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Rituals of Jouissance in Annie Ernaux's *L'Usage de la photo*

Desire is a central concern in contemporary French writer Annie Ernaux's autobiographical corpus from the best-seller *Passion simple*, chronicling her love affair with a Russian diplomat, to *La femme gelée* about the unraveling of her marriage. The jacket of her most recent book, *L'Usage de la photo*, [Slide 1] suggests much of the same—a narrative focused on sexual encounters. Yet this time, Ernaux and her lover, Marc Marie, write about photographs of clothes and furniture left after having made love. But *L'Usage de la photo* is not exclusively about sex. It also offers a portrait of Ernaux's experience with breast cancer. The personal objects—shoes, pens, bras, briefcases, and pants—shown in these post-coital photographs displace her body as the subject of experience and through their silence, contend with the absolute absence of the self.

Even as a breast cancer narrative in which the illness does not take center stage, *L'Usage de la photo* reveals a larger engagement with the boundaries of self-exposure and mortality. For Ernaux, not showing her body in the photographs is a commentary, albeit a paradoxical one, on the media's hesitation to visualize breast cancer in the public eye: “three million breasts sewed, scanned, and marked with red and blue ink, X-rayed, rebuilt, and hidden under blouses [...] writing about my cancer is an unveiling” (112). The very fact that the subject of breast cancer is obscured by the banality of the images is important to its interpretation.

Furthermore, her use of an analog camera in 2005, which many at the time considered “on its way out” because of digital technology, shows that Ernaux is concerned with a certain kind of photography. The practice of capturing scenes is not just a nostalgic recuperation of analog camera use. It allows Ernaux to describe the photographs in a unique way since there is an inherent delay between the moment of capture and the second viewing after she has picked

them up at the drugstore. This kind of photography is also deeply indebted to a Barthesian reading of the photograph as on the one hand, something that provides a material trace, and on the other hand, something that reminds the subject of his or her mortality. Despite the morbidity, Ernaux, like Barthes, finds the “d clic”, or click of the shutter button to be titillating, a moment right on the hinge between life and death.¹ The thrill of the camera is both physical and intellectual. The camera becomes a sexualized prosthetic eye that “causes a particular kind of arousal, as if I had a phallus.”² It also stimulates her intellectually: “the click of the shutter makes my brain tremble with pleasure.”³

The inclusion of post-coital photographs in the text allows Ernaux to stage *la petite mort*, which translates word for word as “the little death” and is the French euphemism for orgasm. We are really dealing with a *m nage   trois* made up of Ernaux, Marc Marie, and death. Ernaux explains in an interview with her publisher, “The absence of my body from the photographs where eroticism is represented by left-behind clothing referred back to the possibility of my absolute absence, my death.”⁴ The photographs are reminders of Ernaux’s closeness to death and desire. Such proximity, Ernaux explains, made it necessary to create tangible memories.⁵ By anchoring her experience of cancer treatment in desire, Ernaux affirms herself as a living and sexual body that abides by the words of Bataille, “Eroticism is [...] assenting to life even in death.” These words serve as the epigraph to Ernaux’s breast cancer narrative.⁶

1 *La Chambre claire* in *Œuvres compl tes*, pp. 1173-1174.

2 “une excitation particuli re, comme si j’avais un sexe masculin” (123).

3 “le d clic me fait tressaillir le cerveau de plaisir” (123).

4 “Au d part, je ne voulais pas  voquer ma maladie. Mais au vu des photos, je ne pouvais pas oublier que, alors, je portais une perruque, que mon corps  tait devenu un champ d’op rations extr mement violentes. Ces photos d’o  les corps sont absents, o  l’ rotisme est seulement repr sent  par les v tements abandonn s, renvoyaient   ma possible absence d finitive.”

(<http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/Entretiens/01052322.htm>)

5 “conserver une repr sentation mat rielle de l’acte” (12)

6 “L’ rotisme est l’approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort.” *Erotisme*, 17.

We can read the title *L'Usage de la photo*, translated as *The Use of Photography*, as a kind of “how-to book” for writing against the stigmas and silence that have surrounded breast cancer. But the title *L'usage de la photo* also alludes to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s text on photography-- *Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, or “Essay on the social uses of photography.” Using a series of post-coital photographs, Ernaux, whose autobiographies often adopt the same ethnographic style as Bourdieu’s writing, interestingly subverts the family-ritual function of photography, which Bourdieu considers to be its primary role. She creates a new ritual of her own, one that does not celebrate birthdays, family gatherings, and holidays, but instead commemorates, both visually and textually, an experience that intertwines death and the erotic.

Together we will look at two photograph and text pairs. First, the post-coital photograph that started it all. Second, the photograph of Ernaux’s desk, which is in total disarray because she and Marc Marie have just made love on top of it.

The first photograph in the text [Slide 2] coincides with Ernaux’s declaration that she has cancer.⁷ It becomes increasingly clear that as we are brought into the space of the apartment, Ernaux domesticates her experience of cancer by folding it into her daily life. As she states, “saying ‘I have chemo tomorrow’ became as natural as saying ‘I have a hair appointment’” (28).⁸

In the style of a detailed police report, she then inventories the objects seen in the photograph: “in the foreground, on the right, a red pull-over,” “a flash illuminates the scene, bleaching out the hall and the radiator” (30). We come to understand that the moment of erotic pleasure is over. She then describes the space we can barely see outside the frame, what Barthes terms “le champ aveugle” [the blind field], which allows the viewer to participate in a kind of

⁷ “L’autre scène, celle où se jouait dans mon corps, absent des clichés, le combat flou—entre la vie et la mort” (16).

