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Annie Ernaux's "photojournal" in *Ecrire la vie*

Photo-diaristic archives as a model of life-writing

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Annie Ernaux's 'Photojournal' in *Écrire la vie*: Photo-Diaristic Archives as a Model of Life Writing

Fabien Arribert-Narce

Shortly after she turned 70 in 2010, Annie Ernaux, one of France's most eminent and consistently experimental autobiographers since the 1970s, disconcerted many of her readers – including critics and scholars specializing in her work¹ – by publishing for the first time in *Écrire la vie* (2011) and *Retour à Yvetot* (2013) dozens of private photographic archives directly extracted from her personal albums. Family snapshots had already played a central role in her work to date, especially since the publication of *La Place* in 1983, but they had previously been only described and not reproduced within the texts.² This is the case, for example, in *Les Années* (2008), Ernaux's narrative attempt to produce a total and 'impersonnelle' autobiography,³ which is punctuated by numerous descriptions of photographs of the author at different stages of her life. It is worth noting that a few photos did appear in other books published in the same period, such as *L'Usage de la photo* (2005) and *L'Autre fille* (2011), but these images did not show any human figures and merely depicted objects and empty places – the two Normandy houses where Ernaux grew up in *L'Autre fille*, and empty rooms with clothes thrown on the floor before making love in *L'Usage*, co-authored with Marc Marie. This is precisely why the choice to disclose these private visual archives exposing her – and her existence – in a new way, and on a new scale, was surprising. In *Écrire la vie*, an anthology of some of her major works to date, Ernaux published about eighty photos depicting her from her childhood to the present, as well as members of her family and places where she had lived or travelled; these images, combined with extracts from the private diary that she has kept since her adolescence, make up a 'photojournal' that opens the collection. A similar format was later used in the short essay *Retour à Yvetot* (the town in Normandy where she grew up), which unexpectedly became a best-seller in France and which contains photos of Ernaux's childhood and teenage years. In this case, the pictures are captioned by extracts from some of her earlier books, which effectively reduces them to an illustrative function.

Several key photos in Ernaux's work that were previously known to her readers only through her written descriptions are now directly accessible to them in *Écrire la vie* and/or *Retour à Yvetot*, therefore allowing readers to compare these images with their corresponding texts. These include the picture (described in *Les Années* and *L'Autre fille*) of Ginette, her elder sister who died of diphtheria before her own birth, and the photos of Ernaux herself when she was receiving chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer (as mentioned in *L'Usage*), or posing with her grandchildren (referred to in *Les Années*). Another example is the picture of her father posing in front of his new car, a 4CV, in 1959, about which she made the following comment

¹ See for instance Natalie Edwards, 'Annie Ernaux's Phototextual Archives: *Écrire la vie*', in *Framing French Culture*, ed. by Natalie Edwards, Ben McCann, and Peter Poiana (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2015), pp. 177–91; Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. 123–26.

² Descriptions of photos play a central role in autobiographical texts such as *La Place* (1983), *Une femme* (1988), *La Honte* (1997), and *Les Années* (2008), all published by Gallimard.

³ Ernaux, *Les Années*, p. 252.

in *La Place*, blending the sociological and the personal (or the ‘*studium*’ and the ‘*punctum*’, to borrow Barthes’s vocabulary in *La Chambre claire*) in her characteristic fashion:

On se fait photgraphier avec ce qu’on est fier de posséder, le commerce, le vélo, plus tard la 4 CV, sur le toit de laquelle il [le père d’Annie Ernaux] appuie une main, faisant par ce geste remonter exagérément son veston. Il ne rit sur aucune photo.⁴

How can we interpret the publication of these pictures, which have marked a new turn in Ernaux’s œuvre, although her most recent *récit personnel* (*Mémoire de fille*, 2016) resumed her idiosyncratic style of life writing by describing photos without showing them?⁵ Since she has also published several kinds of diaries throughout her career (*Journal du dehors*, 1993; *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, 1997; *La Vie extérieure*, 2000; *Se Perdre*, 2001; *L’Atelier noir*, 2011),⁶ what is the exact status of *Écrire la vie*’s photojournal in her work, and how does it differ from her previous *journaux intimes* or *extimes*? More specifically, what place does the photojournal occupy in her innovation in life writing, which is characterized by her rejection of fiction (and autofiction) since *La Place*, and – given her background as a *transfuge de classe* with an ambivalent attitude towards bourgeois culture – her reluctance to present her work in literary terms? This relative hostility to ‘the literary’, which she shares with Philippe Lejeune (see the introduction to this special issue), initially led her not to use her *journal intime* in her œuvre, until her subsequent acknowledgement that it could open up what had previously been a closed text (e.g. with *Se Perdre* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, following respectively the publication of *Passion simple* in 1991 and *Une femme* in 1988). Since Ernaux has nonetheless created new autobiographical forms and explored what are effectively literary issues throughout her writing career, what role do the newly added printed images play in the photojournal, and how does this innovative, hybrid type of diary affect the reception of her work as a whole?

