

**CINEMATOGRAPHY IN THE WORKS OF ANNIE ERNAUX: WRITING
MEMORY AND REALITY**

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ABSTRACT

JACQUELINE DOUGHERTY “Cinematography in the Works of Annie Ernaux: Writing
Memory and Reality”

(Under the direction of Martine Antle)

This dissertation proposes a re-reading of Annie Ernaux’s corpus by considering the cinematographic aspects present in her works. Ernaux has systematically engaged in a reciprocity between the text and the image, including both moving and fixed images. This reciprocity is particularly manifest in Ernaux’s deployment of the flashback to relay the memories of her past experiences. In my introductory chapter, I demonstrate that Ernaux views the recording of such memories from an entirely cinematic perspective.

Chapter 2 investigates Ernaux’s adaptation of the cinematic flashback, including the fade and *voix off* narration, the two devices that initiate the flashback. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates that the combination of visual markers and textual strategies in Ernaux’s writing actually likens the reader to a spectator who views a film on screen. Finally, in keeping with the inherent characteristic of personal testimony on which both literary and cinematic flashbacks rely, Chapter 2 also discusses the numerous strategies at work in Ernaux’s writing that sustain the veracity of her narratives. These strategies include the use of archives, reference to personal diaries and the inclusion of footnotes.

Chapter 3 explores Ernaux’s pervasive deployment and recourse to the terms *image*,

scène, cinéma and *film* as surrogates for the constructions of *souvenir* and *mémoire*. Such memory-images enrich the primary flashback narrative by isolating events whose emotional resonance is particularly acute for the narrator.

The photographic images populating Ernaux's works are interpreted as cinematic freeze-frames in Chapter 4. Like the memory-images analyzed in Chapter 3, the narrator reveals the affective import of the photographs. We discover that, rather than interrupting the flow of the narrative, the incorporation of photographs in the text actually contributes relevant insights, details and truths to the account in question.

The final chapter includes a reflection on the extent to which Ernaux's artful fusion of cinematic and literary devices facilitates her quest for reality in her writing. I conclude by demonstrating Ernaux's multiple innovations of the literary paradigm and designate her as the source of collective memory for her generation.

Dedication

With my most profound admiration and gratitude for twenty-five years of inspiration, I dedicate this dissertation to Mary Donaldson-Evans.

In memory of my grandparents, Joseph Daniel Dougherty, Sr., Cecilia Helen Kramarck and Stephen John Kramarck, Sr.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. Ernaux and Her Contemporaries

Over the past three decades, Annie Ernaux's writing has consistently revealed an interplay between scriptural and visual media. Indeed, from the late twentieth through the twenty-first centuries, the reference to visual images within the literary text has become a common trait in both French and Francophone prose. More than mere aesthetic or sentimental representations of people, places and events, these images often possess pivotal narrative qualities within the text, seeking to address, document, and resolve pertinent philosophical or sociological concerns, including the notions of reality, identity, memory and alterity. Yet, these textual images may or may not be actual photographs. In some cases, they exist in and are focalized through the mind's eye as "snapshots" of past events, while in other cases, they are merely imaginary, embodying what could have or might have been.

Since 1981, Ernaux's contemporaries, such as Hervé Guibert, Marguerite Duras, Marie Redonnet, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Leïla Sebbar, have placed the photographic image at the forefront of their texts, thus establishing a reciprocal, and even a symbiotic relationship between visual and verbal media. Certainly, this association is not surprising to the modern reader, for clichéd expressions such as "A picture is worth a thousand words," or "Every picture tells a story" play into our everyday language. Although there is no discernable literary movement serving to unite contemporary French writers (Rye 165), let us

briefly examine the manner in which the visual image has sustained the narratives of several major French and Francophone authors over the last thirty years.

In *L'Image fantôme* (1981), Hervé Guibert provides sixty-four short essays centered on photography and the elusiveness of the photographic image. In the eponymous essay, Guibert recounts an episode during which he attempted to photograph his mother with the desire to capture her essence. This quest is, of course, reminiscent of Barthes' "search" for his own mother in photographs as relayed in *La Chambre claire*. However, the result for Guibert is *une photo ratée*, a blank image, for he had not properly loaded the film into the camera. Nonetheless, this *photo ratée* possesses scriptural power in that it actually initiates the writing of the text, as Guibert makes clear by stating: "Et le texte n'aurait pas été si l'image avait été prise" (Guibert 17).

