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Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Word & Image

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t716100761>

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To cite this Article Blatt, Ari J.(2009) 'The interphototextual dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'usage de la photo*', *Word & Image*, 25: 1, 46 – 55

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02666280802047711

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666280802047711>

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The interphototextual dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'usage de la photo*

ARI J. BLATT

Ever since the advent of the medium in the mid-nineteenth century, photography has been engaged with literature in an almost constant dialogue and process of intersemiotic cross-fertilization. The scholarly field that has recently begun to develop around the critical study of this kind of aesthetic border crossing — and, more specifically, around what I will be referring to here as the 'phototext' — is as burgeoning as it is multidisciplinary, spanning over 150 years of literary, artistic, and cultural history. Of course, the term phototext is an evasive one that critics and scholars of interart relations have, for years now, been using to refer to a number of different forms that the conjunction of words and photographs might take.¹ Some critics, for example, consider the photograph itself as a kind of phototext, in that all photographs are to be 'read', to some extent at least, in order to be understood.² These days many would agree that photography is constituted by not merely a system of codes, but by language, and that it even constitutes a grammar all of its own.³ Many photographs, for that matter, can be explored for their latent textuality (or not so latent, as the case may be in those photographic 'hieroglyphs' where words actually infiltrate the image's frame).⁴ Much photography can also be appreciated for its narrative capability, a thought which begs the question: Don't all photographs have a story to tell?⁵ Recent photographic *tableaux* by artists like Cindy Sherman, Anna Gaskell and Gregory Crewdson certainly do. Indeed, where Sherman's groundbreaking *Untitled Film Stills* recall scenes culled from the archives of low-budget B-movies, and Gaskell's early *Wonder* series eerily melds references to *Alice in Wonderland* with the horror-genre sensibility of Stephen King, Crewdson's large-scale C-prints from the *Twilight* series — produced with a cast of 'actors' and crew of gaffers, lighting technicians, and prop creators that would make any film director jealous — smack of something straight out of the *X-Files* or even *The Twilight Zone* (figure 1). The case of the *photoroman*,⁶ or photonovella, composed primarily — and sometimes entirely — of images arranged on the pages of a book, allows us not merely to speak of stories, but of plots as well. Some readers may recall Roland Barthes's infamous snub of the *photoroman* when he wrote that he was both touched and traumatized by the 'stupidity' of the genre;⁷ then again, he was not around to experience those second-generation masterworks like Marie-Francoise Plissart's *Droit de regards*, to cite one of the most innovative of 'high-art' examples (figure 2), a text that

links together a series of intriguing and sometimes provocative stills to tell a vertiginous self-reflexive tale whose labyrinthine, almost kinetic visual scenario rivals those rhizomatic narratives of writers like Claude Simon and Italo Calvino.

Complicated? Certainly. But stupid? Hardly.⁸ Indeed, the *photoroman* adds yet another level of complexity to our already loaded, overburdened term, as do those composite works by artists like Sophie Calle, whose original word and image pairings, which have for decades now proven interesting to art historians and literary and cultural critics alike, are disseminated not only on the walls worldwide in galleries and museums, but on the shelves of libraries and bookstores as well. One would be remiss, too, not to mention certain distinctly cinematic phototexts in which the merger of image, plot and *parole* is played out on screen: I am thinking in particular of those now classic case studies on voyeurism, obsession and mechanical reproduction like Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1978) and the more recent, but no less important, *One Hour Photo* (dir. Mark Romanek, 2002) — a small coterie of films that show us just what fun it can be to tell tales with pictures — but also of vehicles like Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962) and Agnès Varda's *Ulysse* (1982), two of the most ingenious and influential cinematic photo-essays of the last half-century.

Finally, we must be careful not to neglect the text as phototext paradigm in which literary narratives explore the nature of photographic representation in words, whether they model their own way of seeing (and writing) on photography, creating a unique kind of optical poetics in the process (one thinks of Emile Zola's particularly photographic conceptualization of the Naturalist project, or of Marcel Proust's optical metaphors, for example), or whether they explore the social and epistemological implications of advances in photographic or protophotographic technology (Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's optogrammatic tale 'Claire Lenoir' (1887) comes to mind here). Other textual phototexts describe and contextualize both real and fictional stills that make their way into narrative, proving just how malleable the figure of ekphrasis really is and engaging the medium's power as a tool of voluntary memory (as in Georges Perec's *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975)), its link to the personal past (Patrick Modiano's *Chien de printemps* (1993)) or its relationship to ritual and the spiritual (Michel Tournier's *La*



Figure 1. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 2001–2002. Digital C-Print, 48 × 60 inches (121.92 × 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Figure 2. Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), pp. 72–73. Courtesy of the artist.

goutte d'or (1985) and 'Les suaires de Véronique' (1978) are often talked about in this regard).