This essay will first show that the photojournal does not only offer a marginal, documentary complement to Ernaux’s longstanding autobiographical project, but that it is first and foremost defined by its radical alterity, at the margins of the literary and the biographical. Indeed, as I will then argue, this photo-textual assemblage constitutes an alternative material and archival form of life writing in its own right, based on fragments of *written* life (both verbal and visual). This factual type of photobiography constructs a singular temporality and a list-like, serial aesthetic which directly emanate from specific characteristics of the diary and photograph. In the final part of the essay, I will examine the possibilities of identification offered by this unusual diaristic configuration. Since the archival traces gathered in the photojournal tend to be more limited to the private sphere of Ernaux’s life than the written descriptions of photos and diaries published in earlier works, to what extent are they less accessible to readers and therefore more ‘distant’ from them? Given the sociological relevance of her writing, which is based on the possibility for readers to relate to her work and feel a certain proximity and familiarity with it – two key aspects of her practice of life writing – the issue of distance and identification is crucial in this context.

⁴ Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 38. This photo appears p. 42 in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011) and p. 48 in *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Mauconduit, 2013).

⁵ See Fabien Arribert-Narce, ‘Ekphraseis photographiques dans *Mémoire de fille*’, *Fabula*, ‘Annie Ernaux, les écritures à l’œuvre’, <<http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document6651.php>> [accessed 1 December 2021].

⁶ Ernaux’s diaries have been analysed in the following critical studies: Sam Ferguson, ‘Chapter 8: Annie Ernaux, The Place of the Diary in Modern Life-Writing’, in *Diaries Real and Fictional in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), pp. 193–222; Akane Kawakami, ‘Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection’, *Nottingham French studies*, 53:2 (2014), 232–46.

The status of the ‘photo-journal’ in Ernaux’s work: complementarity, supplementarity, alterity

As previous studies have shown,⁷ Ernaux tends to use the photograph in her work primarily as an instrument of sociological investigation in line with what she calls her ‘auto-socio-biographical’ project,⁸ initiated in the 1980s. This is arguably one of the main reasons why she decided not to publish pictures of herself and her family in her work before *Écrire la vie*, her aim being to emphasize the collective, ethnographic dimension of the images she describes. Exposing her private archives would have necessarily attracted readers’ attention to the idiosyncrasies of her self, a visual distraction not in keeping with her ambition to access the universal via the individual – or in other words, to ‘écrire la vie. Non pas ma vie, ni sa vie, ni même une vie’⁹ (and this overall ambition is reflected in the title’s collection, ‘Écrire la vie’). For the same reason, when she first published photos in *L’Usage* and *L’Autre fille*, she avoided this anecdotal dimension by depicting only non-human subjects. Ernaux herself substantiated this view and accounted for the absence of personal photos in her work in a 2011 interview:

Je ne voulais pas que la photo réelle se substitue à la photo imaginée par le lecteur, détruise sa représentation intérieure. [...] Permettre au lecteur de projeter, déposer, ses propres images sur la photo décrite et non l’emprisonner, le ‘fasciner’ [...]. Lui permettre aussi, en partant d’une expérience ordinaire [...] – avoir une photo devant soi – de comprendre des mécanismes sociaux, historiques, de ‘lire’ le réel.¹⁰

Following this logic, photos have to be filtered by writing to become relevant in the author’s overall autobiographical project, while the text itself entices the readers’ imagination to play an active role in the reception process. In an interview from 2008, Ernaux went even further in her attempt to justify her decision not to publish the photos mentioned in *Les Années*:

