mourir.” See *De Kafka à Kafka*, Paris: Gallimard, 1951, 52.

presentation of] every thing as lost and gone or absent and future.”¹⁶¹ Photographs also evoke the dread of loss, thus they tend to graft emotions onto their object in a more casual, transparent way than elegy.

In capturing something already out of grasp of the present moment, photographs and elegy make sense of loss using similar methods. This re-inscription of the past by the present moment is photography’s “posthumous irony,” meaning that the knowledge the viewer brings to bear on the photograph after it has been taken underlies its temporalities as different encounters with the subject.¹⁶² Alix Cléo Roubaud’s photographs are imbued with a sense of her death only because we know she died after taking them; hence as her husband views the photographs, he reads her death and his own, which has yet to occur. The photographs by Alix Cléo carry a poignancy within them that, when combined with the poet’s laments, underlines the closeness between elegy and photography. Her husband’s poems show how real photographs can produce images of affect, that then magnify the sense of loss through textual evocation. Susan Sontag views this poignancy as the link between photography and elegy:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. [...] To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. [...] Photography is the inventory of mortality. [...] This link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.¹⁶³

Of note here is Sontag’s emphasis on photographs of people, highlighting that the photograph bears special poignancy because of humanity’s relation to mortality as a kind of future loss. This critique does not mean to imply that mourning of places and objects is invalid since Sontag points out that identification with death on the part of the spectator may be even more poignant

¹⁶¹ Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk* (1835), vol 2, 268. Elegy dates to well before the nineteenth century.

¹⁶² Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1971, 15.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

through photographs of objects and places because we see ourselves—our own death—within them. In the case of *Quelque chose noir*, Roubaud participates in the mortality of his wife through elegy as much as Alix Cléo explores her own death by taking self-portraits in *Si quelque chose noir*. Together, the two works exemplify the “twilight side of life” alluded to by Sontag in the quote above, and even reinforce the photograph as “pure pathos” and an “inventory of mortality.”¹⁶⁴ The photograph in the context of mourning bears a special significance too because black and white conveys life and its opposite, death.

Photographs magnify the *pathos* inherent to elegy and also create ambivalence about the subject pictured. This is due to the presence and absence of light and shadow that generate the image on the emulsion. In “Dans cette lumière III,” the lines of text create an aesthetics of light and dark, of emptiness and fullness: the poet finds it difficult to behold the photograph in front of him, and repeats the command “Regarde,” forcing himself to look. The layout of the poem, reproduced below, imitates the refraction of light scattered and quickly gone, like the “nuage” that concludes the poet’s free association of images.

Regarde

un monde effrontré comme un échafau-
dage

L’image interne, et *celle là* se contredisaient
mais je ne pouvais plus montrer, ni déduire.

Regarde

non sens la lumière
nuage et sa forme qu’il renie.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1971, 15.

¹⁶⁵ *Quelque chose noir*, 114.

In addition to the formal elements on the page, the resignation “je ne pouvais plus montrer ni déduire” demonstrates the poet’s feelings of failure and futility as he tries to pin down the image of his wife, suggested by the emphasis on “*celle là*.”¹⁶⁶ The light (“la lumière”) capturing her image is as fleeting as a cloud. Despite the repeated command “Regarde” (look), by the poet, he is unable to see her pictured; instead, the light and shadow function like fog, obscuring her image. Barthes touches on this same ambivalence in *La chambre claire*, only to conclude that every photograph is subject to this form of hallucination—reading into the image—by the spectator, a movement between haze and clarity created by competition between reality and unfulfilled desire. The term “hallucination,” whose etymology derives from the Latin *alucinatus* meaning “to deceive,” is primarily a visual phenomenon (and a mental disorder); as a visual object, the photograph plays upon this deception founded on desire. Thus, “Dans cette lumière III” is a quest for meaning that proves to be unattainable for the mourner.

Continuing the theme of the image as hallucination, the poem “Univers” asserts a series of propositions made as Roubaud looks at photographs that recall those from Alix Cléo’s series *Si quelque chose noir*. Exploring the propositions—“Elle est vivante,” “Elle serait vivante,” “Il arriverait qu’elle serait vivante”—Roubaud imagines a multitude of universes in which those statements could be true, using the language of logic via a chain of conditionals that begin to create a circular structure and a spiraling movement ending in a deafening, insensitive blow: “L’univers reste insensible à l’offre de ma proposition.”¹⁶⁷ Looking at the photographs, he creates the illusion of presence through discourse and use of the conditional (“Elle serait vivante”), but as he claims, the statement “Tu es morte,” does not depend on enunciation: “la

¹⁶⁶ *Quelque chose noir*, 166.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 129.

proposition ‘tu es morte,’ elle n’a besoin d’aucun univers de discours.”¹⁶⁸ Ultimately, the universe is indifferent to the mourner, whose figurative center of the universe—the beloved—is no longer.

In yet another example of the photographs as works of erasure highlighted in the poem “Lumière, par exemple,” speculates on the play of light in photographs and questions the indexical nature of Alix Cléo’s photographs.¹⁶⁹ Roubaud sketches the difference between image and flesh: the image cannot capture the essential self denoted by the voice, because her image—and here he explicitly refers to a photograph held in his hands as he writes—“touche la trace d’une reconnaissance,” however, this is only a contour of the real, since as he concedes, all images are “révolues.”¹⁷⁰ Hesitant to fully trust photography as a reliable form of memory, he seizes upon this lack within the photograph, as a limitation of the image’s power to evoke memories. Indeed, some senses prove to be more powerful than others because they usher in a memory of her as a living being (rather than a corpse, as is often the case with the photographs the poet selects and reimagines in the poems). Building on this notion, the poem “Je peux affronter ton image” dismisses photographs as merely images— “la semblance” (almost resemblance but not quite)— and thus he is able to view them without causing himself much pain.¹⁷¹ Because the photographs are motionless, they do not remind him of the living, breathing person. The recordings of her voice, however, are too life-like to be heard, as if the voice, *la parole*, would flood his emotions in ways that the photograph does not.

¹⁶⁸ *Quelque chose noir*, 130.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 112: “Chaque image de toi—je parle de celles qui sont dans mes mains, devant mes yeux, sur les papiers—chaque image touché la trace d’une reconnaissance, l’illumine.”

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The illumination of the mute, motionless beloved in the photograph shows not only the medium's bent towards death but also its faultiness (and unreliability). Roubaud's thoughts on photography as a reminder of erasure recall Christian Metz's essay on photography "Photography and Fetish," published five years after *La chambre claire* and one year before *Quelque chose noir* (though no evidence to prove Roubaud knew of Metz).¹⁷² Viewing the photograph as an objective form *par excellence* because, like death, it is immobile and silent, he expands on Barthes's reading of the photograph as a deadening medium by linking it to memorial practices.¹⁷³ The stillness, stiffness, and silence of photographs are a reminder that the loved one in the picture is dead—and thus unchanged—as the world around the viewer is changing.¹⁷⁴ This temporal asymmetry highlights the connections between memory and death that Roubaud sees within the photograph. Even though it is a deadening medium that "escapes attempts of language to appropriate [...] its effect," photography and elegy here provide a forum within which to represent the "untranslatability" of grief.¹⁷⁵

Roubaud achieves some closure by comparing "l'adéquation exacte de la mort" to "la mort même même" and later "la mort identique à elle même même."¹⁷⁶ The repetition of "même" illustrates the permanence of death, while also conveying irony (the *non-sens*) because the "même" is doubled not only to emphasize his reluctance to accept his wife's death but also to remind us that she was, in some way, visualizing her death, which then happened in real life. Either recalling the moment Alix Cléo unveiled the series *Si quelque chose noir* or remembering

¹⁷² Christian Metz, "Photography as Fetish," *October*, vol. 34 (Autum 1985): 81-90.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷⁴ Metz, "Photography as Fetish," 84.

¹⁷⁵ Cheeke, *Writing For Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, 158.

¹⁷⁶ *Quelque chose noir*, 15.

the deathbed scene—both are possible interpretations—the line “évidemment ce n’était pas un cadeau ordinaire. celui de me livrer, à cinq heures du matin, un vendredi, l’image de ta mort” blurs the temporal boundaries between the immediate past and the pluperfect.¹⁷⁷ The imperfect verb “ce n’était pas” seems straightforward: it suggests that the poet is remembering a moment from his life with Alix Cléo, but it is more complicated since “l’image de ta mort” could allude to the photographs or her actual death, or to the poet now seeing a death foretold in the photographs, a vision only made possible because she has died.

Éros mélancolique: Shadows of Alix Cléo Roubaud

To return to the titular pair *Si quelque chose noir* and *Quelque chose noir*, it is clear that Alix Cléo Roubaud casts a shadow over the work of her husband and acts as a “specter” that haunts his works, even after *Quelque chose noir*. The “specter” is a trace, with connotations of shadow, and relates to Roubaud’s own descriptions of Alix Cléo in *Le Grand incendie de Londres*, in which he associates her figure with darkness or the absence of color, the *noir* headlined in both:

Je voyais Alix devant l’allée de cyprès noire, dans la nuit, nue, sa nudité noire elle-même, sa chevelure, le noir à ses bras, à son ventre, s’essayant à un éloge inverse de la lumière, s’efforçant de capturer l’ange du noir, l’infime écart de la forme des cyprès à elle-même, à côté d’elle-même. Je voyais et pensais à son rayonnement mélancolique, beauté du noir.¹⁷⁸

The repetition of *noir*, by a chain of associations that refer to trees at dusk, her head of hair, and her pubis, seems to suggest the primacy of “un éloge inverse de la lumière” (a Baroque *flamme*

¹⁷⁷ *Quelque chose noir*, 16.

¹⁷⁸ See Jacques Roubaud, *Le Grand incendie de Londres- Le Projet*. Paris, Seuil, 2009, 405.

noire) but Roubaud also sees this shadow quality of Alix Cléo, a figure composed of multiple tones of grayness, darkness, and sadness (“*mélancolique*”).

Quelque chose noir was the first text by Jacques Roubaud to meditate on photography; in subsequent publications, he continues to use photographs to explore memory and mourning, from *Le Grand incendie de Londres*, to a recent novel, *Éros mélancolique* (2009), co-authored with Anne Garréta.¹⁷⁹ Though not to the exclusion of the other arts, photography punctuates the majority of Roubaud’s texts. In addition to the themes of mathematics and memory, viewing practices (the technical term would be optics) are essential to understanding his poetry; the word “*œil*” appears a total of 370 times throughout his work (as of 2005).¹⁸⁰ Roubaud’s autobiographical writing consistently interrogates visual forms.¹⁸¹ Photography works to enrich the narrative of Roubaud’s texts, but not in the sense of an illustration, or a supplement to a written text, added after the fact to make reading more enjoyable for his audience.

In *Éros mélancolique*, photography’s density and richness do not just enable a conversation or exchange with other forms of representation, rather it is the structuring tool for a series of intricately nested stories in a work of fiction. Jacques Roubaud contacts Anne Garréta by e-mail one evening, inviting her to download a PDF that he found on the Internet; they later learn the PDF is a lost-and-found manuscript (an apocryphal ‘*manuscrit trouvé*’) titled ‘*Éros mélancolique*’ that was uploaded after it had been discovered in a suitcase full of microfilms from the 1960s in Edinburgh. Written by a man named A.D. Clifford, the story relayed by the text tells of a young Scottish chemist, Goodman, who wrote his thesis on photography in Paris and took up residence in an apartment rented to him by an American in the 1950s. Seeking a

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Roubaud and Anne Garréta, *Éros mélancolique*, Paris: Grasset, 2009.

¹⁸⁰ See Véronique Montémont, *Jacques Roubaud: l’amour du nombre*, Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004, 98.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

break from writing, he turns to photography to pass the time, turning his kitchen into a darkroom and taking photographs every hour from his apartment window like the voyeur character played by Jimmy Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 thriller *Rear Window*. Later in the same text, another story emerges when Goodman shares memories about a photograph of his mother, Esther, who went missing during the Occupation when she ventured out into the city after curfew, and all that remains of her is a photograph taken at the beaches of Guernsey and Jersey. In her honor, he decides to begin taking pictures from his apartment into the facing apartments at the eleventh hour, or for him, "l'heure noire," which was the exact time he received the news (as a child) that his mother was presumed dead and senses the urgency of this finality.¹⁸²

One day, Goodman hears the intoxicating voice of a woman in a café and follows her to a laundromat where he loses the trail, but later that evening, as he sets up his camera, he zooms in on a young woman taking off her clothes and is convinced "que la jeune femme nue et la jeune fille blonde" are the same person.¹⁸³ As he develops the photographs, creating a dizzying collection of images he calls "des carrés mélancoliques" (since he takes pictures from the same spot every hour on the hour and often does not encounter the woman's figure), his desire to meet the young woman grows, and when they meet in the street one day, he persuades her to spend the night with him, even photographing her as she sleeps; however, when he develops the photographs, she appears as a blur ("le blanc de sa mélancolie") and is never seen again.¹⁸⁴ In addition, this story is framed by a post-scriptum, "Fade to grey," and two preludes. In the first, "L'archive fantôme la mémoire digitale," we learn that a laptop has gone missing on a high-speed train (and the replacement laptop contains the PDF we are now reading), and in the

¹⁸² *Éros mélancolique*, 136.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 148.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

second, “Le négatif de la chambre noire,” we learn that an anonymous individual has been scanning the text pages in an operation “sauvegarde” to preserve the originals of the manuscript we are reading. Fonts differentiate these sections—Courier for the parts of the manuscript composed on a typewriter, Times New Roman for the main narrative.

In the novel, pursuit is a driving force that turns out to be fruitless—doubly so for Goodman in that his search for the woman is a dead end and in that his thesis on photography remains unfinished. These two projects are related because the second half of his unfinished thesis was to have been a discussion of the photographs of the adjacent apartment he took on a daily basis. The first (more academic) half of his thesis postulates that an English scientist and polymath, John Herschel, is the true father of photography not only because he gave the technology the name “photography,” the term that most fit the essence of the medium, which defines it: “la photographie est ce qu’elle est dès qu’elle a un nom.”¹⁸⁵ Herschel also discovered the process of fixing an image (without knowledge of Daguerre or Talbot’s methods) approaching light sensitive emulsions as a scientific problem.

This character’s view expresses Roubaud’s own admiration of Herschel, whose gift of the word photography, which means to “write with light,” bears neither the mark of its origin story nor its inventor, as *daguerreotype* named for Louis Daguerre and *talbotype* named for Henry Fox Talbot do. Herschel anonymized the invention (we do not speak of *herscheltypes*). Goodman sees him as a prophet of light, noting the coincidence that he was the son of a great astronomer, Wilhelm Herschel, and noting that even Galileo waxed poetic about “l’alphabet des astres” written in black and white in the sky. Talbot is mentioned as close second for the *mot juste* of photography, since he called it “the pencil of nature,” but for Goodman, the term “pencil” (versus if he had said ‘ink’ for example) is too close to drawing to be considered writing with

¹⁸⁵ *Éros mélancolique*, 204.

light, since “la matérialité invisible de la trace” is closer to ink (“l’encre qui a séché sur la page”).¹⁸⁶ Ink and light appear alongside each other in the opening pages of the story with Goodman reading his mother’s photograph, the only surviving artifact of her existence that binds him to her.

Not only is the second encounter with the woman a failure, Goodman also gives up any hope of finding her, abandoning his photographs and his thesis in the process. The post-scriptum “Fade to grey” sheds light on the theme of absence and erasure that underpin the novel, and characterizes its protagonists as ghosts, from the unnamed conservationist scanning Goodman’s pages and negatives to the blurred figure of the woman in/not in the photographs:

Traces fantômes, encres pales, interférences de la lumière dans les boîtes noires, chambres, rues nocturnes. Ombre double que portent les corps exposés à l’histoire. [...] Une main, frappant les touches d’une machine, a imprimé ces lignes [...] une autre [main] a mis au point, armé, déclenché, réarmé l’appareil photo cadrant ces pages. 324 fois.¹⁸⁷

The hand referenced in the quote above is a metonym for the many hands that do work typing, printing, and pressing the shutter button, throughout the novel. These hands conceptualize the story as “handmade,” though by no means artisanal since it was published in a full print run by a major publisher. Through these overlapping images of hands, we are brought back to an image of the hand that brings together the written and the photographed as two types of traces. This image of the writing hand stands as an emblem for the ongoing exploration of the trace by Jacques Roubaud. It also recalls the uncanny image of Alix Cléo’s hand in *Quelque chose noir*. In addition, it also gestures to the interpersonal collaboration of co-authors Anne Garréta and Roubaud.

¹⁸⁶ *Éros mélancolique*, 208.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 295.

For a novel that insists on black and white, it is interesting that the post-scriptum to *Eros mélancolique* would be titled “Fade to grey,” since Goodman encounters the mystery woman in a “blanchisserie” and he takes photographs at “l’heure noire.” Less fearful of total darkness than of total blindness (a whiteout), Goodman takes a photograph of the vacant street on a snowy afternoon, describing the glare of the snow’s reflection that produces “un soleil blanc.”¹⁸⁸ The flattening of the snow and the sky causes him anxiety, as he realizes the most unbearable sentiment of melancholy comes from the disappearance of the sun in the whiteness of the snow—a white out “un soleil blanc”—that he contrasts with “un paradoxe ultime du blanc et du noir” an inversion of black and white (light for dark).¹⁸⁹ Goodman then interprets this image as an overwhelming melancholy, a loss of reference. Unlike a solar eclipse, a “soleil noir,” which blocks the light of the sun ever so slightly, the white out obliterates any shadow—a terrifying prospect for the photographer in the story. This whiteout motif carries throughout the novel, as it is the color, or the total flooding of light that the image of the woman in the apartment with the dark windows across the street leaves on his film where she appears as a vertical strip of white.¹⁹⁰ Returning to the title of the post-scriptum “Fade to grey,” between the two extremes of black and white is grayscale, never mentioned in the novel until it closes on a discussion of gray, which is a tone, more along a spectrum ranging from presence of light to absence of light than an actual color. Ending on a note of foreclosure, that of a desire unfulfilled and an image unattained, the novel reminds the reader that all traces, like the ink on the page, will fade, “l’encre lumineuse [...] palît,” and the light-sensitive emulsion, “n’offre plus à fixer qu’un brouillard,” cannot

¹⁸⁸ *Eros mélancolique*, 137: “La lumière, ce matin-là sortait de la neige, s’élevait de la neige, plutôt qu’elle ne tombait du soleil pourtant présent dans le ciel: un soleil qui était blanc, que la neige, renvoyant la lumière, avait rendu blanc.”

¹⁸⁹ Ibid: “que la mélancolie la plus insupportable ne vient pas du Soleil Noir, qui cache la lumière.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 223: “une bande verticale blanche.”

capture all for all eternity, as the final words of the novel indicate, “We fade to grey, lumière, encre, corps, sel.”¹⁹¹ In an interesting reversal, Roubaud’s initial thoughts on ekphrasis as exposure in *Quelque chose noire* evolve into a discussion of total erasure in *Éros mélancolique*. This theme of overexposure (total exposure/white) revisited throughout the novel and Roubaud’s original expression of “photographic elegy” fulfill the same function— to express loss.

Reverberating throughout the novel, the ending line “We fade to grey,” the refrain from a famous British Pop song of the eighties by the duo Visage, not only transports us back to the period of the photographs of *Si quelque chose noir* in 1980/1 but also acts as an echo of Jacques Roubaud’s exploration of the photograph as an elusive trace that allows him to enact a poetics of memory and mourning for Alix Cléo Roubaud.¹⁹² Through a dialogue, referred to as imagined (and impossible since she cannot write back) Roubaud’s posthumous engagement with his wife’s oeuvre and its legacy in his own work creates a synthetic structure in which *Si quelque chose noir* and *Quelque chose noir* complete each other as meditations on the afterlife of an oeuvre.¹⁹³

Since its publication in 1986, *Quelque chose noir* has been studied alongside *Si quelque chose noir*. Certain specialists have developed the connections between the trace and memory evident in *Quelque chose noir*, others the connections between his posthumous editing of her *Journal* and the photographs to which *Quelque chose noir* refers. The ekphrastic *Quelque chose noir* is an ongoing monologue by Roubaud about the limitations of the photograph to convey presence. This was already done by Alix Cléo Roubaud, whose work is a poignant commentary on the representation of elegy and death foretold, as well as an intervention on photography that clashed categorizing the medium as an index.

¹⁹¹ *Éros mélancolique*, 299.

¹⁹² The song contains French lyrics “Devenir gris” mimed by English DJ Julia Fodor in the music video for the song.

¹⁹³ See the poem “Je vais me détourner,” *Quelque chose noir*, 61; for an elaboration on the three-part attachment that connects his editing process of her *Journal*, his reading of her photographs, and his reflection on her personal belongings after her death.

In the next chapter, I turn to another couple— this time composed of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, neither photographers nor poets by vocation. Their project, *L'usage de la photo*, entails points of contact as well as disconnection.

CHAPTER TWO

Invisible Scenes: Eroticizing Pictures in Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*

The jacket of best-selling author Annie Ernaux's recent book, *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), suggests a narrative of authentic self-exposure focused on secrecy and sexual encounters—not unlike the story found in her earlier novel *Passion simple* (1991), which chronicles her consuming love affair with a Russian diplomat.¹⁹⁴ In *L'usage de la photo*, Ernaux and Marc Marie, her co-author, a journalist she dated, do write about photographs of garments scattered in the prelude to lovemaking, but the work is not only about sex. It also offers a portrait of Ernaux's experience with breast cancer. What I will call the “post-coital photograph” displaces Annie Ernaux's body as the subject of experience, and, through its eerie quiescence, contends with the absolute erasure of the self. The photographs, picked together by Ernaux and Marie, allow them to transform the depersonalized account of cancer into a process of meaning making through commentary. Neither Ernaux nor Marie knew what the other had produced until publication, having made a pact from the start to leave the piles of clothing as they fell, only altering the scene once they had taken a picture, and that whoever went to pick up the photographs at the drugstore had to leave them in a sealed envelope until they could look at them together to pick out which photographs they wanted to write on. Breaking the rules of their pact by changing the arrangement of an article of clothing would alter the project because it would mean the photographs were no longer traces of a spontaneous act and would instead take on a rehearsed quality—although the same cannot be said for revisions made to the texts composed by the couple. Interestingly, Ernaux likens the crime of tampering with the clothes to that of editing

¹⁹⁴ Annie Ernaux, *Passion simple*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

her diary entries, claiming that both would be serious violations of their agreement. Only at the *mise en page* step, once the text was in the editing room, did the two see what each other wrote, a structure at odds with a traditional approach to authorship. As their voices alternate, they cause us to consider how these images evoke different feelings and even other images for two different people, as well as suggesting that these images invite us to imagine what is not pictured, as a kind of visual eroticism.

Truly unremarkable, the photographs of the co-authors' shoes and brassieres epitomize the banal—after all, what could be more ordinary and lowbrow than a stray sock on a bedroom floor? Written in Ernaux's signature "écriture plate," or flat writing created by short, declarative sentences, the texts follow the same writing style she adopted in *La Place*, one of her first autobiographical novels in which she paints a portrait of her father that turns out to be a self-portrait of her own working class roots. Like the feigned objectivity of the ethnographer, the deceptive simplicity of "écriture plate" finds a visual analog with Ernaux and Marie stripping description down to its most raw form; Marie even adopts her style in *L'usage de la photo*. Their gravitation to certain objects within the photographs conveys a style of free association, repeating descriptions, and attention to odd details similar to the *nouveau roman*, recalling works like Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*, where the pen imitates the camera, and readers have the impression of revisiting roughly the same but not quite the same scene many times over.¹⁹⁵

L'usage de la photo grapples with imagining one's mortality and the process of writing that returns to the scene of the sexual act through the photograph as erotic and life-affirming. This work is visionary for its incisive exploration of the stakes and implications of representation. Its photographs are a continuation of and a turning point within the development

¹⁹⁵ I am grateful to Dominic Thomas for pointing out the stylistic similarities between Ernaux's *écriture plate* and that of the *nouveau roman*.

of a *je transpersonnel* and a growing photographic writing style for Ernaux; the photo-textual narrative, on the one hand, initiates a dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work on the relationship between class taste and photography, *Un Art moyen: les usages sociaux de la photo*, and on the other hand, contests Bourdieu's relegation of photography to a middle-brow art, revealing that the banal is a productive, even subversive aesthetic category. The word "l'usage" in the title also recalls the formula commonly used in how-to manuals (the most famous being the grammar guide *Le Bon usage*), suggesting we read the text as a set of instructions for how to find profound value in Bourdieu's criticism of photography as a lesser art. Moreover, the type of breast cancer narrative *L'usage de la photo* might be according to certain critics appears to be an afterthought on the part of the co-authors.¹⁹⁶ Its impact rests primarily in two tensions: first between the erasure of the bodies in the photographs and their exposure textually through highly personalized anecdotes that both eroticize and de-eroticize the image; secondly, in the strained relations between the co-authors themselves, who by the end of the text, become uncoupled. One wonders, in fact, what *is* the use of photography for Ernaux?

Photographic Writing Style and the *Je transpersonnel*

From the practice of verbal snapshots in *La Place* and *Les Années* to the insertion of actual photographs into the text in *L'usage de la photo* and *Écrire la vie*, photography has always played an important function in Annie Ernaux's œuvre, and she recently developed a "photographic" writing style. As she explains, "La photo a toujours tenu une grande place dans

¹⁹⁶ See Allison Fell, "Intimations of Mortality: Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'usage de la photo* as Breast Cancer Narrative," *Nottingham French Studies*, Volume 48, Issue 2 (2009) 68-79, and Lisa Connell, "Picturing Pain and Pleasure in Annie Ernaux's *L'usage de la photo*," *French Forum*, Volume 39, Numbers 2-3 (Spring/Fall 2014) 145-160.

mes textes,” but with *L’Usage de la photo* the photographs are “le point de départ.”¹⁹⁷ Whereas in *L’Usage de la photo* actual photographs are reproduced in the text, previous works by Ernaux either treat the photograph as metaphorical presence or evoke photographs through verbal description only. *La Place* (1984), which tells the story of growing up in a small town in Normandy and reflects on moving away from her family’s working class origins to pursue her career as a school teacher, describes, in copious detail, four family photographs: her parent’s marriage portrait, two school pictures, and a portrait of her father.¹⁹⁸ Her recent photographic turn entails a method of composition while looking at images of this kind, as well as a new style of writing that imitates the camera.

Her sketchbook series, *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La vie extérieure 1993-1999* (2000), develops a photographic style of “instantanés,” or brief observations of everyday life witnessed in the RER and the environs of her home in Cergy-Pontoise.¹⁹⁹ The preface to *Journal du dehors* clarifies the objective of the project: “une sorte d’écriture photographique du réel”—the textual equivalent of a photograph taken by Paul Strand of a family in Luzzara, Italy, from 1953. This image moved Ernaux for its “présence violente, presque douloureuse” because the subjects, she observes, “sont là, seulement là” staring back at us.²⁰⁰ *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* attempt to record everything around her, from the movements of pedestrians to cashiers at a corner grocery store, much like a surveillance camera. Explaining the move toward the capture of daily life as a productive exercise for a writer composing an autobiography, she contends that writing about the daily life of others allows her to find out more about herself, “on

¹⁹⁷ “Rencontre avec Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie, à l’occasion de la parution de *L’Usage de la photo*,” Gallimard.

¹⁹⁸ Annie Ernaux, *La Place*, Paris: Galimard, 1984.

¹⁹⁹ Ernaux’s latest text, *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, Paris: Seuil, 2014, records details about shoppers at the Auchan supermarket in her neighborhood.

²⁰⁰ *Journal du dehors*, 1993, 2.

se découvre soi-même davantage,” and that the daily life of others, “le monde extérieur,” is a richer primary source than “l’ introspection” on her own life, scribbled in her diaries.²⁰¹ Though the title *La vie extérieure* emphasizes the relation between the writer and her primary material—the crowd—in the end, the observations end up catalogued in a *journal intime*, or diary as a series of notes. Because of the focus on the outside world, it is worth evaluating the term *journal intime* since it suggests personalization, rather than anonymity. She is not “recognized” by her subjects as she takes notes, and she never names them.²⁰²

Novelist Michel Tournier prefers the term *journal extime* to describe published diary entries, since by definition it is a daily practice intended for the eyes of the author only.²⁰³ Neither *journal extérieur* nor *journal externe*, the term *journal extime* plays on the connotations of the *intime*, which promises secrecy and confidentiality of the most personal details, and takes on greater significance when considering Ernaux’s style in *La vie extérieure* because although her writing occurs daily, she is not the subject of the entries, meaning this is all “unclassified” information. Yet, as she writes about the inhabitants and passerby from her neighborhood, these observations also digress into a reflection on her place within the fabric of her quotidian experience, as in the entry from *La vie extérieure* explaining her sketchbook style:

Aujourd’hui, pendant quelques minutes, j’ai essayé de voir tous les gens que je croisais, tous inconnus. Il me semblait que leur existence par l’observation détaillée de leur personne me devenait subitement très proche, comme si je les touchais.²⁰⁴

This style links to that of an ethnographer: she observes her own society and culture as if she were an outsider, all the while remaining connected to them by immediacy. Moreover, the

²⁰¹ *La vie extérieure*, Paris: Gallimard, 2001, 28.