In what follows, I would like to focus on yet another kind of phototext that is perhaps the most explicitly, most visibly hybrid manifestation of the genre: namely, those works of narrative literature (fiction, autofiction, or otherwise)⁹ that offer innovative pathways for thinking about photography, as well as the relationship between photography and writing (let alone photography and the *romanesque*) not simply by invoking images in words, but by establishing a dialogue with certain photographs that appear on the space of the page. First coming to prominence in 1892 with Georges Rodenbach's haunting, symbolist rumination of lost love on the gothic Flemish streets in *Bruges la mort*, and continuing to develop after the turn of the century through works like André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), these 'récits-photo',¹⁰ as Daniel Grojnowski refers to them, have, over time, evolved into some of the most poignant, mystifying phototexts to have ever been written, namely those by the late W. G. Sebald. Like *Bruges la mort* and *Nadja*, illustrated narratives such as Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1992), *Austerlitz* (2001) and *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) stimulate a two-dimensional kind of reception, inviting the readers *cum* beholders to see with their eyes as well as their mind's eye; here, as in all *récits-photo*, ekphrasis and optics merge, encouraging audiences to consider a more complete spectrum of images, both graphic and verbal.

Even more recently, Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie have produced what is one of the most striking exemplars of the illustrated phototext in recent memory, one that is also perhaps among the most important for thinkers and theoreticians of photography, let alone for those interested in photography's status within the field of word and image studies, since it deftly manages to pose a number of important questions not only about the place that photographs occupy in our world today, but also about how we make sense of them. In *L'usage de la photo*, published in 2005, Ernaux, a major figure in the world of contemporary French letters, a figurehead of what some critics have called 'new women's writing' whose minimalist style has been praised for the way it blurs the boundary between the fictional and confessional, and Marie, a comparatively obscure journalist whom she dated in 2003–2004, set out to collectively and retroactively record the history of their relationship, and of their lives during that period, via a series of responses and reactions to 14 photographs (chosen from among dozens) that are reprinted at the opening of each short chapter.¹¹ These images, nondescript amateur stills, portray the desolate 'landscape' (p. 11) of clothes scattered aimlessly about the author's Cergy home (figures 3 and 4), as well as in hotel rooms in various locales throughout France and Belgium (figure 5).¹² Constituting a series of still lives that depict the sartorial detritus of the couple's frantic lovemaking, these photographs, many of which render the everyday objects depicted within more dignified, '[like] sacred ornaments' (p. 180), trigger the authors' nostalgic reflections on time past. Although written

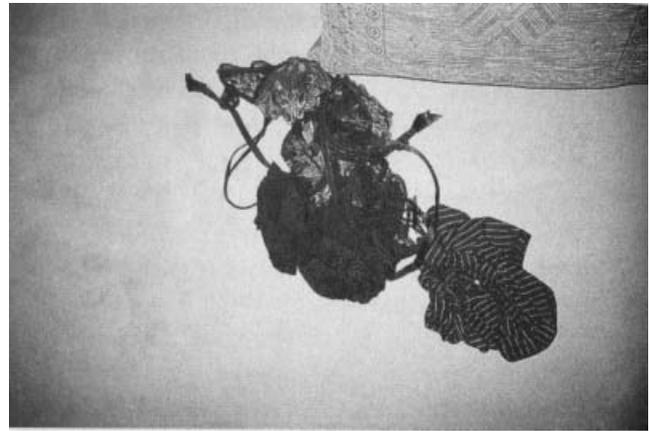


Figure 3. Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 176. Courtesy of the authors.



Figure 4. Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 106. Courtesy of the authors.



Figure 5. Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 44. Courtesy of the authors.

individually — neither Ernaux nor Marie knew what the other had produced until the moment of the *mise en page* — the two alternating narrative voices (referred to, respectively, as ‘A.’ and ‘M.’) do rather fortuitously complement one another, so much so sometimes that they occasionally use the same words or turns of phrase to speak of the same detail or event.¹³ That said, however, although initially designed as a bilateral effort in which both Ernaux and Marie unpack the images and locate them within the context of their lives — both Ernaux and Marie are credited with authorship for the text, and both, apparently, shared in the production of the images — from the outset one gets the clear impression that Ernaux, herself, is really in charge. Not only does her voice frame the book — *L'usage de la photo* begins with a preface and a brief introduction, penned solely by Ernaux, and ends with a short postface that gives her the last word — her own interpellation of each image, the first in each chapter, offers, quite simply, a more compelling, more sophisticated, and indeed more thoughtful rumination on the subjects at hand.¹⁴