The "fantom image" also makes an appearance in Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant* (1984), which we can count among texts making the most striking use of the image, specifically, that of an inexistent, yet crucial, photograph. Duras writes: "Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise, comme une autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances. Mais elle ne l'a pas été" (Duras 16). As in Guibert's *L'Image fantôme*, the photograph that does not exist possesses – paradoxically – a writerly capacity. The imagined photograph, in this case, a "mental snapshot," focalizes and consequently provides the narrative framework for the events recounted in Duras' text. We may also posit that this spectral photograph serves not only as the point of departure of the narration, but is, in fact, the story itself.

Relating to the question of identity and familial alienation, the narrator of *Splendid Hôtel*, published by Marie Redonnet in 1986, evokes photographs featuring her estranged mother and her two sisters, Ada and Adel. After Adel dies, the narrator reports: "J'ai encore

des photos de mes sœurs quand elles étaient petites. Mère est toujours floue sur ces photos, en arrière plan” (Redonnet 107). In the photos, the mother’s being out of focus, in addition to her being situated in the background, visually tells the story of family estrangement and the narrator’s impossibility to identify with her mother.

Within two years of Redonnet’s text, Jean-Philippe Toussaint presents to the reader a narrator permeated by a sense of dread by the mere thought of being photographed for his driving school portfolio. The narrator of *L’Appareil-photo* (1988) recognizes that appearing in a photograph is tantamount to being “frozen” and immobile in space and time, which is clearly unacceptable for this *flâneur par excellence*. Ironically, he fails to realize that providing the photographic documentation to the driving school would be a step towards *more mobility*, as it would lead him one step closer to a driver’s license. Upon discovering and stealing a camera, the narrator does photograph himself. Yet, still insistent on the need for mobility, he decides to photograph his feet “tout courant dans les escaliers” (Toussaint 103).

In terms of Francophone literature, we cannot ignore Leïla Sebbar’s *Métro: Instantanés* (2007), in which the act of writing assumes photographic characteristics. In the “Babel souterraine” (Sebbar 11) of the Parisian subway, Sebbar establishes a parallel between her writerly objectives and those of a photographer to provide “instantanés”, or written snapshots, of those whom she deems exiled, particularly the inhabitants of the *banlieues*. In the preface to the work, Sebbar states, regarding the exiled:

Je les regarde avec, en mémoire, *l’œil mécanique des photographes orientalistes*, aventuriers de l’image, curieux de l’Étranger, de l’Étrangère, le deuxième œil toujours *prêt à saisir sur le vif ou en studio, un visage, le regard grave ou le sourire ironique, des gestes et des corps qui racontent à ceux qui ne voyagent pas*, étoffe de soie

éclatante, velours et mousseline, couleurs d'outre-mer. (Sebbar 11; my emphasis)

While adopting the lexicon and practices specific to photography, Sebbar integrates the work of the author and that of the photographer in order to “photo-document” the reality of the experience of exile.

2. Ernaux, Reality and Memory

Ernaux’s deployment of the visual image throughout her corpus appears in two forms: the constant evocation of images emerging from her memory and the evocation of photographs in her texts. Annie Ernaux’s predilection for visual images rests heavily on her desire to portray reality with the utmost accuracy in her largely autobiographical corpus. In light of contemporary notions on the impact of the photographic image, particularly in terms of its ability to convey reality, Ernaux’s use of that medium is hardly surprising.

Both Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes have published seminal treatises on the photographic image. In Sontag’s estimation, the photographic image possesses both visual and verbal capacities. In her study entitled *On Photography*, Sontag states that photographs are a “grammar” as well as an ethics of “seeing” (3). They fulfill a didactic role in that they inform the spectator of what things were like in the past (Sontag 4). Unlike written statements, which are merely subjective “interpretations,” photographs, according to Sontag, serve as “miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (4).

Barthes confirms Sontag’s assertion on the deficiency of language. In *La Chambre claire*, he posits that, at its core, all language is “fictional,” and subjective. Only recourse to rhetorical mechanisms, implementing logic or taking an oath, liberates language from its inherent impotence (134). On the other hand, the photographic image does not require deployment of such rhetorical devices; photography is, according to Barthes, authentication

itself (*La Chambre claire* 134). “L’effet que [la photo] produit sur moi n’est pas de restituer ce qui est aboli (par le temps, par la distance), *mais d’attester que cela que je vois, a bien été*” (*La Chambre claire* 129; my emphasis). The evidentiary potency of the photograph, according to both Sontag and Barthes, becomes for Ernaux a vehicle by which she can facilitate her *quête du réel*. In fact, photographs appear in the vast majority of her works.¹

In addition to the deployment of the photographic image within her texts, Ernaux’s persistent recalling of scenes or images from her memory and her implementation of narrative devices analogous to cinema, prompt us to rethink her corpus in cinematic terms. This study will demonstrate that the symbiosis between the text and the image and adaptations of cinematic devices facilitate her oft proclaimed *quête du réel* via the excavation and writing of her memory.