La lecture du texte en aurait été changée fondamentalement. Il y a une primauté de l’image sur les mots, de l’image réelle sur celle qui se forme dans la tête quand on lit [...]. Je connais, j’éprouve, le pouvoir d’aspiration des photos, leur troublant effet de réel. Et le lecteur aurait fait un va-et-vient entre la photo et la description que j’en donne, dans une sorte de travail de vérification qui l’aurait sorti du texte, du glissement du temps. C’est l’histoire et l’évolution de l’individu Ernaux, constitué alors en personnage, qui se seraient imposées.¹¹

In the light of these statements, how can we account for Ernaux’s choice to display some of her private photographic archives in *Retour à Yvetot* and more importantly *Écrire la vie*? As we can see here, this not only seems to contradict her past views on the subject, but it also challenges a key feature of her auto-socio-biographical literary project and the type of relationship she is keen to establish with her readers, on which this project is based.

⁷ See Fabien Arribert-Narce, *Photobiographies: pour une écriture de notation de la vie* (Roland Barthes, Denis Roche, Annie Ernaux) (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014); Michèle Bacholle-Boskovic, ‘ph-auto.bio.graphie: écrire la vie par des photos (Annie Ernaux)’, *Women in French Studies*, 21 (2013), 79–93; ‘Annie Ernaux ph-auto-bio-graphe’, *Women in French Studies*, 22 (2014), 72–86; Kawakami, *Photobiography*, pp. 83–130.

⁸ Ernaux used this term to describe her work and her approach to life writing in *L’Écriture comme un couteau* (p. 21), her interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet (Paris: Stock, 2003).

⁹ Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Annie Ernaux, ‘Vers une écriture “photo-socio-biographique” du réel: entretien avec Fabien Arribert-Narce’, *Roman 20–50*, 51 (2011), 151–66 (p. 159).

¹¹ Annie Ernaux, ‘Entretien avec Marie-Laure Delorme’, *Mediapart*, 2 April 2008.

First, it should be noted that the photojournal opening *Écrire la vie* conforms to the specifications of Gallimard's 'Collection Quarto' series, in which the book was published: as the publisher's own marketing declares, 'chaque titre comprend un dossier illustré sur la vie et l'œuvre de l'écrivain'.¹² However, Ernaux made clear in her preface and in several interviews that she was fully responsible for selecting the photos and the extracts from her unpublished diary, and fully embraced the project, describing her rationale in the preface as follows: 'à une biographie, qui laisse souvent une impression décevante par son caractère purement factuel, j'ai préféré l'alliance de deux documents personnels, l'album photo et le journal intime: une sorte de photojournal'.¹³ In the same programmatic text, she claims that 'ce photojournal ne constitue pas une "illustration" de mes livres. [...] Il faut, je crois, le considérer comme un autre texte, troué, sans clôture, porteur d'une autre vérité que ceux qui suivent'.¹⁴ Ernaux therefore considers that this photojournal is fully part of her literary work, even if it is located at its margins: since it constitutes the *limen* or entry point of her *Œuvres complètes*, and the first point of contact for some of her readers, it occupies a strategic place which may play a determining role in the posterity of this work. Beyond this key paratextual position which is likely to condition the reader's approach to the other texts, it is the radical alterity rather than the supplementarity of the photojournal that should be emphasized here. Indeed, what Ernaux stresses in her preface is the 'autre vérité' of this 'autre texte', whose specificity is to remain open and perhaps incomplete ('troué'), 'sans clôture', which implies a refusal of – aesthetic, interpretative, autobiographical – closure. She implicitly gives it the status of a visual counterpart to *Les Années*: it is not a mere illustration, but rather a complementary work which sheds a new light on her other texts. Much like her numerous and varied attempts at diary-writing (e.g. *Journal du dehors* in 1993), which Ernaux has often deliberately marginalized within her œuvre,¹⁵ *Écrire la vie*'s photojournal is original in both its form and ambition, and perhaps bolder in its assertion of the author's singular sense of class identity and social alienation. An obvious example of this is the fact that a majority of her childhood photographs are blurred, with her facial features barely distinguishable, which may reflect the poor quality of the camera used to take these pictures and her working-class family's lack of familiarity with this typically 'bourgeois' medium and practice before its democratization from the 1960s onwards (e.g. with the popularization of Polaroid cameras).¹⁶ In bringing together two types of archival documents and life writing, the photojournal is therefore much more than a mere document: it constitutes yet another attempt to unveil autobiographical truth, which has been Ernaux's primary goal since the 1980s, in a renewed, intermedial diaristic form allowing her readers to make their own interpretations of this raw photo-textual material.