⁸ “Dire ‘j’ai chimio demain’ est devenu aussi naturel ‘que j’ai coiffeur’ l’année d’avant” (28).

visual eroticism as well. Marc Marie touches on this aspect of the frame in his reading of the same photograph: “For an outsider, these are only traces, but we see there what was not shown, what happened before, during, and just after.”⁹ Ernaux and her lover are able to reanimate the scene by writing about the photograph. This is one example of the uses of photography by Ernaux and Marc Marie. On the one hand, the still, silent, shell-like clothing in the photographs remind them of the passage of time; on the other hand, the clothing in the photographs defiantly rejects the stasis and silence of death because they are reminders of the spontaneity and exuberance of sex.

Lastly, Ernaux explains her role as spectator. All of the photographs have a doubled viewership since Ernaux and Marie see the photographs a second time when they comments on them. The clothes thus act as a Rorschach 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 ironic detail here, of course, being that the very place where Ernaux goes to have her body poisoned is named after Marie Curie who died of radiation poisoning.

The moment the photograph was taken and the moment of writing about the photograph feature different points of view by Ernaux. This “double regard” is doubled again by Marc’s reading of the same photograph. The addition of his text demonstrates the connections and disconnections between self and other. In an interesting example of the disconnection between the two voices, Ernaux describes but does not reproduce a photograph of Marc posing naked in bed. She writes “I can describe it, but not expose it to view here.”¹⁰ For her, this image is a male

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10 “Je peux la décrire, je ne pourrais pas l’exposer aux regards.” (20)

equivalent of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, which was originally meant for private viewing. Her verbal description of a visual object also underscores the play between voluntary and involuntary forms of intimate exposure.

Marc exposes a similar kind of vulnerability for Ernaux in his description of the desk scene [Slide 3]. This time they shy away from the usual spots—the hallway, the bedroom, and the living room— and move into Ernaux's workspace: "During her treatment, I saw her desk, always with its pale green folders in the same place, protecting her work [...] we baptized this sacred space by placing our naked butt cheeks on it."¹¹ Ernaux informs the reader that they selected this photo out of a sequence of three because it was the only one without clothing. Instead, we see the pens, papers, and other miscellaneous office supplies flung in every which way behind a desk. Upon seeing the photograph, Ernaux likens the image of her desk, a metonym for her profession as a writer, to the experience of seeing photographs of herself on book jackets and promotional materials. And here again, the reader is allowed to participate as an erotic spectator when viewing the photograph of Ernaux's desk. Marc gestures to this pulling back of the curtain on the writer, stating "the photographers and the tv viewers are always fond of these privileged glimpses into the life of an author."¹² Just like Ernaux's lover, we have the sense of being granted entry into the guarded space of the writer's desk. But as we attempt to read the manuscripts and notes flung around the desk, scanning them for any legible detail, the task of decipherment becomes increasingly elusive. Ernaux herself notes the panicked reaction she felt upon realizing she was unable to ascertain any clues to what was written, as if the blank sheets of white paper serve as a reminder of death's void.

11 "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**" (91).

12 "les photographes, les téléspectateurs sont toujours friands de ces moments qu'ils nomment privilégiés" (92).

The erotic space between the photographs and writing created by Ernaux and her lover is all at once textual, visual, and sexual. Writing and photography become part and parcel of creating material traces that allow Ernaux to create a new model for making sense of her experience with cancer. As the latest installment in an already numerous series of seventeen autobiographies by Ernaux, *L'Usage de la photo* like its antecedents is both intensely personal and public. As she wryly remarks, the only interest it contains for future readers may be a “testimony about which shoes were fashionable in the early 2000s.”¹³ Yet it is undeniable that Ernaux has also made a provocative and important intervention against the stigma of breast cancer as a silent death sentence.

Media

Slide 1- *L'usage de la photo* book jacket illustration

Slide 2- “Dans le couloir, 6 mars 2003” photograph (‘her and his’ entries “À cette période de ma vie” and “La composition du couloir”)

Slide 4- “Dans le bureau, 5 avril” photograph (‘her and his’ entries “Pour quelle révélation” and “Sanctuaire”)

13 “des témoignages sur la mode des chaussures au début des années 2000” (151).

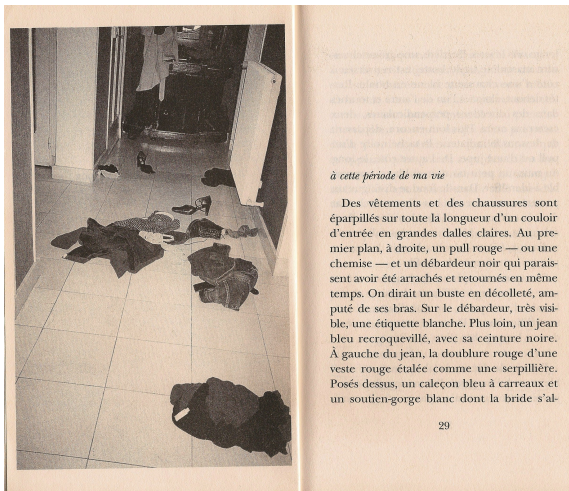
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Annie Ernaux Marc Marie
L'usage de la photo



Slide 2



Slide 3