²⁰² *Journal du dehors*, 20.

²⁰³ See Michel Tournier, *Journal extime*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

²⁰⁴ *La vie extérieure*, 29.

sketchbook style of the two texts, *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La vie extérieure* (2001), published almost a decade apart yet consistent in their formatting, is a highly reflexive endeavor that evokes the experimental autobiography of Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*. In it, the sociologist states that he is not attempting to write an autobiography.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, this negative posturing, much like René Magritte’s painting “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” produces a new form of self-aware autobiography, a brief intellectual self-portrait of the sociologist resisting formal categories that might seek to classify him. Similarly, the sketchbook form Ernaux employs to notate her surroundings is highly analytic and self-aware, but unlike *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* that traces Bourdieu’s intellectual trajectory, ranging from his early schooling and *cours préparatoires* to his stance on the Algerian war, Ernaux’s sketchbook is not about herself, or if it is, only obliquely so. The fragmentary, hurried style of the entries in her sketchbook series—and of course, these are not actual drawings—gestures to their immediacy. Furthermore, because she too shies away from calling these works autobiography, the entries function more like a secret camera and perhaps a tool used to fish ideas for her novels. Although Ernaux states in the preface to *Journal du dehors* that she found a textual equivalent in the photographs taken by Paul Strand (and the blank stares of the family as they gaze back at the camera do convey the same feeling of observation or intrusion that Ernaux practices on the métro as she takes notes about fellow passengers), it is my hypothesis that the sketchbook series is closer to Walker Evans’s photographs in the subway that caught his subjects unaware. The sense of surveillance, as noted earlier, is palpable in the entries; however, they are not necessarily a commentary of voyeurism or alienation within the city. They are undoubtedly original and compelling to this study as another example of Ernauxian representative techniques and a

²⁰⁵ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2004. This text was written shortly before Bourdieu’s death and seeks to understand his “intellectual dispositions” working backwards from his childhood.

burgeoning photographic writing style.

Before examining the stake of photographs in *L'usage de la photo*, the first instance of Ernaux inserting photographs directly into the text, it is equally important to discuss the effects of such an insertion in two subsequent texts: *Les Années* (2008), which does *not* include photographs, and *Écrire la vie* (2011), which does. Published three years after *L'usage de la photo*, the monumental *Les Années* is a work of French social history and autobiographical narrative that links photographs belonging to “collective memory” to personal photographs from Ernaux’s life through detailed textual description. In *Les Années*, a fragmentary portrait gesturing to the totality of the historical dimension of women’s experience in France since the 1950, Ernaux draws upon iconic images broadcast on television, turns of phrase, and popular name brands to depict the simultaneously collective and individual experience of the past.²⁰⁶ With *Les Années*, Ernaux pays careful attention to the material supports of the photographs, describing the color and context, rather than just the subject of the photograph. The description of the support as “c’est une photo de sépia, ovale, collée à l’intérieur d’un livret doré, protégée par une feuille gaufrée, transparente” has more detail than the identification of the subject pictured, “une bébé à la lippe boudeuse, de cheveux bruns.” This focalization on the material support of the image at the expense of its subject also reveals that photographs are not merely illustrations but part of a vast archive of documents from which the author can draw to contextualize autobiography, anchoring it in the real. The photograph grants access to family history before one’s birth, and similarly, the decay of the material support of the image, described as a sepia tone pasted into an album whose glue is slowly dissolving the edges of the photograph, attests to the passage of time. Furthermore, the layout of *Les Années* respects the personal archive model, as each

²⁰⁶ See Shirley Jordan, “Writing Age: Ernaux’s *Les Années*” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (2011) vol. 47, no2.; 138-149.

description of a photograph is separated by five lines of white space, creating the effect of flipping through an album of photographs. In sum, *Les Années* is concerned with the physicality of images as documents—where they are found and displayed, whose handwriting is scribbled on the back—and as the opening line of the text cautions, “Toutes les images disparaîtront,” Ernaux is also concerned with how images fade, their potential loss.²⁰⁷

Three years after *Les Années* and close to five years after *L’usage de la photo*, Ernaux published a book-length photo-essay, *Écrire la vie*, composed of one hundred pages of printed photographs and captions excerpted from her diaries, discussing her writing process, recycling descriptions of photographs from earlier texts, and elaborating on new ones that had never been released. Reflecting on the role of the photograph inserted into the text, Ernaux calls *Écrire la vie* “une façon d’ouvrir un espace autobiographique différent” that juxtaposes source material in a historical sense— “la réalité matérielle”—and her point of view, gleaned from her diaries—“la réalité subjective du journal.”²⁰⁸ This process of self-examination, or “la réévaluation constante du vécu,” provided by the source materials like photographs and personal accounts from her journal, takes a hybrid photojournal form composed of excerpts from her diary dating as early as 1984, photographs that she had famously described in previous works, and others that have not been written about until their appearance in *Écrire la vie*.

Moreover, nestled among the family portraits and pictures of her childhood home is even a photograph of her diaries, which turns the photo-journal into a *mise-en-abyme* structure, as the hybrid visual and verbal work we are reading is composed of excerpts from the diaries pictured on its pages.²⁰⁹ The layout of the diary photograph spreads across two pages and, in multi-

²⁰⁷ *Les Années*, 1. qtd in *Écrire la vie*, 927. The title is also a play on the author’s name “Annie.”

²⁰⁸ *Écrire la vie*, 8.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 34-35.

layered fashion, shows three elements: the faded background image is an overhead shot of handwritten manuscripts and on top of this image are a typed quote from her diary dated August 1988 and four images of her diaries, two per page as recto-verso sets. Continuing the structure of the *mise-en-abyme*, scribbled in pencil on the tattered covers of the diaries pictured are dates, from 1963 to 1984—over twenty years of journaling. As an emblem, the photographs of a journal within a photojournal also allude to the transience of the diaries themselves, which are subject to disappearance, and as we later learn, are incomplete. In this two-page layout, Ernaux includes a typed quote from her diary reflecting on a key moment from 1988, shortly after discovering that several of her diaries were destroyed:

Ce journal que j'écris depuis 1957, conservé depuis 1963 (cette douleur d'avoir constaté que ma mere avait brûlé 6 ans de journal, 57-63, les années clé), me donne l'impression d'une faible durée, au fond je pourrais placer—j'imagine à tort? —un passage de 78 dans 67, un de 63 dans 88, y aurait-il une grande différence, une distorsion? Rien ne rend autant la presence du moi que le journal [...].²¹⁰

The temporal gap from 1957 to 1963 is an irrecoverable period for the writer, and since it was the beginning of her journaling practice, it is deemed the most important phase of her writerly persona as a diarist, granting the lost journals an almost mythic status. In turn, the loss of the journals also creates anxiety for the writer, whose identity is entangled with and substantiated by the practice of journaling. Through their loss, she is brought back to contemplate her own fleeting existence—a “faible durée”—like the journals themselves, conserved on paper but not immune to destruction. The fate of many journals is to be destroyed at some point, either by families or by the practitioner of the journal, since they may contain secrets not intended for posthumous publication.²¹¹ It is unclear from the entry about the destroyed journals if there was

²¹⁰ *Écrire la vie*, 8.

²¹¹ See Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

foul play. Nevertheless, as a photo-journal, *Écrire la vie* affords a space for reflection on the vast archive of materials alongside which she composes her autobiographies.

From her first textual description of a photograph in *La Place* to a critical reflection on how photographs allow a unique form of self-examination in the photo-essay *Écrire la vie*, her œuvre is not merely punctuated by photographs—it has greatly expanded from simple textual allusions, or a “photographic writing style,” to a formatting change that inserts photographs directly into the text. Commenting on the growing influence of photography in her corpus of texts, during a recent interview Ernaux explains that photographs are more fruitful for storytelling than her own memory and act as “un activateur d’écriture,” triggering her writing process.²¹² Decipherment and dissection of detail within the photograph is not the objective for Ernaux at the early stages, rather it is a more diffuse odyssey of memory that takes place, “de chercher surtout ce qu’elle signifie ou ce qu’elle peut signifier,” and knowing full well that her interpretation may not be factual, that she might misidentify the photograph’s subject, place, or when taken.²¹³ Without the photograph before her as she composes a text, she notices that she has difficulty writing, so much photographs have infiltrated her textual composition practices; as a prop, the photograph helps her initial phase of writing to flow.²¹⁴ Photographs, as she explains in *Écrire la vie*, are not merely illustrations that accompany her texts, they are “un autre texte” and “porteur d’une autre vérité.”²¹⁵ This conclusion about the photograph as a different text, or even a different truth, constitutes a theory of writing as a process of revelation that also evokes the origin of the term photograph and infers an ability to produce alternate meanings that contest

²¹² *Retour à Yvetot*, Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013, 68.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*: “sans qu’il y ait un moment où [...] une photo intervienne.”

²¹⁵ *Écrire la vie*, 9.

the written word. Thus, the effect of *L'usage de la photo* (2005), the first instance of inserting physical photographs into the text, on further work has been to make the reader more aware of the historicity of the images presented.

The increased insertion of physical photographs into Ernaux's texts has come about as a writer's quick reference, or "shorthand" that notates work.²¹⁶ If we are really to study her oeuvre "photographically" as well as "textually," as some critics would suggest, we ought to look at the paratext, all of the diaries, photographic materials, and interviews that surround a published text to make sense of this ever-growing autobiographical enterprise. Though not the focus of this study, this is a compelling invitation for any scholar studying Annie Ernaux. Taking into account Ernaux's remark that "pour vivre vraiment les choses, j'ai besoin de les revivre," it is not unreasonable to say that photography participates in this process of self-examination over time as a kind of "longue durée" for autobiographical writings and that it attends to a need to see the self in order to bear witness to lived experience, to make sense of it.²¹⁷

In this same vein, her desire to see herself "othered" by the photograph—to become an object—is a continuation of the concept of *je transpersonnel* used in her other autobiographical texts. In the essay "Vers un je transpersonnel," Ernaux outlines her dilemma over the possibilities granted by either the pronoun "je" or "elle" in writing her autobiography. This work opposes the use of "elle," whose function is to construct an identity or "[s]'autofictionner," and of "je," which speaks to a lived reality, "[s]on expérience."²¹⁸ Though decided purely by chance (she claims that she tossed a coin to decide which pronoun to use), the outcome of "je" according to Ernaux is not personal in a solipsistic way. Instead "je" refers to a interdependent

²¹⁶ Akane Kawakami, "Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection," *Nottingham French Studies*. Volume 53, Issue 2 (Summer 2014): 232-46.

²¹⁷ Annie Ernaux, *L'écriture comme un couteau: Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*, Paris: Stock, 2004, 25.

²¹⁸ "Vers un je transpersonnel," *Recherches interdisciplinaires sur les textes modernes* (1993,) no 6: 219-21.

sociological/autobiographical approach, in which saying “I” is “une forme impersonnelle” that often carries the voice of the other, “une parole de l’autre” more prominently than her own, “une parole de moi.”²¹⁹ At the same time, Ernaux underscores the importance of specific, personalizing details, “des faits précis, des paroles entendues, les valeurs de l’époque,” used to support the “je” that speaks in the text.²²⁰ However, these personalizing details do not necessarily fall under the category of personal essay or memoir, since they could allude to certain “vérités qui ne sont pas de l’ordre simplement individuel” and therefore must be collective truths linked by shared everyday experiences as the common denominator.²²¹ As she notes in the opening to *Écrire la vie*, this multivolume autobiographical project is better termed “la vie” instead of “ma vie,” “sa vie,” or “une vie,” alluding to shared experiences shaping the body, education, sex, and mourning.²²² Generic and personal, simultaneously erasure and exposure, Ernaux’s theorization of a *je transpersonnel* upholds the ambiguous identity of the “je” as one and the same with the author, while reinforcing the notion of shared experiences that overwhelm simple first-person autobiographical writings.

Ernaux’s *je transpersonnel* also draws our attention to a messy temporal overlap among texts in her autobiographical project. The neat timeline of one text folding seamlessly into the next is a myth: often as one text is being written, Ernaux draws from another text, recycles sections, or begins another text in the middle of another. This is by no means groundbreaking or surprising— it shows writing as an open-ended, continuous process of revision. Close followers of her work have noticed this overlap: for example, she kept a diary chronicling her mother’s

²¹⁹ “Vers un je transpersonnel,” 221.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Interview from 1992 published in “Quelque part entre la littérature, la sociologie, et l’histoire,” Isabelle Charpentier, *Revue Contextes- Discours en contexte* (2006). <http://contextes.revues.org/74?lang=en#ftn9>. Online. The direct quote is “des vérités collectives.”

²²² *Écrire la vie*, 7: “les contenus qui sont les mêmes pour tous mais que l’on éprouve de façon individuelle.”

decline due to Alzheimer's disease (later published as *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* in 1997) while writing *La Place* about her father and carrying out the affair we learn about in *Passion simple* published in 1994. Furthermore, as witnessed in *Écrire la vie* and *Les Années*, her diaries are the “source material” for personal moments, but she is also writing a sociological history corresponding to larger units of time—decades, years, generations—than her daily life. These overlapping projects add a temporal dimension to her *je transpersonnel*, which is to say that the simultaneity of Ernaux's self-narratives “under construction” makes her “je” transpersonal because “je” can appear in a diary or a published text, designating different life moments, between the moment of writing and the moment of living. Thus, the *je transpersonnel* alludes to a self that is becoming, being constructed and re-shaped by the author, bearing not only a sociological dimension in which the author attempts to account for an entire social class's shared experience but also a questioning of the temporal shifts of the *je*.

Considered against the autobiographical pact (defined by Philippe Lejeune) as a kind of contract between the reader, the author, and the publisher that “supposes that there is identity of name between the author and the name on the cover,” with the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about, it is clear that Ernaux's autobiographical corpus is consistent with both the fragmentation and expansiveness of a “je” while also revealing “I” to be a moving target, undergoing transformation through textual recycling from one text to the next.²²³ Early in *L'usage de la photo*, the couple establishes a pact with the reader echoing the terms of Lejeune's “autobiographical pact,” therefore assuming the photographs to be referential documents— but the question still stands regarding what the photographs can really prove.²²⁴

What would it matter if Ernaux and Marc Marie staged the photographs? Many famous

²²³ See Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, transl. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

²²⁴ See Nora Cottille-Foley, “L'usage de la photographie chez Annie Ernaux,” *French Studies* (2008) 62 (4):442-54.

photographs were later shown to have been “staged” after the fact or “set up” for the perfect shot.²²⁵ Ernaux and Marc Marie insist that the photographs were not staged and uphold the myth of the “instant décisif,” or decisive moment, which photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson (working from an epigraph by Cardinal de Retz) sees as the precise moment when the photographer seizes the subject in the frame.²²⁶ However, Ernaux and Marc Marie’s insistence on the un-tampered quality of the photograph raises doubts. This ironic aspect of the photograph, an object that promises proof of spontaneity yet often contradicts it, is frequently at play in *L’Usage de la photo*.

In another example of the autobiographical pact and its relationship to the *je transpersonnel*, on the cover of *L’Usage de la photo*, two names appear: Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, which signals that when reading a co-authored text, the term *je transpersonnel* takes on added significance: the “transpersonnel” alludes to the doubled voices that compose the text. However, as Ernaux and Marie tightly intertwine their narrative, their voices remain distinct. This imbrication of the self with another perspective—separate yet interconnected—raises many questions. What would it mean to speak for and with another voice? How might a lover’s voice inform one’s own? Autobiography is intermediary in that often authors seek out other selves to multiply their narrative voices and therefore more fully represent the self.²²⁷ Likewise, I maintain that *L’usage de la photo* exemplifies the idea of self-portraiture as an “individualized patchwork,” a term referring to the fragmentary way in which an individual creates an image of

²²⁵ In 1840, Hippolyte Bayard’s “Self-Portrait of a Drowned Man” claimed he committed suicide (later revealed to be a hoax). Robert Doisneau admitted that “Le Baiser” (1950), of a young couple kissing near the Hôtel de Ville, was staged after his models leaked this information to the press.

²²⁶ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images à la sauvette*, Paris, Editions Verve, 1952: “Photographe: c’est dans un même instant et en une fraction de seconde reconnaître un fait et l’organisation rigoureuse de formes perçues visuellement qui expriment et signifient ce fait.”

²²⁷ Nancy Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 3.

the self through references to bits and pieces of society, using the language of the collective.²²⁸ But this reciprocal action—the writer finding herself in the images of others and in turn, her readership finding themselves in Ernaux’s experiences—does not work, at least not fully, in *L’Usage de la photo*. Ernaux does not choose an anonymous passerby this time, instead she asks Marc Marie to provide an outsider’s point of view, adding to her self-representation. Co-authorship is yet another instance of the wider use of “je” as a signifier that simultaneously captures the individual and the other (or Marc Marie’s audience of one in *L’Usage de la photo*) within Ernaux’s oeuvre.

Like the *je transpersonnel*, Ernaux’s term *écriture plate* also has a sociological function in that this flat writing style is both an aesthetic and political choice. Ernaux remarks that she sought an objective style like that of a camera “qui ne valorise ni ne dévalorise les faits racontés,” and thus would not create poignancy and ostensibly would avoid tapping into the affective response of her readers.²²⁹ The first to admit her texts are neither/nor but in between “la littérature, la sociologie, et l’histoire,” Ernaux views her writing style as a refusal of fictionalization and a search for rawness.²³⁰ In this regard, the concepts of *je transpersonnel* and *écriture plate* help explain the simplicity and banality of the photographs in *L’Usage de la photo*.

Exhibiting the Banal

The family albums, school portraits, childhood photographs of beach vacations, and Xeroxed pages ripped from her journals that Ernaux described in *Les Années* and that are

²²⁸ See Michel Beajour, *Miroirs d’encre*, 196.

²²⁹ Interview “Quelque part entre la littérature, la sociologie, et l’histoire,” Isabelle Charpentier, *Revue Contextes-Discours en contexte* (2006).

²³⁰ “Les différents aspects de mon travail, de mon écriture ne peuvent pas être dépouillés de cette dimension politique: qu’il s’agisse du refus de la fiction et de l’autofiction, de la vision de l’écriture comme recherche du réel, une écriture se situant, au risque de me répéter, “entre la littérature, la sociologie et l’histoire. Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau: Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*, Paris: Stock, 2004, 81.

physically reproduced for the reader in *Écrire la vie*, are noticeably missing from *L'usage de la photo*. Instead of referring to the aforementioned vernacular photographs, *L'usage de la photo* seizes upon commonplace domestic surroundings. Rather boring upon first glance, this work more subversively asks us to slow down and inhabit its images, and in the process, inaugurates a way of looking that recognizes the value of the everyday. It thus illustrates a predominant trend in contemporary literature and photography, conceived as the “aesthetics of the banal.”²³¹

An aesthetic category within photography whose credo could be “bad photography reigns,” the banal usually implies a negative perception, a dismissal of the subject as superficial or uninteresting. Yet, it ultimately proves to be a thought-provoking image.²³² A discussion of banality as an aesthetic category also implies a consideration of its association with administration and sconsumerism, not only because photographs are linked to driver’s licenses and snapshots but also because the subject of banal photographs is often household “stuff.”²³³ Here, we might think of Sophie Calle’s project *Les Dormeurs* (1980), where she invites strangers to sleep in her bed in exchange for food and photographing them, or *The Hotel* (1981), where she pretends to be a cleaning lady and takes pictures of the personal belongings of the hotel guests. Calle’s photography of these mundane backdrops hardly elevates the subject—in fact, it actively denies the “transformative power” of photography since these banal images “ask us to do nothing,” except maybe be voyeurs.²³⁴ Moreover, banal photographs have the tendency to frustrate the viewer because of their refusal to delight or to entertain; far from extraordinary, they

²³¹ See Eugenie Shinkle, “Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: Contemporary Photography and the Aesthetics of the Banal,” 176.

²³² See Neville Wakefield, “Secondhand Daylight: An Aesthetics of Disappointment,” 238-47.

²³³ See Shinkle, 169.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 176.

neither shock nor amaze, but even produce an affective experience of disappointment for the viewer.²³⁵

It is worth asking, then: why would a photographer or a writer make something so unengaging, after all? One critic suggests that “overfamiliarity with [...] banal images acts as a deterrent to critical engagement,” highlighting how the humdrum of everyday life works to desensitize us to the potentially ripe investigation of the marvelous within the mundane, much like *le merveilleux quotidien*, an idea developed by Louis Aragon in *Le Paysan de Paris*, that supposes the encounter between the viewer and the image will be serendipitous.²³⁶ Nevertheless, *le merveilleux quotidien* is not explored as a narrative tool in *L’usage de la photo*, whose scenes are anchored in the domesticated space of the apartment and never venture outside of it. In this regard, *L’usage de la photo* belongs to a larger family of texts from the late twentieth to early twenty-first century that investigate, and to an extent, theorize, the everyday, *la vie quotidienne*.²³⁷ Recent attention has turned to the everyday as a literary thematic; from Rita Felski’s overview of the topic in *Everyday Life* (2002) to Michael Sheringham’s *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (2006), a number of critics have, in Sheringham’s words, attempted to “rescue” the concept of everyday life from “neglect.”²³⁸ Dwelling on how Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, and Georges Perec (namely for his “projects of attention” in the post-war period such as *La vie mode d’emploi* and *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*) theorize the everyday not only as a spatial practice but also as

²³⁵ Wakefield, “Secondhand Daylight: An Aesthetics of Disappointment,” 240.

²³⁶ Shinkle, 167.

²³⁷ Authors such as Georges Perec, François Bon, Jacques Réda, and Sophie Calle come to mind, though this list is by no means exhaustive.

²³⁸ See Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 2. See also Rita Felski, “Everyday Life,” *New Literary History*, 33 (2002): 607-22.

an aesthetic category, Sheringham ultimately concludes that “[...] the *quotidien* is elusive: it is neither objective fact nor subjective fantasy, but a level of lived experience that exists for us to the extent that, rather than treat it with disdain, we find ways of paying it—obliquely—attention.”²³⁹ Somewhere between the concept of *ostranenie*, or de-familiarization, and a minimalist style, an aesthetics of the banal relates to the theorization of the everyday because of their shared goal of revalorizing the ordinary. It also goes without mention that *L’usage de la photo* is not the first text in her corpus to adopt a flat style, her signature “écriture plate;” the theme of revalorizing the everyday is a common thread in her oeuvre. This characterization of Annie Ernaux as a “minimalist” writer has led some critics to group her with writers of “l’extrême contemporain,” or the extreme contemporary, which is not a literary movement *per se*, but refers to French literature from the past ten years generally portrayed as a poorly defined group of writers (François Bon, Didier Daeninckx, and Christine Angot have been described using the expression “l’extrême contemporain”) whose work shares an aesthetic of fragments, minimalist narrative style, and see a heroism in the minutiae of daily life.²⁴⁰

The photographs of *L’usage de la photo* are banal both because of their amateur style and the mundaneness of the clothing and dishes, tiled floors and carpets that are their subject. Unlike banal photographs that might make use of deadpan expressions or the kitsch of a frozen dinner, *L’usage de la photo*’s images are simply poorly made; often, the foreground and the background are slightly out of focus, the faint outline of a finger creeps into the corner, or the entire frame appears tilted. It bears repeating that neither Annie Ernaux nor Marc Marie is a professional photographer, unlike the other photographer-writers studied in this dissertation. Ernaux and Marie’s snapshot aesthetic, nevertheless, comes close to epitomizing photographer Garry

²³⁹Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, 21.

²⁴⁰See Dominique Viart, *Le roman français au XXe siècle*. Paris: Würzburg, 1999.

Winogrand's witty remark, "It's not about making a nice picture. That anyone can do," since Ernaux informs the reader that they use an old Nikon but neither one had any formal photography training before they embarked on the project.²⁴¹ Their amateur aesthetic, which is truly the result of being amateurs (a term whose etymology refers to a practitioner of a trade or art who does it for the *love* of the thing, not for profit or profession), works to recuperate the spontaneity of their lovemaking, and if the framing is off-center, these imperfections only serve to offer more authenticity that these photographs are indeed snapshots. What matters most to them is not the result, since the photographs are part of a game Ernaux and Marie play, from picking up the batch at the drugstore to looking through them together. Nevertheless, the interesting problem arising from amateur photographs whose practitioners attempt to exhibit them, as Ernaux and Marie do on the space of the page, is that, on one hand, they are not bad enough to fit into the category of "so-bad-it's-good" that one might expect from professional photographers, and on the other hand, cannot be considered aesthetically or formally innovative enough to be taken seriously as an artistic object. Consequently, the photographs in *L'usage de la photo* hover in an in-between position: neither high-brow nor low-brow, they exemplify a middle-brow aesthetic.²⁴²

Pierre Bourdieu's *Un Art moyen: Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (1965), translated as "Photography: A Middle Brow Art," to which Ernaux's title *L'usage de la photo* clearly refers, analyzes class tastes and attitudes toward photography in France.²⁴³ Located at the midpoint in his cultural capital classification system (sketched in *La Distinction* but fully

²⁴¹ See Sean O'Hagan, "Why street photography is facing a moment of truth," *The Guardian*. 23 April 2015.

²⁴² See Annebella Pollen, "Tilting the Horizon: Reconsidering Amateur Photography," *Either/And*. National Media Museum.

²⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*. Trans. by Shaun Whiteside. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1990. Originally published as Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, *Un Art moyen: Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1965.

exploited in *Un Art moyen*), photography, in Bourdieu's view, is a middle class practice because it is cheap, and unlike painting or sculpture, requires little training. *Un Art moyen* is also preoccupied with the social status of the photographer, whom Bourdieu classifies as middle class too, though one exception is made for the fashion photographer, who belongs mainly to the upper classes and appeal to these classes through high-brow advertising; despite no mention of journalism, it would be plausible to suggest that Bourdieu sees the same breakdown for the photojournalist whose reporting assumes a large accumulation of cultural capital.²⁴⁴ Here again, the translation of the French title *Un Art moyen* into *A Middle-brow Art* conveys the sense of the ordinary and the middle class associations Bourdieu hints at in the text, as when he notes that over ninety-one percent of those self-identifying as middle class own at least one camera (though perhaps this would be an oversimplification for today's society).²⁴⁵ Moreover, according to Bourdieu, photography is the "instrument of integration" and a tool *par excellence* for showing familial linkages, a mirror held up to the family unit cementing its heredity and resemblance: photography and family go together, because family portraits crystallize the tribe as a social unit, affirming the ceremonial cohesion of birthdays and other rites of passage while creating a visual souvenir of the passage of time.²⁴⁶

To call photography "middle-brow" at first implies a negative value judgment, or at least an anachronistic qualification, since photography performs well on the fine arts auction block today; notwithstanding these concessions, Bourdieu's characterization of photography as a tool that ensures family structure and social custom provides a powerful interlocutor for Ernaux in

²⁴⁴ For more on this topic, see J.A. Gonzalez, "A Contemporary Look at Pierre Bourdieu's Photography," *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1992) 126-31.

²⁴⁵ *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*. 1990, 186.

²⁴⁶ *Un Art moyen: Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. 1965, 41: "la pratique photographique ne subsiste la plupart du temps que par sa fonction *familiale* [...] qui cherche à éterniser les grands moments de la vie familiale, de renforcer l'intégration du groupe familiale en réaffirmant le sentiment qu'il a de son unité."