A hybrid, archival model of life writing, between image and text

As suggested earlier, Ernaux may have found with the photojournal a way to transgress the

¹² <<http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Quarto>> [accessed 1 December 2021].

¹³ Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ 'Ernaux's strategy of marginalizing diary-writing within her œuvre' was analysed by Ferguson in the chapter 'Annie Ernaux, The Place of the Diary in Modern Life-Writing' (cited here from p. 197).

¹⁶ In *La Honte*, for example, Ernaux writes about a picture taken in Biarritz in 1952: 'La photo est très floue, prise avec l'appareil cubique gagné par mes parents dans une kermesse avant la guerre. On distingue mal mon visage, mes lunettes, mais un sourire large est visible' (p. 25).

limits set by her own work to date, but also literary codes – and more specifically the codes of the autobiographical genre – more broadly. Whereas her numerous autobiographical texts (or ‘textes concertés’ as she has called them herself)¹⁷ are characterized by her trademark ‘écriture plate’¹⁸ – a predominantly factual and analytical style of writing, with no effusive language, containing only subdued emotions and a frequent recourse to understatement – *Écrire la vie*’s photojournal promotes an essentially material form of life writing lying once more at the intersection ‘entre la littérature, la sociologie et l’histoire’, to borrow her expression.¹⁹ In other words, what she achieves with this photo-text is to demystify and ‘[briser] le livre en tant qu’objet littéraire pur’,²⁰ via an ‘impure’, hybrid form of diary writing that experimentally combines the structures of the family photo album, notes, and narrative. It thereby explores the limits of the very concept of the literary.

Several strategies are used in the photojournal to emphasize the material nature of the visual and textual documents assembled. The most obvious example is that, on many pages, the text appears superimposed on a background photo which corresponds more or less closely to the content and time period of the selected diary extracts.²¹ This invites readers to apprehend the text as an image and the image as text, thereby creating an oscillation between the acts of seeing and reading that makes the reception process of this intermedial work more complex. Following the same logic, the photojournal contains pictures of the notebooks used by Ernaux to write her diary (34–35), which is another way of staging the materiality of writing and further emphasizing the association between the visual and the textual in her work.²² Several pages also display the author’s handwriting, reminding the readers/viewers that her life is a life of writing (as reflected by her lifelong diary kept since her teenage years), the life of a (life) writer. These various ways of emphasizing the materiality of both texts and photos effectively function as an incitement to consider their form beyond their mere content.

The pictures and diary entries published in the photojournal are explicitly presented as documents, their material status prevailing over what they show or describe, be it visually or textually. Accordingly, most photographs are presented uncropped, in their original format: the dented frames, stains, holes, and staple marks of old snapshots are clearly visible, such as on the ID photographs taken in Ernaux’s youth (pp. 41 and 50). This archival, documentary dimension is reinforced by the inclusion of other artefacts such as school reports (39), which of course provide evidence on the author’s individual past, but also more importantly, given the scope of her literary project, socio-historical, ethnographic information about the collective past (for example, shared experiences and common references such as brands or types of clothing, which all contribute to the *air du temps*). In this perspective, the photojournal’s private archives

¹⁷ Ernaux, *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 24.

¹⁹ Ernaux, *Une femme*, p. 106; *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, p. 80.

²⁰ ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux: propos recueillis par Nathalie Jungerman’, *Fondation La Poste*, October 2011.

²¹ This is the case on pp. 10–11; 12–13; 18; 23; 30; 32–33; 35; 38; 40; 47; 48; 52–53; 57; 62; 64–65; 68; 74; 80–81; 82; 88–89; 91; 92; 101. The diary extracts do not appear in the chronological order in which they were written but in the order of the *époques de la vie* that they deal with (in a similar way to the ordering of texts in *Écrire la vie*), which challenges and dismantles the usual linear chronology of *journaux*.