Despite the lopsided presence of each authorial voice, however, both does his or her part to help the images speak, for as Ernaux reminds us, initially ‘all photos are mute’ (p. 73). Each chapter begins almost systematically with a description of the image under consideration that helps to decipher the individual components that figure in each frame. Here skirts, g-strings and boxer shorts lie prostrate on the ground, markers of a fleeting moment of pre-coital passion, and as the light from windows, lamps and the camera’s flash brightens each scene, dresses and carpeting and home furniture begin to take on a life of their own. Readers with an eye for the anthropomorphic might stop to reflect on the description of a red tank top that resembles ‘a scoop neck bust, amputated at the arms’ (p. 29),

while others might ponder a sport-jacket splayed on the floor, whose creased lining is folded in a such a way as to evoke uncannily, for Ernaux, ‘a gas mask’ (p. 107). Marie’s shoes, too, are the topic of frequent conversation, starring, as they do, in more than one picture. Looking at a particular shot in which they figure ‘on the hardwood floor, in a striking close-up ... gaping like a yawning mouth’ (p. 59) (figure 6), one cannot help but think of one of the twentieth century’s most famous art historical debates over another image of a quite similar pair of well-worn boots (figure 7), an intellectual skirmish waged between Meyer Shapiro and Martin Heidegger, and later synthesized and developed further by Jacques Derrida.¹⁵ Whereas Heidegger’s essentialist reading claimed these were the boots of a peasant woman, and Shapiro’s autobiographical take attributed them to the painter himself — not only are these the boots of a city dweller, he argued, they constitute one of Van Gogh’s most penetrating self-portraits — Derrida famously deconstructed the discussion to suggest that representation, all representation, is fundamentally inconclusive; that perhaps these are not even boots at all!¹⁶ Thankfully, Ernaux and Marie do not go as far, and agree, more often than not, on the provenance and symbolic value of Marie’s doddering Doc Martens; where Marie sees a ‘man’s shoe treading on a bra. Or rather no, crushing it by the toes ...’ (p. 63), Ernaux pictures them ‘devouring’ the frilly cotton undergarment, reading the boots as ‘an illustration of masculine domination’ (p. 60). Their interpretation, however, is playfully hypothetical since, as Ernaux makes sure to note, Marie — a lover, not a fighter — was at heart a more submissive soul (p. 60).

All of which is to say that writing in *L'usage de la photo* takes on a special function, namely, to interact with the photographs, to



Figure 6. Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 58. Courtesy of the authors.

situate them within a particular spatio-temporal nexus, and to offer a first-hand inquiry into the deeper nature of the image's signification. Not only do the authors sketch a pseudo-semiotic analysis, as in the example above, that highlights both the denotative and connotative structures at work in each picture — and, in a sense, illustrates each picture, which is to say to brings them to light — but they also summon the symbolic pull of the various referents on display, homing in on the details that attract the viewer's attention. Writing, then, figures here as a kind of supplement, that 'something extra' (p. 16) as Ernaux calls it, that gives form and shape to the image, domesticating its wildness and pinning down an excess of potential meanings.

After these initial moments of visual exegesis, in each chapter Ernaux and Marie branch out to give added voice to the silence, chronicling their time spent together, waxing poetic about the past, and sharing personal reflections on everything from music and books, to family, sex and, to be sure, photography. One realizes, however, that if writing gives voice to (and elicits latent meaning from) the silent images,



Figure 7. Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, Paris, 1886, oil on canvas (72 × 55 cm). Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

hypostasizing what initially seem like abstract compositions in the process, the photographs, too, have their own unique usage, one that can be characterized primarily as indexical in nature and which is motivated by Ernaux's double fascination, both for photography as well as for what she calls 'those material traces of presence' (p. 196):

I find myself as fascinated by photos as I've been since my childhood by stains made from blood, sperm, or urine deposited on sheets or old mattresses thrown out on the sidewalk; from wine or food incrustated in dining tables; from coffee or oily fingers on letters from the past. (p. 99)

Like those ordinary human stains, the photographs reproduced so systematically in the text serve, for Ernaux, as physical, material evidence of what once was, seeking as they do to capture the 'unreality of sex in the reality of traces' (p. 17), or to 'safekeep the traces of our most amorous hours' (p. 15). Writing, too, is positioned as a similar kind of imprint: 'I expect the same from writing.... I wish that words were more like stains that just won't go away' (pp. 99–100). Yet if writing and photography function as indices of the couple's time spent together, as physical proof of their 'having made love',¹⁷ proof as indisputable and as incriminating as a fingerprint on a [love] letter or a semen stain on a sheet,¹⁸ Ernaux, thinking more democratically, ultimately hopes that the photographs and the text collectively will call out to others, becoming a nostalgic stimulus that might evoke new feelings, sympathies and sensations in the minds of her readers: 'The highest degree of reality, though, will only be achieved if these written photos can transform themselves into other scenes in the reader's own memory or imagination' (p. 17).