L'usage de la photo. Equally important, Bourdieu has exerted stylistic influence over her work, as she is known for borrowing his mental structures and ethics, even citing him as one of her role models in a tribute titled, “Bourdieu: le chagrin,” that appeared in *Le Monde* following his death. In this article, she identifies such a strong “onde fraternelle” for Bourdieu that she writes she was tempted to use the pronoun “nous” when composing the tribute.²⁴⁷ Defending Bourdieu’s ideas regarding the tyranny of language to reinforce the dominance of one social class over another—“les dominés” and “les dominants”—that some critics saw as a fatal flaw in his conception of sociology, she writes that his sociological critique, on the contrary, inspired her to lay bare “le réfoulé social,” or the battlefield where cultural capital, through tastes in art and literature, is formed.²⁴⁸ For instance, she states that *Un Art moyen: Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* like many others from Bourdieu’s corpus “ne détruit pas l’art, ne le réduit pas,” by stripping it of its formal, art historical, or affective qualities, but rather knocks it off its pedestal, “il le désacralise simplement.”²⁴⁹ Later, in *Retour à Yvetot*, Ernaux expresses the revelation she experienced after discovering Bourdieu and finally coming to terms with her migration from the daughter of working class parents to the status of the *bourgeois*, which she metaphorically likens to the figure of the refugee, not from one country to another but from one social class to another:

J’ai découvert Pierre Bourdieu dans les années 71-72 en lisant *Les Héritiers* et *La Reproduction* [...] La réussite qu’avait été la mienne supposait une rupture avec la culture d’origine [...] En fait, grâce à Bourdieu, je savais qui j’étais: une déclassée par le haut, une ‘transfuge de classe.’²⁵⁰

L’usage de la photo’s resonance with the title *Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* is significant as a veiled reference to the themes of shared experience framed by sociological

²⁴⁷ See Annie Ernaux, “Bourdieu: le chagrin,” *Le Monde*, 25 January 2002.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ See Annie Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot*, Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013, 71.

themes attached to the individual—one’s surroundings, body, gender, tastes— that her text, like his, explores.

Nevertheless, Ernaux does not agree with Bourdieu’s view of the photograph as merely a document of family life that has no other function than to commemorate baby milestones, birthday parties, and schoolchildren’s passage from one grade to the next. As Marc Marie recognizes, their type of photography practice is far from that of a bourgeois family. He observes what kind of images they are *not*. The post-coital images are far from the images a family might display in their home. *L’usage de la photo* does not convey the same tame photographs one might expect to find in the average household, “des images dans leur cadre sur le rebord de la cheminée” showing relatives “au milieu d’un père, de bébés dodus, d’une grand-oncle en uniforme.”²⁵¹ Ernaux even goes as far as to subvert the family ritual function of the photograph, “le rite du culte domestique,” sublimating it into a new kind of routine that establishes normalcy— as much as one can conceive it at this point as she undergoes chemotherapy—and that is conveyed visually and textually as a process affirming life in the face of death.²⁵² These are not family photographs, as the couple recognizes, but they still retain “la valeur d’un journal intime” since they offer a viewpoint on the author’s daily life and a tour into the apartment where she lives.²⁵³ In perverting the middle-class association and socially cohesive function of photography that Bourdieu delineates in *Un Art moyen*, the photographs and texts of *L’usage de la photo* accomplish two things: first, a reappraisal of photography that embraces its platitudes and banality as a potentially thought-provoking project to explore the everyday as a critical category, and second, a reconsideration of his uncompromising assignment of the photograph to family ritual instead of a potentially subversive art, regardless of social class. If Bourdieu

²⁵¹ *L’usage de la photo*, 191.

²⁵² Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen: Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1965, 41.

²⁵³ *L’usage de la photo*, 191.

characterizes photography as a middle-brow art because it is commonplace and chained to a social function, Ernaux then champions its mundane flatness, finding in it an aesthetic that resonates with her experience. *L'usage de la photo* challenges these categories because of its intermediality and interpersonal dimension.

No Pink Ribbon: Visualizing Autopathography

Not showing bodies, the photographs in *L'usage de la photo* are too generic and ordinary to stand on their own as narrative; instead, the text becomes the prop for the images and in doing so, pushes the definition of autopathography to its limit: first, it is no longer just one individual's account—we have another voice, that of Marc Marie, and second, illness, since Ernaux is undergoing treatment for breast cancer as they produce these post-coital compositions, may be the pretext to create the photographs but the subsequent commentary on the photographs goes further to show how they unleash some of our deepest anxieties about death and desire, which is not necessarily an argument against the genre of what an autopathography can or cannot do (nor what it *should* do). The intermediality of this work to some degree banalizes a poignant personal experience of illness and thus condemns how breast cancer lacks representation in France.

Because illness is not center stage—it is relegated to the margins of the narrative—*L'Usage de la photo* does not fit a conventional illness narrative, or autopathography. The categories for the “illness narrative” genre, as established by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller*, range widely but can be grouped into five main types: the hero narrative, the interruption narrative, the survivor narrative, the chaos narrative, and the writing as therapy

narrative.²⁵⁴ In the hero narrative, the illness is a villain and the ill person is on a quest to overcome it. Such survivor stories do not really exist for cancer, since reoccurrence is always a possibility (it goes into “remission”). In the interruption narrative, illness relieves the ill person from some duty and allows him or her to occupy a place of privileged marginality, unfettered by daily concerns. Ernaux touches on this aspect when she writes that cancer is a kind of “grandes vacances,” a permanent vacation that gives the author a wildcard to miss public appearances and skip family functions.²⁵⁵ In the survivor narrative, the ill person is “rescued” from death by a miracle drug or an unforeseen recovery against all possible odds. In the chaos narrative, the ill subject takes a nihilist view that the world is a meaningless place, and thus writing is the only way to give order to the chaos and senselessness of illness. Similarly, in the “writing as therapy” narrative, writing becomes a “cure” for gaining mastery over the chaos of illness, allowing for the writer to gradually deal and come to terms with death. This type of illness narrative has found success in the self-help category that promises the ill person transcendence and peace of mind only if they put pen to paper. If none of the above models exactly fit *L’Usage de la photo*, how then does text represent cancer without resorting to cliché? Although the text does not subscribe to any of the models above, it could be argued to some degree that the writing as therapy model has credence since Ernaux enfolds the experience of cancer within her larger autobiographical project, as the concern of remission is ever-present, even at the conclusion of the text. The majority of autopathographies focus on the relationship between doctor and patient, namely how patients reclaim experience and act anti-hegemonically to “take back” control of their life and treatment. The same cannot be said for *L’usage de la photo* in which the power struggle, between a militant patient turned activist and the authoritative medical establishment over the narrative, is

²⁵⁴ See Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 5-25.

²⁵⁵ *L’usage de la photo*, 55.

noticeably absent. This text is more about criticizing representations of breast cancer.

In *Écrire la vie*, published six years after *L'usage de la photo*, once Ernaux's cancer has gone into remission, we learn that she was diagnosed with cancer in 2002, three years before the publication of *L'Usage de la photo*. In it, she also supplies an excerpt from her journals, and next to it, two portraits. In the first photograph captioned "En chimiothérapie pour un cancer de sein, 2002-2003," she is shown bald and wrapped in a magnificent furcoat as she looks straight into the camera, and in the second photograph captioned "Avec une classe de Première, à droite sous perruque," she is shown wearing her wig, as students surround her for a class picture. Her commentary on the two portraits demonstrates the value of the photograph as a reminder of illness as a strange alterity, "l'état où en écrivant, je ne suis plus écrivain (comme toutes ces années)," which suggests that her persona as "Annie Ernaux the novelist" breaks down slightly when she encounters illness.²⁵⁶ Participating in this breakdown is the concern and social pressure to speak on behalf of a community, although Ernaux does not specifically raise this concern in such terms as to identify herself as a "spokesperson" for breast cancer. This pair of photographs that provides "proof" of her experience with breast cancer stands in stark opposition to the emptiness of the photographs in *L'Usage de la photo*. It points to the twinned sensation of otherness engendered by the photograph and by being ill. It also shows how Ernaux not only continues to reflect on this episode of her life but also how she knowingly chose, in *L'usage de la photo*, an aesthetics of absence to visualize the possibility of her death as a way to domesticate it. Once declared cancer free, the images of her self can finally appear.

This pair of photographs from *Écrire la vie* causes the reader to question its status as "autopathography." In the traditional connotation of the term, it refers to any narrative of illness not necessarily considered "literary," as in blogs or newspaper columns, journals and self-help

²⁵⁶ *Écrire la vie*, 96.

books.²⁵⁷ That is not to say that autopathographies are devoid of complexity and artistic merit. On the contrary, the expansiveness of the term makes it difficult to apply to a work like *L'Usage de la photo* that is autopathographic only to the extent that it is a narrative of a woman's experience of breast cancer. In it, Ernaux does not just compose one narrative, she deploys many narratives that surround her own and most importantly, the discussion of cancer is subordinated to her readings of the images. The word "cancer" is neither in the title nor in the foreword, nor on the book jacket. As if reluctant to speak in the name of breast cancer, Ernaux is ambivalent about activism, de-emphasizing her contribution to public awareness by placing her participation in brackets: "[Écrire sur le mien participe de ce dévoilement.]."²⁵⁸ Many critics see this as an afterthought of her experience of breast cancer, rather than a direct engagement. She also tacks on the timeframe to this imperative statement, writing "un jour il faudra oser les montrer," referring to breasts.²⁵⁹ To imply "not now" surprises us because Ernaux is known as a writer of the "taboo" (she discusses abortion in *Les Armoires vides* and domestic violence in *La Honte*). In sum, the text's contention with breast cancer is very subtle, as Alison Fell states, the very omission of actual breasts and pictures of Ernaux's body is a commentary, albeit a paradoxical one, on the media's hesitation to visualize breast cancer in the public eye, which Ernaux sees as "hidden breasts," providing the facts that "en France, 11% des femmes ont été, sont atteintes d'un cancer du sein," which translates into a staggering three million breasts "couturés, scannés [...]."²⁶⁰ This quote is often cited in isolation of the more classically boring readings of the image by Ernaux and Marie. By focusing on the banality of the work, my analysis shows

²⁵⁷ *Intra-Venus* (1992-1993) by Hannah Wilke and *The Picture of Health? And The Final Project* by Jo Spence use images of their bodies to dispel stereotypes about the helplessness of women with breast cancer.

²⁵⁸ *L'usage de la photo*, 113.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

they are engaged in a deeper critique of how breast cancer is represented.

Ernaux's pared down, almost blasé aesthetic stands in contrast to bold moves like *Intra-Venus*, a photographic series by Hannah Wilke from 1993 about her treatment for cancer, and an earlier self-portrait by Wilke reflecting on her mother's double mastectomy, to which we might also add *The Picture of Health?* a photographic sequence by Jo Spence. As British and American artists who identify as second-wave feminists, Wilke and Spence hold fast to the belief that the "personal is political" and use images of scarred bodies to dispel stereotypes about the helplessness of women with cancer, contesting the infantilization of their bodies. Of mention too are more recent photographic endeavors like the 2011 SCAR Project, a web-based open forum of large-scale portraits of breast cancer survivors.²⁶¹ By making us look at scars as a badge of courage, they seek to change our perception of "la cancéreuse" as a powerless figure. Because Ernaux's work does not fall into the same aesthetic category as the photo essays mentioned above, her "parenthetical" approach—when she inserts "[Écrire sur le mien participe de ce dévoilement.]"—comes as a shock to the reader mid-way through the text. The force of her narrative lies in this unspectacular, jarring detail. In a way, we are conned into thinking for the first five pages that we will be reading a "true story" of harlequin romance, only for this to prove partially correct since it is the illusion that everything is normal that succeeds in creating a ripple, producing a very serious, if understated, engagement with the representation of breast cancer.

Moreover, the aforementioned examples of photo-essays of mastectomies are largely American, and it is important to consider differing cultures of health between the United States, where announcements from celebrities and public figures that they are struggling with an illness no longer shock and have even become scripted— from the very visible public profile and campaigns of the Susan G. Komen foundation to Angelina Jolie's articles in the *New York Times*

²⁶¹ See The Scar Project: "Breast Cancer is Not a Pink Ribbon," <http://www.thescarproject.org/>. 23 April 2015.

about her breast and ovarian cancers. Susan Sontag's critical and autobiographical essays on metaphor are different from these examples: they are very early engagements with the representation of illness. *Illness as Metaphor* argues against the metaphorization of illnesses such as cancer (eg, the turn of phrase "social cancer") that negate the lived bodily experience of the ill. In *AIDS and Its Metaphor*, she reveals she wrote the text while being treated for stage IV breast cancer.²⁶² In contrast to these examples from the United States, the comparatively non-existent practice of avowals and revelations to the public in France that a celebrity, especially a recognized writer like Annie Ernaux, has a disease, has yet to be coded and gendered as a woman's issue, if publicized at all. The types of bold moves made by Wilke and Spence, Jolie, Sontag, and the anonymous women of the SCAR project, do not have a French analog because of the widespread cultural practice in France of maintaining illness as a private matter.

The "intermedial" expresses both illness and sex using the banal. It is striking how Ernaux domesticates chemotherapy, comparing it to the regularity of doing the dishes, as she says "J'ai chimio demain," became as natural as "j'ai coiffeur."²⁶³ And yet this is not to say that breast cancer did not leave a profound mark on her. These rare moments stand in stark contrast to the more quotidian comparisons, as when she writes about the experience of no longer recognizing her body as her own, comparing it to an extraterrestrial because of the chemoport, "ma fiole toxique," and the permanent marker scribbles on her skin designating operation locations, "mes marquages de toutes les couleurs."²⁶⁴ This disidentification—she goes as far as to call herself an alien life form—takes on even greater significance when she realizes she may never grow old because she might die, which is a dizzying thought, because as she claims, the

²⁶² See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978, and *Aids and Its Metaphors*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989.

²⁶³ *L'usage de la photo*, 28.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

most shocking part of being diagnosed is “la simplicité de tout cela,” and her disbelief that *this* is happening to her is unmistakable, also conveys her embarrassment, if not more that of others to whom she revealed her diagnosis and whose reactions of shock and anxiety make her uncomfortable.²⁶⁵ Written after having been through chemo, the end of the text shows that Ernaux henceforth finds fictional characters battling cancer to be repugnant: “Par quelle inconscience des auteurs osent-ils *inventer* cela.”²⁶⁶ Questions of veracity and authenticity predominate here.

L’Usage de la photo, which refuses to show her body in the photographs, and to a degree *Écrire la vie*, which shows her post-treatment, both banalize experience: they shy away from a kind of shameless self-promotion that might mythologize cancer or promise a “cure,” producing instead a tentative, even unwilling representation of the self because she buries the revelation of illness. She suggests that the “most authentic” indexical value of the photograph is the epitome of banality. This wry gesture hints that the only reason *L’usage de la photo* may be interesting for Ernaux’s future readers is as a historical document telling about what will then be vintage fashions, or “la mode des chaussures au début des années 2005.”²⁶⁷ Despite the self-effacing move that closes the text, it is evident that Ernaux has also made a first step toward exposing the invisibility of breast cancer in contemporary France, on her own terms, using the language of the banal.

²⁶⁵ *L’usage de la photo*, 36.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 151.

Text as Jouissance

Given that the photographs and writing in *L'usage de la photo* are so banal, it is surprising that Ernaux places a quote by Georges Bataille—"L'érotisme est l'approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort"—as the epigraph to the text.²⁶⁸ Bataille is the author of several works about eroticism, from *Histoire de l'œil*, a novella published in 1928 composed of a series of vignettes about rape, necrophilia, and fetishism, to *L'Érotisme*, from which Ernaux plucks the epigraph in question. In these works, he develops the themes of transgression and taboo in addition to shame, sexuality, and the sacred.²⁶⁹ He appears as an odd choice for *L'usage de la photo* because Ernaux and Marie's photographs are so plain—they hardly resemble an erotic thriller. Instead, *L'usage de la photo* touches upon the same transgression of writing that ventures into the erotic, which was explored by Bataille. Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag examine this idea in their respective interpretations of eroticism put forth in Bataille's work. In the essay "The Metaphor of the Eye," Barthes analyzes the metaphorical chains linking the eyes, eggs, and testicles, in addition to the tears, yolks, milk sperm, and urine referred to in *Histoire de l'œil*, and concludes that Bataille's pornographic style is first and foremost a transgression of language. Similarly, Susan Sontag defends pornography in "The Pornographic Imagination," arguing that erotic fantasy is also a generic fantasy of "performing what is forbidden"; she claims that the pornographic imaginations of Bataille and Sade, which seek to transform every encounter into a sexual one, offer transcendence in some way to the bleak and dismal emptiness of modern life.²⁷⁰ On second glimpse, these Bataille-esque themes also appear throughout the entire Ernauxian oeuvre, though in *L'usage de la photo* they are more muted, only coming to the fore in the reflection on how

²⁶⁸ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1957, 17.

²⁶⁹ *Histoire de l'œil*, 1928. Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 1998, and *L'Érotisme*, Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1957.

²⁷⁰ See Barthes, *Critical Essays*. Trans. Richard Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972. 239-248, and Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination." *Styles of Radical Will*, New York: Picador, 1967. 65-7.

photography helps her see the erotic. Of course, even though the texts refer to lovemaking, they are far from pornographic. On the contrary, *L'usage de la photo* problematizes the themes of shame and the taboo through the experiences of sex and cancer (also extended to death), while withholding the body from view. Ernaux's stance on the erotic coincides with looking at photographs and seeing things that are only hinted at, not clearly delineated in the frame, as she observes: "Et je ne sais pas si c'est la vie ou la mort qu'on voit sur une photo. Sans doute les deux à la fois."²⁷¹ Her commentary that she always sees life and death in co-existence in a photograph highlights this duality in the photographs that make up *L'Usage de la photo*, as she reiterates in a later commentary published on Gallimard's website:

Au vu des photos, je ne pouvais pas oublier que, alors, je portais une perruque, que mon corps était devenu un champ d'opérations extrêmement violentes [...] Ces photos où les corps sont absents, où l'érotisme est seulement représenté par les vêtements abandonnés, renvoyaient à ma possible absence définitive.²⁷²

In the quote above, she suggests that the photographs somehow lie about her body, or seem counterfeit, meaning they are unable to attest to the very real experiences of scarring from biopsies to chemotherapy drugs that imprint on her corporeal existence. Furthermore, the wearing of her wig, she claims, tells a different story than if she was to show her baldness in public, much like the photographs are engaged in obscuring any details that might give away that she has cancer. In this respect, the text, added to the photographs and composed in response to them, is often more erotic (and more authentic) than the images she chose to include; because only her clothes appear in the photographs, she can visualize what her apartment would look alike if she were to die. In staging this disconcerting *ménage à trois* among Ernaux, Marie, and the image, photographs serve as reminders of her proximity to death as well as of the desire to

²⁷¹ *Retour à Yvetot*, Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2013, 69.

²⁷² "Rencontre avec Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie, à l'occasion de la parution de *L'Usage de la photo*," Gallimard.

anchor this experience in the everyday surroundings of her home, where she lives, works, and loves—and possibly might die. Consequently, the epigraph by Bataille “L’erotisme est l’approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort” transforms the project from a simple lovemaking ritual or an exhaustive investigation of the most uninteresting photographic subject imaginable—what to us really looks like dirty laundry—to the most philosophically rich meditation on writing as erasure, exposure, and eroticism.²⁷³

Might the “absence définitive” suggested by these stray clothes and shoes that Ernaux reads as certificates of her death become richer in meaning and gain a kind of fullness through the process of interpretation and commentary on the image—so that something so unremarkable suddenly turns interesting because Ernaux writes on it in a style that rouses our attention? I believe that these visibly banal photographs become erotic through Ernaux and Marie’s gaze in addition to our own. This is even more significant because Ernaux states in a footnote to the text that her visualization of the absent body in the photographs implies a moment when libido is at its lowest, which is a side effect of chemotherapy according to most medical authorities.²⁷⁴

Before turning to show photographs become erotic through the decipherment of the images by the co-authors—and our own spectatorial gaze— it is necessary to define the type of eroticism foregrounded in the epigraph by Bataille. He reasons that taboos arise from an awareness of death, and since their main objective is to prevent violence, any breaking of them constitutes a transgression, from which shame and sexuality, that are religious in origin, derive.²⁷⁵ Sex, death, and violence belong to the realm of the erotic because all three can be seen

²⁷³ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 17.

²⁷⁴ *L’usage de la photo*, 194.

²⁷⁵ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 39. He establishes three types of the erotic linked by violence: physical exemplified by orgasm and flagellation, emotional as evidenced by passion and suffering, and religious in the form of sacrifice and cannibalism.

as transgressions that, in Bataille's words, result from a violation.²⁷⁶ The purpose of transgression and transgressive acts, for Bataille, is to explore the feelings of sacrifice, loss, and passion, like that of Christ or other figures in religious ceremonies; transgression (once the taboo has been violated) thus produces bodily pleasure, a kind of sexual freedom brought about by the violation of the sacred.²⁷⁷ Death fits into this schema because, according to Bataille, it is a source of fascination that must be controlled. This fascination makes dead bodies—corpses—abject, as they remind society of the violence inherent in dying. Similarly, the erotic, as a fundamental rupture of the individual, whose identity becomes dissolved and whose ego is *disrupted*, creates a crisis for the individual; this process characterizes the paradox of the taboo surrounding sexual pleasure: desire, in Bataille's view, is rooted in a longing for death, the moment of the ego's dissolution and eventual extinction.²⁷⁸ Working through the Bataille-esque themes of passion and loss, *L'usage de la photo* removes the abject body from the visual realm of the photographs and assigns this task of representation to the text. *L'usage de la photo* thus also engages in a pornographic imagination, defined by Susan Sontag's idea of "generic fantasy": Ernaux's text breaks taboos surrounding literary genres. It is not pornographic *per se* in a conventional sense of the term, but because it delves into a fantasy of different genres, text and image. Therefore, this work, in performing, textually, "what is forbidden"—or here, withheld, in the case of the sexual act and the medical scrutiny of a cancerous body—succeeds in transcending the emptiness of the banal photographs.²⁷⁹ To illustrate this point, I will now zero in on the tension created by the text as it either eroticizes or de-eroticizes the image, using three examples: first, the cover jacket then

²⁷⁶ See *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings*, trans. Michael Richardson, London: Sage Publications, 56, and Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 39 : "taboos are there in order to be violated."

²⁷⁷ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 42. See his thoughts on ritualized violence such as cannibalism and war as mass murder.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

²⁷⁹ See Barthes, *Critical Essays*. Trans. Richard Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972. 239-48, and Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination." *Styles of Radical Will*, New York: Picador, 1967. 65-7.

two photograph and text doublets, or pairs— the post-coital photograph that started it all, and the photograph of Ernaux’s desk, which is in total disarray because she and Marc Marie have just made love on top of it.

Vaginal and serene, the folds of the scarf that appear on the book jacket suggest closeness and comfort, while simultaneously giving the viewer a sense that a dark shadow lurks over the scene. Set against a muted white background of contrasting textures from the matelassé bedspread to the slight fuzziness of the carpet, the scarves are a tangled mess of ruched, wrinkled, and patterned polyester, a monster that has emerged from underneath the bed and absentmindedly forgot to tuck in its white tag, as it sticks out against the pile of rainbow scarves. The bedroom scene on the cover connects *L’usage de la photo* to a socio-cultural-historical matrix that equally punctuates the text *La chambre claire*. Comparing their jackets with the sole color photographs of each book reveals that they are very similar in subject matter and have similar functions in the texts. Both represent beds as erotic and deadening spaces.

The cover jacket of *L’Usage de la photo* refers to the opening photograph of *La chambre claire*. The Polaroid by Daniel Boudinet that opens Barthes’s text encapsulates the photographic topics discussed in the text to follow. Because the thing pictured is, at its most basic level, a room, the Polaroid also evokes the origins of the medium—the *camera obscura*, a room with a hole in it that allows light to enter and displays an inverted image of the world outside. These connections of the image to the origin of the medium demonstrate its importance as a visual frontispiece. Despite these fruitful connections likening it to a “veiled, intimate *boudoir*” with a “tantalizingly partial revelation of light gleaming through the cleavage in the curtains,” W.J.T. Mitchell reads Boudinet’s image as a site of illegibility, or the mute indifference of all

photographs.²⁸⁰ To some, it has a “come hither” look.²⁸¹ It is clear that since its appearance in Barthes’s text, this image has fascinated critics, so much that it has earned a reputation as more than “just a photograph.” Until very recently, few have addressed its color palette due to the wider availability of the English edition of *La Chambre claire* sold under the title *Camera Lucida*. The latter reprints the Polaroid and all images that follow in black and white, as if they were just another image, whereas the French edition prints the blue-toned image in color on glossy paper while subsequent images are printed in black and white, which gives the first photograph special significance. Geoffrey Batchen asserts that the opening photograph in *La Chambre claire* establishes the necessary melancholy mood for the text to follow, and this view is in agreement with other critics who claim that even though Barthes never comments on the image, it is precisely this omission that makes the Polaroid an integral part of any interpretation. In one such interpretation, one critic argues that because Barthes spends the second half of the text discussing a photograph of his mother that is withheld from the viewer, the blue tones in the Polaroid might stand in for his mother’s blue eyes.²⁸² Notwithstanding the maternal overtones that are the centerpiece to *La chambre claire*— he wrote the text while his mother was ill— a formal analysis of the Polaroid image tells us that in its most elemental form, the photograph shows a bed and a window with parted curtains. This is certainly taken up and deepened by Ernaux. A comparison with the eroticized death/deathly eroticizing theme of *L’usage de la photo* reveals that it is not a coincidence that the majority of her photographs are of beds and that she also chooses only one photograph from her series to appear in color on the cover. Barthesian in

²⁸⁰ See W.J.T. Michell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 302.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² See Beryl Schlossman, “The Descent of Orpheus: On Reading Barthes and Proust,” in Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

inspiration, the cover of *L'Usage de la photo* places the viewer in an indirect line of questions related to the very themes evoked by Boudinet's Polaroid. The cover image of the bedroom also establishes a mood that, to borrow one critic's description of the opening image in *La chambre claire*, is "simultaneously erotic and funereal."²⁸³ The photographs and texts in *L'Usage de la photo* ask us to look beyond the frame and imagine color instead of black and white, a sexual act and a sick body in the place of clothing. Enticing the reader to visualize what is not there, Ernaux and Marc Marie succeed in placing us in the position of a voyeur, intruding on what is usually hidden from view. Their brand of eroticism, which resituates the space of death and birth all in one back to the bed, functions as a commentary its representation. The photographs also evoke the mental snapshots, or "chambres en abyme," that Ernaux has retained of her young adulthood, as in the photograph of her bed that calls to mind her experience of a hospital bed where she convalesced after an abortion, a series of events relayed in *L'Événement* (2000).²⁸⁴ A dominant image in the photographs, beds are bookends for the text, from the cover jacket to a scene at "L'Hôtel Amigo" and the ending "photograph" imagined by the couple but never taken, linking together death and birth. In the final image of the couple, Ernaux has emerged from her chemotherapy, and they find themselves cuddling on the bed:

Nous sommes restés tout l'après-midi sur le lit. [...] J'étais accroupie sur M., entre mes cuisses, comme s'il sortait de mon ventre. J'ai pensé à ce moment-là il aurait fallu une photo. J'avais le titre, *Naissance*.²⁸⁵

Though this picture was never taken, it signals a kind of birthing of the text and a rebirth for the author, as well as the position of Ernaux birthing him—as a mother, a life-giver. This image is

²⁸³ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 302.

²⁸⁴ *L'usage de la photo*, 168.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 197.

also a sign of closure: that her collaboration with Marc Marie (that often took place in her bed) is drawing to a close.

The photographs of beds highlight the social perceptions of death and its associations with this space. What was once a ritualized event—one died on a “deathbed”—transitions to a private event, invisible to the wider community. In contemporary Western society, it is not an exaggeration to say that death has essentially been pushed to funeral parlors and discussion is usually prefaced with excuses for delving into such a morbid topic. In contrast to the social ubiquity of death in the medieval bedchamber and to the Victorian bedroom, where sex and death coalesced into one shared erotic space, the twentieth century moves the event of death from the bedroom to the hospital room.²⁸⁶ By extension, the bedroom becomes more closely associated with sexual activity alone and less as a shared space where one is conceived, is born, and ultimately dies.²⁸⁷ The outline of the changing social mores surrounding death alludes to a primary message about the relationship between space, eroticism, and the forbidden. Though sex and death were once both linked by the bedroom, they no longer share this space; instead, death supersedes sex as an event that exists outside the bounds of social propriety and view.²⁸⁸ The cover jacket alludes to the old taboo—sex—that is opposed by the taboo of death, raised in turn by the text.