²² The covers of some of these diaries as well as random pages appear for example on pp. 10–11; 34–35; 48–49; 52–53; 68–69; 80–81; 92–93; 101.

are first and foremost ‘du passé déposé’,²³ graphic deposits of life, samples of photographed or written traces produced in and by Ernaux’s existence and accumulated over the years²⁴ – hence the almost infra-ordinary, everyday feel that emanates from them. This feature of the photojournal corresponds to a key characteristic of diaristic writing as it was defined by Maurice Blanchot: ‘Écrire son journal intime, c’est se mettre momentanément sous la protection des jours communs [...]. Ce qui s’écrit s’enracine alors [...] dans le quotidien et dans la perspective que le quotidien délimite’;²⁵ ‘le journal enracine le mouvement d’écrire dans le temps, dans l’humilité du quotidien daté et préservé par sa date’.²⁶ It is a common feature of both photographic images and diary extracts that they both associate fragments of the past with a specific date and place (for example, in captions attached to photographs), and through this shared structural and functional feature they both ‘respecte[nt] le calendrier’, as Blanchot puts it.²⁷ In this way, they anchor life writing in prosaic, day-to-day reality, with all its gaps, ambiguities, and grey zones that resist meaning and elude our understanding – like any photo album or *journal intime*, the photojournal lists facts while hiding others, leaving them *hors champ*, in the darkness of oblivion.

Compounding their everydayness, the documents gathered in the photojournal are also characterized by a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Most of the photos represent streets, houses, or Ernaux and members of her family posing and looking at the camera; they therefore capture specific moments in time, taking their place in the album of a life that unfolds as a succession of flashes and instants. As for the diaristic passages, they invariably relate past events, some of them very distant, to the present of writing, which pervades everything and functions as a time travelling machine. Its palimpsestic nature emphasizes the density of memory: ‘je n’aime réellement qu’écrire, parce que c’est retenir la vie’ (62); ‘tout le passé est nécessaire pour aimer le présent’ (70).²⁸ As Ernaux suggested in an interview, ‘Les photos et le journal, ce sont des documents, des pièces irréfutables, et aussi des instantanés. La photo bien sûr mais le journal aussi, qui fixe la pensée et la sensation à un moment précis.’²⁹ This radically *notational* form of life writing,³⁰ resolutely anchored in the present and mostly using the present tense, differs from the other texts in which she describes photographs, since they all have an

²³ Annie Ernaux, ‘Entretien’, in Arribert-Narce, *Photobiographies*, p. 348.

²⁴ This is heightened by the superimposition of different times and the non-linear dimension of the photo-diary.

²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 252.

²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 25.

²⁷ Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir*, p. 252.

²⁸ Still in *Écrire la vie*’s photo-diary, Ernaux also writes: ‘Cet après-midi, au soleil, fugacement l’impression de me retrouver à Yvetot, adolescente, et de “sentir” la présence du passé qui était alors en moi. Une mémoire, à peine, plutôt un éclair de la mémoire. C’est cela que je voudrais obtenir, non pas seulement me transporter dans un autre temps, me revoir et revoir le monde autour, mais *me souvenir de mes souvenirs*, qui ne sauraient être ceux de maintenant. 31 mai 2002’ (p. 36).

²⁹ ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux: propos recueillis par Nathalie Jungerman’. In *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, she also wrote in this respect: ‘Les journaux, ce qui les réunit au-delà de leur diversité – intime, extérieur, d’écriture, des visites à ma mère – c’est le présent. Ce que j’écris dans un journal, quel qu’il soit, saisit du présent. Pour des raisons différentes, certes, fixer une émotion, une rencontre, des difficultés de vie ou d’écriture, avec la croyance que les écrire m’aidera d’une façon ou d’une autre. Le journal, c’est le réservoir de la fugacité’ (p. 46); ‘Ces trois textes [*Passion simple*, *L’Occupation*, and *Une femme*] sont “doublés” par un journal qui, lui, est la saisie du vécu dans l’instant, quelque chose comme l’effort pour “se souvenir du présent”, selon le vœu de Jules Renard, qui écrit dans son journal, “le vrai bonheur serait de se souvenir du présent”’ (p. 58).