Indeed, in examining the cinematic media operating throughout Ernaux’s largely autobiographical corpus, we must also consider the operation of memory, for as the author herself acknowledges, “Ma méthode de travail est fondée essentiellement sur la mémoire qui m’apporte constamment des éléments en écrivant, mais aussi dans les moments où je n’écris pas, où je suis obsédée par mon livre en cours” (Ernaux and Jeannet 41). Memory does provide the point of departure for Ernaux’s texts, but more importantly, we shall determine that along with a lexicon that situates memory as a primarily visual phenomenon, the author adapts in the literary medium the cinematic devices of flashback, fade, voix off and freeze-frame. These devices play pivotal roles in Ernaux’s writing stage as well as within the final text. Whether we encounter the first-person testimonial narratives of Ernaux’s early semi-

¹ Ernaux’s first three novels, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (1977) and *La Femme gelée* (1981), and the diary *Se perdre*, do not feature photographs. In addition, *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La vie extérieure* (2000), while promoting a precise, photo-like writing, do not contain actual photographs.

fictional protagonists, such as Denise Lesur in *Les Armoires vides*, the anonymous narrator of *La Femme gelée*,² or those of a narrator understood to be Ernaux herself,² we witness the rewinding and replaying of the narrators' memories.

I do not wish to imply in this study that memory, unlike the final product of a filmic image on celluloid or DVD, remains unchanged, inalterable, for Ernaux often incorporates into her texts reflections on the problematic nature of memory, namely in terms of fallibility, unreliability. As I will argue throughout this thesis, Ernaux persistently writes (visual) memory in cinematic terms so that it *will not* change, so that when it is "remade" through the process of voluntary memory, it will *not* undergo further change. The pervasive designation of memory as a cinematic phenomenon continues to distinguish Ernaux from the writers of her generation.

The fusion of writerly and cinematic devices prevents further permutation of human memory. Ernaux also attempts to overcome that permutation through her exacting methodology, including verifying dates and facts in official archives, as well as in her personal diaries and agendas. I will now present the content of this project, as well as an overview of Ernaux's corpus and its relevance in terms of photographic and filmic images, before delving into the theoretical apparatuses that will sustain its arguments.

² In works including and subsequent to *La Place*, published in 1983, the narrator corresponds directly to Ernaux. That said, Ernaux has also sought to avoid an overly subjective "je," favoring instead what she terms a "je transpersonnel." In her essay "Sur l'écriture," Ernaux states, "Depuis le début j'utilise le « je », mais le statut de ce « je » a varié depuis mes premiers livres jusqu'au dernier. Au début, dans les premiers livres, le « je » est celui à la fois du personnage et celui de la narratrice, donc la voix varie. Dans *Les Armoires vides*, le « je » exprime les affects de la petite fille, mais à d'autres moments c'est la narratrice qui analyse. Les deux « je » se confondent à la lecture. Ultérieurement, à partir de *La Place*, le « je » va renvoyer à l'auteur, c'est la personne de l'auteur, et en même temps, c'est une voix le plus souvent impersonnelle : un « je » qui est vidé d'affect" (19).

3. Scope and Content of the Project

As of 2011, no one has published a book-length analysis of Ernaux's entire body of work. In fact, the last comprehensive study of Ernaux, *Annie Ernaux: Étude de l'œuvre*, was published by Francine Dugast-Portes in 2008, and includes works that Ernaux has released through 2005. More importantly, although critics have published essays on Ernaux's use of photographs and/or modes of expression, there are no monographs examining the cinematic processes operating within her works. The remainder of this first chapter will provide information on Ernaux's conception of the real, an overview of her corpus and her writing methodology. I will also present recent scholarship that associates the operations of memory with cinematic processes.