Now, while it is certainly useful to inquire how the authors (how Ernaux especially) conceive of their phototextual project

by exploring how they articulate what is (or are) precisely, the use (and uses) of photography (and of writing, as it were), I am also inclined to think that the particular kind of phototext that they have composed here is perhaps more ambitious than they give it credit for being. Although it seems to make perfect sense that an analysis of *L'usage de la photo* would consider what the authors want from their phototext, especially when we bear in mind that *L'usage de la photo* is, in part at least, about desire, that it reproduces images indirectly evocative of that desire, and that it even suggests how the photographic act is a kind of manifestation of desire — as Ernaux writes, ‘the click of the shutter is a strange simulation of desire’ (p. 123)¹⁹ — I’d like to turn to another question that we might contemplate asking as well: specifically, what does the phototext, itself, want? For scholar and pioneer of word and image studies W. J. T. Mitchell, whose most recent book *What Do Pictures Want?* informs my argument here, given the status of pictures in society today, as well as the surfeit of discourses about their power to seduce, endanger, fool, entrance, trick and generally captivate the weary public, it has become progressively more important that we not simply attempt to interpret the signs of visual culture and explore what they mean, but that we also ask them, almost as if they were living, breathing beings, what they want, ‘what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond’.²⁰ Although Mitchell recognizes precisely how bizarre this reification of images appears, he remains convinced that the question is crucial since it can potentially allow us to understand more effectively the relationship between the image and those who see it, the goal being ‘to make the *relationality* of image and beholder the field of investigation’.²¹ Asking not what a picture can do for us, or what sorts of uses we can put it to (in other words, what *we* want from it), but rather, what a picture needs from us, what it wants from us and might want to do for us, might seem difficult to prove (Mitchell is quick to say that he is far from proposing a new method, or a new kind of iconology). Yet to ask this question as it pertains to the kind of phototextual hybrid that I am exploring here is, I feel, a particularly innovative and potentially very fruitful way to animate a new kind of conversation about images, about their relationship to writing and verbal language, and about how we relate to both.

What I would like to propose, then, is that if the photographs in *L'usage de la photo*, in conjunction with the words that speak for them, work together to memorialize a personal experience (namely, a relationship), to promote new ways of thinking, precisely, about photography and writing, and even to evoke emotions and memories on the part of the beholder who might identify, as Ernaux hopes they would, with the images shown and the situations described, I would argue that the pictures and words that constitute *L'usage de la photo* also strive (insofar as a work of art can do so) to open the text up to the vertical axis of associations that link one phototext to another and, I would even go so far to say, that link virtually all phototexts to one another. For every phototext is, to appropriate and augment Barthes’s

influential thoughts on intertextuality, not merely a tissue of quotations, but a tissue of quotations of other phototexts which share some of the same affinities and engage similar questions.²² *L'usage de la photo* not only belongs to and communicates with the larger constellation of phototexts that collectively contribute to our understanding of photography and its relation to society, knowledge and the other arts; it actively works to remind readers of how continuous and fluid, but also how enlightening that constellation actually is.²³ Moreover, if Ernaux ultimately anticipates that her images and words will galvanize readers’ own sensibilities, the text itself, I believe, not only is sensitive to the place it occupies in an increasingly diverse network of narrative, pictorial and theoretical engagements with photography, but subtly encourages readers to locate and identify other members of this network for themselves. *L'usage de la photo*, in other words, wants to incite readers to read, and to think, interphototextually.

How, then, does one do so? The pages that follow suggest one potential pathway that such an approach might take, as they drift through a small network of some of *L'usage de la photo*’s most promising and revealing interphototexts. Far from an exhaustive catalogue, this approach is, in many ways, a subjective exercise, one that not only illuminates the text under consideration through the lens of other works, but ultimately says a lot about how one (in this case, how I) read. Indeed, for Michael Riffaterre, intertextuality (and particularly Barthes’s formulation of intertextuality) ‘proclaims the reader’s freedom to associate texts at random, as dictated by his culture or personal idiosyncracies — a response by definition personal, shared with others only by chance’.²⁴ If theorizations of intertextuality thus provide us with a tool with which to think about the writer’s own influences, and about how texts communicate with one another, it seems clear that they can also be quite suggestive (and perhaps even more suggestive) of the reader’s tastes and sensibilities as well.