This is all played out in the first photograph-text pair, titled “La composition du couloir.” In the image, it is visible that the camera has been caught off balance, slightly off kilter with respect to the checkerboard pattern on the floor—somewhat tipsy; but the text could not be more

²⁸⁶ Philippe Ariès. *Western Attitudes toward Death: From Middle Ages to the Present*. Trans. Patricia Ranum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

²⁸⁷ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 228.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 229.

exacting for how it uses the style of the detailed and detached police report, a clinical and cold list of the objects seen in the photograph. This is an example of how Ernaux, in order to de-eroticize the images, adopts a flat style—a style that she occasionally likens to a knife.²⁸⁹ Stamped with the date and place the photograph was taken, the forensic style of the text eventually gives way to interiorized, associative brooding on specific objects selected from the mess made by Marie and Ernaux in relation to her everyday life, though no details regarding her sex life are given. Gazing upon the disorder pictured in the hallway, she opines that laundry is meaningless and that the maddening futility governing the cycle of domestic tidiness no longer appeals to her. Then, focusing on the heels pictured, she reasons that budgeting for new clothes no longer makes sense because money is useless—what would be worth saving for in the short life she envisions ahead—recognizing that money cannot buy her health, justifying a splurge on two cashmere sweaters and two new pairs of heels. Whereas Ernaux’s reading is hardly what we might consider erotic, Marc Marie’s reading of the same photograph dramatizes the interaction of the clothing, noting that the white bra seems to strangle the jeans, boots, and shirt, and he even supplies the color of the shirt for us—red—the color of passion, the color of blood. Here, his description of the clothing evokes the spontaneity and exuberance of sex, *la petite mort* the French term for orgasm, thus showing how writing on the image defiantly rejects death’s stillness in a moment of desire. He even goes further to eroticize the photograph through a discussion of its layout on the page in relation to the text itself, as he writes: “Pour les autres, ce sont des traces, mais nous on voit ce qui n’est pas montré, ce qui s’est passé avant, pendant, et après,” pointing out the titillating space we can barely see outside the frame, what Barthes terms “le champ aveugle,” which allows us as viewers to participate in a kind of visual eroticism

²⁸⁹ Annie Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau: Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*, Paris: Stock, 2004.

because we become absorbed in recreating the scene.²⁹⁰ As the first photograph-text pair demonstrates, the clothes act as an inkblot test for emotions they express the day the photograph was taken and the day they are writing about them.

On the day the first photograph was taken, Ernaux had just come home after visiting a library on the scholarly rue d'Ulm, which conveniently faces the Marie Curie Institute where we learn she has been going for chemo. The viewing of the photograph collapses the time frame of these two experiences, layering the pre-diagnosis and post-diagnosis moments of her life, and this "double take" is doubled again by Marc's reading of the same photograph. The addition of his text is an interesting example of the mismatch between the two voices; Ernaux describes but does not reproduce a photograph of Marc posing nude in bed, confessing that she cannot show it—that words will have to suffice.²⁹¹ For her, this image is a male equivalent of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, a provocative, voyeuristic painting of a woman's pubis that was originally meant for private viewing only, and her verbal description of the omitted visual also underscores the play between voluntary and involuntary forms of intimate exposure, who decides what gets exposed, which raises another point about the notion of couples in this work; from the push and pull of photographs and text to the collaborative composition at hand—as much as it might appear to be an equal co-authorship—the narrative is biased toward Ernaux who oversees the majority of the editing from the preface to the last entry in *L'usage de la photo*.

Marc reveals Ernaux's vulnerability in his description of her desk. This time they shy away from the usual spots—the hallway, the bedroom, and the living room—and move into Ernaux's workspace, where we are led to believe by Marc Marie that few have been granted entry:

²⁹⁰ *L'usage de la photo*, 25. See Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980, 176.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 20.

Pendant son traitement j'ai vu son bureau, avec toujours posées au même endroit des pochettes vertes pâle qui protégeaient son travail [...] on a baptisé cet espace sacralisé à y poser les fesses nues.²⁹²

This photo was selected out of a sequence of three because it was the only one that included the tools of her trade—miscellaneous office supplies flung in every which way behind a desk—instead of clothing; Marc's text focuses on Ernaux's double identity, attempting to reconcile the woman he has sex with on top of a desk with the celebrity status and myth of Ernaux the writer, the woman he sees through his own eyes and whom he knows intimately, and the woman the public sees. The white pages strewn on the floor cause him to remember, anecdotally, that when a film crew came to Ernaux's home in Cergy to complete an interview for a television special about contemporary writers, she appeared natural yet posed at her desk working on her latest manuscript as the camera rolled. Later, when the film was shown on television, she was concerned that viewers might be able to see what she wrote if the film were projected on a big screen. After having destroyed the green folders that contain her manuscripts and wreaking general havoc on the office supplies that once covered the desk—not even the lamp escapes their wake of destruction—the couple, in their individual readings of the same photograph, mentions the white glare created by the flash of the camera that makes it impossible to read what is written on the pages scattered on the floor. As we attempt to read the manuscripts and notes, like they did, scanning them for any legible detail, the task of decipherment becomes increasingly elusive. Ernaux's initial descriptions of the photograph take on a quickening and frenetic pace of writing down the objects in rapid succession with comma upon comma, which is a style not present in her other entries that I comment on here. However, when this acceleration created by the run-on sentence structure and the inability of Ernaux to focalize on any one specific detail recurs at the end of the passage, it is writerly “distress” rather than “arousal” because when she attempts to

²⁹² *L'usage de la photo*, 91.

read the manuscript only to discover she was unable to ascertain any clues to what was written, she panicks, as if the blank sheets of white paper serve as a reminder of death's void.

The space between the photographs and writing opened up by Ernaux and her lover is all at once textual, visual, but *scarcely overtly sexual*, in its descriptions, and therefore, the eroticism announced in the Bataille epigraph only comes through periodically when the photograph demands it, as when either Marie or Ernaux relives the act through memory, or when the photograph suggests loss, as in the illegible manuscript pages, and the text must work to assert its ownership over the image.²⁹³ In another example, Marie admits that several of the photographs are so interestingly arranged that it might lead readers to believe that they were staged since “la portée symbolique du cliché” is so pronounced in the texts that Marie worries they might insist too much, as if they are covering up some violation of their original pact not to alter the arrangement of the clothing, admitting, “on peut légitimement douter du caractère fortuit de la situation.”²⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the photograph allows the viewer, in this case Marie, to relive the moment of the original striptease involved in taking off the bra in the foreground, as the text reanimates the still objects, reconfiguring them into small love scenes. Gazing upon the photograph, Marie envisions the undoing of the hook-and-eye closures, “les lacets” of the brassiere before it falls to the ground, reanimating the brassiere, figuratively, using action verbs like “virevolter,” and calling its graceful descent a “danse légère.”²⁹⁵ In another instance of the text working to assert erotic power over the image, one day, Marc Marie accuses Ernaux, rather starkly, “Tu n’as eu un cancer que pour l’écrire,” as if she had made the whole thing up, and interestingly, Ernaux does not correct him, rather she acknowledges that writing about the

²⁹³ The only exception to this would be her description of a photograph showing her co-author's penis that she would not or could not include because it would be too personal.

²⁹⁴ *L'usage de la photo*, 64.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

photographs somehow empowered writing about her experience with cancer; returning to the scene of their crime, they gain more pleasure from reliving the scene textually.

Because eroticism is seldom overtly sexual, it is based more on Ernaux's fascination with leaving traces (that speak to her death because they show how she too will disappear) and on the imagination of the co-authors in addition to our own. Writing and photography become part and parcel of creating material traces, or really traces of traces—since the clothes are a shell of her and the photograph is a record of that record—that allow Ernaux to carve out space for individual meaning making. Even the capture of such traces, not necessarily writing about the image, excites her, as she describes the “déclic” of the shutter button as a strange simulation of desire, as if she had a phallus.²⁹⁶ This pleasure speaks both to her body and her intellect, as she equates physical arousal with mental stimulation, stating “celui qui ne jouit pas aussi avec son cerveau ne connaît peut-être pas la vraie jouissance.”²⁹⁷ To be truly erotic is to use the imagination, and that is precisely what the photographs ask of their viewers. The stated goal of the text, as Ernaux defines it, is for these photographs to evoke personalized sensations and images in the mind of the reader.²⁹⁸ The excavation of the scene by the co-authors's descriptions of it that opens each photograph-text pair is a primary counter-motion to the later reliving of the scene's chronological attribution, and this bare style lets the reader enter the scene, as it were, to visualize what has happened before and recolor what we cannot ascertain with the naked eye in the black and white image.

Considering that illusion and imagination are at the core of eroticism in *L'Usage de la photo*, if we concede that some staging took place as Marc Marie suggests, the pleasure the

²⁹⁶ *L'usage de la photo*, 123.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 124.

²⁹⁸ See Ari Blatt, “The Interphototextual Dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'usage de la photo*,” *Word & Image* 25:1 (Jan.-Mar. 2009): 46-55.

photographs bring would be purely textual. Regardless, the text is equally capable of creating pleasure, even the blissful, sexual variety, as Roland Barthes notes in *Le Plaisir du texte*. The place of *jouissance* (a term that has too easily been translated as “pleasure”) within and its connotations for *L’usage de la photo* are far-reaching.²⁹⁹ His definition of *jouissance*, which he contrasts with another term, *plaisir*, characterizes *jouissance* as ego-disruptive and against the grain of dominant culture, allowing it to enter the territory of shock value that rebels against convention; *plaisir* is characterized as an ego-affirming experience.³⁰⁰ All in all, by placing a slash between the two terms—*Jouissance/Plaisir*—Barthes establishes a spectrum that oscillates between two connotations, the former generally associated with unapologetic sexual pleasure and release, implying a loss of control, and the latter, a more tame version with less sexual overtones.³⁰¹ In *L’usage de la photo*’s kind of eroticism, *jouissance* is transferred from physical sex into the process of staging the photos, and into writing about a remembered and re-imagined sexual encounter.³⁰²

The photographs ask us to imagine three things: details that are just outside the frame, a colored image, and living bodies. For instance, In “La chaussure dans le séjour, 15 mars,” untying the shoelaces of a boot creates a delay that Ernaux experiences as an augmentation of the erotic, whereas Marie views the untying of shoelaces as a risky moment in which his arousal tends to fade, so frustrating for him that he goes as far as to consider purchasing Velcro shoes

²⁹⁹ See Jane Gallop, “Beyond the Jouissance Principle,” *Representations*, No. 7 (Summer 1984) 110-15. Like Michèle Richman, in “The Language of French Feminist Criticism” *Language and Style* 13:4 (1980), Gallop agrees that it may be impossible to give an adequate definition for *jouissance* in English; better to use the French term.

³⁰⁰ See Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975, 22-23.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰² My argument does not take into account theories of *jouissance* developed by Julia Kristeva with regard to the abject body, though it is unmistakable that *L’usage de la photo* “censors” the body, removing any real bodily fluids or flesh that might signal abjection as a corporeal reminder of death See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

and rip-away clothes like those worn by performers who change costumes quickly between scenes. Appearing to dance a tango, according to Marie's descriptions, the boot first gingerly "piétine," or treads, then more violently "écrase," or crushes, a brassiere, and in the background, a woman's heel suddenly becomes contemptuous, with an air "rageur" and "dégoûté," an allusion perhaps to repressed feelings experienced by the couple.³⁰³ In this regard, exposing her approach to writing gives greater pleasure than revealing she had sex during chemotherapy, suggesting the big reveal in *L'usage de la photo* to be writing itself, more transgressive than the routine of a sexual encounter.³⁰⁴ Though *L'usage de la photo* promises an eroticism that is as intellectual as it is physical, the reader questions the equivalence between writing and lovemaking that Ernaux establishes throughout the text.

As announced in the incipit of the text, *L'usage de la photo* is a work destined to "saisir l'irréalité du sexe dans la réalité des traces;" it oscillates between two types of eroticism: textual and sexual.³⁰⁵ The mere fantasy of capturing the material trace arouses her, and this version of the erotic that requires a subtraction of the full image or even an erasure of the body itself, borrows from the well-acknowledged affective response of viewers. Moreover, she alludes to textual eroticism as she awaits Marc Marie's writings about the photographs and—more importantly—about her. Her apprehensions about publishing the text are not about shocking the public, even though many (and there are many) of them have often been sold on the principle of a "succès de scandale" involving a revelation about her sex life, but about discovering the viewpoint of the other: "J'ai peur de découvrir ce qu'il a écrit."³⁰⁶ Indeed, not showing graphic

³⁰³ *L'usage de la photo*, 63.

³⁰⁴ Ernaux states: "ouvrir son espace d'écriture est plus violent que d'ouvrir son sexe." Ibid, 62.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 17.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 196: "[...]Je me demande si je n'ai pas simplement exploré et réuni dans un texte une double fascination que j'ai toujours eue: à l'égard de la photo et des traces." matérielles de la présence.

violence directly but alluding to it off-screen either through sound or text can be more violent, since it relies on the imagination to fill in the gaps of what was not shown in the narrative.

A theory of the trace as an eroticizing detail is not inconceivable for *L'usage de la photo* because throughout the text, the co-authors explore the intensely metaphysical consequences of taking photographs and trying to decipher the image by writing about it. Ernaux speculates about the Big Bang as a theory of the trace; perhaps a cosmic orgasm brought the universe into existence and all we witness today is the remains of this originary event, leftovers of a “dieu disparu” who had a large sexual appetite.³⁰⁷ This fascination with the trace displayed through *L'usage de la photo* touches upon other traces, demonstrating that the clothes featured in the photographs are not just clothes but specters, a notion presented in the introduction to this study.. As shells of her body, a “coquille vide,” clothes allude to her death because while they retain the form of her body as worn garments, they are ultimately empty.³⁰⁸ The shells of clothing are similar to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the death mask, which explores how before the use of photography to capture the recently deceased before their burial, death masks made of plaster applied to the face preserved their likeness. In this regard, clothes in *L'usage de la photo* function as a wrapping or imprint of the person even though the “mould” (the person) for the cast (the shell) is now absent. Building on the idea of a trace within a trace, Nancy theorizes the photograph as a “death-mask,” an exteriorization of its referent. This paradigm borrows from André Bazin’s conception of the cinematic and photographic images as ‘Shrouds of Turin,’ or media that bear the physical trace of an object.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, Bazin, like Nancy, sees the

³⁰⁷*L'usage de la photo*, 114: “Peut-être que la nature est ce qui reste du désir d’un dieu disparu, de son orgasme immense, le big bang où il s’est désintégré.” See Nora Cottille-Foley, “L’usage de la photographie chez Annie Ernaux,” *French Studies* (2008) 62 (4):442-454, for an elaboration of the metaphysics of absence in *L'usage de la photo*, and the intertextuality between the title and Blaise Pascal’s *Prière pour le bon usage des maladies*.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 128.

³⁰⁹ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” *Film Quarterly* (1960) vol. 13 (4) 1-9.

photograph not only as an index but an emanation of its referent, usually a person, which makes the photograph more than just a representation that is co-terminous with the sitter— it goes from index to exposure, a transformation Nancy calls “exscription,” or an outward manifestation of an inwardly facing record.³¹⁰ This term echoes another of his terms, “*expeausition*” a play on exposition, or a exteriorizing of the body that in the process makes oneself recognize the self as “other,” which Michael Sheringham reveals to be a recurring thread in Ernaux’s body of work.³¹¹ Exscription is twofold in *L’Usage de la photo* because the photographs, which are indexes pointing to real objects, feature objects that point to real bodies. Like the crumpled sheets of the hotel room in Bruxelles shared by Marc Marie and Ernaux, these traces are empty yet full because they bear witness to the body.³¹² This theme of “full emptiness” or “absence as presence” is ubiquitous in *L’Usage de la photo*. For example, she describes the “exscription” of the empty tomb in the story of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, where sheets are found in the shape of the missing body: “il ne restait que les linges dont le corps avait été enveloppé.”³¹³ Sheets become a signifier of daily existence (and are transformed into a canvas for the trace) because like clothing, they retain the shape of the person who slept in them. The photographed shells of clothing and sheets are death masks for Ernaux because it transforms her everyday surroundings into a shadow of her existence, which in turns draws her closer to her mortality.

Using the rhetoric of the “trace,” *L’usage de la photo* problematizes photography as a kind of mark-making on par with writing. For instance, she meditates on the impermanence of

³¹⁰ See Louis Kaplan, “Photograph/Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy’s Recasting of the Photographic Image,” *Journal of Visual Culture* (2010) 9: 45-62.

³¹¹ Michael Sheringham, “Annie Ernaux, homing in on herself,” *The Time Literary Supplement*, 8 October 2012. Here, he focuses on Ernaux’s novel, *L’Événement*. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p. 124-125, and “L’Intrus,” about his heart transplant as a real-life manifestation of expeausition (the other within the self, or self-alienation made visible) Paris: Éditions de Galilée, 2000.

³¹² *L’usage de la photo*, 44-45.

³¹³ *Ibid*, 145.

the post-coital scenes, “la précarité de la scène que nous avons dû effacer comme d’habitude [...] sitôt la photo exécutée,” in which her clothes will be put away, and in the process, the scene will disappear, but the photograph will forever allude to its existence.³¹⁴ She also reminisces about a former inhabitant of her house who had sent her photographs taken in the 1970s. This “time capsule” moves the couple, who imagine themselves through the older pictures; in an identical room where they have slept on the floor, completely nude, the photographs show a girl dancing. Ernaux creates a sense of inter-temporality between the old photographs of her house and those of *L’usage de la photo*, where in the same spirit of exuberance as dancing, the co-authors have made love, demonstrating how even houses “gardent la mémoire de ce qui s’y est passé.”³¹⁵ Thus, the photographs remind the viewer of the temporal layering of spaces. Likewise, a photograph “makes a mark” by leaving a physical trace of the sitter, even if only a trace of a trace like the clothes pictured in the photographs taken by Marc Marie and Annie Ernaux. More than a quirk, “les taches,” or stains, fascinate Ernaux, and participate in an exploration of the self, figured through its excretions whether “les taches de sang, de sperme, d’urine [...] de vin, de nourritures incrustées dans les bois des buffets,” or the photographs and the texts of *L’usage de la photo*.³¹⁶

Intermediality as Uncoupling

As shown in the section on eroticization and de-eroticization at work in *L’usage de la photo*, Marc Marie and Annie Ernaux, as a couple, act out “la petite mort.” But what kind of couple are they? How does the discord between the two reflect the “other” unnamed but tangible

³¹⁴ *L’usage de la photo*, 97.

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, 98.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 99.

couple— photography and text— that make up *L'Usage de la photo*? Claiming that the work never was synthetic, Marie expands on this idea in an interview of metacommentary published within a few months after *L'usage de la photo*'s début in bookstores. Defiantly resisting any characterization of the text as a true duet, as he de-mystifies their collaboration for readers: “De toute façon, les deux voix restent distinctes jusque dans *la mise en page*: ce n'est pas un ouvrage à quatre mains.”³¹⁷ In a similar vein, the text reflects this disjunction because the entries are structurally discontinuous and fragmentary, and the voices that compose it are discordant. In the first few photographs, the reader must work to piece together when each contributor's voice is speaking until the alternating “his”(Marie) and “hers” (Ernaux) pattern emerges. Like these verbal misreadings by Ernaux of Marie and vice versa, the photographs challenge and undermine the text inasmuch as the text undermines the photographs, making them equally unreliable props for one another, as distrustful companions. Even Marie is hesitant to identify with these pictures as a self-portrait, “Ces photos ne me montrent pas,” referring to the heavy bias of the images toward his co-author's life.³¹⁸

Ernaux too recognizes the paradox of the photograph where all is “transfiguré et désincarné” testifying not only to a death foretold but also to the withering of their love affair.³¹⁹ The already mentioned photograph-text pair “La Chaussure dans le séjour” is emblematic of their tense relationship as co-authors. Unlike the others, which show an entire room, this photograph shows only two objects: a Doc Martens leather boot and a bra. In this composition, the boot is stomping on the bra, suggesting a combat between the co-authors. Shoes are more prominent in the photographs than brassieres, which could easily be a title for a fable, a boot and

³¹⁷ “Rencontre avec Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie, à l'occasion de la parution de *L'Usage de la photo*” Gallimard.

³¹⁸ *L'usage de la photo*, 184.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 188: “Cette photo destine à donner plus de réalité à notre amour et qui le déréalise [...] Ici je suis morte.”

brassiere function as metonyms for their owners, who read their partner's antagonistic behavior in the two objects shown. In another instance, the kitchen scene titled "Cuisine matinale, dimanche 16 mars," shows how the couple explores the disorder left in the wake of their lovemaking in relation to the violence of other images such as the Iraq war. The disconnect between the co-authors becomes apparent as both observe a growing disorder within the texts—"organisations inconnues d'écriture"—and their personal lives—"les attaques verbales."³²⁰

Another configuration of couples in the text comes from the *punctum/studium*, the two *barthesien* terms that form a continuum of reactions to photographs. In Barthes's terms, the *studium* is "the wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste," whereas the *punctum* is more complicated, a detail that "rises from the scenes, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" as a "wound," a "prick," a "sting," a "speck," a "cut," or a "little hole."³²¹ As something so physical, the *punctum* avoids intellectual analysis; it is a singular notion that expands the meaning of the photographic detail into a more comprehensive whole, which Barthes terms its "metonymic function" since it enables the viewer to move from the particular to the general.³²² Nevertheless, the *punctum*'s pricking works on an individual level, rather than a universal one and is dependent upon the spectator. Through the *punctum*, photography shakes the spectator out of a stupor, a passive way of viewing:

It is capable of piercing through the banality—the tame, civilized, domesticated effects—that the mediation of culture has provided for photographs almost since the beginning of the medium's existence. This challenge can be expressed as that which allows for and even exalts the participation and identification of individual over collective identity—the private and personal over the public and universal.³²³

³²⁰ *L'usage de la photo*, 76 and 81.

³²¹ *La chambre claire*, 27.

³²² *Ibid*, 74.

³²³ See Nancy M. Shawcross. "The Filter of Culture and the Culture of Death: How Barthes and Boltanski play the Mythologies of the Photograph," *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*. Ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, 63.

The imbrication of the personal with the public, the private with the universal, though reductive, demonstrates that meaning is created through the experience of viewing and its difference from one spectator to the next. The slash separating the *studium/punctum* couple is a kind of suppleness of exchange in which the terms are opposed while also reciprocally inhabiting this place.³²⁴ This slash structure was also used by Barthes in *La chambre claire* to oppose *La Vie/la Mort*, where the slash refers to the click of the camera's shutter button, separating life from death.³²⁵ The movement between *studium/punctum* shuttles back and forth as a spectator stands in front of the photograph, each dominating the other in turn.³²⁶ *L'usage de la photo*, in which co-authors read the same details differently, problematizes not only *studium/punctum* but also the opposition between *la Vie/la Mort*.

In addition, returning to the interactions “behind the scenes” between the co-authors themselves, the reader has a sense that Ernaux has “used” Marie, though not purely for sex, as she confesses that all men with whom she has had a sexual relationship have become the start of a text, “une révélation.”³²⁷ Surprisingly, the purpose of these men who fade in and out of her life as a writer, she claims, comes less from “une nécessité purement sexuelle” than “un désir de savoir.”³²⁸ In what initially reads like a jab at Ernaux's entire autobiographical enterprise, Marie inculcates his co-author with, “Tu n'as eu un cancer que pour l'écrire,” as I brought up

³²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, Ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Paris: Galilée, 2001, 68.

³²⁵ Ibid, 67.

³²⁶ Ibid, 68.

³²⁷ *L'usage de la photo*, 88. Ernaux's remark evokes a new trend in women's autobiographical writing in contemporary France that “uses” the other in experiential experiments, like the break up letter that becomes the basis for translation and interpretation by other women in Sophie Calle's *Prenez-soin de vous*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2007.

³²⁸ Ibid.

previously in my analysis of eroticization in *L'usage de la photo*.³²⁹ Here, however, it is to be noted that in response to Marie's accusation, Ernaux considers the truth of it, concluding that writing on the photographs led her to write differently about herself, and this "lien entre les deux" was the impetus for writing about her cancer.³³⁰

In a moment of comic relief, both parties comment on the improbability of their relationship. Marc reveals that Ernaux dislikes the term "couple" just as much as he does. To be caught in the "micro-univers" of this couple, Marc Marie and Annie Ernaux have almost accidentally fallen into this "modèle socialement acceptable, reconnu" and are surprised to find themselves taking pleasure in the sex as much as in the occasional "engueulade" and in small chores like peeling potatoes.³³¹ Looking back, Marc reflects on the couple's dissolution—having foreseen the cracks in their relationship, yet nonetheless, respecting the contingency of their collaborative project. All in all, the introduction of the "other" in *L'usage de la photo* suggests that their fraught coupledness produces self-knowledge that is both troubling and enlightening. Are they drifting apart as they intertwine their perspectives, a question *L'usage de la photo* frames clearly as Ernaux wonders, "est-ce qu'écrire sépare ou réunit?"³³²

The interruptions and discontinuities that characterize Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's co-authorship call into question the feasibility of staging the volume of photographs (forty total) taken. The couple insists (directly or indirectly) ten times that the photographs were *not* staged. As Marie explains in the interview with Gallimard, the photographs are organized as a timeline,

³²⁹ *L'usage de la photo*, 76.

³³⁰ Ibid: "C'est seulement en commençant d'écrire sur ces photos que j'ai pu le faire. Comme si l'écriture autorisait celle du cancer. Qu'il y ait un lien entre les deux."

³³¹ Ibid, 79-80.

³³² Ibid, 196.

but when they were taken, they were random and unaltered, ostensibly unrehearsed.³³³ The theme of the untouched, raw account recurs throughout the text, casting aspersions over the unrehearsed quality since if at first they were not scripted, by the fortieth photograph, they must have fallen into a set of self-made guidelines and aesthetic boundaries. In spite of this, whereas Marie insists that “[...] les textes sont non réécrits, non corrigés, non retouchés,” Ernaux is more subtle, stating that “C’était la règle du jeu, rester dans la vérité, pour les photos et l’écriture.”³³⁴ In addition to other rules once the photographs have been developed, the aforementioned rules of their pact do not prevent “editorializing.” For example, Marc Marie is the principal photographer (with occasional dabbling by Ernaux) and takes multiple shots of the same scene, and near the end of the text, Ernaux has laid out all forty photographs on a coffee table to select which photographs to include in the final work. These two instances demonstrate that considerable editing took place and that certain photographs were selected over others to create a more uniform story.

Even though the couple is not a synthetic one, their voices often converge as they coincidentally focus on the same detail in a photograph. However, Ernaux characterizes the co-authorship as a dysfunctional process that emerges out of her own desire to connect words with experience:

Il me semble que nous ne pouvons rien faire de mieux ensemble que cela, un acte à la fois uni et disjoint, d’écriture. Quelquefois, cela m’effraie aussi. [...] Rendre les mots et les phrases inébranlables—[...].³³⁵

³³³ “Rencontre avec Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie, à l’occasion de la parution de *L’Usage de la photo*,” Gallimard: “D’ailleurs, elles sont classées par ordre chronologique et toutes existaient quand nous avons commencé à écrire. Il n’y a aucune photo ‘de circonstance’, ni la moindre mise en scène dans les objets photographiés.”

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ *L’usage de la photo*, 62.

Commenting on his co-author's dislike of the term 'couple,' Marie agrees that he is both intrigued and repulsed by it.³³⁶ And it is clear that *L'usage de la photo* is mainly about Annie Ernaux, as he notes in his commentary on one of the last images in the text, in which he sees his clothes, and— by extension—himself, gradually stamped out from the frame.³³⁷

Ernaux articulates an objective, raw style using photographs of rather boring objects such as her clothing and shoes. Unassuming and even banal, the photographs were taken with a point and shoot camera and developed at a drugstore. Because of their flatness, the photographs seem to provide evidence of a sexual encounter, and as much as they denote presence of the bodies, they are only traces of what was once there, and thus, also are erasures. In this respect, the photographs are simultaneously self-portraits since their content shows the empty shells of the photographers—Ernaux and Marc Marie— and “stock images” of what we expect to see after any couple—not necessarily *this* couple—has made love.

Frequently at a loss of words before the photograph, Ernaux uses visual details to spark her memory. Even more often, when it fails her, she turns to her diary to summon the context of the photograph. The question arises: why then use photographs at all, if they cannot speak for memory? Reflecting on the phototextual collaboration between her and Marc Marie, Ernaux states that she cannot define the interest at the time in capturing these images of existence, but part of the necessity emerged from “la mise en images effrénée de l'existence qui caractérise l'époque.”³³⁸ Such an impulse to record the present becoming past using photography and the written word allows Ernaux to relive moments from her life, and that the images of *L'usage de la photo* were made using a Nikon analog camera is significant since a cell phone or digital camera

³³⁶ *L'usage de la photo*, 62.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, 173.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, 108.

might have been easier for an amateur photographer. The impetus to take this type of photograph is already part of a period that has faded. *L'usage de la photo* thus belongs to a discourse of the trace and shows tremendous nostalgic value, borrowing the aesthetic of the family photo then subverting it.