Chapter 2 investigates Annie Ernaux's amalgamation of literary and cinematic aspects of the flashback. Of particular interest are the visual *trucages* implemented to prompt a fade or shift into *voix off* narration. Chapter 2 also considers the ways in which Ernaux implies movement and pace, again with visual cues, within the flashback narrative. Since the flashback can be read as a testimonial narrative mode, I will also discuss the various verification strategies undertaken by Ernaux to ensure the reader of the accuracy of the testimony the narrative provides. The penultimate section of Chapter 2 presents a global analysis of the flashback mechanisms at work in *Les Armoires vides* and *Les Années*, with emphasis given to the orchestration of the device in the prologue or preface of each text. I conclude the first chapter by investigating Ernaux's characterization of memory as a cinematic apparatus.

Chapter 3 analyzes the pervasive deployment of the terms *image*, *scène*, *cinéma* and *film* as substitutes for the terms *souvenir* and *mémoire*. These various memory-images

resonate with and remain inefaceable to the narrator because of their emotional impact. These images represent varying degrees of trauma, from the wounded psyche of a narrator plagued with feelings of socio-cultural inferiority, to a narrator haunted by a scene of near-fatal violence. This chapter also explains how and why Annie Ernaux maximizes the semantic richness of the term *scène*, before ultimately transforming its meaning into *souvenir*.

Also included among visual memories, the photographic images pervading Ernaux's corpus from 1983 through 2011 are examined as freeze-frames in Chapter 4. Photographic images are only shown in two works, *L'Usage de la photo* and *L'Autre fille*. In all other cases, the photos are evoked and their content is narrated. Nonetheless, we will determine that these images shed light upon the events recounted or the leitmotiv treated in the primary flashback portion of the text. These images are carefully selected and judiciously placed at just the right moment within the narrative framework.

4. Situating the “Real” in Ernauxian Terms

The notion of the *real* in Ernauxian terms, is tantamount to the accurate portrayal of the author's lived experience. Born to working-class parents, Ernaux confronted during her years at a private Catholic school, and later at university, the radical differences existing between her own social milieu and that of the “cultivated” bourgeoisie. Related to this, sociologist Smaïn Laacher has designated Ernaux's first three works as “une invitation au voyage dans le pays des déplacés” (14). The socio-cultural alienation, or “exil intérieur,”³ resulting from this encounter marks the majority of her texts. In a 1997 interview with

³ See Claire-Lise Tondeur's “Entretien avec Annie Ernaux.” Ernaux clarifies the notion of “exil intérieur” by stating: “C'est la position très inconfortable d'être entre deux chaises. Je suis exilée de mon propre milieu. Jamais je ne me départirai de cela. J'ai le regard fait par cet exil intérieur.” (38).

Philippe Vilain, Ernaux remarks that her approach to writing comprises “une mise au jour de *réalités* (et des lois régissant ces réalités) au travers d’un *donné irréfutable, mon expérience vécue de la déchirure sociale*” (“Annie Ernaux ou l’autobiographie en question” 143; my emphasis). Throughout her corpus, Annie Ernaux transcribes what she has seen, heard, and lived as an “immigrée de l’intérieur” (Ernaux and Jeannet 35) of French society, having obtained bourgeois status through higher education and marriage. Although it produces malaise on the personal level, Ernaux’s “déchirure sociale” and subsequent arrival in the bourgeois world ultimately afford her the means to “write her reality,” thereby providing a voice to those whom literature had previously deemed as “unworthy” of representation.

Ernaux’s writing of the “real” aims to be simultaneously individual and collective. In fact, she has categorized her *posture d’écriture* for much of her work as “auto-socio-biographique” (*L’Écriture comme un couteau* 21).⁴ Lyn Thomas notes that this process, whereby Ernaux simultaneously writes about herself and others within a defined sociological context, aids in the author’s questioning of literary boundaries, while bringing to the forefront of “literature” social realities (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction* 161). Embedded within Ernaux’s own *vécu* we also find that of her parents, that of working class in general, and that of other *transfuges de classe*. Like Thomas, Anne Simon is apt to point out the sociological posture adopted by Ernaux. In her 2008 essay “Déplacements du genre autobiographique: les sujets Ernaux,” Simon designates Ernaux’s writing as “l’écriture de l’enquête,” whose ultimate goal is to “transcrire la voix et les paroles des oubliés” (75-76). Siobhán McIlvanney also notices the trajectory of Ernaux’s social consciousness from the individual to the collective by identifying the familial microcosm as “devant représenter le

⁴ I will revisit the notion of *auto-socio-biographie* in the conclusion of my dissertation.

macrocosme social” (“Annie Ernaux: Un écrivain dans la tradition du réalisme” 249).

