

Photographs in Autobiographies: Identities in Progress

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The article deals with the use of photographs in several French contemporary autobiographies (Roland Barthes, Annie Ernaux, Denis Roche, Hervé Guibert, Marguerite Duras). Its aim is to present this corpus of works grafting photographs onto various kinds of texts, works that can be called *photobiographies*. In the second part, the article analyses several issues raised by this new literary field. In particular, the article explains why the use of photographs changes the forms and the conditions of the autobiographical expression. Indeed, photographs problematize the representation and the construction of personal identities.

Keywords:

Photography has manifested its influence on literary works since its creation in the nineteenth century, either praised or despised by the authors referring to it. In the contemporary period its presence has strengthened more particularly in the novelistic field and in autobiographies. As regards the latter, the publication of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in 1975 and *La Chambre claire (Camera Lucida)* by Barthes in 1980 opened a new era in French literature. These books, both of which combine photographs and texts in an original attempt at self-representation, deeply influenced French critics and writers of the time. Hervé Guibert's *L'Image fantôme (Ghost Image)* published in 1981 and Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant (The Lover)* from 1984 followed directly in Barthes's footsteps. This corpus of works using photographs in an autobiographical context¹ has continued to increase since this period.² Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*, published in February 2008, whose structure is directly determined by a series of pictures and films representing Ernaux throughout her life, is probably the latest example of this kind of work.

¹ I am using here a minimal definition of *autobiography*, referring to works that attempt at representing the story of one's life. The scope of this definition encompasses experimental projects and works playing with the border between reference and fiction, between truth and invention.

² The corpus of works we are considering here encompasses the last forty years, and is very diverse. It includes authors as different as Denis Roche, Sophie Calle, Raymond Depardon, Christian Boltanski, Jean Rouaud, Hubert Lucot and François Bon.

This trend can be easily explained if we consider that photographs are precious documents for autobiographers. As Michael Sheringham puts it: ‘for a majority of Westerners in our time photographs are the most telling and evocative tokens of the individual past.’³ Nowadays it even seems that if someone wants to write about his or her own life, he or she will soon be confronted with an unfathomable number of photographs, digital or otherwise, and maybe even with videos. It would be certainly difficult to avoid them, or at least to avoid their influence on personal memory.

My aim in this paper will be to explore this corpus of French recent autobiographical works that graft photographs onto various kinds of texts, examining in particular the extent to which the use of photography changes the forms and the conditions of autobiographical expression. Indeed, grafted photographic bodies involve a tension between two forms of structure, the Narrative and the Album, and between two forms of reception, seeing and reading.⁴ How can these antagonisms prompt a renewal of the genre, with an increasing importance of ‘sense’ beyond the mere level of autobiographical ‘significations’?⁵ Finally, this particular kind of grafting process has major consequences on the way one can perceive and communicate one’s own identity, which gives the impression of dealing with ‘identities in progress’, as we talk of ‘works in progress’. Indeed, the use of photographs by autobiographers suggests that modern identities appear to be dynamic processes rather than well established entities.

1. Photobiographies: a contemporary autobiographical trend characterised by various kinds of grafting processes

1.1 Photobiographies as grafting processes: the scope of a definition

It is tempting to call works combining photographs and autobiographical texts ‘photobiographies’. This neologism was used for the first time in French by Gilles Mora in his *Manifeste photobiographique* published in 1983 and co-written with Claude Nori.⁶ But in this book, the term has a narrow meaning, referring roughly to a diary illustrated by photographs. The term is now commonly used by publishers to sell commercial illustrated biographies such as *Che: The Photobiography of Che Guevara*.⁷ However, several academic researchers mainly

³ Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 315.

⁴ I don’t mean here to oversimplify the complex issue of the relationship between *reading* and *seeing*. Of course, it can be argued that *reading* is a kind of *seeing*, and that it is possible to *read* an image. I am supporting here a clear distinction between these two activities for the sake of my analysis.

⁵ I am borrowing this distinction between *sense* and *signification* from Jean-François Lyotard. I shall come back to it later.

⁶ Gilles Mora, Claude Nori, *L’Été dernier. Manifeste photobiographique* (Paris: Éditions de l’Étoile, Écrit sur l’image, 1983).

⁷ Christophe Loviny, *Che: The Photobiography of Che Guevara* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1998).

in France and in the United States have been trying to redefine it since the end of the 1990's, that is to say to link it to the corpus of works referred to earlier. This paper intends to contribute to this effort.