Take, then, the insistence that Ernaux places on the notion of the trace, an aspect of her writing explored above, that resonates with one of the most salient reflections on photography’s capacity to capture an imprint of the real, notably André Bazin’s groundbreaking essay on the ontology of the photographic image in which he posits that the essential metaphysical property of the photograph lies in its indexicality, not simply its iconicity. The photograph, as Bazin writes, is not merely a mirror image of the world, but manages to capture a physical trace of that world. The automatic, objective quality of photography is what legitimizes his suggestion that the medium, unlike, say, painting, is the most ‘credible’ of forms since ‘we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, what is actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference from the thing to its reproduction’.²⁵ More specifically, and perhaps more interestingly for our purposes here, however, in a crucial passage that opens that famous essay Bazin refers to a latent motivator in

the creation of images in general (and photographs in particular) as a practice akin to ‘embalming the dead’, since artworks, and photographs especially, have since the beginning sought to preserve the body, ‘to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life’.²⁶

If Bazin offers a compelling theorization of the photograph as mummified presence, in his wistful recent book *Mummy, mummies* Alain Fleischer plays with that paradigm and examines the mummy itself as evocative of the photographic process. In this combination of essay and fiction that focuses upon a group of mummified bodies housed for eternity in the museum crypts at Ferentillo and Palermo in Italy, Fleischer conceptualizes the relationship between mummified and photographic traces: ‘Mummification and photography are united against the disappearance of appearances: they are alike in their materiality, their techniques, and their codes of resemblance.’²⁷ By way of illustration, Fleischer, an accomplished artist in his own right, a veritable polymath whose photography and installation work has been exhibited worldwide, has himself preserved a few of the wizened human fossils from Ferentillo in a series of 14 artfully crafted photographs, reproduced at the center of the book, that ultimately serve to protect the bodies within, like the mummification process itself, from the destructive power of time:

In the darkness of the catacombs ... mummies are like photographic images that have been developed but not fixed, saved from a fatal and definitive exposure to the light of the living, rescued from an ultimate oxidation by death’s corrosives, thanks to a red, inactinic light, a laboratory light. Like photographs yet to be printed, cadavers ... to become mummies, were initially material supports, emulsions, conserved in the dark, subsequently treated with acids, then exposed to light before being brought back underground.²⁸

Like a photograph that slowly reveals its secrets when placed into a shallow pool of chemicals, yet which is never entirely fixed, the mummification process perpetuates the dead body’s slow march towards decay. Fleischer’s photographs of mummies, then, function as a curious *mise en abyme* of the photographic process itself, born as it is from a desire to ‘photograph a photo that has already been revealed’.²⁹ His book, too — another in a series of innovative phototextual hybrids to have been published in France recently — wraps these images of images in a third-degree protective shield, suggesting literature’s own power to preserve traces of the past.

Of course, Fleischer also makes a point of noting that the term mummy in French (*une momie*), as in Italian (*una mummia*), is in the feminine, and, for him, resonates with the maternal qualities of the English word ‘Mummy’. Curiously, in a number of works that comprise the canon of phototextuality that I have been establishing here, the mother figures prominently. Moreover, many of these phototexts mobilize photography as the vehicle through which to mourn the mother’s absence. We might think of Percec considering a series

of images (described but not reproduced on the page) of his own mother, who disappeared at Auschwitz, in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, or of Barthes’s disconsolate discovery of the famous Winter Garden photograph in *Camera Lucida*, another absent image of an absent mother that signals a turn towards a more personal reflection on photographic meaning. Ernaux, too, mobilizes photography, and in particular a photograph of an empty hotel room, to reflect on the recent death of her own mother, and on the sense she has of her mother’s own ‘having been there’: ‘That she was still alive when I first came to this hotel seems unbelievable. There must have been a period of time when I could see her [before her death] ... I cannot imagine this time’ (p. 46).

Although it might not seem like it at first, for Ernaux that photograph (like Barthes’s winter garden photograph, like the stills of Cyrla Percec) functions as a *memento mori*. Yet, when we consider how fundamental the notion of death is to the ontology of the photograph — virtually all of the most important thinkers about photography have explored this issue³⁰ — it is hardly surprising that Ernaux would make the connection. After all, are all photographs not ultimately suggestive of a certain kind of disappearance, absence or loss?

I pause to consider the relationship between death and memory in photography that Bazin and Fleischer so skillfully develop precisely because much of *L’usage de la photo* concerns the very same issue. For not only do Ernaux and Marie ‘use’ photography to capture fleeting traces of an episodic fling, the clothes strewn about representing markers of their own *jouissance* (p. 11) — often, and quite fittingly referred to as *la petite mort*, a euphemism that Ernaux registers in an epigraph attributed to Georges Bataille³¹ — but the text also devotes much attention to Ernaux’s consciousness of her own mortality since most of the narrative about that year spent with Marie also turns around the arduous battle she waged during that same period with breast cancer. The latest installment of a considerably sweeping autofictional universe that Ernaux has been constructing ever since the publication of her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, in 1974, *L’usage de la photo*, therefore, does not simply make a complex and highly personal contribution to contemporary thinking about photography (and its relation to writing): it also offers one of the most compelling recent reflections on illness.