Ernaux herself recognizes the collective scope of her *quête du réel*. Interestingly, ten years after the publication of McIlvanney’s essay, we find in Ernaux’s 2008 publication, *Les Années*, a virtually identical statement regarding the notions of microcosm and macrocosm: “Récit familial et récit social c’est tout un” (*Les Années* 28). Contemporary critics have also emphasized the importance of socio-historical considerations when attempting to convey reality. George Levine states that valid descriptions of reality occur when “all reality claims are implicated in particular social, political and historical moments and must be considered as part of a fully human, not merely “rational” or intellectual, activity” (4). In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, we will note that Ernaux adheres to Levine’s assertion by undertaking a sociological, political and historical inquest in *La Honte* when she attempts to reconstruct her reality from the summer of 1952.

Ernaux represents reality in both its banality and its occasional horror. For example, we may encounter within a text the day-to-day operations of her parents’ *café-épicerie*, her school girl experiences at the Pensionnat Saint-Michel or her wandering through Paris or Cergy. Eliana DalMolin suggests that in Ernaux’s work, such everyday experiences assume “visual” qualities, becoming “le spectacle de la vie quotidienne ou la vie quotidienne devenue spectaculaire” (107). Yet, Ernaux’s *vécu quotidien* sometimes reveals an even more “spectacular” nature, in that it corresponds to events fraught with revulsion or violence, corresponding instead to what I would deem Ernaux’s *vécu insolite*.

Regarding *le vécu insolite*, the reader may confront the very “real” details of Ernaux’s nearly fatal hemorrhage after a clandestine abortion in January 1964, the physical and mental devastation that Alzheimer’s Disease inflicted upon her mother, the day on which her father

nearly murdered her mother, or the ravages that breast cancer inflicted upon Ernaux's own body. With the exception of Ernaux's first two works, *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, the recounting of these events is devoid of emotional undertones and is undertaken with unadorned precision, further reinforcing the notion of "realness."

5. Overview of the Corpus: 1974-2011

As a benefit to the reader, I shall provide a synopsis of each work referenced in this study, highlighting significant details and adding relevant critical commentary where necessary. Between 1974 and 2011, Ernaux has published seventeen works, two of which are collaborative efforts.⁵

Les Armoires vides (1974) recounts socio-cultural alienation as relayed by Denise Lesur, the protagonist/narrator who also serves as Ernaux's double in this semi-autobiographical novel. At the novel's incipit, Denise has just visited a "faiseuse d'anges" (13) for a clandestine abortion, as did Annie Ernaux in January 1964. In this inaugural text, Ernaux deploys the flashback as a narrative device. While the photographic image does not appear in *Les Armoires vides*, I shall demonstrate in Chapter 2 that Denise's memory-images retain a highly visual, and even cinematic quality. Of further importance in terms of cinematography, Ernaux instills within the text several visual and verbal *trucages* that mimic the cinematic fade and *voix off* narration.

Ce qu'ils disent ou rien (1977) is also semi-autobiographical in terms of content. In the text, fifteen-year-old Anne describes in a very short-term flashback, the summer before going into *seconde*. The overall tone of Anne's account is one of (typical) adolescent angst

⁵ *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, a series of interviews conducted over eighteen months via email with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, was published in 2003, while *L'Usage de la photo*, co-authored with Ernaux's lover, Marc Marie, appeared in 2005.

and rebellion against parental authority. In a fashion similar to Denise Lesur, Anne also experiences alienation from her working-class origins as she begins to frequent a group of university students working as summer camp counselors near the summer's end. In my estimation and despite the proximity in names between the narrator/protagonist and the author (Anne/Annie), the adolescent perspective adopted in the narrative renders *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* the least "Ernauxian" of the corpus. Moreover, the visual image does not play a role in the relaying of Anne's narrative. Therefore, with the exception of occasional references, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* will not comprise a major part of this study.

La Femme gelée (1981) can be seen as a *roman d'apprentissage*, wherein an anonymous thirty-something narrator, also a double of Ernaux, retraces the years, from childhood to the present moment, that led to her disillusion with life as a wife and mother. Raised by patrons of a *café-épicerie*, the narrator marries into the bourgeoisie. *La Femme gelée* is a pivotal text in Ernaux's authorial trajectory not only because it reveals her last literary venture with the genre of the novel, but also because it introduces for the first time in the corpus the persistent substitution of the term *image* for *souvenir*.