As a text that adds to criticism of photography's history in France, all the while complicating conventional categories of "illness narratives," *L'usage de la photo* does not conform to our expectations about desire; whether it is Marc Marie mistaking the healthy breast for the cancerous breast or the couple's use of writing to eroticize the everyday through a transgression of language and genre, to make the low libido associated with illness coexist with sexy. *L'usage de la photo* also shows the uncoupling of intermedia in its torn aspect and its fraught dialogue, revealing that photographs only tell part of the story. As Marie posits— "les photos mentent toujours."³³⁹

The next chapter develops the theme of the erotic in a different direction: moving away from the couple structure, it examines the evolution from erasure to exposure in the work of a professional photographer and writer of autobiographical texts, Hervé Guibert.

³³⁹ *L'usage de la photo*, 182.

CHAPTER THREE

From Erasure to Exposure: Hervé Guibert's Theory of the Image

The dying, desiring body is a central concern in Hervé Guibert's work: from his novels about AIDS such as *L'Ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) and *Le Protocole compassionnel* (1991) to his regular photography column in the newspaper *Le Monde*, he came to be known primarily as a novelist and secondarily as a photographer, leaving behind a corpus of works that are hard to classify because of their combination of text and images (cinematographic and photographic).³⁴⁰ Two works, *L'image fantôme* (1981), which is an early critical essay composed of short personal entries about photographs (from the Photomaton to the art gallery) but without any photographs reproduced therein, and *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1992), which I term a "film-text," merit special attention for their cross-pollination of media. In these works photographs are not merely illustrative, rather, they are placed alongside text and film in a dialectical arrangement to be interpreted together. Caught between motion and stasis, this intermediality is used to tell events from his life such as struggling with AIDS, faking his own suicide on camera, and watching his octogenarian aunts decline. From the early essays to his very last film, his fascination with death is palpable; these works also suggest a visual preoccupation with shifts between media, tempered with a tenacious foregrounding of sexual desire.

In order to understand intermediality in Guibert's oeuvre, it is necessary to discuss Barthes's influence. This helps reveal how *La chambre claire* inspired his *L'image fantôme*, where a tension is revealed between taking photographs and writing; the wish to photograph something becomes the pretext for writing but also signals the extinction of desire. In *L'image*

³⁴⁰ The novels were translated into English in 1993, shortly after Guibert's death, as *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* and *The Compassion Protocol*. Among Guibert's friends and collaborators: Patrice Chéreau, Isabelle Adjani, Michel Foucault, Hans Georg-Berger, and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

fantôme, Guibert explores the ghostly quality of both photography and writing, that turns into a morbid discussion of images whose subjects become specters. These themes are developed in the film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* (made after Guibert's AIDS diagnosis), whose scenes—a fake suicide, a surgical operation, a confrontation in the mirror—destabilize the viewer. The major thorough line here concerns the stakes of self-citation, or moments where his act of writing and its corollary, reading from his own books, takes center stage. Guibert highlights the intermediality underpinning his photographic and filmic texts and uses his body as a focal point: “Mon corps, soit sous l'effet de la jouissance, soit sous l'effet de la douleur, est mis dans un état de théâtralité, de paroxysme, qu'il me plairait de reproduire, de quelque façon que ce soit: photo, film, bande-son.”³⁴¹ To this end, excerpts from a *photo-roman* titled *Suzanne et Louise* that visualize the theme of the corpse reappear throughout the film. These ideas of intermediality also take on historical significance when studied alongside the reception of his film by the public in the early 1990s in France. Guibert's early theoretical text, *L'image fantôme*, views photography as an extinction of the erotic, but towards the end of his life, brought on prematurely by disease, the image acts as the reassertion of desire in a final gesture in *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*.

The conventional autobiographical set up of a wise old person looking back over his or her life does not fit Guibert's type of self-writing. His premature death compresses his autobiographical project into a series of acts of self-presentation through diverse media—written, visual, and filmic. This aspect of intermedia and self-reflexivity also sheds light on the critical leanings of his project. Guibert's place in the canon of twentieth-century French literature offers some preliminary answers: his writings on photography have been neglected by critics and relegated to the margins of many fields—literature, photography, and cinema. Even though in recent years interest in his work has developed, chiefly focusing on his important role as a writer

³⁴¹ Guibert, *La Mort propagande*, Paris: Régine Desforges, 1977, 183.

of AIDS (“l’écritain du sida”) in France. A consequence of this moniker has been an oversimplification of his oeuvre as a life narrative in which he is seen, one dimensionally, as an activist, without closer analysis of his aesthetics.³⁴² But an examination of his AIDS novels alongside hybrid genres (*photo-roman*, film-text) unsettles such categories as “writer,” “photographer,” and “filmmaker” (“activist” too) preventing any essentializing that goes with narration of his experiences. His self-citational aesthetic foregrounds the gaps between the multiple positions and identities he occupies: hardly a “straightforward” autobiographical project, *L’image fantôme* and *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, are an explicit “autobiographical performance within/as an act of criticism” that turns theory back on itself.³⁴³ Together, these works seem to reject theory, which “exacts as its price the repression of feeling,” but in doing so, assert a theory of “self-citation”: they take part not only in writing but also in reading and in visualizing it.³⁴⁴ Having been made close to a decade apart, they show an evolution in Guibert’s self-citation, from a style characterized by erasure to that of increasing exposure.

In an interview from 1991, he acknowledges rereading his own work as a rich process of “self-rediscovery” (“une redécouverte de moi-même”) underpinning the transformation of ideas from text to image (“comment les choses se sont transformées”).³⁴⁵ This retrospective glance lends itself easily to self-citation; for instance, in 1991 he re-edits and publishes *La Mort propagande*, which was originally composed in 1977. Calling the original text “un peu délirant” because its suicide scene is later copied in the film *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, he realizes that the stakes of republication are higher now that he is a well-known author; he wryly asks himself,

³⁴² The term “life narrative” is borrowed from Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, eds. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

³⁴³ Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 5.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Didier Eribon, “Hervé Guibert et son double,” *Le nouvel observateur*, 18-24 juillet 1991: 87-89.

‘Qui voudra filmer mon suicide, ce best-seller ?’ C’était un texte un peu prémonitoire.’³⁴⁶ The publicization of his work in 1991 was due in part to his diagnosis three years before in 1988, immediately after which he retreated from the public eye, then increasingly began to give literary interviews. Guibert’s notoriety also meant more readers (“c’est incroyable de passer de cinq mille à cent-trente mille lecteurs”) whom he treated on a personal level, describing the sale of his texts as a privileged, almost sexualized “encounter” (“ce sont des rencontres”) with anonymous individuals.³⁴⁷

Such eroticizing—whether between the author and his reader through the text or the author as reader of other texts—occurred between Roland Barthes and Guibert: they knew of each other as early as 1975, when Guibert read *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and was inspired by it. They then began writing each other letters in 1977, but their correspondence ended abruptly when Guibert asked Barthes to provide a preface to one of his texts. Guibert purports that the Barthes had asked a favor in return: that they sleep together. Guibert was shocked a man of Barthes’s age (he was then sixty two) would ask such a thing: “Et pour moi ce n’était pas possible. À cette époque, je n’aurais pas pu avoir un rapport avec un homme de cet âge.”³⁴⁸ Upon closer examination of these supposed encounters, it is clear that they held each other in mutual fascination, textually and in terms of style, if not sexually— as suggested by Guibert’s sense of shame and/or embarrassment regarding Barthes’s alleged proposal. An early anecdote of his first “encounter” with seeing Barthes in person, yet from afar, when he attended one of his lectures at the Collège de France, provides evidence of his admiration of the critic.

Un jour, j'avais rencontré un critique de cinéma qui m'avait dit : « Vous n'allez pas au séminaire de Barthes ? Venez, il n'est pas nécessaire d'arriver plusieurs heures à l'avance

³⁴⁶ Didier Eribon, “Hervé Guibert et son double,” *Le nouvel observateur*, 18-24 juillet 1991: 87-89.

³⁴⁷ Ibid: “C'est incroyable de passer de 5 000 à 130 000 lecteurs. Ce sont des rencontres. [...] [avec] des femmes. Beaucoup de femmes. Des femmes infirmières, des nounous, des mamans, des saintes déplorables. C'est troublant.”

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

pour avoir une place Barthes nous fait entrer par une petite porte. » Alors j'y suis allé. Barthes est arrivé, timide, il nous a fait entrer, j'ai eu une place de choix, au milieu de l'amphithéâtre. Et Barthes, dans un silence de paix a commencé à parler. Et je me suis dit: mais qu'est-ce que je suis con d'être là! Ce type est mortel, ennuyeux à périr!... Alors je me suis levé, j'ai dérangé tout le monde. Barthes a vu que quelqu'un sortait. Et je pensais: tant pis, je ne veux plus vivre cet ennui. Je suis rentré chez moi, j'ai ouvert ma boîte à lettres il y avait une lettre de Barthes. Une de mes grandes joies. Il avait lu mon livre et me disait: « Je voudrais parler avec vous du rapport entre l'écriture et le fantasme, mais sans vous connaître. Par lettres. » On s'est écrit longtemps.³⁴⁹

The initial disappointment caused by seeing Barthes lecture does not discourage Guibert from beginning an intellectual friendship. It is not unimportant that their most meaningful encounter takes place in writing, since both were fascinated by the connected themes of desire, photography, and criticism.

The two authors were not only interested in similar themes—how language produces desire—they were also experimenting with hybrid forms of criticism that bridge autobiography and theory. *L'image fantôme* was published one year after *La chambre claire*, and it is no coincidence that in it Guibert includes a portrait of Barthes, though it could easily be interpreted as a self-portrait. Focusing on the author's role as spectator, Guibert writes “[...] s'il aime une photo [...] c'est pour des raisons intimes, détournées, romanesques, perverses” and these moments of intrigue offered by the image are dependent on the person viewing them, who sees “ce qui cloche [...] ou ce qui se rattache à sa propre biographie ou à son corps.”³⁵⁰ Even though he is speaking about Barthes, he might as well be speaking about his own attitude toward photographs. It is evident that they shared an ethos of longing and desire for photographic images; however, even though Barthes highlights images that appeal to him as a spectator, he never wrote biographies or essays on contemporary photographers like Guibert did. The latter's photographic criticism (he was a columnist on the subject at *Le Monde* from 1977 to 1985)

³⁴⁹ Didier Eribon, “Hervé Guibert et son double,” *Le nouvel observateur*, 18-24 juillet 1991: 87-89.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 123.

includes over one hundred articles on figures as diverse as the narrative artist Sophie Calle and the Magnum photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, among others; his column granted photography a place within cultural criticism alongside cinema and fine arts in the formal setting of the most widely read newspaper in France.³⁵¹ *La chambre claire* does include photographs by famous (then contemporary) artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Diane Arbus, but their role is to be a focal point for Barthes's interpretations; he does not discuss the biography of the photographers like Guibert does in his newspaper column. Another key difference between their criticism on photography deals with the evolution of Barthes's early writing on the medium from a structuralist viewpoint ("Le message photographique" from 1961) to a more sentimental style (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and *La chambre claire*). In this regard, Barthes "discovered" an affective tone for criticism late in his career, but Guibert consistently employed the same personal style whether in *Le Monde* or in *L'image fantôme*.

Barthes wrote an essay on Hervé Guibert, titled "Fragment pour H," which sketches the image of a young photographer, with a passing resemblance to him.³⁵² The "H" in the title is a double signifier, for Hervé and perhaps "homosexualité," as a critic notes: the entry "la déesse H" from *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* characterizes this association as "le pouvoir de jouissance d'une perversion (en l'occurrence de celle des deux H, haschich et homosexualité, qui produit un plus: je suis plus sensible, plus perceptif, plus loquace [...])."³⁵³ Stylistically, Guibert

³⁵¹ *La Photo inéluctablement*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999; and *Articles intrépides*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003. The style of his column was more fictional than journalistic, mixing tones between the detective and the reporter—he even called his articles "enquête" instead of "reportage." See Stéphane Roussel, "Articles intrépides, le journalisme hybride," *University of Ottawa Revue Analyses*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Printemps-Été) 2012: 185-205.

³⁵² See Guibert, *L'Autre journal*, 19 mars 1986, and Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3. Paris: Seuil, 2002. 1297-98.

³⁵³ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, qtd in Anne-Cécile Guilbard, "Guibert après Barthes: 'un refus de tout temps'," *Rue Descartes*, 2001/4, 34: 71-86.

borrowed from Barthes's frequent use of dialogic structure between two anonymous voices as "L'homosexualité" in *L'image fantôme* demonstrates below.

-- La plupart de vos récits suintent l'homosexualité...
-- Comment voulez-vous qu'ils ne la suintent pas? [...] Comment voulez-vous parler de photographie sans parler de désir? [...] Je ne saurais vous dire cela plus simplement: l'image est l'essence du désir, et déséxualiser l'image, ce serait la réduire à la théorie...³⁵⁴

The erotic image is a destructive force in Guibert's view; in a vignette titled "L'image cancéreuse," a photograph of his lover taken by the author decays over time, its emulsion merging with the skin ("comme un tatouage") of the spectator, who carries it in his back pocket. We learn that the friction of the surface results in the picture of the lover being erased, leaving white smudges.³⁵⁵ Based on this example, it is clear that Guibert does not equate photographs with absence, or ghosts, as much as the title might suggest this; they are not mute or inactive ("les photos ne sont pas lettres mortes, objets inanimés, embaumés par le fixateur") but *act* upon the spectator, even in physical ways like skin rubbing against the surface.³⁵⁶

Ghostliness in *L'Image fantôme*

Another way that *La Chambre claire* and *L'image fantôme* are connected is their relationship of the author to his parent. Barthes grieves his mother while writing the text, and Guibert opens with two childhood anecdotes: in the first sketch, he remembers his mother, whose picture he took but did not succeed in printing. Consequently, this image becomes lost forever when they discover the camera door had been left open (or perhaps the film had not been loaded

³⁵⁴ *L'image fantôme*, Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1981, 89.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 169.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 157.

properly, as the author speculates). The two cannot simply retake the photograph—the father has prohibited it because he is overprotective of his mother (Oedipal desires in conflict here)—and Guibert experiences this moment as a profound loss: “Pour ma mère comme pour moi, ce fut un instant d’accablement, de douleur, une sensation d’impuissance, de fatalité, de perte irrémédiable.”³⁵⁷ Rescuing the photograph from oblivion, the text we are reading conveys the despair of the lost image and is the eponymous “image fantôme.”³⁵⁸ Continuing the motif of a severed bond with a parent, Guibert sees his father as a child pictured in a photograph he describes (but does not show) in *L’image fantôme*. A lock of his father’s baby hair taped to a photographic portrait of his father’s baptism causes Guibert to realize, rather humorously, that his father (now bald) once had hair. Real traces challenge the photographic ones when placed next to it, as Guibert maintains—the physical (its texture too) makes a plain fact more real than its initial presentation in the image: “Je peux la [lock of hair] tenir dans ma main, et c’est une sorte de médaillon funeste car j’ai toujours connu mon père chauve.”³⁵⁹ By opening the text with two encounters with a photograph and his parents, *L’image fantôme* highlights not only the absence produced by those images “not taken” but also the deficiency of this medium as true memorabilia when placed alongside more corporeal, sensual traces of the past.

L’image fantôme conceptualizes photography as “une pratique oubliuse” and writing as “une pratique mélancolique.”³⁶⁰ In it, writing resurrects the image not taken (this is why writing in relation to photography is underpinned by loss), and this dynamic is evident in its layout: no photographs are physically reproduced in the pages of the text. Ironically, Guibert finds that the best photographs are those that are not taken; when the camera gets the best of him acting as

³⁵⁷ *L’image fantôme*, 16.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 18.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 42.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 24.

“mauvais technicien” or the device itself as “mauvais médiateur.”³⁶¹ He uses metaphors of the photograph, “une plaque sensible de la mémoire” and “l’abstraction [...] révélée par l’écriture,” to talk about this tension: the image of a photograph *not taken* (“la photo ratée”) becomes even more beautiful through the imagination of the writer (“elle aura le temps de faire son chemin dans ma tête, de s’y cristalliser en image parfaite [...]).”³⁶² In this way, writing about the photograph surpasses the original image, underlining its ephemeral quality. Because of the powerful mental images expressed by the imagination, Guibert even indicates regret about taking good pictures. In fact, if he were able to travel back in time and find the image he had not taken, it would be less impressive than the one he imagined based on the original memory: “si je tentais demain de retrouver la vision réelle pour la photographier, elle me semblerait pauvre.”³⁶³ These “diapositives mentales” are usually blurry and immediate—in other words, impressionistic projections of reality (“juste derrière les yeux, là où il semble y avoir un autre écran”)—that are more meaningful when fantasized through writing (and not captured by a real camera).³⁶⁴

But *L’image fantôme* also shows evidence of Guibert’s morbid fascinations with photography. The vignette “Photo animée” recounts him watching home videos from when he was a child and remembering family members who have since died; he lists their cause of death in a disturbing, objective style: “Il s’est suicidé, Robert,” “Il a eu les jambes coupées Edouard,” “Il est tombé à l’eau et il est mort. On l’a retrouvé à l’écluse” etc.³⁶⁵ Based on such a succession of somber images, the narrator reflects on the cruel “histoire de la dégradation des corps” that the

³⁶¹ *L’image fantôme*, 78.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 142. Logically, then, as he explains, when a person dies, their mental images (an entire “fonds photographique”) are destroyed.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

images tell as they are projected on the screen and annotated by the spectator. Neither sensational nor sentimental, this passage is presented in a clinical style that Guibert uses in subsequent texts about dying, from the photo-text *Suzanne et Louise* to the film-text *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*. Guibert's favorite novel was Gabrielle Wittkop's *Le Nécrophile* (1972), which takes the form of a *journal intime* written by an antiques dealer who engages in erotic acts with dead bodies (this novel was tagged as "adult reading only" in French public libraries).³⁶⁶ However, noticeably absent from *L'image fantôme* is a style I term "sans frein," the counterpoint to the deadening, clinical prose of the aforementioned passages. Elsewhere, writing is about speed for Guibert ("dans l'écriture je n'ai pas de frein, pas de scrupule"), which gives him the sense of an unfettered "self."³⁶⁷ The sexual fantasies explored in his novels such as *La mort propagande* ("j'aime me frotter deux, trois bites en même temps sur le visage") constitute a style central to an aesthetics that produces a quickening in the text.³⁶⁸ This "vitesse du temps" in Guibert's style conveys an upsurge of the self that borders on annihilation; as Peter Sloterdijk notes, the concept of self-intensification is linked to the death drive: "l'individu moderne dans les tentatives qu'il mène sur lui-même prend la liberté de se tester jusqu'à l'auto-annihilation."³⁶⁹ In addition to viewing photographs, writing is a process of othering: visualizing himself through the words on the page as a character in a novel or in front of the lens of a camera, he no longer sees himself as "Hervé Guibert" properly speaking. He comments on this sensation of otherness, in an interview:

³⁶⁶ Gabrielle Wittkop, *Le Nécrophile*, Paris: Verticale, 1975.

³⁶⁷ Guibert, *Le Seul visage*, Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1984, 5: "Dans l'écriture je n'ai pas de frein, pas de scrupule, parce qu'il n'y a que moi, pratiquement, qui est mis en jeu (les autres sont relégués, en abstractions de personnes, sous forme d'initiales [...])."

³⁶⁸ Guibert, *La Mort propagande*, Paris: Régine Deforges, 1991, 371.

³⁶⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Essai d'intoxication volontaire*, Paris: Callmann-Levy, 1999. qtd in Catherine Mavrikakis, "À bout de soufflé: Vitesse, rage, et pornographie. Parcours rapide des textes d'Hervé Guibert et Christine Angot," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2002): 370-78, 372.

J'ai souvent l'impression de mener une double vie. Quand des gens me demandent dans la rue: « Vous êtes Hervé Guibert », j'ai envie de répondre: « Non, je ne le suis pas en ce moment. » Parce qu'à ce moment-là je ne suis pas dans une vague d'impudeur, dans cet étrange rapport qu'il y a entre l'expérience et l'écriture.³⁷⁰

This sense of “*impudeur*,” which translates to a lack of embarrassment (a shamelessness or immodesty), is made manifest through the interstices between writing and recognition of the visual properties of the self. *L'image fantôme* thus offers a glimpse into the two styles—the clinical/morbid and the unfettered/fast (even erotic)—used in later works.

Corpsing: Staging Suicide on Camera

Close to a decade separates *L'image fantôme* and Guibert's documentary, *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*. It aired shortly before midnight January 26, 1992 on TF1 (the largest television network in France)— although it risked never being shown since none of the French television channels expressed interest in buying it. Even before its broadcast, the film polarized critics and health associations alike for its intimate and gruesome portrayal of his daily struggle with AIDS.

³⁷¹ By the time it went on air, Guibert had died— he never saw the broadcast. Despite the memorial significance of the film, the *Conseil national du sida* mandated that the broadcast be postponed, claiming the documentary had no generalizable value for sufferers of AIDS (“aucune valeur de témoignage d'information ou d'exemple généralisable”) especially the final sequence of the documentary where Guibert stages his suicide by filling one glass of water with a toxic dose of Digitaline, a potent antiviral drug, and another with a regular dose.³⁷² Although he seemed to be engaging in an on-screen game of Russian roulette, it is revealed (later) that

³⁷⁰ Didier Eribon, “Hervé Guibert et son double,” *Le nouvel observateur*, 18-24 juillet 1991: 87-89.

³⁷¹ La Sept, Canal+, and La Cinq all turned it down.

³⁷² Frank Nouchi, “Le film d'Hervé Guibert devrait être diffusé sur TF1” *Le Monde*, jan 22 1992, 10.

Guibert had tampered with the glasses to detect which one was lethal— a fact disclosed to the viewer at the end when he is alive and well. A public service announcement for a national suicide prevention hotline immediately followed the film in an effort to prevent widespread panic: this scene raised concerns over the potentially devastating impact a film, intended as an AIDS testimony, would have on HIV-positive patients, who might see it as encouraging suicide.³⁷³ Broadcasting *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* on television not only amplified its status as a *document choc*, or its shock-value, but also raised the question of how to show “le sida à l'écran.”³⁷⁴ More generally, the taboo the film addresses is not restricted to a discussion of AIDS but may be extended to death and visualizations of the corpse.

La Pudeur ou l'impudeur, which angered health organizations and the national council on AIDS, establishes uncertainty surrounding the life-less/life-like appearance of the subject through a gesture I refer to as “corpsing.” Because Guibert does not *really* kill himself but leads the audience to believe he might drink the toxic dose of Digitaline, then closes his eyes for a long period after drinking one of the two glasses, he only plays dead. The term has been used in acting to refer to playing dead or breaking character on stage. Guibert performs the latter when he reveals to the audience that he knew which glass was lethal and chose the non-toxic one. The corpsing action of suicide experiment blurs the distinction between Guibert as subject and Guibert as an object/body; this becomes increasingly unclear as we watch him become immobile after taking one of the doses. As a mass of tissues, fluids, and other material subject to decay, the corpse is abject, constituting a form of sublime that also involves a loss of self, but it is not the horror of physical deformity that causes abjection; rather, it is caused by anything “which disturbs identity, system, order [...] borders, positions, rules,” thus the real taboo the film

³⁷³ “Entretien avec Pascale Breugnot,” *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 30 janvier 1992, 2.

³⁷⁴ “La Mort à l'œuvre: le sida d'Hervé Guibert trouble l'écran,” 1992.

breaches is more generally about showing death.³⁷⁵ Ross Chambers argues that “in AIDS diaries there is an implicit, occasionally explicit, reference to suicide as the alternative option, the temptation to which the author, in choosing to survive in order to write [...] is specifically *not* succumbing”; the fake suicide in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* is thus the ultimate performance of the witnessing act (for AIDS). I join Chambers in this interpretation of the film: the “link between the desire to commit suicide and the desire to write” is emblemized in the gamble between life and death shown in the video, making both Guibert and the audience spectators to a brush with death.³⁷⁶

The viewer is led to believe he or she is witnessing the death of a writer, a theme that reoccurs throughout the film and its references to his aunts, Suzanne and Louise (who also appear in an earlier *photo-roman*). Guibert remarks that he emerged from the experience of the suicide experiment, “comme modifié” and that “filmer ça” (the ça marks “suicide” as an unnameable word) changed his relationship to death; sharing the experience with the audience shows that he is hyperaware of the posthumous stakes of the spectacle. This confrontation with his own death is not an isolated example of the motif of death since the pre- and post-diagnosis parts of Guibert’s œuvre deals with an aesthetics of the cadaver— its dissection and preservation, and tropes of the *nature morte*. In Guibert’s first book on photography, *L’Image fantôme*, he writes that photography forces the viewer to “passer au plus près de la mort.”³⁷⁷ This mortiferous quality of images is considered by Barthes in *La chambre claire*:

³⁷⁵ See Rambali, “Bitter Cry” 1992; 27; and Wim Wender’s documentary *Lightning Over Water* (1986), which chronicles the experience of director Nicholas Ray’s last days after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. The film sent a shockwave through critical circles for its treatment of a similar theme: dealing with “being in the public eye” while dying.

³⁷⁶ Chambers, “The Suicide Experiment” *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol 37, no. 3, Fall 1997, 75.

³⁷⁷ *L’image fantôme*, 150.

Si la photographie devient alors horrible, c'est parce qu'elle certifie, si l'on peut dire, que le cadavre est vivant, en tant que cadavre: c'est l'image vivante d'une chose morte. Car l'immobilité de la photo est comme le résultat d'une confusion entre deux concepts: le Réel et le Vivant: en attestant que l'objet a été réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu'il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle; mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé (« ça a été »), elle suggère qu'il est déjà mort.³⁷⁸

The borderline lifeless/lifelike quality of the photograph—its uncanny effect— makes the viewer call into question the nature of the image.³⁷⁹ Barthes observes that the act of posing for a portrait entails a transformation in which one is “ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir objet.”³⁸⁰ This “micro-expérience de la mort” is what Guibert puts into practice while filming: knowing he will die, not only does he stage a simulacrum of suicide, but he also becomes a witness to it by enacting the corpsing pose described by Barthes.³⁸¹ This film is thus a thanatography that grapples with the temporalities of dying.

La pudeur ou l'impudeur is an experiment with an expected death, though it does not capture such a real event, like Calle's *Pas pu saisir la mort*. Real or experimental, death represents a special problem for film representation. The contours of the problematic relationship between death and documentary film are traced by Vivian Sobchack: dying has replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject, thus there is a tendency to avoid showing death on screen—it is “un-representable.”³⁸² A dead body signifies the trace of the person when he or she was alive, an artifact pointing to prior existence, thus a corpse, “a thing of flesh, inanimate, static” emphasizes

³⁷⁸ *La Chambre claire*, 124-5.

³⁷⁹ See Peter Schwenger, “Corpsing the Image” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26 (Spring 2000): 396: “When a real corpse is subjected to this figurative corpsing, then, certain issues about the photographic image are raised in their most extreme form.”

³⁸⁰ *La chambre claire*, 120.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁸² Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 229.

the border between life and death.³⁸³ In this regard, the corpse is abject, not only because it is flesh but also— as a doubly horrific yet sacred taboo object— alerts the spectator to the dissolution of categories, boundaries, and borders.³⁸⁴ Even more interesting, the majority of films considered death documentaries are not commonly considered films. Rather, they are “seen to exist in some ‘raw’ and ‘realer’ (that is more indexical) state as ‘raw footage’ or ‘documents’”— and *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* plays upon this aesthetics.³⁸⁵

Sabine Kriebel remarks that “film returns the dead to an appearance of life” but the photograph (and a documentary film we might add) maintains “the memory of the dead being dead.”³⁸⁶ In this regard, what would Sobchack’s claims imply for an AIDS autobiography such as *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* that was televised posthumously? Do we approach it the same way one would a documentary or a fictive film, or even a photograph? André Bazin sees photography as a medium that “embalms” time because it captures a moment from the past: the photograph is not a device that entombs its sitter but offers it “a purchase on the future,” whereas the temporal unfolding of cinema sets it apart.³⁸⁷ Film is equally capable of “embalming” time (like photography) but only as a function of pausing the image or flashing back to one frame. This exception aside, photographs hold a moment, rather than create a flow from one moment to the next, which is the case for film images that disappear one right after another. *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* exploits this tension between stasis and motion, death and life, and object and subject

³⁸³ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 236.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 237.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 244.

³⁸⁶ See Stamelman “Theories of Photography: A Short History” *Photography Theory* in James Elkins; Routledge, NY: 2007, 1-49. 34.

³⁸⁷ Metz, “Photography and Fetish” 1985 *October*, 34: 81-90. See also Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

to problematize the intermedial documentation of the self.³⁸⁸ Throughout the film, Guibert refers to a prior work, the photo-literary hybrid work *Suzanne et Louise*: each photograph in it is accompanied by text (and it is not clear which came first). The main theme of the text involves him imagining then staging the death of his aunts and himself. In the film, he continues this practice, turning the camcorder briefly on his aunt Suzanne to ask her, “Est-ce que tu penses qu’il faut se suicider quand on a très mal?,” which foreshadows the suicide experiment at the end and refers to an anecdote told to him by his aunt about her brother-in-law who had committed suicide.