Like Susan Sontag, whose own bout with breast cancer informed a series of essays collected in the 1978 classic *Illness as Metaphor*, Ernaux, a survivor, writes in order to demystify her suffering, to render it more real, more quotidian even: ‘To say “I have chemo tomorrow” has become as natural as saying “I have a haircut appointment” the year before’ (p. 7). In her essay, Sontag, too, argued against the trend, in literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mostly, to mythologize illnesses such as tuberculosis and cancer. For Sontag, the stereotyping and typologizing of disease that figurative or fictional writing enables does a disservice to our understanding of illness, and in fact clouds our sensitivity to what it means to be

sick: 'illness is *not* a metaphor', she writes, 'and the most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking'.³² Ernaux's stark, neatly efficient prose style, a minimalist kind of *écriture blanche* grounded in the often dour realities of everyday life, similarly resists the kind of metaphoricization of breast cancer that Sontag abhors. 'I can no longer tolerate', she writes, 'novels whose fictional characters are stricken with cancer. Nor films. How do authors dare *invent* such a thing. It all seems laughably fake to me' (p. 195).

Interestingly enough, whereas Sontag's famous thoughts on photography are published elsewhere in a collection of essays that now rivals Barthes's *Camera Lucida* for the title of most oft-cited work of photographic theory today, *L'usage de la photo* makes the link between photography and the author's own experience of illness that much more explicit. For as she notes, the photographs that fill the pages of the text provided a necessary stimulus for the writing about her disease:

One day [Marc] said to me, 'You only had cancer so that you could write about it'. I felt that, in a way, he was right, but until now I couldn't accept it. Only as I began to write about these photos could I do so. As if writing about the photos authorized the writing about cancer. There is a link between the two. (p. 76)

To simply write about her disease, in a kind of testimonial, would have been too difficult, too gratuitous almost. The photographs, on the other hand, allow her to enter more softly into that experience, perhaps because the images, void of any directly human presence, so hauntingly suggest what she is incapable of thinking or writing, precisely because it would be too painful, too awkward: namely, the potential for her own imminent disappearance, the thought that, one day perhaps, she will be no longer. 'When I look at our photos, I see the disappearance of my body' (p. 146).³³

Although, in the end, thankfully, Ernaux does not disappear, the physical toll extracted on her body, likened at one point to 'a theater of violent operations' (p. 111), is made all too clear. As she writes about the oncological poking and prodding, the catheter sticking out of her chest that resembles a 'supernumerary bone' (p. 25), and the inevitable hair loss that results from the chemotherapy — her bald head, she writes, calls to mind pictures of 'women whose heads were shorn after the liberation' (p. 47) — the text, a kind of *mise en pratique* of disease, what Ernaux calls a 'good use of illness' (p. 110), tells of a body *usé*, or worn away, by the treatment, treatment that paradoxically is designed to keep her alive by targeting and ridding the body of damaged cells.

Not inconsequentially, an integral part of modern medicine's attempt to defend the body against the onslaught of disease includes a graphic (and often photographic) component that Ernaux recalls: 'For months my body was investigated and photographed numerous times under all sorts of circumstances and by every technique imaginable. Mammography ... sonography ... radiography ... scintigraphy ... MRI ... CAT

scan ... tomography' (p. 194). That her decaying body is transformed into a series of images hints of the last interphototext that I would like to propose, one that also explores how bodies may become photographs, how photographs become bodies, and how both, not unlike mummies for that matter, are equally subject to decay. I am thinking here of a short text by Hervé Guibert, the penultimate chapter to his own 'photobiography'³⁴ *L'image fantôme*, entitled 'L'image cancéreuse' ('The cancerous image'). Here Guibert describes his almost fetishistic fascination for a photograph of a young man. Yet as the photo ages, the glue from the cardboard support on which it is pasted begins to slowly eat away at the paper from behind. The narrator, after an agitated search for ways to save it, wonders if the image, 'his friend', is worth saving at all. Ultimately, Guibert decides to wear the photo like a girdle on his chest, until one day it almost magically imprints itself on his skin, halting the corrosive influence of time: 'Each chemical pigment of the paper found its place in one of the pores of my skin. And the same image reconstituted itself perfectly, in reverse. The transference saved it from its illness.'³⁵ The fact that this image, this sickly, slowly rotting image, is saved by the body of an admiring subject upon which it is imprinted serves as an interesting counterpoint to Ernaux's discussion of her own body, a sickly body, saved in turn by the photographic technologies that were able to track and locate her cancer with enough precision to almost guarantee the success of her treatment. Of course, the most interesting twist to this invocation of Guibert's 'cancerous image', one that resonates on another level with the life and work of both Annie Ernaux and Susan Sontag (who was diagnosed with breast cancer in her early forties, and later died of cancer-related complications in 2004³⁶), is that Guibert, a writer hardly a stranger to photography (he was, after all, a practicing photographer, a successful author not merely of novels but of a number of innovative imagetexts, as well as a photographic critic for *Le Monde*), was, unfortunately, no stranger to the ravages of disease: Hervé Guibert died at the age of 36 in 1991 after suffering from HIV/AIDS, a harrowing, yet poignantly human experience to which he also bore witness in the form of videos and, like Ernaux, in photographs and in writing.