Although *Les Armoires vides*, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *La Femme gelée* are classified as novels, and thus, fiction, readers of Ernaux will certainly recognize in these initial works a significant degree of thematic and plot-related intertextuality with subsequent works, from *La Place* (1983) through *Les Années* (2008). Recurring themes include socio-cultural and familial alienation, shame due to social origins, the attempt to reconcile feelings of guilt and betrayal as a *transfuge de classe*, and female sexuality. Cathy Jellenik examines this intertextual penchant in *Rewriting Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux and Marie Redonnet*. In the chapter on Ernaux, entitled "Literary Sabotage," Jellenik states:

Ernaux rewrites her own texts in order to undermine and potentially alter both literary tradition and the bourgeois ideologies which sustain it. For she views the fruit of her writing and rewriting as a sort of corrective designed to minimize the chasm separating the working classes and women from their representation in literature. (74-75)

Ernaux's departure from traditional literary paradigms begins in *La Place*, which she had initially intended to entitle *Éléments pour une ethnologie familiale* (Ernaux and Jeannet 34). The text, the first of her auto-socio-biographies, presents the trajectory of her father's life, his "place" in the societal structure, and by extension, Ernaux's own experiences, particularly, "cette distance venue à l'adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, qui n'a pas de nom. Comme de l'amour séparé" (*La Place* 23). Clarifying why she could not tell her father's story as a novel, the writer states that this literary form "aurait déréalisé l'existence réelle de mon père" (Ernaux and Jeannet 34) and that it would have been "une trahison de la réalité" (Vilain "Annie Ernaux ou l'autobiographie en question." 143). Siobhán McIlvanney also notes fiction's deficiency in terms of Ernaux's *quête du réel*, stating, "where fiction was previously a facilitator in the narrators' representation of their past, it becomes an obstacle to their coming-to-terms with it" (*The Return to Origins* 10). Aside from abandoning institutionalized literary forms, Ernaux also rejects literary language, adopting what she terms "l'écriture plate" (*La Place* 24), a neutral, sparse mode of expression. *La Place* reveals Ernaux's first use of substantial and pervasive textual scissions within the flashback narrative to imply visually the cinematic fade and a departure into *voix off* narration. In *La Place*, we encounter visually resonant memory-images, designated as *scènes* (13; 98) or *instantanés de la mémoire* (95), that demonstrate affective potency on the narrator's psyche. Finally, *La Place* marks the inaugural entry of the photographic image into Ernaux's corpus. Chapter 4 of my dissertation will treat the four

photographs in *La Place* as freeze-framed images that serve to supplement the narrative.

Une Femme (1987) retraces the life and death of Ernaux's mother. The intentions of this text resemble those of *La Place*, for Ernaux continues to privilege sociological over literary aspects in *Une Femme*, expressing the desire to “rester, d'une certain façon, au-dessous de la littérature” (*Une Femme* 23), and by designating this work as “quelque chose entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire” (*Une Femme* 106). Like *La Place*, *Une Femme* is recounted in flashback and relies on blank spaces within the text to designate a shift in temporal perspectives. Ernaux sustains her use of both photographic and memory-images as narrative devices in *Une Femme*. In order to avoid redundancy, I have chosen to focus on those appearing in *La Place*.

Exploring the origin of her “exil intérieur” (Tondeur “Entretien avec Annie Ernaux” 38) and the resultant feeling of socio-cultural shame, Ernaux sets out in *La Honte* (1997) to “être en somme l'ethnologue de moi-même” (38). The text uses as a point of departure a Sunday in June 1952, when her father made an attempt on her mother's life. After this event, which is subsequently labeled “la scène indicible de mes douze ans” (*La Honte* 38), the young Ernaux discovers that her family dynamic and socio-economic status does not correspond to that of the dominant bourgeois social stratum. We discover that the “scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38) is also a “scène ineffaceable,” whose traumatic resonance forever fixes it within the narrator's memory. Aside from trying to reconstruct this highly visual traumatic memory, the adult narrator sets out on an ethnological quest to understand objectively the events of that fateful summer by examining two pivotal photographs evoked in the text in order to reintegrate her past and present selves.