An early experiment with verbo-visual form, *Suzanne et Louise* had many reincarnations, first as a play, then a film script, and finally a *photo-roman*. Despite being separated by a decade, the film *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* and the photo-text *Suzanne et Louise* are linked by this tension between static and mobile images enfolded within another.³⁸⁹ The different forms of the latter force the reader to consider the textual and visual elements for the *mise en scène* of the self in the film as a dialectic, rather than as separate entities.³⁹⁰ *Suzanne et Louise* not only confronts the taboos surrounding death (especially suicide), but also the effects of ageing on the body. In it, even though the photographs are not of Guibert’s body but that of his great aunts, he reused them a decade later as recurrent “characters” *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*.³⁹¹ The portraits of his aunts

³⁸⁸ The embalming of the subject further alludes to Barthes’s idea of embalming speech in *Le Grain de la voix* and tangentially, to the death of the author.

³⁸⁹ Mavrikakis, “Quelques r.v. avec Hervé” *Intermédialités* no. 7 (2006): 137.

³⁹⁰ See Jan Baetens, *Pour le roman-photo*, Bruxelles: Les impressions nouvelles, 2010. The difference between a photography book and a *roman-photo* or *photo-roman* lies not in questions of form but narrative structure. Traditionally, a *roman-photo* used speech bubbles, but more recent examples are more fluid—they may or may not include text.

³⁹¹ Guibert often recycles characters in several works. He fictionalizes the contemporary artist Sophie Calle in *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) and in turn, she grants him a cameo appearance in her film, *No Sex Last Night* (1996), which begins with Calle receiving word of Guibert’s death, and in the photo-text, *Douleur exquise* (2002), which covers the trip they took to Japan in 1984.

become the model for his bodily experiences of film because it stages scenes from the *photo-roman*. Both mobilize the corpse aesthetic, a previously neglected motif within Guibert's work.

Though none of the photographs of *Suzanne et Louise*, except for the final one which represents Guibert with his aunts, are self-portraits in the conventional sense, they are about self-representation in that these women's corporeal experiences allow him to convey his own. In a preface to a catalog of photographs taken of Guibert by his friend Hans Georg-Berger, he reiterates the above idea in the context of the photographer-sitter relationship:

Rarement, le sujet se retrouve dans sa propre histoire: il en est sorti de force par l'empreinte du photographe, ce déterminisme du cadre qui l'efface un peu comme individu.³⁹²

As a kind of stamp or mark of the photographer, the sitter is always an extension of the artist; when a picture is taken, whether of an animate or inanimate subject, it becomes folded into a narrative. Therefore, when Guibert shows his aunts, he incorporates them in his own story. *Suzanne et Louise* may not always directly show him, but the photographs of the two women denote his presence and connection to his subject—though not pictured, he is present because he took the picture.³⁹³ In *L'image Fantôme*, he expands on his connection to the subject, which exceeds a loving relationship and borders on a predatory instinct: “en prenant ta photo, je te lie à moi [...] je t'assimile un peu, et tu n'y peux rien.”³⁹⁴ To say that *Suzanne et Louise* is about two elderly sisters would be false: more than a simple hereditary connection, the aunts in *Suzanne et Louise* are absorbed into Guibert's autobiographical enterprise, creating a strange mirror through which the photographer sees himself.

³⁹² *L'Image de soi, ou l'injonction de son beau moment? Seize photographies de Hans Georg-Berger*. Bordeaux: William Blake, 1988.

³⁹³ Akane Kawakami, “Un coup de foudre photographique: Autobiography and Photography in Hervé Guibert,” *Romance Studies*, vol. 25 (3), July 2007: 211-25.

³⁹⁴ *L'image fantôme*, 164.

The photo-text doublets in *Suzanne et Louise* were originally studies for a film by the same name— but abandoned by Guibert due to financial issues and his aunts’ insistence on privacy. As evidenced by the multiple iterations that carry the same title *Suzanne et Louise*, the genesis of these photographs proceeds as a set of nested Russian dolls: the photographs are based on a play and in turn, these are studies for film never fully realized. Rather, the play and photographs come together to make a *photo-roman*. Guibert adapted the twenty mini-scenes of the play to twenty entries each with a photograph as a recto-verso set.³⁹⁵ Each pair making up the *photo-roman* reads as a dialogue between Suzanne and Louise as they discuss what being eighty years old means to them: ageing, stories about their youth, and their attitudes toward dying. *Suzanne et Louise* was not Guibert’s first text to include photographs in a narrative sequence. *Vice*, written in 1979 but not published until 1991 (due to difficulties finding an editor), tells the story of a brooding *flâneur*’s trip to the Jardin des Plantes, the Musée de l’Histoire naturelle, and the École vétérinaire. The unnamed visitor does an inventory of all of the personal articles in the suitcase of a doctor, then visits the Musée de l’Histoire naturelle and the École vétérinaire, where he photographs dead things, dissected or preserved. A sequence of nineteen photographs divides the text into two sections: “Articles personnels” and “Parcours.” In the recto-verso set “Le cadavre,” Louise describes in disturbing detail for Suzanne what will happen to her body once she dies:

Eh ben, ils t’emmènent directement à la Faculté de Médecine. Ensuite, ils te saignent sur une cuvette en coupant une artère à la base de l’aîne, pour pouvoir te remplir de formol. Le formol, ils le mettent par le haut, en le faisant couler dans une artère à la base du cou [...] Avec le formol, il paraît que tu deviens bleue très vite, presque marron. Tout ton corps prend une apparence de cire. Ensuite, ils te font descendre en ascenseur jusque dans la salle souterraine où personne n’a le droit d’entrer. [...] C’est une salle très sombre avec juste une grande cuve en verre transparente remplie de formol où flottent les

³⁹⁵ The titles are *La pièce*; *Les jambes de Suzanne*; *La photo*; *Tonton clown*; *Le Carmel*; *Une transformation*; *Le rachat*; *Le rêve*; *La mort du chien*; *Amok*; *La lettre*; *Le songe*; *La transfiguration*; *Les cheveux de Louise*; *Le paradis*; *Un simulacre*; *Le cadavre*; *La mise-en-scène*; *Le vernissage*; *Le scénario*.

cadavres. C'est là dedans qu'ils te mettent, avec les autres [...] Il y a juste un néon et un ventilateur [...] Ensuite on est coupé en morceaux et distribué aux étudiants de la médecine.³⁹⁶

In the penultimate scene “Un simulacre,” Louise takes a picture of Suzanne who is covered in a sheet, only to discover that she has not installed the film into the camera correctly. Louise notices that this image “deadens” her (“on va croire qu’[elle est] morte”).³⁹⁷ Suzanne then scolds her for not having placed the film into the camera correctly, but at this precise moment, we know that Guibert has captured the scene. It is unclear if these conversations ever took place (in real life) or are fantasized by Guibert (and attributed to Suzanne and Louise); nevertheless, they show that he was already probing the question of suicide, ten years before he conducted the suicide experiment in *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*. Suzanne asks Louise to kill her if she ever becomes senile: “Si je deviens gâteuse, tu me tueras? Tu me feras une over-dose!,” to which Louise asks her to explain what kind of “une over-dose,” which she then compares to the drug used by their veterinarian to put down their German Shepherd.

In a review of the *photo-roman* version of *Suzanne et Louise* by *Le Monde*, critic Frédéric Edelman remarks that the piece plays with “le morbide comme la presse de cœur fait avec l’amour” and blurs the boundary between writing and images.³⁹⁸ Imbricating the verbal and the visual, *Suzanne et Louise* makes these categories inseparable and heralds the genesis of the project as one centered on death and decay: “l’image est le texte, le texte est l’image, où se déroule, comme les cheveux de ses tantes [...] la patiente passion de l’auteur pour [...] la mort.”³⁹⁹ Echoing these remarks, Serge Saint-Michel situates *Suzanne et Louise* within the genre

³⁹⁶ *Suzanne et Louise*, 26.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Frédéric Edelman, “Le Palace des idoles,” *Le Monde*, 9 octobre 1980.

³⁹⁹ Edelman, “Le Palace des idoles.”

of *roman-photo*, and not the *photo-roman* as it is traditionally understood. Though he does not use the word “intermedia,” his definition implies an intermedial process at play since he views the *roman-photo* as a genre that challenges conventional reading practices and forces the reader “to establish connections between the images and the text.”⁴⁰⁰ Whether termed a *roman-photo* or a *photo-roman* (as I have used it throughout this dissertation), it is clear that *Suzanne et Louise* functions as a double narrative intertwining verbal and visual elements. This distinction concerns the *photo-roman* as a creation in which photographs contain enough information to constitute a narrative of their own, whereas a *roman-photo* is work wherein photographs remain dependent on the text to co-opt narrative functions.⁴⁰¹ Given that the *roman-photo* version of *Suzanne et Louise* was the result of a theatre piece that became the basis for the beginning of a film project, on one hand, it relies on scenes to explain the project instead of allowing the photographs to speak for themselves, and on the other hand, because the photographs were a study for a film, they act as a placeholder for a moving image. The dual nature of the *roman-photo* is derived from its status as post-theatre/pre-film. And thus, the text in *Suzanne et Louise* does not fit a novelistic form of storytelling tracing narrative development in an arc, instead, it reads like a screenplay or a series of short vignettes about the difficulties Guibert encountered when he asked his aunts to sit for portraits and their anxieties over being seen by a public.

To reiterate, he originally wanted to shoot a film about his aunts, using the photographs as a tool for composition. The preface to *Suzanne et Louise* (*photo-roman* version) titled “La pose” explains the genesis of the project as “un travail de [...] mise-en-scène.”⁴⁰²

Il y a cinq ans, j’ai proposé à mes grande-tantes de réaliser un film sur elles, j’avais commencé à écrire un scénario, mais leur refus a été si catégorique qu’il m’a sapé tout

⁴⁰⁰ Serge Saint-Michel, *Le roman-photo*, Paris: Labrousse, 1984, 4.

⁴⁰¹ “Le photo-roman et l’avant-garde” *Rapports*, 55.4 (1985), 181.

⁴⁰² *Suzanne et Louise*, 2.

espoir de le faire un jour. Deux ans plus tard, je me suis mis en remplacement, à écrire la pièce de théâtre, une pièce à deux personnages, où je m'étais totalement gommé [...] C'est à cette époque que j'ai commencé à prendre des photos, régulièrement, presque chaque dimanche (en fait des "champs-contre-champ"). Et j'entassais les planches-contacts, je ne faisais tirer aucune photo, je pensais que ce travail n'aura sa raison d'être qu'après leur mort.⁴⁰³

Using the photographs as a guide, he had planned to set up "une séries de plans-photos," or still photographs of the apartment: the original opening scene would cut to a travelling shot following the feet of Louise as she enters a butcher shop for horse meat and then back to the still-photographs of the apartment. In the next scene, the camera would seize upon objects in the apartment of his aunts such as clothing, perfume bottles, and small paintings by their bedside table, as he reads in voiceover from the original, handwritten texts. In the third sequence where the camera tours the apartment, Guibert envisages the only shot in color as Louise unwraps the meat from the butcher shop: "le rouge cru de la viande, uniquement, coloré."⁴⁰⁴

The penultimate sequence of the script for *Suzanne et Louise* (that closely resembles the *photo-roman* version) brings together the themes of contagion, nudity, and immunity, as it tells of a visit to the morgue as Guibert reads from the text "Simulacre de la mort/le cadavre." His instructions call for a slow camera pan of halls leading to an autopsy room at the Salpêtrière Hospital, revealing empty dissecting tables; instead, the viewer must imagine them as he reads from the text. The final sequence of the film places the camera in the living room, where Suzanne, Louise, and Guibert are taking a family portrait: "C'est la caméra qui les photographie [...] tandis qu'ils fixent tous les trois l'objectif, on entend le bruit de ressort du déclencheur jusqu'au dé clic final."⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ *Suzanne et Louise*, 1.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

Originally, Guibert wanted the film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* to be composed only of images, but at the insistence of his editor (Maureen Mazurek) he decided to use voiceover to make the images more relatable to an audience unfamiliar with his work. When his editor received some footage that catalogued all of the objects in Guibert's living room including a bizarre taxidermed green monkey, it was suggested that he should comment in voice-over that monkeys were one of the first hypotheses surrounding the vector of transmission for the virus.⁴⁰⁶ In the example of the green monkey, the voiceover complicates the image, inscribing it in a typology of signs.

Working from his own textual corpus, Guibert uses self-citation: he recycles scenes from two of his AIDS novels, *Le protocole compassionnel* and *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, as “scripts” for several key scenes from the film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*. These novels are “survival narratives,” according to Jean-Pierre Boulé; not only because death threatens the existence of the narrator but also because shortly after the novel's publication Guibert appeared on the television show “Apostrophes” announcing he would no longer publish and that readers should “[le] maintenir en vie” by reading his books.⁴⁰⁷ By the time he agreed to shoot the film, which took only one year, Guibert already had cultivated a public persona.⁴⁰⁸ Following his appearance on television, the public became enamored with him: he claims to have received up to twenty-five fan mail letters a day. Nevertheless, the most poignant challenge to the film was the death of Guibert himself. In a somber example of life following fiction, after the fake suicide represented in the film, he killed himself by overdosing on Digitaline. The documentary was left

⁴⁰⁶ “*La pudeur ou l'impudeur* d'Hervé Guibert: Génèse d'un des documentaires les plus bizarres,” Philippe Artières and Gilles Cugnon; 2001, 155.

⁴⁰⁷ Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.

⁴⁰⁸ Filming began mid July 1990 and ended February 1991.

unfinished but it was edited according to detailed annotations he had left on the script.⁴⁰⁹

Maureen Mazurek, who had been brought on board when filming had begun the previous year, assisted with finalizing the remaining film editing. These examples demonstrate how self-citation had an impact on the film's interpretation.

It is also worth mentioning Guibert's mark on French literature of the late twentieth-century. Comparing the reception of his novels about AIDS with that of the film *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*, which aired in 1992, helps elucidate his place in the canon as both writer and filmmaker. *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) and *Le protocole compassionnel* (1991) relay the experiences of scrambling for access to promising medical drugs and the slow metamorphosis of the body by infections. These novels were initially criticized for exposing prominent members of the Parisian literary circles as HIV positive: the experience recounted in the novels reads like a transcription of bodily transformations and deploys a series of role-reversals between doctor and patient, showing how Guibert occupies an "ambivalent position as voyeuristic spectator and subject of the disease."⁴¹⁰ His diagnosis came about after a series of inexplicable medical problems in January 1988, immediately after which he pursued experimental pharmaceutical treatments. Written two years after, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* sent a shockwave through the Parisian intelligentsia; Guibert is often credited with "bringing the subject of AIDS out of the French closet."⁴¹¹ An autofictional account of his early stages with AIDS, it opens with the sentence, "J'ai eu le sida pendant trois mois," which makes the reader believe it will be a survival story since the use of the *passé composé* implies Guibert no longer

⁴⁰⁹ Although Guibert did not contribute directly to the conversion, he left detailed guidelines to delete the massage table scene, but the producer kept it. We find out that the masseuse's grandfather had been deported to Drancy.

⁴¹⁰ Emily Apter, "Fantom Images" *Writing Aids*, 83.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

has the disease at the moment of utterance (when he, in fact, does).⁴¹² This strange temporal frame sets up reader expectations for a survival story; however, as it becomes clear that the narrator will seek new experimental drugs by bribing doctors with the threat of killing himself, his relationship to survival becomes increasingly uncertain. *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, does not name politicians or allude to public campaigns against AIDS; it engages with the eventual promise of a cure that, in the end, is not delivered. A friend—who did not save his life—leads the narrator into thinking he knows a scientist who has found a wonder drug, but it turns out to be ineffective.

His second autofictional account of AIDS, *Le protocole compassionnel* sheds light on the doctor-patient relationship as a sado-masochistic game and its title reveals this ironic twist.⁴¹³ The first pages of the book are a list of things he can no longer do because of the disease's progression; in one especially violent scene, he describes the experience of a doctor placing a fibroscope down his throat. The text also speaks of the medical surveillance of the sick body and Guibert's reaction to a new experimental drug, DDI, which is referred to as a "compassionate treatment" (hence the title) because doctors were only willing to administer the drug to terminal patients since it could make the patients go blind and potentially kill them. Seeing DDI as a double-edged sword, he acknowledges that the drug may cause his AIDS temporarily to go into remission, which will allow him to continue writing, but the side effects could be lethal.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to describe his first novel *Fils*, the term "autofiction" refers to a novel where the author, protagonist, and narrator share one identity. Autofiction is predicated on troubling questions of "la réalité, vérité, sincérité, fiction [...] dans le champ de la mémoire." Arnaud Genon and Isabelle Grell, "Présentation" autofiction.org.

⁴¹³ See David Caron, "Playing doctors: refiguring the doctor-patient relationship in Hervé Guibert's AIDS novels," *Literature and Medicine* (Fall 1995) vol. 14, no. 2: 237-249.

⁴¹⁴ See also Guibert's hospitalization diary, *Cytomégalovirus*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

Guibert's novels were criticized by AIDES and ACT UP for reinforcing stereotypes about people living with AIDS: they were declared just another example of "le créateur séropositif qui met en scène sa séropositivité sous un aspect héroïque."⁴¹⁵ These organizations were outraged by *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and *Le protocole compassionnel* because they were written as an individual experience, without an explicit political or social target *a priori*, the novels disturbed the conventional, activist narrative of AIDS. His novels do not express outrage; instead they create "une intime complicité du malade avec sa maladie."⁴¹⁶ Guibert was controversial because he treated the disease too peacefully, as the next episode of his life— folded into in a pre-existing autobiographical project.

There is no question that the novels had an enormous influence on the representation and ensuing perception of AIDS in France, yet they do not constitute the same subversive chronicle as *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, which marked his return to the spotlight to speak about his experience.⁴¹⁷ This film is a critical turning point in Guibert's representation of his body. Some critics have understood it to reflect his belief in the "restorative power of the visual" that enables the subject to cling to the idea of "functional self" in spite of disidentification with his body.⁴¹⁸ I challenge this reading on the basis of the aesthetics of the film, which not only was left unfinished as a series of fragments to be stitched together by Guibert's producer but also overwhelms the viewer with images of him as a "walking, talking dead" body. These images do not convey seamlessness and cohesion— even if they lend a certain beauty to the dying subject, as Guibert notes when he sees a photograph of Robert Mapplethorpe wasting away: "il fallait

⁴¹⁵ ACT-UP Paris, *Le sida: Combien de divisions?* Paris: Dagorno 1994, 176.

⁴¹⁶ Alain Ménil, *Sain[t]s et saufs: une épidémie d'interprétation*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997, 132.

⁴¹⁷ Guibert famously disclosed the HIV-positive status of Michel Foucault's death by creating a character— "Muzil"— modeled closely on the French philosopher.

⁴¹⁸ Derek Duncan, "Gestes autobiographiques: le sida et les formes d'expressions artistiques du moi," *Nottingham French Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1995): 100-11.

trouver de la beauté aux malades, aux mourants.”⁴¹⁹ The use of the camera to capture everyday life with AIDS provided a kind of raw honesty about the disease (the anchoring of an extreme experience in routine helped domesticate it). Yet, this is only one part of the aesthetics of the film. Rather, it is the movement between the surreal (staging suicide) and the everyday that destabilizes any comforting categories we might have about the sick subject and the author as activist.⁴²⁰

After a round of drug therapies that had left Guibert weak, shooting was a practical way to record material.⁴²¹ At the insistence of television producer Pascale Breugnot, who had contacted him about making the film that would become *La Pudeur et l'impudeur*, he began using a camcorder to document changes to his body and his routine. Film offered not only a spontaneous record of day-to-day events but also a new relationship to the *mise-en-scène* of the self. Breugnot had contacted Guibert because she saw a “liberté de ton et de parole” in his *sida* novels that would translate into a televisual document “plus précis, rigoureux, et informatif que le témoignage d’autres personnes plus timorées.”⁴²² Known for a new form of television programming that emphasized true-life stories, Breugnot was a major voice in television in France in the 1990s: she publicly advocated new horizons for life documentary in television, claiming it offered an alternative genre to the genres of drama and educational documentaries, and famously entered into a debate with Bernard Pivot in 1992 over the role of new media in the

⁴¹⁹ *Le protocole compassionnel*, 115.

⁴²⁰ Apter, Chambers, and Caron all speculate that showing the daily life of a person with AIDS in the 1990s was “a difficult task because taboos associated with grave illnesses are even stronger in France than in North America” and that Guibert helped to “bring the subject of AIDs out of the French closet.”

⁴²¹ Guibert wrote in his diary about the struggle to write despite hospitalization.

⁴²² *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 30 janvier 1992, 14.

1900s, arguing against the idea of hegemonic “high culture” on French television.⁴²³ Pivot saw *télé-réalité*, or the early brand of real life documentary used by Breugnot and others, as existentialist because it reminded viewers that “Hell is other people.”⁴²⁴ French television à la Breugnot was a distinct blend of on the one hand, exhibitionism and voyeurism, and on the other hand, an urge to entertain and to inform. The film Guibert and Breugnot released tested the limits of voyeuristic subject matter even for what we might consider to be an early form of reality television. This was nothing like what we have come to call, colloquially, “reality TV,” which came later with European shows such as *Big Brother* and *Loft Story*.⁴²⁵ In the early 1990s, proto-*télé-réalité* shows were known for candid on-screen conversations about sex, marriage, and travel—not illness.

Shot in the first-person and using a camcorder, *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* inaugurated a series of autobiographical documentary films in the same amateur style.⁴²⁶ Guibert and his film editor Mazurek worked together closely to retain this quality; for example, they kept sequences where he dances in front of the camera unaware it is upside down. It is clear that the amateur look of the film was an aesthetic choice since he was no stranger to film, having applied to *L’Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*, and having won in 1983, a César for a

⁴²³ Pascale Breugnot produced for TF1, the following reality shows: *L’Amour en danger* (1991), a telefilm about psychotherapy for couples whose marriage was “on the rocks,” and *Mea culpa* (1992), a show that allowed people who had been wrongfully accused by family members or neighbors to plead their case.

⁴²⁴ Jérôme Garcin, “Putain de part de marché” Interview between Jérôme Garcin and Bernard Pivot, *L’Événement du jeudi* (1992) 20-6 February: 89-93. Qtd in Hugh Dauncey, “French Reality Television: More Than a Matter of Taste?” *European Journal of Communication*, 1996, vol. 11, 83.

⁴²⁵ Entertainment shows or “Variétés” such as “N’oublie pas ta brosse à dents” and “La fureur du samedi soir” were popular precursors to the big ticket series like *Big Brother*. See Jean-Pierre Boulé, “The Postponing of *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*: Modesty or Hypocrisy on the Part of French Television?” *French Cultural Studies* 3, (Oct. 1992): 299-305) for a discussion of nudity in the film.

⁴²⁶ The groundbreaking example of *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* signaled a strong departure from mainstream film and existing forms of AIDS testimony; the film adaptation of Cyril Collard’s semi-autobiographical novel *Les nuit fauves* (1992) was shot using a *professional* camera and crew.

screenplay written with Patrice Chéreau for the controversial film *L'Homme blessé*.⁴²⁷ Examples of other films around this period that were inspired by Guibert's *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* include *No Sex Last Night* (Sophie Calle and Greg Shephard; 1992), *Demain ou encore demain* (Dominique Cabrera; 1997), *La Rencontre* (Alain Cavalier; 1996), and *Omelette* (Rémi Lange; 1994). Raymond Bellour argues in *Eye for I: Video Self-Portraits* that autobiographical films, especially video diaries, are “une stratégie du cinéaste pour agir par la présence de la caméra [...] sur sa propre vie [...] sans le prétexte ou l'alibi d'un film.”⁴²⁸ Extending Bellour's argument to *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*, it is clear that recourse to a camcorder for home use allowed Guibert to be director, cameraman, scriptwriter, and main character all at once: he filmed over 25 cassettes of 45 minutes each, totaling over a thousand hours of footage. The camcorder appealed to him because of the simplicity of no set and no crew: “j'adore le cinéma, c'est quelque chose que je vénère [...] la vidéo, c'est pas du tout ça, mais il n'y a pas d'attente avec le caméoscope, il n'y pas d'équipe.”⁴²⁹ It also was similar in size and weight to the Rollei 35 camera he used to take photographs.⁴³⁰ The camera is a character in the film, as Guibert sees it: “Pour moi, la vidéo c'est un personnage”— a thought which indirectly raises the question that has long plagued films categorized as autobiography (in distinction to the looser term “autobiographical film”). Is there

⁴²⁷ Chéreau and Guibert worked together on the screenplay for six years. It tells the story of an eighteen year old boy, Henri, who leaves on vacation with his family and begins a sexual relationship with a criminal, Jean, who he meets in a train station.

⁴²⁸ Interview by Raymond Bellour, 5.

⁴²⁹ “Pour répondre à quelques questions qui se posent,” interview with avec Christophe Donner, *La Règle du jeu*, n° 7, mai, 1992: 146. qtd in “*La pudeur ou l'impudeur* d'Hervé Guibert: Génèse d'un des documentaires les plus bizarres,” Philippe Artières and Gilles Cugnon; 2001, 155.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 155 : “J'ai trouvé un rapport entre le caméoscope et l'appareil avec lequel j'ai fait toutes mes photos, le Rollei 35, qui est un tout petit appareil.”

truly an appropriate “eye” for relaying “I”?⁴³¹ For example, before the development of the handheld camcorder, the use of division of labor as the criterion would preclude the actor, cinematographer, and editor from being the same person. Division of labor considerations aside, it is clear that the numerous mirror shots in *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*, which show the camera as it films Guibert behind the camera, underscore the independent role of the camera as character, not merely as tool.

The size of the camera also allowed him to take it into intimate spaces; it was so portable that he was able to bring it into the operating room, transgressing a space to which only doctors and nurses have access. In what I will call “the biopsy scene,” as the surgeon and his assistants prepare the operating table, they cover Guibert in a sterile, blue sheet. Not only do we see the incision take place, we also hear the surgeon say “Ça, c’est l’os” as he angles the surgical lamp toward the mark. Once the tissue has been extracted and the surgeon has left, the camera lingers for minutes at a time, tracking the steady rise and fall of Guibert’s breath under the blue sheet. Silently and with utter stillness, the camera captures his vulnerability on the operating table: in the operating room scene, he is under objective surveillance of the camera, but later in the film, the camera records him as a spectator watching footage of the surgery. We see him as he re-watches the scene, pausing it and looking intensely at the still image of the operating table. In an interview from 1992, shortly before his death, Guibert remarked that during the scene where he watches the biopsy take place, he shuddered at the sight of his body placed under a sheet—it so shockingly figured him as a dead body.⁴³²

⁴³¹ “Pour répondre à quelques questions qui se posent.” For an outline of definitions that incorporate examples of films made with camcorders and that fit the definition of autobiography or video-diary, see Nadja Gernalzick, “To Act or To Perform: Distinguishing Filmic Autobiography,” *Biography*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2006): 1-13.

⁴³² Though not explicitly referring to the biopsy scene, a critic called the film, “un journal quasi clinique, précis, et impitoyable” (*Le Figaro* “Auto analyse d’une agonie,” 30 janvier 1992).

As a textual counterpoint to the biopsy scene, where Guibert appears dead on the operating table and the doctor is in full control, Guibert recounts in *Le Protocole compassionnel*, that he snuck the camcorder into an official doctor visit. He had asked permission to film the examination, but the doctor refused, citing camera shyness. In an interesting reversal of the objective surveillance of the camera in the operating room scene, the following passage from *Le Protocole compassionnel* reveals that the “hidden” camera in the examination room echoes the same fascination Guibert expressed at the sight of his body as a corpse (a medicalized object).

Je changeai l’angle de prise de vues et sans rien lui demander je filmai Claudette Dumouchel. Elle était belle. Je filmai ses longues mains blanches qui pianotaient sur le clavier de l’ordinateur. Je filmai son visage dans cette lumière sublime, j’étais heureux. L’œil au viseur, je voyais que l’image tremblotait imperceptiblement au rythme de ma respiration, des battements de mon cœur. Le mot “End” s’est mis à clignoter dans l’image-témoin. *Fin de bande.*⁴³³

This passage suggests that the camera eye and the observer’s eye become one; the apparatus of the camera synchronizes with the motion of his breath and his heart beat: “au rythme de ma respiration, des battements de mon cœur.” In the film, the camera, positioned out of the doctor’s view, gravitates toward sensual details such as her long slender hands. As we see in the film, Guibert has blurred the face of the doctor out of privacy, but the scene retains other voyeuristic elements because it is a hidden camera. The abrupt ending of the scene as he runs out of space on his cassette tape alerts the viewer to the seduction of the image they have just witnessed: one almost forgets that the camera has intruded on a private space of the medical office, and the expression “fin de bande” also bears a sexual connotation, from the verb “bander,” to get an erection. The repeated use of novels in the film functions not only as voiceover for scenes in the film but also as a script for staging and re-enacting a voyeuristic scene from the novel.