³⁰ See Arribert-Narce, *Photobiographies*, pp. 81–92.

overarching retrospective dimension matching Philippe Lejeune's classic definition of the autobiographical genre as a 'récit rétrospectif en prose'.³¹ This is the case, for example, in *Les Années*, a long narrative interspersed with descriptions of photos, and which reconstitutes France's socio-cultural history from the 1940s to the present. Even the photographic ekphrases in this work, in which Ernaux temporarily switches from past to present tense, are embedded within its overall chronological discourse, a narrative flow that contextualizes the images mentioned and conditions their reception. The specificity of *Écrire la vie*'s photojournal is therefore to give access to the backbone of life writing, to the autobiographical past as present, the published documents having been selected, edited, and assembled, but not elucidated further. According to Ernaux:

cette mise en relation de photos et du journal, sans qu'il y ait correspondance de dates entre les deux, n'est pas une façon de faire parler la photo. C'est placer, à côté de la fixité de la photo, de son caractère d'instant figé à jamais, la continuité de la vie inscrite dans le journal, avec les diverses interprétations de soi, du monde, selon les années. Associer des fragments du réel objectif – celui de la photo – à des fragments du réel subjectif, celui du journal: dans ce 'montage', il y a une place pour faire trembler l'imaginaire du 'regardeur', je crois. Quelque part, c'est une sorte de roman-photo.³²

As such, the photojournal is primarily a fragmentary work presenting a selected series of images and texts, which roughly corresponds to Lejeune's definition of the diary as a 'série de traces datées'.³³ But unlike the author's *journaux intimes*, it presupposes, via its selection of extracts and integration of images, a construction effort that resembles that of her *livres concertés*, thereby transcending the 'pur être-là' or *effet de présence* of both photos and diaries, and making it an innovative autobiographical project (and way of projecting her self) in its own right. For Ernaux, the photojournal has its own goal or 'finalité', a feature that the *journal intime* itself tends to lack:

J'ai toujours fait une grande différence entre les livres que j'entreprends et mon journal intime. [...] Dans le second, le temps impose la structure, et la vie immédiate est la matière. C'est donc plus limité, moins libre, je n'ai pas le sentiment de 'construire' une réalité, seulement de laisser une trace d'existence, de déposer quelque chose, sans finalité particulière, sans délai aucun de publication, du pur être-là.³⁴

Combining the serial, repetitive structure of the photo album with that of the diary, and therefore elements of continuity and discontinuity, the photojournal only shares with its narrative counterpart, *Les Années*, its chronological structure, as the photos assembled essentially follow a chronological order. This aspect is crucial for Ernaux as she sees this as an opportunity to

³¹ 'Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité' (Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 14).

³² Ernaux, 'Entretien', in Arribert-Narce, *Photobiographies*, p. 369. In the text presenting her photojournal in *Écrire la vie*, Ernaux adds: 'En associant ainsi la réalité matérielle, irréfutable des photos, dont la succession "fait histoire", dessine une trajectoire sociale, et la réalité subjective du journal avec les rêves, les obsessions, l'expression brute des affects, la réévaluation constante du vécu' (p. 8).

³³ Philippe Lejeune, *Aux origines du journal personnel: France, 1750–1815* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2016), p. 8.

³⁴ Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, p. 23.

represent the range of successive social environments she has encountered in her life as a *transfuge de classe*, having parted from the working-class background of her Normandy-based family to establish herself as a major French writer and leftist intellectual living in Cergy, in the north-western suburbs of Paris. Considering the hybrid nature of the photojournal's archives, and the room for imagination that they allow, their reader/viewer has to play an active role and breathe life back into them, by linking together the 'objective' and 'subjective' elements of past reality mentioned by Ernaux so as to recompose her autobiographical puzzle spanning more than seventy years.

Distance and identification processes

Given the onus placed on the reader in this unusual diaristic configuration, I would now like to consider the possibilities of identification offered by this compilation of unpolished traces, this succession of flashes of time found in *Écrire la vie*'s photojournal. Since these traces tend to be more limited to the private sphere of Ernaux's life than the written descriptions of photos and published diaries in her œuvre, to what extent are they less accessible to readers and more 'distant' from them, that is to say, less generalizable to the reader's experience? The first obvious point to make is that, despite the impression of immediacy that characterizes it, the photojournal does not necessarily allow readers/viewers to get closer to the reality of the author's past. What the pictures show us is her social self, her family photographed for special occasions such as weddings and births; despite their everyday nature, most of them are posed photographs that present only a restricted and 'official' version of Ernaux's life at a given time.³⁵ Likewise, even when they were written shortly after the events they mention, the extracts of her diary remain impressionistic and do not give a better account of the past than a retrospective narrative would. This is emphasized by the numerous questions, doubts, and uncertainties that pepper these entries, preventing the sense of closure that memoirs can give. Instead, what the photojournal provides is a different, singular point of view on her life, that of the moment of the writing present, with an almost immediate, yet indecisive perspective.