The first difficulty is to delimit the scope of a definition. In this respect, we can consider that photobiography encompasses a series of contemporary works characterised by an autobiographical design and in which photographs play a major role, however they are used. The evocation of a photograph in an autobiography can trigger memory and narrative processes. But it can be described as well with more or less precision, which implies an *ekphrasistic* process. An *ekphrasis* is, indeed, a rhetorical trope referring to the description of a work of art (traditionally a painting or a sculpture). This is for example the case in Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*, already mentioned.⁸ Finally, photographs can be materially reproduced in an autobiographical work and are then co-present with a certain number of texts, be they captions, descriptions or narratives. This is what is to be found in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* which opens with an album of private snapshots, with captions provided by Barthes himself.

Moreover, photographs can be used to express autobiographical content. Various writers such as Denis Roche have combined a practice of photography with a writing of the self.⁹ But the status of photographs is intrinsically closer to a portrait or a self-portrait than to a proper autobiography.¹⁰ Indeed, a single snapshot does not have the necessary scale to represent the story of one's life. This situation can change when this snapshot is put into an album, whose status is closer to a narrative. I shall return to this problem later. In any case, photographs do not *express* their content in the way texts do. Photobiographies thus confront two different modes of expression and of reception (that is to say, reading and seeing). This grafting process has major consequences for the construction of autobiographical identities.

1.2 Between referentiality and fictionality: the problematic status of photographs in autobiographies

Academic works dedicated to photobiography have mainly focused on the referential possibilities offered by photographs. Indeed, their spectator is thought to believe, more or less spontaneously, that what they represent is *real*, authentic (this is, however, less the case for

⁸ The photographic *ekphrasis* has specific characteristics which are due in particular to the referential status of photos and to the fact that most of the family snapshots can't be considered as works of art. To define the exact nature of the photographic *ekphrasis* is one of the main issues related to the study of photobiographies.

⁹ See for instance *La Disparition des lucioles* (Paris: éditions de l'Etoile, 1982) and *Photolalies* (Paris: Argraphie, 1988). Denis Roche is a writer and a photographer. He uses photography to support his meditation on time, taking for example several snapshots of the same place at different periods of his life.

¹⁰ It does not mean that an autobiography, understood as an attempt at representing the story of one's life, cannot include portraits and self-portraits.

digital snapshots).¹¹ Thus their use in an autobiography could reinforce the reader's belief in the truth of the author's discourse. In a way, they could prove that what the autobiographer refers to does exist.

Photographs are, indeed, commonly used to authenticate things and, in particular, identities (on identity cards, driving licences). But one should not confuse here legal identities with autobiographical ones. Indeed, they often do not coincide for the simple reason that autobiographical identities are complex puzzles and are more often than not constructed against the arbitrary graft of names upon photographs. In photobiographies the effects produced by a picture depend on its various interactions with texts. Captions and narratives can problematize its interpretation and can even make it fictional if there is an obvious discrepancy between what is said and what is shown. This very discrepancy signifies for the reader/spectator that his or her take on the text or the snapshot could be wrong. His or her natural reaction is to have suspicions about the two and about the relationship between them. Photographs can thus be used as elements of fiction or can even produce a 'fiction effect' if their spectators realize that they do not match the text.¹² Besides, photographs have an intrinsic fictional dimension, which is due, for example, to our natural tendency to pose when we are photographed and to the various means of faking a snapshot.

Finally, the use of photographs renders the reception of autobiographies more complex. They seem, in fact, to provoke autobiographical writing in both senses of the term, that is to say to trigger, to call it (*pro vocare*) and to defy it, to problematize its status.

2. Between images and texts: a series of struggles between photographic and (textual) autobiographical bodies

2.1 A Foucauldian approach: the photobiographical possibilities offered by a dynamic opposition

Several theoretical analyses related to the relationship between images and texts are relevant as far as photobiographies are concerned. In particular, I would like to refer here to the work of Michel Foucault, who describes this relationship in terms of a power struggle. In this respect, in *This Is Not a Pipe*, with regard to René Magritte's painting of the same name, he writes: 'we must therefore admit between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections – or rather

¹¹ See Kendall Walton, 'Transparent Pictures. On the Nature of Photographic Realism', in *Marvellous Images. On Values and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 79–109.

¹² Such a mismatch between pictures and their captions can be found, for example, in Christian Boltanski's *Les Modèles* (Paris: Cheval d'Attaque, 1979). In the section of this book entitled 'Les portraits photographiques de C.B.', nine photographs are reproduced accompanied by a caption and a date. They are said to represent the author aged between two and twenty years old. But these pictures are obviously not showing the same person and the reader/spectator is soon inclined to doubt about their referential status.

attacks launched by one against the other, arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle.’¹³ The relationship is understood here as a battle field where the bodies of the text and of the picture are trying to capture one another. I used the expression ‘battle field’ implying the presence of a place, a ground common to images and texts, whereas Foucault himself only talks of a ‘non-place’ and of a ‘non-relation.’¹⁴ Indeed, for him they are by nature radically different and can only be brought together in the space of a book. And the configuration of this very space depends on a series of pressures and mutual influences. For Foucault, moreover, language, as a determining form, has a primacy over the visible, which is a determined and passive form. But despite this primacy, its relationship with the visible is ‘infinite’. That is to say, it keeps *relating to* it but is never able to *get the better of* it. In other words, if texts, be they captions, commentaries, descriptions or narratives, can influence the reception of images, they can never erase completely the specificity of the visible.