As I hope to have shown here, the exemplarity of *L'usage de la photo* as a phototext resides in the way it contributes to and dialogues with (and, in fact, suggests a desire to contribute and dialogue with) such a rich mosaic of narrative writing and critical thinking about photography. Yet that it should resonate so soundly with the most noticeable components of that mosaic might initially position the text as a kind of apotheosis or impasse of interphototextuality. That critics of photography (as well as those scholars working on the relationship between writing and photography) should turn time and time again to those usual theoretical suspects — Sontag, Benjamin, Bazin and Barthes, to name a few — might tend to suggest that critical writing about the medium in general, and about phototextuality in particular, is a closed circle, that it risks

becoming a bit too predictable (given my own liberal reference to a few of these sources here, I clearly plead guilty (no contest) to this charge as well). At the same time, however, *L'usage de la photo* makes such a compelling contribution to some of those enduring critical and theoretical discourses since it also speaks to a number of other, perhaps less obvious works (like those of Fleischer and, to a lesser extent, Guibert) that allow us to approach it from new perspectives.³⁷ As the constellation of textual phototexts grows larger every day with the publication of unique works of photographic criticism and theory, as well as with the appearance of innovative verbal/visual hybrids (like Camille Laurens's *Cet absent-là* (2004) and Marie N'Diaye's *Autoportrait en vert* (2005), to invoke two of the most recent texts to have come out of France), the potential for original interphototextual readings, spurned by texts that encourage this kind of reading, that in fact 'want' readers to read in such a way, is promising.

NOTES

1 – While Jefferson Hunter has proposed the term 'photo text' to refer to 'composite publications evoking a landscape or recording a history, celebrating a history or mourning a loss', Marsha Bryant prefers the term 'photo-text', joining the two constituents together to avoid the 'hidden bias' inherent in the term 'text', itself. She notes that, 'the double sense of text as written language and the site of interpretation makes Hunter's term a slippery one'. See, respectively, Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 1–2, and Marsha Bryant, ed., *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 11. The particular spelling of the term that I propose here is meant to accept, and even embrace, that inherent 'slipperiness', and refers, more generally, to those cultural artifacts (explicitly hybrid or, as we shall see, otherwise) that enable us to explore the reciprocity of the two media under consideration from within one, singular work. My understanding of the 'phototext' considers, then, the photographic specificity of the 'imagetext', a term that designates, quite simply, 'composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text'. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 89, n. 9.

2 – As Victor Burgin points out, 'Even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by language when it is "read" by a viewer'. 'Looking at photographs', in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 131.

3 – 'A photograph could also be described as a quotation'. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 71. Others, like Roland Barthes, in one of his earliest discussions of photography, highlighted, contra-Sontag, how the medium differs from language ('photography', as he wrote in 'The Photographic Message', is 'a message without a code'.) For a helpful discussion of the debate see Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, pp. 281–5.

4 – I borrow the notion of the 'hieroglyph' from Tom Conley's discussion of films that encourage reading (and writing), specifically his focus on those moments where alphabetic writing crops up within the frame of the moving image. See Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

5 – 'The art in photography is literary art before it is anything else; its triumphs and monuments are historical, anecdotal, reportorial, observational before they are purely pictorial. The photograph has to tell a story if it is to work as art. And it is in choosing and accosting his story, or subject, that the artist-photographer makes the decisions crucial to his art.' This also helps to explain Greenberg's famous dismissal of photography,

which he felt was too transparent, too intimately tied to the world it represents, indeed too indexical really to be considered in the same category as painting. Clement Greenberg, 'Four photographers', *New York Review of Books*, 23 January 1964. Quoted in William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 192.

6 – Or *roman-photo*, depending on one's understanding of that equally complex term. See, for example, the discussion in Jan Baetens, *Du roman-photo* (Mannheim and Paris: Medusa-Medias et Les Impressions nouvelles, 1992).

7 – Barthes, 'The third meaning', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Steven Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 66, n. 1.

8 – Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).

9 – I am thinking of those hard to place composite texts like Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), or John Berger and Jean Mohr's *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

10 – Daniel Grojnowski, *Photographie et langage* (Paris: José Corti, 2002), p. 96.

11 – Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 2005). References to selected pages will be made in parentheses. Translations of quoted passages are my own, unless otherwise noted.