Moreover, Ernaux's 'real' life, or what she would consider as such, does not entirely lie in the documents displayed. This is one of the fundamental limits of the photojournal: the published archives can only be adequately contextualized and deciphered by the writer herself; only she knows what they reveal and what they hide, what they mean for her now, and what they meant then, at the time they were produced. Naturally, readers/viewers may have some personal memories triggered by these private archives that are not their own; but they may also consider that what interests them most is Ernaux's reading and interpretation of these otherwise enigmatic and anecdotal fragments. As Barthes suggested in his presentation of the photo-album that opens *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 'il s'ensuit que la photographie de jeunesse est à la fois très indiscreète (c'est mon corps du dessous qui s'y donne à lire) et très discrète (ce n'est pas de "moi" qu'elle parle)'.³⁶ What viewers can potentially identify in Ernaux's photos are *studium* details, general information about clothes, cars, habits, or in other

³⁵ In *Écrire la vie*, Ernaux writes in this respect that 'les photos disent à quoi je ressemblais, non ce que je pensais, sentais, elles disent ce que j'étais pour les autres, rien de plus' (p. 37).

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), IV, 575–771 (p. 581).

words all the external signs that characterize a specific period of time.³⁷ Her *punctum*, that is, the emotional bursts triggered by the most private and singular traits encapsulated in images, experiences, or memories, can only be expressed and shared verbally in the passages of her diary, or perhaps more accurately in the interstice between images and texts, this visual, material point of encounter that results from a process of graphic production and montage supervised by the author, without any further comments or explanations from her.³⁸ In this context, identification is possible, but it can only operate at a relatively superficial level: readers/viewers can be moved by and drawn to these diary extracts and photographic images because of their social and cultural meaning, but also for more idiosyncratic reasons which are not sociologically relevant and therefore disrupt one of the main goals of Ernaux's overall autobiographical project.

By publishing private archives in *Écrire la vie*, Ernaux has exposed herself more directly in her œuvre. Compared with photographic ekphrases in her other works, she has also accepted that she will have less control over the reception of her photos, which is at odds with her tendency to guide the reading and critical interpretation of her work via frequent meta-commentaries interspersed in her texts. As we have seen, she is aware that the photojournal may be read as a kind of 'roman-photo',³⁹ which compels readers/viewers to form connections between texts and images in order to construct their own reading of these archives, whether they fictionalize them or not, but also to read *between the lines*, making assumptions based on the scarce information provided. Paradoxically, making available very personal documents may have opened some space for fiction – or rather fictional readings – in her work, despite her rejection of this dimension since the publication of *La Place* in 1983.⁴⁰ However, it is important to remember that in Ernaux's case the publication of images in *Écrire la vie* came after their description in various texts, where these more impersonal ekphrastic accounts made it easier for her readers to identify, to project themselves and 'déposer [leurs] propres images', to use her expression.⁴¹ Even if these photos in themselves (as objects) may be less effective than their former written description in serving the author's auto-socio-biographical project, considered in the context of her œuvre as a whole, they offer a new angle from which to approach her life – they participate in her overall 'autobiographical space'.⁴² Ernaux often presents herself as a witness of her time, a key characteristic shared by her photos and diary; indeed, as she puts it, the latter 'fait histoire, [...] porte témoignage de croyances, de concepts, d'un langage même

³⁷ See Sections 10 and 11 in *La Chambre Claire* (*Œuvres complètes*, v, 807–10).

³⁸ Roberta Coglitore talks about a 'digital re-mediation' and 'manipulation of documents' in relation to the *photojournal*'s montage (Roberta Coglitore, 'La ri-mediazione digitale e la dissolvenza dell'io nel Photojournal di Annie Ernaux', in *Schermi. Rappresentazioni, immagini, transmedialità*, ed. by Francesca Agamennoni, Matteo Rima, and Stefano Tani (= *Between*, VIII:16 (2018)) (p. 14), <<http://www.betweenjournal.it/>> [accessed 1 December 2021]). See also Isabelle Roussel-Grillet, 'De Birthday au photo-journal, l'expérience des images pour remonter la mémoire', in *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire*, ed. by Francine Best, Bruno Blanckeman and Francine Dugast-Porte (Paris: Stock, 2014), pp. 422–39.