What can we make of this Foucauldian epistemological ground as far as photobiography is concerned? First of all, we can consider that this kind of work is characterised by a series of micro power struggles between two rival and heterogeneous agents – the visual and the textual. In this respect, writing can expand *against* the photographic body to reduce its space of expression. This might explain why actual photographs have disappeared from photobiographical works, that is to say, why they are not materially reproduced. In Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image* for example, a book which describes or evokes a series of virtual or actual photographs linked to Guibert’s personal story, pictures are no more than mere negatives, ghosts. Their only role is to trigger the text, to allow its development. As Guibert puts it: ‘[the] text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or foggy image — a ghost image’.¹⁵ The text casts out the frustration provoked by photography, which is unsatisfactory for Guibert because of its ontological limits. And finally, it replaces the actual snapshots.

Regarding photographs, they can introduce into the space of the page a dense block attracting the gaze of the reader/spectator, stopping, or hindering the linear textual progression. Their status as indexical icons (that is to say, as pictures produced by a direct recording of reality) particularizes the way they interweave with texts. They can fix the spectator’s attention; fascinate him or her like no other images — such as paintings or drawings. This is what Barthes

¹³ Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, translated and edited by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41 and p. 36.

¹⁵ Hervé Guibert, *Ghost Image*, trans. by Robert Bononno (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1996), p. 16.

suggests in *Camera Lucida* when he describes photography as a ‘pure deictic language’.¹⁶ And when a snapshot is not actually reproduced in a photobiographical work, it can still leave a trace of its existence in the text, a trace manifested for example by a characteristic fragmentation, a discontinuity inherited from photography.

2.2 How do photographs affect autobiographical discourse? A tension between the Album and the Narrative

Finally, the use of photographs in autobiographies introduces a struggle between two forms of structure and of progression, the album and the narrative. At first sight, photographs seem to tend to the former and autobiography to the latter. But their relationship of exchange and influence changes this situation. For example, although actual pictures are absent from their works, Ernaux’s texts in *Les Années* and Barthes’ in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* take an album-like shape. As for captions, even when they only indicate a name, a date, a place, they tend to insert pictures into a minimal narrative structure.

Once again, the relationship between the narrative and the album is probably to be thought of in terms of a representative rivalry consequent upon either, the photobiographer’s will to show or to conceal himself or herself or the dichotomy between the continuous and the discontinuous. These two forms keep intersecting. A whole series of intermediary configurations are possible between the two absolute limits of photobiography: the pure Album, having excluded all textual presence, and the pure Narrative, in which all photographic traces have disappeared.

3. A conflict at the heart of the photobiographical process of reception: between ‘sense’ and ‘signification’

3.1 ‘Sense’ and ‘Signification’: a Renewal of the Autobiographical Genre?

Regarding the reception of photobiographical works, this power struggle at the heart of the creative process confronts two activities which can be viewed as radically opposed — seeing and reading. If photographs can somehow be read and interpreted by virtue of the rational and cultural background that Barthes calls the *studium* — opposed to the purely emotional *punctum* — the elements of information we can get from them always remain uncertain. They cannot be reduced to pure texts and their interpretation does not depend only on the textual indications related to them.

The reader of a photobiographical work has thus to make an effort of adaptation, of accommodation. The mode of reception required could correspond to the type of reading that

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 5.

Jean-François Lyotard refers to as ‘dancing’ in *Discours, figure*. In this case, the reader’s eye is not only grasping linguistic signals but is attracted as well by a material substance. As Lyotard puts it, ‘il y a aussi matière pour le corps’ (there is also matter for the body).¹⁷ The very presence of photographs generates indeed an instability which prevents the reader from seizing a clear autobiographical *signified*. There are two orders of meaning that intersect in photobiography. Lyotard refers to them as ‘sens’ (‘sense’) and ‘signification’ (‘signification’). The latter is expressed in language through linguistic signs – it can only be read, whereas the former concerns mainly the fields of the sensible and of the unconscious and is expressed in particular in what Lyotard calls ‘l’espace figural’ (the space of the figure).¹⁸