12 – These are not the only photographs that figure in the text. Others, like a shot of Marc Marie's erect penis (p. 19), of both Ernaux and Marie in Brussels (p. 55), or of Marie's ex-girlfriend (p. 158) are mentioned and described, but not reproduced.

13 – In their reactions to the same photograph (the one reproduced on p. 130), both Ernaux and Marie invoke Barthes's famous notion of the *punctum* (without referencing this term outright). For Ernaux, 'There is always in a photo a detail that attracts our gaze, a detail that is more moving than others' (p. 132). For Marie, in each image, 'one detail dominates'. In this case, for both, a pair of white mules is what catches the eye.

14 – Consequently, much of what I shall have to say about the text focuses on Ernaux's text alone.

15 – See Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 4.

16 – For a concise history of this fascinating debate, see James Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 54–9.

17 – To borrow from Barthes's theorization of the 'ça a été,' that 'having been there' quality that marks all photographs with a 'certificate of presence'. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 87.

18 – There is something faintly criminal in the way the photographs appear here, not unlike those Eugène Atget streetscapes that Walter Benjamin so famously referred to as 'scenes of a crime'. As Marc Marie notes in his first intervention, the lovers made sure not to touch or displace any of the clothing before snapping the shutter, 'Like cops after a murder' (p. 40).

19 – Indeed, as Hervé Guibert wrote, 'the image is the essence of desire'. See Guibert, *L'Image fantôme* (Paris: Minuit, 1981), p. 89. Translation mine.

20 – W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xv.

21 – Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 49.

22 – The full citation is as follows: 'We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.' Barthes, 'The death of the author', in *Image, Music, Text*, p. 146.

23 – My understanding of interphototextuality, therefore, veers from Williams Irwin's condemnation of a kind of 'banal and idiosyncratic' intertextual reading in which 'intertextual speculations quickly degenerate into the *déjà lu*, pseudointellectual cocktail talk of the type, "This reminds me of that and so on".' See Irwin, 'Against intertextuality', *Philosophy and Literature*, 28 (2004), p. 236.

24 – Quoted in Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 36. Of course, this paper has focused (and will continue to focus) much of its attention on French enunciations of the phototext not merely because, as the veritable birthplace of photography, French writers and artists have been exploring the virtues of the medium for a very long time, but also, and perhaps more simply, because it is the literary and artistic tradition that I know best.

25 – André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 13–14. How ‘real’ a photograph’s representation of the world might seem has been an object of critical contention for many years. See, for example, Joel Snyder’s brilliant critique of the ‘realist fallacy’ in ‘Picturing vision’, *Critical Inquiry*, 6/3 (1980), pp. 499–526.

26 – Bazin, p. 9.

27 – Alain Fleischer, *Mummy, mummies* (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 2002), pp. 15–16. Translations mine.

28 – Fleischer, p. 14.

29 – Fleischer, p. 15.

30 – Philippe Dubois, for example, develops the idea of still photography as a kind of ‘thanaphotography’. See Dubois, *L’acte photographique* (Paris and Brussels: Nathan & Labor, 1983), p. 160. For her part, Susan Sontag writes, ‘Photographs state innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people’. See Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 70. See also, among others, Christian Metz’s discussion of the many ways photography is ‘linked with death’ in his article ‘Photography and Fetish’, *October*, 34 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 81–90.

31 – The epigraph reads: ‘L’erotisme est l’approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort’.

32 – Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 3.

33 – Further along, another photograph seems so abstract that it faintly registers with Ernaux. Her choice of words here, though, suggests precisely how much she has mortality on her mind: ‘[The photo] stirs up nothing in me. There is no longer here any life nor time. Here I am dead’ (p. 188).

34 – Pierre Saint-Amand devised this generic term to describe a particular kind of life-writing that integrates (in words or, quite literally, in pictures) a collection of personal photographs. See Saint-Amand, ‘Mort à blanc: Guibert et la photographie’, *Le Corps textuel d’Hervé Guibert*, ed. Ralph Sarkonak, *Au Jour le siècle*, 2 (1997), pp. 81–95.

35 – Guibert, p. 161.

36 – Annie Liebovitz’s latest book adds a moving photographic dimension to Sontag’s illness in its inclusion of a number of images that document the critic’s own struggle with cancer. See Liebovitz, *A Photographer’s Life: 1990–2005* (New York: Random House, 2006).

37 – In her own, very personal (yet no less critical) reading of *L’usage de la photo*, Martine Delvaux relies on a different set of interphototexts. Her exploration of the Ernaux/Marie collaboration through the lens of Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1992), proves especially convincing and, indeed, reveals quite a bit about how she reads. See Delvaux, ‘Des images malgré tout: Annie Ernaux/Marc Marie, *L’usage de la photo*’, *French Forum*, 31/3 (2006), pp. 137–55.