³⁹ In relation to the 'literariness' of the photojournal, the choice of this expression by Ernaux is quite striking as it normally refers to 'popular' culture, glossy magazines, etc., which play an important part in her works.

⁴⁰ See for instance *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, pp. 25–67.

⁴¹ Ernaux, 'Vers une écriture "photo-socio-biographique" du réel', p. 159.

⁴² See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, pp. 41–46. Taking the example of Gide and Mauriac, Lejeune claims that 'l'espace autobiographique' of an author includes both autobiographical works and fictional texts.

propre à mes différents âges et à la traversée d'une époque, de ses mutations'.⁴³ She offers in her work several viewpoints, several versions of the same key periods or events in her life, thereby developing an aesthetics of *ressassement*. In this respect, the sense of poignant intimacy that emanates from her archival *dispositif* – a sharp, physical poignancy like that associated with Barthes's *punctum*⁴⁴ – contrasts with her trademark distant and analytic style of writing. It is then up to Ernaux's readers to decide if they wish to consult her archives before, while, or after they read her 'textes concertés', including the texts anthologized in *Écrire la vie*.

Conclusion

The fragmentary nature of the photojournal, which reflects a defining feature of both photos and diaristic entries, corresponds in fact to some of Ernaux's longstanding convictions and intuitions about life writing, and notably her long-standing distrust of its potential storytelling and *romanesque* dimensions. For example, in *L'Atelier noir*, her *carnet* or 'journal d'écriture' published in 2011, she claims in an entry dated 3 October 1983: 'Raconter une histoire [...], c'est tarte. La construction peut seule donner de l'intérêt à ce que je ferai. Les meilleurs passages dans *La Place* sont ceux qui coupent, tranchent, le *fragment* est vraiment important'.⁴⁵ Almost twenty years later, on 14 May 2002, she confirmed this view in even more radical terms:

Il me paraît évident qu'une *vie* en narration romanesque est une imposture. Plus je pense à mon 'histoire' plus elle est en 'choses' extérieures (fond) et fragments (forme). Les romans nous font croire que la *vie* est dicible en roman. Rien n'est plus une illusion. Fausseté absolue de 'l'autofiction'.⁴⁶

By combining 'choses extérieures' and 'fragments', made up of the material, ordinary 'stuff' of life (the life of a writer, in Ernaux's case), including numerous personal archives and writing notes of all kinds, Ernaux's photojournal is arguably one of her most radical attempts to break away from traditional narrative autobiography and more recent approaches associated with autofiction. Perhaps the 'negative' that her œuvre has developed to the full, the alternative model of life writing constituted by this 'vie déposée, archivée',⁴⁷ is one that creates a kaleidoscopic pattern at the intersection of the extro-, intro-, and retro-spective. In this sense, these previously unpublished private archives may allow the readers/viewers to get closer to the author's experience in a certain way, but still essentially from the outside, and without offering more decisive insights, since the factuality of a life is not capable of eliminating the elusiveness of the autobiographical subject. What makes them so compelling and poignant is the passage of time that they make us feel almost organically, making it possible to bond with these material documents covering all the periods of Ernaux's existence, and therefore incarnating ageing – which is embodied in the reader's sense of identification – while ageing themselves as archival artefacts. This dive into the depths of time, of an entire life, is dizzying and reflects the palimpsestic experience repeatedly described by the author in her diary extracts.

⁴³ Fabrice Thumerel, 'Entretien avec Annie Ernaux', in *Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, ed. by Fabrice Thumerel (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004), pp. 245–51 (p. 251).

⁴⁴ 'Le *punctum* d'une photo [...] *me point* (mais aussi *me meurtrit*, *me poigne*'); Barthes, *La Chambre Claire*, p. 809.

⁴⁵ Annie Ernaux, *L'Atelier noir* (Paris: Éditions des Busclats, 2011), p. 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 191–92.

⁴⁷ Thumerel, 'Entretien avec Annie Ernaux', p. 248.

Borrowing from the popular genres of the family photo album and the private diary, and remaining as such at the margins of the literary, the photojournal finally gives a rare access to 'le temps lui-même',⁴⁸ 'le temps à l'état pur',⁴⁹ but not via a Proustian route.

⁴⁸ Annie Ernaux, *Se Perdre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 16.

⁴⁹ Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p. 23.