An autobiographical content cannot thus be *signified* by a photograph and can only be communicated *sensibly*. Besides, a photographic document (that is to say a snapshot that has not been specifically taken by its author to express something about his or her own life) can only show a biographical content — or ‘biographemes’ to use Barthes’s expression — that the photobiographer will have to change into an autobiographical one. The aim of the text is then to set up a network of significations from this document, allocating it a role in an attempt at self-expression. Because of their status as fragments which do not communicate their context of creation in a direct manner, their *before* and their *after*, it seems that photographs have to be supplied in several ways by autobiographical discourse, being subjects of a dynamic of appropriation whose minimal stakes are names, dates and places. As Jacques Derrida writes in *Lecture de Droits de regard (Right of Inspection)*, ‘[a photograph] wants names, wants more than names, the name itself. And more than discourse, nomination itself, this exemplary instance, the singularity of a single proper name, as random as it is necessary.’¹⁹ He obviously refers here to the patronymic name.

3.2 Identities in interactions: between the individual and the collective, memories and images

Indeed, photographs constitute, like any autobiographical work, crossroads between the individual, the personal and the collective,²⁰ between the common and the proper. Family

¹⁷ This translation is mine. *Discours, figure* has not yet been translated completely into English.

¹⁸ Lyotard’s distinction between *sens* and *signification* seems to overlap partly with Barthes’s one – in *La Chambre Claire* – between *punctum* (involving affects, desires) and *studium* (cultural and rational interest). From this perspective, we could argue that instead of a strong opposition between *seeing* and *reading*, photobiographies involve two modes of reception dividing each of these activities. One engages a process of intellection and searches for significations and signifieds whereas the other concerns the body, the desiring self, and is attracted by signifiers, by words and pictures’ materiality.

¹⁹ Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Right of Inspection*, text by Jacques Derrida, trans. by David Wills (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), p. XIII.

²⁰ *Individual* refers to the process of individuation whereas *personal* evokes the classical concept of ‘person’.

albums are, for example, in a way all similar, being characterised by recurrent contents (events such as births, birthdays, and weddings) and ways to represent them. The individual story is embedded in collective patterns and the photobiographer's identity takes shape on this background of the in-between. This is particularly striking in Annie Ernaux's work in which she uses private photographs as memory as well as sociological traces allowing her to tell the story of a period, of a whole generation. But, on the contrary, a photobiographer can be tempted to defy this dimension of interchangeability characterising family pictures and to reassert against them the violence of a personal story, of desires and fantasies, and of shameful secrets: in other words, he or she can be tempted to write everything which is not shown by photographs, which is the case for Hervé Guibert in *Ghost Image* and of Marguerite Duras in *The Lover*.²¹

This coded and collective dimension of photographs stresses their particular relationship with memories. Indeed, they are more often than not treated as if they were equivalent to memories. It is probably one of the main reasons why people take so many pictures. However, if a snapshot can trigger or, on the contrary, block a memory process, the way it functions and represents is completely different from that of a proper memory. It belongs, in fact, to a larger network of pictures related to the personal past including, in particular, mental images – or, in other words, latent photographs. It is in this framework that snapshots are reworked by the Imaginary and by the Unconscious. Whether memories are constructed thanks to them or against them, photographs never replace them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of photographs in autobiographies allows a renewal of this literary genre. Indeed, it problematizes if not refutes the status of autobiographical discourse. What is at stake in this context extends far beyond photographs' mere authenticatory function in everyday life. On the contrary, it is at the core of a grafting process involving different kinds of texts, from titles, captions to descriptions and narratives. This dynamic process aims at the construction of a complex identity combining contradictory signs and which I have described as a struggle. If a picture can trigger autobiographical writing, writing itself can tend to neutralize it, framing it in a network of significations, or even serving to erase and to replace it in an *ekphrasistic* manner. Indeed, photographs are fundamentally unsatisfactory and their meanings always elude us. Besides, if they are characterised by a representative plenitude – as Roland Barthes puts it

²¹ In *Ghost Image*, Guibert explores the subversive and invisible stories related to family snapshots. In *The Lover*, Duras tells the whole story of her relationship with a Chinese man developing — textually — an introductory picture supposed to represent her just before her first meeting with her lover.

in *Camera Lucida*, everything is *there* in a photograph – they never show *everything*. It is then the text's task to supply them and to relate them to their off-frames. Photographs are finally shown or hidden, operated or mutilated by texts according to the image that the photobiographer wants to leave of himself or herself and of his or her life.

To the assertion of the absolute presence of photographs, of its particular *being there*, the photobiographical text opposes the construction of an autobiographical signified and tries to replace a *writing of the Referent* by a *writing of Meaning*. To use Barthes's terms in *Camera Lucida*, it is the writing process that achieves the transition from the 'that has been' to the 'that is it', from the biographical to the autobiographical.

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