Ernaux proceeds with her task as ethnographer in her “journaux extimes,”⁶ *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La Vie extérieure* (2000), a diptych spanning 1985-1992 and 1993-1999, respectively. In the preamble to *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux refers to the scenes comprising the two diaries as “une collection d’instantanés de la vie quotidienne collective” (*Journal du dehors* 8). In these “written snapshots” of everyday urban life in Paris, Cergy, the subway, RER and shopping centers, Ernaux’s aspires towards “une sorte d’écriture photographique du réel” (*Journal du dehors* 9). As their titles imply, in these two texts, Ernaux’s narrator relays scenes witnessed “outside,” in and around Cergy-Pontoise and Paris, with a pointed focus on issues of class distinction. As Lyn Thomas notes:

The narrating voice always identifies with those whose public behavior is outside the norms of bourgeois politeness, and indicative of a level of powerlessness where these norms become irrelevant. On the other hand, middle-class culture, including its more bohemian expressions, is subjected to acerbic irony, particularly when the language and the self-representations of members of the milieu are contradicted by their evident material privileges. (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer* 20)

Tu Hanh Nguyen posits that the entries in the two *journaux* are camera-like and seek to permanently record reality in its immediacy: “En « fixant » la réalité et les sujets changeants, [les journaux] offrent une résistance au temps” (181). Steven Winspur has also argued that the two texts have as their ultimate goal the creation of images (54). Because they are diaries, the diptych comprising *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* can be classified as *reportages* or documentaries, rather than as flashback narratives. Given the high degree of intertextuality in Ernaux’s corpus, several of the scenes recorded in these two *journaux* are reprised in *Les Années*. We will consider such intertextual references between the three texts

⁶ Robin Tierney reminds us that the term “journal extime” was originated by Michel Tournier (113).

in Chapter 2.

In addition to the “journaux extimes.” Annie Ernaux has published on two occasions excerpts from her personal diaries. « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » (1997) details the horror Ernaux encountered while caring for, and eventually having to permanently hospitalize, her ailing mother.⁷ Departing from the objectivity sought in her other works, Ernaux advises the reader, “En aucun cas, on ne lira ces pages comme un témoignage objectif sur le « long séjour » en maison de retraite [...] seulement comme le résidu d’une douleur” (13).

Se perdre (2001), serving as a companion piece to *Passion simple* (1992), reveals the emotionally debilitating effects of Ernaux’s passionate love affair and obsession with a married Russian diplomat stationed in Paris. The diary, which begins in September 27, 1988 and concludes April 9, 1990, represents Ernaux’s desire to transcribe her lived experience, at whatever cost. In the preamble of *Se perdre*, she informs the reader:

Je me suis aperçue qu’il y avait dans ces pages une « vérité » autre que celle contenue dans *Passion simple*. Quelque chose de cru et de noir, sans salut, quelque chose de l’*oblation*. J’ai pensé que cela aussi devait être porté au jour (15; Ernaux’s emphasis).

Published nine years earlier than its diary-counterpart, *Passion simple* serves to record objectively the same events recounted as entries in *Se perdre*. The text presents an almost clinical analysis of the adulterous love affair – in stark contrast to the angst expressed in *Se perdre*. The texts will both figure in Chapter 5, as evidence of Ernaux’s unfailing tendency to reveal truthfully even the most intimate details of her life – without self-censure.

⁷ “Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit” was the last lucid sentence ever written by her mother, who at the time was suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease. It is the first – and only- line of a letter her mother had begun to write to her friend, Paulette.

In *L'Événement* (2000), the non-fiction companion piece to *Les Armoires vides*, Annie Ernaux relays the events surrounding her pregnancy and clandestine abortion – with grisly detail. In order to reconstruct and authenticate the narration of this “event,” she consults her personal diaries, agenda and the *images* embedded in her memory from October 1963 through January 1964. seeking to submerge herself in “chaque image jusqu’à ce que j’aie la sensation physique de la « rejoindre », et que quelques mots surgissent, dont je puisse dire, « c’est ça »” (26-27). The text will be examined in Chapter 2 as representative of Ernaux’s desire to confirm the veracity of her texts.

L'Occupation (2003) relates Ernaux’s obsessive jealousy of her former lover’s new love interest, a history professor whose identity her ex-lover refuses to reveal.⁸ Although she ended the relationship, Ernaux finds herself consumed with this new woman, to the extent that she “feels” the other woman’s presence within her own body. Moreover, her obsession leads her to undertake all sorts of machinations to uncover the name of this woman. As Ernaux states, “J’étais, au double sens du terme, occupée”(14). Still faithful to her writing reality by fusing visual and verbal modes of expression to inscribe truthfully the reality of this experience, Ernaux states at the text’s closing: “J’ai fini de dégager les figures d’un imaginaire livré à la jalousie, dont j’ai été la proie et la spectatrice [...] de décrire toute cette rhétorique [...] destinée à obtenir coûte que coûte la vérité. J’ai réussi à combler de mots l’image et le nom absents de celle qui, durant six mois, a continué de se maquiller, de vaquer à ses cours, de parler et de jouir, sans soupçonner qu’elle vivait aussi ailleurs, dans la tête et la peau d’une autre femme” (*L'Occupation* 70). In *L'Occupation*, Ernaux ponders the association between memory and filmic images, particularly in terms of the accelerated pace