La pudeur ou l’impudeur is a film-text to the extent that the novels function as a script for it, and that, in turn it opens a dialogue with his textual corpus. Reappropriated scenes from *Le*

⁴³³ *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 260.

Protocole compassionnel (and to a lesser degree *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*) inscribe the simple act of citation into an autobiographical mode. Yet, the conceit of the film is not limited to reading in voiceover from his novels. Using the structure of *mise en abyme*, the camera seizes upon an excerpt from Guibert's journal toward the end of the film, revealing that the entire time he has been writing a script for a film with the same title *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, the very film we are watching. His film is thus a startling autopathography—it is as much about AIDS as it is the intermedial aesthetics that underpin his autobiographical writing. In the same vein, the final sequence, which shows Guibert at the writer's desk, supports a view of it as a “film-text,” emblematic of the intertwined processes of writing and filming that became inseparable at the end of his life. In this scene, he wakes up to the sound of his alarm clock then walks over to his typewriter to begin a day's work as he reads the following passage (in voice-over).

Il faut déjà avoir vécu les choses une première fois avant de pouvoir les filmer en vidéo. Sinon on ne les comprend pas, on ne les vit pas. La vidéo absorbe tout de suite et bêtement cette vie pas vécue. Mais elle peut aussi faire le lien entre photo et écriture, et cinéma. Avec la vidéo, on s'approche de notre instant, de l'instant nouveau, avec comme en superposition dans un fondu enchaîné purement mental les souvenirs du premier instant, alors un instant présent à la richesse du passé.

These thoughts, spoken by Guibert while the camera steadies on him writing at his desk, cause us to ask if writing accomplishes the same task as film. Video records life, rather stupidly and flatly, without any explanation, which by default allows you to relive moments in their rawest form. The camcorder (*la vidéo*) is thus a gateway to a new kind of filmic autobiography. The text enters into the picture here to transform the footage into something more cinematic; the film-text, as he conceptualizes it, allows immediacy of the image and reworking of it by writing.

Framing Reactions to *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*

In contrast to the shock-value of the film, its opening sequence is perhaps the most innocuous and least shocking of all the scenes to follow, and gives a sense of the structure of the film as a whole. Beginning with the title credits, which appear in blue text against a stark, black background, the color scheme offers the palette of a bruise. While the credits roll, we hear a grandfather clock chime, as if counting down the final hours. Later, the sound is revealed to be a tuning fork used by Guibert's doctor during a medical exam that had initially caused some bruising. This alludes to the paradoxical nature of medical interventions, while also result in some injury to the patient. The sound bridge serves to collapse the spaces of the private—his apartment—and the institutional—the doctor's office. After the title credits, the film draws the viewer into the space of the medical examination room, a space outside of everyday life, familiar for most and uncomfortable nevertheless: Guibert, wearing a suit that swallows his small frame, is shown slumped in a metal chair, his knuckles clutching the arms of the chair as a nurse enters the frame. One has only to cite the alarming number of people who suffer from latrophobia (the fear of doctors) to understand the commonplace anxiety provoked by an upcoming visit. Awaiting a blood test, he nervously rolls up his sleeve, readying his arm for the tourniquet. We then hear him purposefully read an excerpt from *Le Protocole compassionnel* in solemn voiceover while the sample is collected:

Le processus de détérioration amorcé dans mon sang par le sida se poursuit de jour en jour. Avant les prises du sang [...] j'ai senti mon sang tout à coup découvert, mis à nu, comme si un vêtement l'avait toujours protégé, sans que j'en aie conscience. Il me fallait vivre désormais avec ce sang dénudé, exposé, à toute heure dans les transports publics, dans la rue quand je marche, toujours guetté par une flèche qui me vise à chaque instant. Est-ce que ça se voit dans les yeux?

The repetition of the word blood, as his voice latches onto “dans mon sang,” “avant les prises du sang,” “j'ai senti mon sang [...] mis à nu,” “ce sang dénudé,” in the passage above alludes to the

enmeshed meaning of exposure as on the one hand, the possibility of contact with pathogens when blood is drawn since the AIDS virus is a pathogen transmitted by body fluids, and on the other hand, a more literary (and literal) form of exposure. Since blood also works a metonym, standing in for Guibert himself, by extension the repetition of the word blood addresses a more implicit understanding of his position as a writer of autobiography; the opening up of the writer's life to the public when an autobiography is published implies a decision of how much self-exposure is appropriate or desired.

Instead of viewing himself as a vector of a dangerous virus threatening the public, Guibert chooses to see the public itself as a threat because they can only see him as a person with AIDS, defined by the virus-content of his own blood, “ce sang dénudé, exposé, à toute heure [...]” He conveys another fear deeply rooted in his vocation as a writer; to become a diseased body, or one that bears legible signs of infection also makes him into “a spectacle-text for public consumption and interpretation.”⁴³⁴ The painful question “Est-ce que ça se voit dans les yeux?” which he reads aloud to himself and to his audience, problematizes the feeling of being a host for the AIDS virus, an intrusive non-self within the self, and accordingly, the use of “ça” refers to the virus, emphasizing yet again the inability pin point the dividing line between foreign body and his own body. Furthermore, by insisting on the visual, the question “est-ce que ça se voit dans les yeux?” addresses the numerous images of Guibert's frail, naked body as it is subjected to medical tests and the stakes of this kind of *mise-en-scène* as a strong counterpoint to the first-person narratives of AIDS in France that were largely verbal, instead of visual, and portrayed the person with AIDS as a hero (see Cyril Collard's 1992 film *Les Nuits Fauves*).⁴³⁵ In contrast, the

⁴³⁴ See James Agar, “Self-Mourning in Paradise: Writing (about) AIDS Through Death-bed Delirium,” *Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 1 (March 2007) 67-84: 69.

⁴³⁵ In this semi-autobiographical film, the screenwriter and director Cyril Collard also plays the main character, Jean, a young man diagnosed with AIDS. Collard was awarded four César awards but did not live to accept them because

countless images *of* and *by* Guibert in the opening sequence bombard the viewer and highlight the space of confrontation between the viewer and the viewed, and the reading by him from his own novels in the opening sequence announces and accomplishes what was already written, giving the film a sad sense of inevitability, which highlights how near to death he was at the time, and in turn, his dual role as filmmaker and subject.⁴³⁶ Having examined the opening sequence, it is clear that the medical examination scene is relatively modest in terms of shock value. The viewer does not learn of Guibert's medical status of AIDS until five minutes into the film: before he rolls up his sleeve for the blood test and reads aloud from his novel, asking us "Est-ce que ça se voit dans les yeux?" we first see him look into the camera as we look back at him—an exchange of gazes. The revelation of AIDS takes place verbally rather than visually, and in an instant, the revelation causes a shift in the spectator's viewpoint, which goes from just watching him to actively "looking" for legible signs of disease on his body, a sign of the virus.

Later scenes from the film were deemed shocking for their less subtle confrontations with nudity: Guibert often appears in front of the camera seated on the toilet and peering at his full frontal reflection in the mirror. While *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* pushed the boundaries of the representation of AIDS in France through conventional shock value of nudity, it also introduced a subtle form of critique through a double gesture of which nudity is only one part. First, he visualizes the AIDS body as a series of tropes about illness ultimately in order to dismantle them; in acting out stereotypes associated less commonly with AIDS and more commonly with historical diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera (discussed by Susan Sontag in *Illness in*

he died three days earlier. The film does not directly address the gradual process of contamination and death with the same attention to bodily changes brought about by AIDS as Guibert in *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*.

⁴³⁶ In a cruel twist of fate, Guibert, the photographer, became blind shortly before the end of his life due to infection a common pathogen.

Metaphor), he is able to elucidate a parodic, subversive signifying practice about ill bodies.⁴³⁷ For example, he often situates the camera directly in front of his bed as we stare with difficulty to observe the steady rise and fall of his breathing beneath the sheets, as if he were a tuberculosis patient, or the bony legs from behind the frame of the bathroom door. In another example chronicling his summer trip to Elba, the footage shows him as a youthful, fedora-wearing dandy who ruefully spends his days reading from a Walter de la Mare text whose main character has decided to die peacefully. Both examples enact the trope of the sick writer using illness as inspiration, which is ironically the same project undertaken by Guibert in making the film; however, the number of images he provides of his own body acting out romanticizations of illness are overshadowed greatly by the number of shocking, real images of his struggle with AIDS. The second part of the double gesture is related to the visceral accounts of witnessing his body turn into a living skeleton: turning the camera on himself, he shows the viewer a part of life often hidden from view (toileting and showering) because considered to be too private (bodily). Before turning to a more detailed discussion of these scenes, it is important to address reactions to the film by the public—critics, journalists, and organizations—in order to identify and clarify the precise cause of the film’s shock value.

Taking into account the very real premature conclusion of the film due to Guibert’s death, *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* confronted the “profil bas” reaction of the French state, which refused to acknowledge the gravity of the epidemic even though French researchers were the first to isolate and identify the virus.⁴³⁸ France had one of the highest numbers of AIDS patients in

⁴³⁷ See Alex Hughes, “AIDS-video: Representing the body in Guibert’s *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*,” *Gender and French Cinema*; New York: Berg Press, 2001.

⁴³⁸ ‘La campagne français se distingue par son profil bas,’ *Les homosexuels et le sida: sociologie d’une épidémie*, Pollak; 140. In 1981, case reports in the United States began to emerge describing an unknown syndrome. Six months later, there were seventeen new cases in France. In 1983, the French scientist Luc Montagnier discovered the HIV microbe. One year later, the United States developed a screening test for donated blood.

Europe at the time of its broadcast.⁴³⁹ In spite of this fact, state responses to the disease were largely characterized by a de-dramatized public health campaign rationalized by an effort to avoid panic and paranoia.⁴⁴⁰ The first public health campaigns debuted in 1987 and showed ostensibly healthy individuals whose bodies displayed no visible sign of illness. Carefully aware of the conflation between contagion and otherness, the campaign emphasized the collective burden of AIDS with the tagline, “Le sida ne passera pas par moi” in order to encourage widespread prevention.⁴⁴¹ One of the most striking aspects of the disease is that it affected many communities at once, however, the universalist overtones of the campaign neglected to recognize marginalized groups and the communities (IV drug users and gay men), where the virus first appeared in France, as one and the same.⁴⁴²

Aside from the ineffectiveness of the first public campaign for the prevention of AIDS, the de-dramatized responses by the French state to the crisis of the 1990s are best understood through the lens of the 1991 “l’affaire du sang contaminé,” the first public health crisis and scandal of the French AIDS epidemic. Before the establishment of universal blood donor screening in France, minister Laurent Fabius postponed use of an HIV-test from the United States in order to allow l’Institut Pasteur to develop their own test, and consequentially, over half

⁴³⁹ The United States and France are the two countries with the most proliferation of AIDS testimonies because they recognized the disease early and also produced the most research. See also Pollak, *Les homosexuels et le sida: sociologie d’une épidémie*, 140.

⁴⁴⁰ See Rambali, “Bitter Cry from the Confesional’ *The Guardian*, Jan 23 1992.

⁴⁴¹ Claude Thiaudière, “Le sida et la santé publique: des ratés au démarrage,” *CRNS Journal*. French laws from the 1920s concerning public morals, which banned advertisements for condoms, limited the efficacy of the campaign because the state could not give concrete details about methods of prevention. The de-dramatized campaign was also an attempt to counter the moralistic overtones of the National Front, which demonized persons as AIDS as criminals and degenerates.

⁴⁴² David Caron argues that the French state refused to acknowledge specific communities targeted by AIDS in the name of universalism, which prevents the state from keeping statistical data on minorities. *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press; 2001.

of registered hemophiliacs in France contracted the disease.⁴⁴³ The blood scandal revealed much about the cultural stigmas surrounding passive versus active transmission: those who had “innocently” contracted the disease—hemophiliacs, via blood transfusions, healthcare personnel, or transmission from mother to fetus— were viewed by the public as victims, whereas those who had contracted the disease through certain “irresponsible” behaviors such as sex and drug use were not.⁴⁴⁴ Defining the acquisition of the disease became part and parcel of conceptualizing AIDS as a sexually transmitted illness, which entailed connotations of divine punishment for so-called transgressive promiscuity (and exclusion from society since the disease was defined by *visible* signs of infection). Persons with AIDS and HIV-positive people were frequently treated as a threat to public health, despite the fact that their lives were in danger, not the other way around.⁴⁴⁵

In addition to being viewed as a response to state and public attitudes toward AIDS, after it aired on television, *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* faced criticism by specialized health agencies such as AIDES. Founded in 1984 as a non-profit organization with the aim of defending the rights and dignity of those living with HIV/AIDS, the AIDES group lambasted the portrayal of Guibert as a “victime singulière” and deemed his on-screen experiment with suicide by Digitaline nothing more than insensitive “déterminisme morbide.”⁴⁴⁶ To them, he had played the

⁴⁴³ Caron, “A Cultural History of AIDS Discourse,” 111.

⁴⁴⁴ As Cindy Patton argues in *Inventing AIDS*, London: Routledge, 1991, 91: “if victims are ‘spoken for,’ the victim label prevents the AIDS person from writing back to medical discourse.”

⁴⁴⁵ Caron argues that since its discovery by French microbiologist Luc Montagnier in 1983, the AIDS virus was explained through obsolete metaphors of illness from the nineteenth century, which were then redeployed to “make sense” of the epidemic. (“A Cultural History of AIDS Discourse,” 99). He cites the extreme rhetoric of the Front National health expert Dr. François Bachelot, who calls persons with HIV or AIDS extraterrestrials and terrorists. At the same time, the scandal surrounding “l’affaire du sang contaminé” debunked the myth that AIDS targeted only certain, already marginalized groups. It showed, albeit less markedly, that the larger population also had reason to be concerned.

⁴⁴⁶ “Hervé Guibert, en toute pudeur et impudeur,” 18 et 19 janvier 1992, *Libération*; 24.

cliché role of the suffering artist, and organizations similar to AIDES sneered at the success of the film because “it depicted illness as a strictly individual venture,” instead of championing the creation of a community.⁴⁴⁷ Of the same opinion as the organization AIDES, *Le Monde* despised the “l’exhibitionnisme post-mortem du goût malsain” and accused the film of encouraging persons with HIV or AIDS to abandon hope. Journalists from both *Le Monde* and *La Libération* rebuked Guibert for appearing detached and submissive, as if he were surrendering to death: was it not crass to expose so much of oneself— and so publicly— at the end of life? How could he be so callous in discouraging “ceux qui, vivant encore, se débattent avec le mal, l’esprit, et le corps luttant de conserver ?”⁴⁴⁸ They found *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* to be too individualistic to fit the needs of a community of persons with AIDS.

It is clear that his film could not escape criticism from all sides, and ultimately, it triggered a debate about how to show “le sida à l’écran” that was framed less in terms of a public health crisis and more as a crisis of representation, or an “epidemic of signification” in the early 1990s.⁴⁴⁹ Writing about how the literature on AIDS sought to instruct the public on the scientific discovery of the disease and the narrative of progress in public health, Douglas Crimp affirms that it precipitates a much larger crisis that exceeds social or political aims because, “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices.”⁴⁵⁰ French sociologist Michael Pollak makes a similar remark when writing about the French context, stating that *le sida* encompassed “autant de réactions d’angoisse et de fascination, brassant les craintes et les tabous millénaires d’épidémies,

⁴⁴⁷ Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

⁴⁴⁸ Bruno Frappat, “Zones frontières” 26-27 janvier 1992.

⁴⁴⁹ Paula Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.” *AIDS Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*.

⁴⁵⁰ *AIDS Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.

d'homosexualité, et de mort."⁴⁵¹ Pollak was among the first to approach the AIDS epidemic from a sociological perspective; his 1988 text *Les homosexuels et le sida: sociologie d'une épidémie* contextualized the disease within discourses of sexuality and social class. Before turning to the film's self-reflexivity and meditation on such aforementioned taboos, I will first elaborate on the identity politics (and disidentifications) suggested by Guibert.

Breakdown of Boundaries

In an interview, Guibert states about homosexuality "[...] c'est un mot qui n'a jamais eu vraiment un rapport avec moi, bizarrement, alors qu'il en a évidemment un..., ce n'est pas la façon dont je me sens, j'ai l'impression que je suis ailleurs que dans ces..."⁴⁵² The dangling quote results from Guibert trailing off mid-sentence, which creates considerable ambiguity for the reader who is left to wonder about what follows the demonstrative pronoun "ces" in his remark "je suis ailleurs que dans ces," though it is clear that his use of a spatial vocabulary, suggested by the word elsewhere, shows a resistance to restrictive definitions of sexuality and fixed identities. Additionally, even though he never uses the word "queer," it is not insignificant that the development of queer theory (in the United States) is appreciably coterminous with critical writing on HIV/AIDS, which had caused a re-examination of how the subject is constructed through biomedical and public discourse.⁴⁵³ Critics from the past decade have begun

⁴⁵¹ Pollak, *Les homosexuels et le sida: sociologie d'une épidémie*, 91.

⁴⁵² Donner, "Pour répondre à quelques questions qui se posent," *La Règle du jeu*, 7.

⁴⁵³ See Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Demographics* (Bay Press, 1990) and *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003). See also, *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*, eds. Erica Carter and Simon Watney. London: Serpent's Tail, 1989.

to read Guibert as a queer filmmaker whose films—because of their play with acting out prejudicial configurations of the AIDS body—constitute a “posthumous *dissidentification*” or opposition to pre-established binary categories and seeks to undo them by caricature in order to show the arbitrariness of the division between terms.⁴⁵⁴ *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* stands on the threshold of a 1990s “queer moment borne by the collusion of sexual politics, gay identity politics, queer disidentity, and AIDS,” and consequently, the negative reception of the film by both newspaper reviewers and activist organizations demonstrates the fact that the film is able to work *within* and *against* dominant representations of AIDS in the early years of the decade.⁴⁵⁵

Because Guibert is a subject of the disease by virtue of being ill, he problematizes metaphors that are used to describe it. For example, the intersubjective experience of being a host to a virus makes him identify all at once as self and non-self, which allows him to move beyond and between “categories of control.”⁴⁵⁶ At first glance, Guibert seems to violate Susan Sontag’s repudiation of metaphor to describe illness; potentially deadly because it objectifies patients’ bodies as “battlegrounds” and renders them passive, metaphors such as this risk dulling the visceral experiences that accompany disease.⁴⁵⁷ In her view, if patients were to reclaim “rhetorical ownership of disease” to understand how “it is possessed in argument and cliché,” they could exert greater control in representing the ill subject in a realistic way.⁴⁵⁸ Guibert’s

⁴⁵⁴ Agar, “Dissidentification in France,” 57. See also Alex Hughes, “AIDS-video: Representing the Body in Guibert’s *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*” *Gender and French Cinema*; Hughes and Williams, ed. Oxford: Berg, 2001.

⁴⁵⁵ As Leo Bersani states, “Nothing has made gay men more visible than AIDS.” *Homos*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, 19. See also Frédéric Martel, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France since 1968*, transl. Jane Todd, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999. For more about disidentification and misrecognition, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London: Routledge, 1993, and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

⁴⁵⁶ Agar, “Self-Mourning in Paradise,” 70.

⁴⁵⁷ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 3.

⁴⁵⁸ Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 181.

metaphorizing, however, is not damaging; it does not involve diluting the physical experience of AIDS. His living with the virus is related to his experimentation with forms of self-expression “that evade totalizing definitions,” and this use of photography, film, and quoting from his own novels constitutes intermediality.⁴⁵⁹ *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* elucidates these intermedial aspects, or to borrow a metaphor from medical discourse, the “cross-contamination” of media and genres, in Guibert’s oeuvre.

If *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* inherits a metaphorical history and multiple significations alongside the dominant, officializing representation of AIDS, then among them we might also include a “breakdown of boundaries” that forms a visual and structural motif for the film. This aspect is also indicative of intermediality. This very chapter, in which many terms—queerness, representation of illness, photography and film, and autobiographical experimental forms—productively interact, speaks to this breakdown.⁴⁶⁰ This breakdown is also temporal: from Guibert’s diagnosis to writing a continuous autobiography, from writing about being diagnosed to writing a film script, from shooting it to see himself as dead, from being dead to speaking from *outré-tombe*, and from appearing alive to viewers yet also appearing dead. In introducing the film as a collusion of many different discourses from the 1990s, I want to gesture to the major terms at play and how they transgress and traverse *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*. The boundaries in question in the film are simultaneously medical, sociological, and media-based, much like “the virus [AIDS that] threatens to cross over the border between Other and Self: the threat it poses not only one of disease but one of dissolution, the contamination of categories.”⁴⁶¹ Contamination, which comes from the Latin verb *contaminare* meaning to bring into contact, is

⁴⁵⁹ Agar, “Self-Mourning in Paradise,” 70.

⁴⁶⁰ Judith Williamson, “Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meaning of HIV and AIDS,” eds. Carter and Watney, *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*; London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999; 69.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid*, 11.

also a figure for metaphor in which the image for one thing is brought into contact with another, in the sense of being “touched” together.⁴⁶² Part of the reason for the “dissolution” of categories brought about by AIDS arises from the fact that the infected person must “balance the somatic experience of the virus within the body with the psychological experience of being a host to the virus, all while dealing with the morally loaded discourses of HIV/AIDS that attempt to circumscribe his or her experience”.⁴⁶³ In relating this experience of feeling the self invaded by “Other” (being a host to the virus), Guibert reclaims the process of contamination as an undoing of categories, an infection of one thing by another.

Self-Reflexivity and the Camera

Despite the criticism surrounding the film, *Les Cahiers du cinéma* gave it a positive review. In their view, the strongpoint of the film was its insistence on ways of seeing—and the paradox surrounding its subtle compositions organized as a series of mirror scenes and confrontations with the self.⁴⁶⁴ The film’s general “expérience du regard” was due in part to the camcorder, which created a new mode of relation between viewer and subject predicated on the immediacy and rawness of the footage. As in the biopsy sequence and the hidden camera experiment in the doctor’s office, the experience of looking—whether in the mirror or directly

⁴⁶² “Metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic,” writes Derrida in “Plato’s Pharmacy” qtd in Caron, *AIDS in French Culture*, 138. See David Caron’s most recent book, *The Nearness of Others: A Search for Tact and Contact in the Age of HIV*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.

⁴⁶³ Guibert alludes to the socially charged stigma of being host, carrier, and vector for the virus: “Je l’ai compris comme ça [...] le sida n’est pas vraiment une maladie, ça simplifie les choses de dire que c’en est une; c’est un état de faiblesse et d’abandon qui ouvre la cage de la bête qu’on avait en soi, à qui je suis contraint de donner pleins pouvoirs pour qu’elle me dévore, à qui je laisse faire sur mon corps vivant ce qu’elle s’apprêtait à faire sur mon cadavre pour le désintégrer.” *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*, 66. See also Agar, “Self-Mourning in Paradise: Writing (about) AIDS Through Death-bed Delirium,” *Paraglyph*, vol. 30, no. 1 (March 2007) 67-84, 69.

⁴⁶⁴ “Vidéo Disparition,” *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, Laurence Giavirini, no. 456, 6 avril 1991, 76.

into the camera— and being *looked at*, underpin the entire film. However, in the examples to follow, I show that he uses the omnipresence of his body as a principle of structuration that addresses both shame and shamelessness, as suggested by the film's title.

In the first example, Guibert shows that his AIDS body forces a confrontation with the reality of death that has made it difficult for him to write; in addition, the use of montage demonstrates the extent to which the virus makes him travel through time/memories.⁴⁶⁵ As photographer and screenwriter, he was aware of the *mise-en-scène* of self-representation and its ability to destabilize the subject/object dichotomy. Visualizing his own body as both self and not-self through film, Guibert touches on the body as “irreducible difference and [...] at the same time, the principle of all structuration.”⁴⁶⁶ The remark that one's own body is both self and not self comes across at first as an empty paradox, but when related to the timetable of a disease (its course and effects), the body operates as a ledger for the signs of infection as a result of the illness (and indicates that there is a division between the self and a microbial something else). In his autobiography, Barthes inserts a copy of a tuberculosis chart from the sanatorium, demonstrating his preoccupation with “traces” of the body. While signifying continuity with the present—Barthes was sick when the chart was made but improved in order to be the writer composing the text we read— this medical object also underscores an acute moment in his life, a discontinuous rupture with the past. The tuberculosis chart is one of the least commented photographs that make up the “album” of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* since the majority show him or his family members, which constitute a prehistory for the writer.⁴⁶⁷ The album photographs surprise him since he recognizes himself as a tender young boy held by his mother

⁴⁶⁵ *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*.

⁴⁶⁶ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, 175.

⁴⁶⁷ He also keeps a part of his rib, or “côtelette,” wrapped in tissue paper tucked in a desk drawer.

while he is shocked by photographs of him as an adolescent: “Mais je n’ai jamais ressemblé à cela!”⁴⁶⁸ For Barthes, the temporal gap between his writing self (author of the text we are reading) and the adolescent self provokes anxiety because the image dispossesses him of a stable, fixed identity; these moments of non-recognition include the body in autobiography as a point of division and also the structuring principle of the very notion of a self.

Addressing the problem of self-relation, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that during periods of illness and medical intervention “se rapporter à soi” becomes a problem, as evidenced by his personal experience as recipient of a heart transplant, which calls into question his conception of identity in several ways.⁴⁶⁹ The transplant takes on even more significance after he learns the heart was transplanted from a young woman, and secondly, the medical records (charts, data, figures) kept by the hospital cause him to feel alienated: “jamais l’étrangeté de ma propre identité ne m’a touché avec cette acuité.”⁴⁷⁰ In addition, after the operation he experienced extreme loneliness as a result of being placed on immunosuppressant drugs, which would ensure his body accepted the new organ but also made him more susceptible to infections than a person with normal immune function would be able to withstand. The very real, concrete physical body placed certain limits on his strength and made him more aware of the physical conditions that form the basis for any intellectual work. Post-operation, his life consisted of regular visits to the hospital and debilitating episodes of dry mouth from radiotherapy, which made him realize that illness forces disidentification: “on ne se reconnaît plus” and the verb “reconnaître,” which means both to recognize and to identify, no longer carries the same meaning since being so close to death, he now sees himself differently. Self-recognition can no longer be thought apart from

⁴⁶⁸ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 40.

⁴⁶⁹ *L’Intrus*, 39.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

the body. Nancy provides insight into the history of writing about the self by quoting from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the earliest models for Western autobiographical writing: *corpus meum interior intimo meo* ("the body is more intimate to me than I am to myself" [my translation]).⁴⁷¹ Drawing on his personal experience as the recipient of an organ transplant, Nancy echoes the bodily precept of Augustine's view of the self, meaning the body is inseparable from any real knowledge of the self.

Using montage, Guibert effectively problematizes a similar conundrum concerning self-recognition, namely his inability to reconcile his pre-diagnosis and post-diagnosis bodies. Stating that AIDS forces him to time travel in the montage sequences discussed, Guibert is first pictured in the shower, and this scene is followed by frames from a family vacation when he was a child, joyfully spraying himself with the hose. The juxtaposition of the two images—as an adult then as a child yet similar in their content—gestures toward the loss of levity in his life: the ease of everyday life becomes a series of Herculean tasks. In later scenes, he does not hide the shame felt from relearning toilet training, though we are clearly witnessing a man out of control of his own body. In many ways, Guibert shows the infantilization of the sick body: he is forced to become a child again, while attempting to retain his dignity. The footage of him as a child also evokes the helplessness of being a person with AIDS during the beginning of lethal epidemic. In the second example of a use of montage to convey his inability to recognize his current self, which is in part due to bodily changes, he remarks, "j'ai quatre-vingts cinq ans comme ma tante Suzanne. Chaque jour je perds un geste que j'étais encore capable de produire la veille. Je lutte contre la mort," as the film cuts to a scene of his aunt Suzanne being spoon-fed. When asked what she would like for her eighty-fifth birthday, she mutters, barely audible, "Vivre encore un peu," the same wish as Guibert.

⁴⁷¹*L'Intrus*, 43.

In another sequence from the film that demonstrates his inability to recognize himself at the time the film was made (disidentification), a male massage therapist works on Guibert's naked body, shown in profile face down on the massage table, the angularity of his hip bones and shoulders readily apparent. Situated on the same level as the table, the camera placement accentuates the horizontality of the shot and occasionally cuts off the image of the therapist at the shoulders, revealing only his hands and torso as they perform the massage. This banal scene from everyday life takes on greater significance due to voiceover in which Guibert shares a startling fact about the massage therapist's grandfather. As he reads from *Le Protocole compassionnel*, it becomes clear that the grandfather had sent letters from Drancy before being deported to Auschwitz. No context is given for the massage therapist's motivations in sharing this information with his client; it can only be conjectured that he and the massage therapist have developed a close relationship (they *tutoie* each other). More significant to my interpretation, Guibert draws a comparison between his body and the staggering corpses of the concentration camps; he remarks that gazing into the mirror every morning he found a "corps décharné [...] en panoramique auschwitzien" that was somehow the same body as the one the massage therapist works upon in the film footage.⁴⁷² Though not directly implied, it is plausible that Guibert's evocation of "un corps [...] en panoramique auschwitzien" is a veiled reference to the figure of the *Muselmann*. The term *Muselmann* is jargon from the concentration camps (and more specifically, Auschwitz) that translates as "Muslim"; this designation came about because the severely malnourished victims in the camps had a curved stature that made them look like they were kneeling in prayer.⁴⁷³ Agamben identifies the *Muselmann* as the threshold between the

⁴⁷² *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 73.

⁴⁷³ See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 2002, 41. The reference about the origin of the term *Muselmann* comes from a monograph by Zdzislaw Ryn and Stanislaw Klodzinski, *An der Grenze zwischen Leben und Tod. Eine Studie über die*

human and the inhuman, something alive yet barely due to malnourishment. It must be said that the comparison between Guibert's body and that of the *Muselmann* defies the historical specificity of the term while at the same time underscores the extreme bodily misidentification he experienced as the virus progressed. Both convey a death visible on them, pre-inscribed.

The omnipresence of his body throughout the film forces us to treat its images as a text, a surface of legible signs and inscriptions.⁴⁷⁴ One critic claims that the body-heavy scenes “overfeed” the spectatorial gaze and stand in diametrical opposition to the erotic self-portraits that predate his diagnosis. In his opinion, they also “target the scrutinizing look of a homophobic viewer who wants to detect all of the physical signs stamped on the AIDS-body and censor them.”⁴⁷⁵ While the excess of images is undeniable, the objective of the film is not constrained to “[unsettling] the scopic impulse of the voyeur” since he uses bodies other than his own to convey messages about dying, desiring bodies like his own.⁴⁷⁶ In addition to incorporating his aunt Suzanne into several sequences of the film, where she acts as an interlocutor about whether or not one should have the right to kill oneself when in pain and also as an analogy for the bodily changes undergone by Guibert as a result of AIDS, he uses stuffed animals as actors. The stuffed animal sequence stitches together a frame of the author as a child holding a stuffed animal with a sequence of stuffed animals in sexual positions. Unlike scenes where he appears in front of the mirror fully nude in direct confrontation with the viewer and comments on it in voiceover, the stuffed animals add an element of dark humor to the graphic bodily scenes that come before and

Erscheinung des “Muselmanns” im Konzentrationslager, Auschwitz-Hefte, vol. 1. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz, 1987: 94.

⁴⁷⁴ For a discussion of the body as text in other examples of AIDS autobiography, see Derek Duncan, “Gestes autobiographiques: le sida et les formes d’expressions artistiques du moi” *Nottingham French Studies*, vol. 34 (1995): 100-111; 109.

⁴⁷⁵ Alex Hughes, *Gender and French Cinema*, New York: Berg Press, 2001, 217.

⁴⁷⁶ See Julia Thomas, *Reading Images*, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000, and J. Rendell, “Hervé Guibert, Foucault, and the Medical Gaze,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* (Spring 2004), vol. 25, no. 1: 33-45.

after it. Because the scenes are void of any commentary by Guibert, the visuals are allowed to speak for themselves: the cuts between the footage of him playing with a lamb toy as a child and the stuffed animals “playing” together on his bed create a sequence of images in which the playful, childlike quality of the animals contrasts sharply with their sexually suggestive positions of embrace and penetration. This sequence is one of the least commented upon by critics because it does not fit the argument of Guibert’s insistence on his own corporeality. Scholars have chosen to focus on it because it helps explain his connection to the body as a legible surface, or text. However, it is important to acknowledge the numerous sequences throughout the film that do not overtly emphasize the transformation of his body into a living skeleton and to analyze his choices for “bodily analogs” that convey these transformations— not as evidence of self-censorship but tools for constructing a narrative of the self that encompasses the very discontinuous nature of writing the self (the lack of resemblance between childhood and the present). This is then filtered by identification with an illness such as AIDS— the loss of innocence between playful encounters and a sexually transmitted disease.

While my argument has focused on the bodily analogs and use of montage (in order to show how film allows him to dissolve past and present), it is worth mentioning the role of nudity throughout the film— not only for its shock value and its role in unsettling stereotypes about the ill body and its perception, but also because Guibert conceptualized nudity textually and photographically as part and parcel of his work as writer and photographer. He often posed bare-chested in self-portraits, encouraging his sitters to do the same, and used nudity as a leitmotif in *Le Protocole compassionnel*, when the narrator deliberates over posing nude for a series of paintings entitled “Nu malade du sida” and then desires to appear nude on stage at the Avignon theatre festival, which Guibert regularly attended as a photography critic.⁴⁷⁷ The narrator only

⁴⁷⁷ *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 16.

refuses to bare all when the theatre director cautions him that his nudity verges on exhibitionism with, “On va dire que vous vous exhibez.”⁴⁷⁸ Tracing the fine line between artistic nudity and exhibitionism, Guibert states that he was struck by the introduction to the *Essais* of Montaigne, which he misquotes as, “J’ai voulu me peindre nu,” and found that the *mise-à-nu* of the self as described by Montaigne could speak for his work as a whole, functioning as “un exergue à tout ce que [il a] fait.”⁴⁷⁹ His emphasis on the self as disclosure, confession, and revelation is also the story of a body, “l’histoire d’un corps, qui vieillit, qui est malade, qui est abîmé”— in relation to the metamorphosis of his body by HIV, he also traces the parallel, ever co-terminous story of “un corps monstrueux aussi, d’un corps difforme.”⁴⁸⁰ In this regard, he also resists the tragedy that accompanies sympathy directed toward ill subjects and author activists; in one telling scene he shadowboxes at the camera tripod, as the hit song “J’suis fatigué de faire semblant d’être un héros” (1990s) plays in the background, suggesting that the role of playing the hero in a tragedy separates everyday life from fiction.

It is clear that throughout the film Guibert displays a shamelessness (*l’impudeur*) as referenced in its title. From full frontal nudity to honest avowals of being too tired to be the hero of his own narrative (a breaking of the fourth wall), he stages scenes that place the viewer outside of his or her comfort zone. The redefinition of decency and shamelessness is not the only dilemma alluded to by the title, which also refers to a viewing framework between audience and subject. The original title would have used “et” instead of “ou,” but he decided against the conjunction “and” because the “or” asks the viewer to treat the title as a disjunction (either the

⁴⁷⁸ *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 26.

⁴⁷⁹ “Pour répondre à quelques questions qui se posent...,” entretien avec Christophe Donner, *La Règle du jeu*, vol. 3, n° 7, mai.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 145. The figurative trope of nudity and exposure common to autobiography takes on a literal meaning for Guibert, who also expands on his version of a *mise-à-nu* of the self as “l’impression d’être mon propre personnage” and “un corps en jeu dans des situations, des narratives,” *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*.

film is judged “pudique” or “impudique”) rather than a paradox (“pudique et impudique”). In chronicling illness without apology or self-censorship, Guibert transgressed the voyeuristic relationship between audience and subject, and opened up an arena for the public to choose only one of the two options: either decency or shamelessness— but not both.

La Pudeur ou l'impudeur can be read as historically conditioned by responses to the AIDS epidemic in France, and as the culmination point of the complex relationship between text and image in his larger autobiographical corpus. Though reactions to the film were mixed, the consensus was that Guibert had reclaimed phobic constructions of AIDS with an unsettling degree of sang-froid. It is my contention that the “expérience du regard” foregrounded by the film reveals the crisis of the ill writer as both object of medicine and a subject with a voice reclaiming rhetorical ownership of self-representation. Contested by the many discourses that sought to conceptualize it, respond to it, and in doing so, essentially control it, Guibert’s representation of AIDS on-screen parses the “epidemic of signification” that accompanies it, and moreover, the importance of carving out space for meaning-making of the AIDS experience by an individual. In bringing together film, photography, and text to create a process of self-citation, he transgresses the boundaries of categorization between writer, filmmaker, and photographer. The production of a self-citational praxis, where he is able to stage and relive certain scenes from his works using different representational modes, demonstrates a serious consideration of the ill body and its relationship to time. Moving from an aesthetics of erasure to that of exposure, he conceptualizes photography as a “pratique oubliuse” and writing as a reassertion of desire (and the erotic), but at the end of his life, images accomplish this urgency more efficiently than writing due to the physical challenges of late stage AIDS. The final image of *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* offers a portrait of Guibert surrounded by manuscripts and photographs; the ghostliness of this image (its spectral quality) emphasized by dim lighting and the barely audible

hum of his pen scratching the paper, compels us, I believe, to rethink how his oeuvre has been interpreted and canonized (too generically perhaps). To this end, I have argued that his only film in which he was all at once screenwriter, director, and actor, bears traces of intermediality that underpins his entire oeuvre, problematizing the experience of his predicted death while at the same time remaining a desiring body.

CONCLUSION

The central aim of this dissertation has been to explore how autobiographical writings experiment with the photography (and film), in dialogue with the most quoted book on the medium—Roland Barthes’s *La chambre claire*—that is also written as an encounter with mortality. To this end, I have undertaken a close analysis of the form and content of autobiographies that are particularly exemplary of an original intermedial and interpersonal aesthetic with which to represent the self in relation to illness and death. In each chapter, I traced the gravitation both toward and away from Barthes’s legacy of the image, acknowledging how they account for a fuller understanding of photographs and film as certificates of both absence and presence, while incorporating lesser-known critics on these media into their autobiographies. I have argued that although these authors refer to his association with the photograph, they also draw our attention to new ways of looking at media that connect the practice of photography with its spectator. They (unlike Barthes) highlight their role as photographers. I have also outlined the relationship between intermedia and autopathography, nuancing the latter for each author’s respective works. *Quelque chose noir* sublimates the pain of loss with manic commentary, performing aphasia as an impossible dialogue with the deceased. *L’usage de la photo* understates the category of illness narrative to critique the erasure of breast cancer in the public eye. *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* radicalizes the disclosure of AIDS on camera yet acknowledges the challenges facing the author as activist. On this note, I conclude that all the intermedial autobiographies in my dissertation are not only thanatographies that place the author closer to contemplating his or her own death, but also meta-reflections on the nature of cinematographic and photographic images made with analog technologies.

Given the diminished use of analog media, what are we to make of the growing presence of the digital in autobiographical writings from the past thirty years? Of course, Guibert did not have access to Facebook in the early 1990s when he made *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*, but a handheld camera to document the self represents something analogous to a smartphone today. Ernaux's choice of a Nikon film camera (instead of digital) in the early 2000s clashes with her rationale for including photographs in *L'usage de la photo*. Though she felt inspired by "la mise en images effrénée qui caractérise notre époque," the frenzied pace of image culture around this period was predominantly "numérique," not "argentique."⁴⁸¹ It would have been easier for an amateur to use a digital camera (and perhaps more readily available). Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique* confirms that all electronic traces, even materials like microfilms and paper manuscripts that are "rescued" by digitalization, are caught in a web of constant archiving and destruction.

What configurations of erasure and exposure might exist for self-representation in the digital age? In today's "netlingo" of the blogosphere, the twitterverse, the Facebookdom, and others, it is important to consider how writers have responded to these vernacular forms of social media in writing the self, whether adopting these new interfaces for greater interaction with the public or using them to create avatars of the self. An obvious contender for such configurations is the "selfie"—a coinage based on the term "self-portrait"—that officially entered the English language in 2013, though its practice began close to five years earlier.⁴⁸² Selfies are more spontaneous and casual than a traditional self-portrait, and are also based on the principle of sharing because they circulate on a network. This new visual genre marks a change in our

⁴⁸¹ *L'usage de la photo*, 12-13. Kodak's slogan "You press the button and we do the rest," becomes even easier with digital cameras, since the photographer no longer has to drop off film at the drugstore; he or she simply uploads them to an image-sharing device.

⁴⁸² The "selfie" was Oxford Dictionary's 2013 word of the year. The Pope, astronauts, and even heads of state have taken selfies. See Jerry Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie," *Vulture*, 26 January 2014.

understanding of photography in contemporary culture from a “memorial function” to a “communication device,” the same camera that used to seize a moment for a forever (to be remembered later) now instantly uploads images to Facebook. Geoffrey Batchen views this communicative aspect as a “back and forth between personal and promotional use” that “refashions the self for a semipublic view.”⁴⁸³ And yet there is something of the certificate about the selfie because it proves “I was there.” This desire to see and to be seen is at the root of selfie culture, which art historians and new media critics have begun to take more seriously, without dismissing them as simply “nombriliste” or an expression of the “culte du Moi.”

Another iteration of autobiographical gesture in the digital age, broadly conceived, is web writing—“l’écriture web”—that refers to the complex interactions between readers and writers; this type is more layered than the encounters we are accustomed to with literature in print.⁴⁸⁴ For example, both print writers and web writers use indexes, but a web page can link to another page, allowing the reader (“l’internaute”) to create a new path. As the explosion of literary blogs and the numerous usurpations of identity on social media accounts can attest, “l’écriture web,” from blogs to open-source editing, is an ever-growing concept tied to the representation of the everyday.

Blogs are the new *journal intime*, and the Internet is well adapted for these brief personal writings (“posts”) made daily, in which photos and other images accompany text almost naturally. The term “blog” first appeared in 1997, to describe subjective and personal

⁴⁸³ See Geoffrey Batchen qtd in David Colman, “Me, Myself, and iPhone” *New York Times*, 30 June 2010: “The camera was used to record something that happened so it could be remembered. Now it’s used immediately. It’s uploaded to Facebook to say, ‘Here I am in Istanbul’ or whatever, so it also goes back and forth between personal and promotional use. It really represents the refashioning of the self for a semipublic view.”

⁴⁸⁴ Such fields as search engine optimization have developed in response to ways Internet users depend on Google and others to find information. Web designers now keep metrics on which terms are the most searched and tend to use them to increase the number of visits to their site.

impressions, opposed to “objective” style journalistic reporting, through daily entries.⁴⁸⁵ Blogs do not require the same expectations of sincerity, or a contract with the reader, as one might expect for the printed pages of an autobiography, where the author’s name on the cover is taken to be the “I” of the narrator.⁴⁸⁶ Plus, a blog’s forums and commentary sections allow for not only interaction between reader and writer but also the blurring of the line separating them, which underscores the socializing aspect of autobiographical writings in the “moi électronique,” as Lejeune notes:

Nous n’existons qu’en relation avec les autres. L’intime n’existe pas en soi, il est toujours intériorisation. Ce retour vers autrui que fait le cyberdiariste en indiquant son adresse électronique, ce n’est pas une trahison des secrets du moi, mais l’accomplissement de son souhait le plus profond, l’accès à un alter ego, une synthèse du journal et de la correspondance.⁴⁸⁷

The “moi électronique” is ubiquitous in everyday culture; a preponderant “curating of the self” for ordinary people through new media may be the symptom of an ever-growing narcissism in contemporary life, in which social media image-sharing merely amounts to a form of visual bragging. Social media profiles have also begun to show us that the referent, contrary to Barthes’s belief, does not always adhere: “catfishing” and other hoaxes produced by fake profiles trick others into thinking a persona is real.⁴⁸⁸ In a more literary sense, the majority of blogs by French and Francophone writers are indeed textual, but the format lends itself easily to incorporating images, from portraits of the author to photographs from his or her daily life, and there are no rules about blogs being purely text. Twitter limits the number of characters (one

⁴⁸⁵ Évelyne Broudoux, “Je blogue, tu blogues, nous bloguons, – du carnet individuel à l’écriture collective,” *Les dossiers de l’ingénierie éducative*, no. 45, (2003): 62-63. The coinage is attributed to Jorn Barger, who hybridized the terms “logbook” (a ship’s record of travel) and a “log” (tech jargon for the record of computers connected to the same server), 62.

⁴⁸⁶ See Anne Cauquelin, *L’Exposition de soi. Du journal intime aux Webcams*, Eshel, 2003, for a discussion of new media avatars of the *journal intime* in video-blogs and open-source online diaries.

⁴⁸⁷ Philippe Lejeune, “Cher écran...” *Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet*. Paris: Seuil, 2000, 44.

⁴⁸⁸ The term “catfishing” comes from a 2010 documentary by the same name in which the director, Nev Schulman, was conned into a web-based relationship with based on a profile of a woman who, in reality, did not exist.

hundred and forty, to be exact) and some applications like Tumblr and Instagram even encourage the user to create a narrative composed almost exclusively of photographs. The writer's blog also adds another layer to the notion of the paratext.⁴⁸⁹ As useful as they are as projects and experiments for big-name writers in France (and popular culture alike), these forms of "moi électronique," also raise questions over how to interpret ongoing, fragmentary web-based narratives as intermedial autobiographical acts.

Available on the web, written in the first person, archived in chronological order, and composed of fragmentary entries, the blog epitomizes autobiographical writing in the digital age, and the French population has earned the reputation as one of the world's most active blogging cultures, with sixty-percent having visited one in the past month, versus only thirty-percent of Americans.⁴⁹⁰ The author of the aforementioned *blogueur* study speculates that this is due in part to early introduction of the Minitel, a computer network that enfolded online communication into everyday experience in France in the 1980s.⁴⁹¹

The "blog-effect" has even taken root in experimental contemporary French literature with some writer's blogs being visited over a thousand times daily on average. Novelists and *blogueurs* such as Éric Chevillard and François Bon, among others, (separately, of course) begin a project as a blog then publish it as a book, though the two authors disagree with regards to the importance of print for contemporary literature.⁴⁹² Chevillard sees the blog as a lowbrow

⁴⁸⁹ Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris: Seuil, 1987. François Bon's personal website receives 2,500 visitors daily. Éric Chevillard's blog receives 2,000, and Alain Mabanckou's receives 1,800 visitors per day. See Marie-Ève Thérénty, "L'effet-blog en littérature: Sur *L'Autofictif* d'Éric Chevillard et *Tumulte* de François Bon," *Itinéraires*, no. 2 (2010): 53-63.

⁴⁹⁰ Thomas Crampton, "France's mysterious embrace of blogs" *The New York Times*, 27 July 2006.

⁴⁹¹ At the same time, the Minitel did not allow for much in the way of self-expression because it was a pre-World Wide Web telecommunications service designed for information (banking, booking travel, etc). Minitel was shut down as late as 2012.

⁴⁹² Marie-Ève Thérénty, "L'effet-blog en littérature: Sur *L'Autofictif* d'Éric Chevillard et *Tumulte* de François Bon," *Itinéraires*, no. 2 (2010): 53-63.

artform, citing his initial reservations to begin one, whereas Bon recognizes the blog as one of many forms of literature besides the printed book.⁴⁹³

Chevillard has published with Les Éditions de Minuit for more than twenty years, producing over seventeen novels and short stories, but his blog *L'Autofictif*, which often playfully critiques the literary establishment in France, has received more attention since its début in 2009 than his “classical” literary output.⁴⁹⁴ In a recent entry, he pokes fun at the endless stream of mundane posts on social media sites that closely resembles the task facing any autobiographer: “L’autobiographe propose une anthologie de son existence. Il publie des morceaux choisis de celle-ci, les meilleurs passages. L’intégralité nous ennuerait à mourir.”⁴⁹⁵ Everyday he publishes three short aphorisms, written in the first-person, and after their accumulation, usually over the period of a year, he deletes them from the archives of the blog; without altering the content, he reproduces them in an eponymous book, the most recent being the seventh volume *L'Autofictif au petit pois*, covering 2013-2014.⁴⁹⁶ Chevillard does not allow comments, a feature that can be enabled or disabled on blogs. Its use of the blog format gestures to a public domain yet it prevents any interaction with its readers, a hybrid quality that has influenced critics’s decision to refer to *L'Autofictif* as “un journal extime fait d’éclats de littérature.”⁴⁹⁷ The disabled function makes his blog more “literary” than others: like in “classic” literary form (the book, for example) the reader cannot comment. This playfulness with regards to the autobiographical in his blog has influenced his approach to writing the self with tongue-in-

⁴⁹³ François Bon, “Le livre n’a jamais été l’unique vecteur de la littérature” (www.tierslivre.net) qtd. in Martine Laval, “Que disent les écrivains sur leurs blogs?” *Télérama*, 2 February 28 2009.

⁴⁹⁴ Éric Chevillard, <http://autofictif.blogspot.com/>. He also writes as a columnist for *Le Monde des Livres*.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, “samedi 25 avril 2015: #2589.”

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, *L'Autofictif au petit pois*, Bordeaux: L’Arbre vengeur, 2015.

⁴⁹⁷ Pierre Assouline, “Ce Chevillard qui fait blog à part,” *La République des livres- Le Monde*, 21 janvier 2009.

cheek humor, evidenced by a self-portrait in his text *Le Désordre azerty*, where he lets his keyboard guide him, using the first letters (AZERTY; the English equivalent would be QWERTY) to structure twenty-six alphabetized vignettes of and by the author.⁴⁹⁸ Without input from the blogosphere, Chevillard exerts control over self-representation, from the entries' first appearance online to the final print version, demonstrating his interest in maintaining a literary bent to his autobiographical writing, whether blog or book.

Bon's attitude toward the book is much more skeptical than Chevillard's. In the essay "Après le livre," he posits that electronic forms (on the screen) have replaced print, as the dominant form of transmission of ideas, from e-Readers to web pages; this is not a prophecy since such changes already structure daily life.⁴⁹⁹ "L'écriture web" has thus successfully shaken up categories of the reader and writer through electronic forums on web pages, Twitter, and other examples of social media that break down boundaries between users and producers, which calls into question the figure of the "author" in the double sense of "authority" and "writer." Despite Bon's claims, critics were puzzled when the book first appeared, since the title suggests print is a bygone relic, yet this announcement is made in the pages of none other than a book.⁵⁰⁰ Nevertheless, his main point is to urge study of this new relationship to the text and to books that has changed as a result of new digital forms like blogs that are more open to "rewriting" and successive reiterations of a text. In addition to Bon's corpus of texts, since 1997 he has maintained a website, www.tierslivre.net, and in 2008 founded a digital publishing house for contemporary literature, www.publie.net. He contributed to the blog (though he does not use the

⁴⁹⁸ Éric Chevillard, *Le Désordre azerty*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2014. For example, the entry "Q comme Quinquagénaire" reads: "Je nie qu'un mot aussi laid puisse contenir quelque vérité que ce soit me concernant. Pas plus quinquagénaire que quincailleur, moi, et la preuve en est que je n'ai jamais su planter un clou : j'aurais l'air malin d'en vendre !"

⁴⁹⁹ François Bon, *Après le livre*, Paris: Seuil, 2011.

⁵⁰⁰ See Roger Chartier, "Après le livre de François Bon: lira bien qui écrira le dernier" *Le Monde*, 22 September 2011.

term) version of *Tumulte* for the entire year of 2006, then moved several of these entries to a site that acted like a preview for the printed version; shortly after book's publication, the original site's entries were deleted (and the address erased), like those of *L'Autofictif*, no longer available on the web and can only be read in print.⁵⁰¹

The blogs by the two authors point toward the digital horizon of “literary” writings of the self, inherently wrapped up in an exploration of *la vie quotidienne* that forms the impetus for each of their projects, not in terms of a transgressive “confession” or “exposure” in which the writer tells all. Bon is intrigued by the instantaneity of the online format, imagining “une sorte de livre fait tout entier d’histoires inventées et souvenirs mêlés” that is “immédiatement disponible sur Internet, mise en ligne au quotidien.” Chevillard, on the contrary, has mixed feelings about using something so vernacular, calling it “un vilain blog” and explaining the title was chosen “par dérision envers le genre complaisant de l’autofiction” that has bothered him since the origination of the term in the 1970s.⁵⁰² In the spirit of the blog’s facetiousness, it should be read as “la chronique énervée” of modern day life.⁵⁰³ Neither Chevillard nor Bon necessarily needs a blog to promote their work; generally speaking, when generated by the author, it is seen less a marketing tool and more as a readily available format—easily accessible and publishable—that allows them to experiment with writing (the) everyday while giving them the option to repurpose materials for publication in a more “serious” literary form, the book. *Tumulte* and *L'Autofictif* are writer’s blogs that show process, works coming into being; they rarely expose intimate details about their personal lives.

⁵⁰¹ See Marie-Ève Thérénty, “L’effet-blog en littérature: Sur *L'Autofictif* d’Éric Chevillard et *Tumulte* de François Bon,” *Itinéraires*, no. 2 (2010): 53-63, for a timeline of the work’s three formats. *Tumulte* was available online for close to a year before it was turned into a book. Bon did leave the preview site available on his personal website: www.tierslivre.net.

⁵⁰² Éric Chevillard, *L'Autofictif*, Paris, L’Arbre vengeur, 2009, 8. He is referring to Serge Doubrovsky’s term “autofiction,” broadly conceived as “fictionalized autobiography,” *Fils*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977, 10.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid*, 8.

In the rapid turnover of new media, blogs also seem somewhat outdated, having been eclipsed by the tyranny of social media.⁵⁰⁴ The plug of “follow me” on outlets like Twitter, Facebook, etc., is an echo of Sophie Calle’s first photo-textual project *Suite vénitienne/Please follow me* (1980) in which the simple exercise of tracking passerby in the street leads Calle to trail a stranger all the way to Venice. Jean Baudrillard’s afterword to the text explains that “[t]o shadow another is to give him, in fact, a double life, a parallel existence,” since “any commonplace existence can be transfigured” and “any exceptional existence can be made commonplace” because the other is never truly “known.”⁵⁰⁵ This contemporary desire to be followed, not so distant from the voyeurism Baudrillard describes or the implications that a study of “cybervoyeurism” might entail, characterizes popular exhibitionistic practices in social media circles.⁵⁰⁶

One can no longer speak of the impact of “online presence” (a virtual and visual self-representational process) without discussing social media. Using status updates and photos in the form of a list in conjunction with more interactive postures—liking, retweeting, or reposting, this type of voluntary self-exposure also implies the perils of the digital age where social media users are encouraged to share personal details (birthdate, birthplace, university and professional affiliations) accompanied by video clips and photographs.⁵⁰⁷ Given the systematic patterns of self-representation in contemporary life, terms like a “dévoilement de soi” (unveiling of the self)

⁵⁰⁴Nicolas Gary, “Le blog est dépassé, aujourd’hui on écrit des romans sur Twitter,” *Books*, no. 7, July-August 2009; Jill Walker, “Mirrors and Shadows : The Digital Aestheticisation of Oneself” *The Proceedings of Digital Arts and Culture*, 2005.

⁵⁰⁵ Sophie Calle and Jean Baudrillard, *Suite vénitienne/Please follow me*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1980, 79.

⁵⁰⁶ See Joanne Jacobs, “Communications Over Exposure: The Rise of Blogs as a Product of Cybervoyeurism,” *ANZCA Conference*, 2003.

⁵⁰⁷ Intel successfully market an application called “Museum of Me,” geared toward Facebook users, that turns their profile and posts into a virtual museum tour complete with white walls and animations of museum-goers, a true tribute to the self (and our narcissism). Intel, “Museum of Me,” 2011.

or an “écriture de soi” (writing, not photographing) no longer fully address practices of ordinary people.⁵⁰⁸ Instead, intermediality (and its resonances with the interpersonal) intervenes in these practices. The autobiographical writings and visualizations discussed in this dissertation thus seem to long for a prior moment of self-exposure that still allowed for a meditation on erasure, using, as a model, Barthes’s withholding of a photograph of his mother from the space of the page. Their careful rhetorical posturing and omission of photographs reveals not only an awareness of the self as a construction but also the desire to retain some degree of privacy in a world increasingly centered on the self.

⁵⁰⁸ Once these details are shared online, the owner faces the risk of losing ownership of the information. The French government’s website cautions: “Cette nouvelle forme de traçage [...] naît précisément de l'exposition consciente et volontaire, par les individus, de pans entiers de leur vie privée sur Internet.”

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