⁸ Ernaux published an early version of this text in *Le Monde* in 2001.

at which we receive affectively-charged memory-images.⁹

Eroticism as a means to surmount the physical and emotional devastation of breast cancer is the driving force behind *L'Usage de la photo* (2005). With one exception,¹⁰ Ernaux and Marc Marie reproduce the photographs in the text. Wanting to capture the moments preceding or following lovemaking (clothes strewn about, furniture turned over, disheveled beds), Ernaux and Marc Marie photograph these scenes “the morning after,” before commenting on them individually. Photography, then, provides a catalyst to writing in *L'Usage de la photo*.

Although unable to determine the interest their project will elicit in others, Ernaux does realize that modern society is characterized by an avalanche of images, which she deems: “la mise en images effrénée de l’existence qui, de plus en plus, caractérise l’époque” (*L'Usage de la photo* 17). In fact, contemporary theorists, such as Marc Augé, posit that we can no longer “see” *le réel* due to the veritable onslaught of images in modern culture (Augé 161). Augé echoes this sentiment by stating : “C’est l’ensemble du monde aujourd’hui, qui est mis en images et en spectacle” (126). Likewise, Susan Sontag notes that suggests that modern society has grown dependent on the power of the photographic image to convey reality. She notes that the craving “to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies” (24).

Assuming that her readers are accustomed to the blitz of images unique to the

⁹ See Chapter 5, Note 89.

¹⁰ Ernaux evokes and describes, without showing, a photograph of her lover’s erect penis. In addition, Ernaux’s latest work, *L’Autre fille*, contains two reproduced photographic images, which feature her family’s *cafés-épiceries* in Lillebonne (73) and in Yvetot (17).

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Ernaux offers *L'Usage de la photo* – both image and text – as a means to create even more images, whether “real” memory-images, or strictly imaginary ones. Ernaux announces: “Le plus haut degré de la réalité ne sera atteint que si ces photos écrites se changent en d’autres scènes dans la mémoire ou l’imagination des lecteurs” (*L'Usage de la photo* 17). In this respect, Ernaux mirrors Barthes’ and Sontag’s notion that a photograph elicits speculation and reflection on the part of the spectator. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes assigns communicative powers to the photographic image. The photograph, according to Barthes, “parle...induit vaguement à penser” (65). Likewise, Sontag posits a nearly identical assertion, by stating that photographs invite us to “think – or rather feel, intuit – what the reality must be like if [the image] looks this way. Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy” (23). Ernaux invites the “reader” of *L'Usage de la photo* to write his or her own reality, with the text’s images and the reader’s own memory or fantasy as a starting point.

Ernaux attains the apogee of the dynamic between memory, reality, the photographic image and the written word in *Les Années*. Classified as “une sorte d’autobiographie impersonnelle” (*Les Années* 240), this work employs narration by *nous* and *on* to capture the collective human experience of the past seven decades, while an anonymous *elle* appears in photographs interspersed throughout the text. The text’s incipit affirms: “Toutes les images disparaîtront” (*Les Années* 11). This statement, which reveals the transient nature of reality, of memory, as well as the certainty of death, precedes a fragmentary enumeration of randomly recalled mental images from the narrator’s past:

Les images réelles ou imaginaires [...]’évanouiront toutes d’un seul coup, comme l’ont fait les millions d’images qui étaient derrière les fronts des grands-parents mort il y a un demi-siècle, des parents morts eux aussi.
(*Les Années* 14-15)

The memory-images in *Les Années* are seen in and recounted through the mind’s eye, which functions here in a manner similar to a camera’s lens. At the end of Chapter 2, we will note that in *Les Années*, the narrator’s memory adopts the mechanical aspects of cinematic devices that record, imprint, project and display the multitude of images presented in the text. Sontag establishes a similar metaphor whereby human memory becomes a storehouse of all of the images it has perceived. In *On Photography*, Sontag states: “Photography gives the impression that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images” (3). *Les Années* will be analyzed in Chapters 2 and 4. In Chapter 2, we will investigate the manner in which the text visually mimics the cinematic flashback, while in Chapter 4, numerous photographs evoked within the narrative will be studied as freeze-frames that “tell the story” of the narrator’s trajectory.

In March 2011, Annie Ernaux released her most recent book, *L’Autre fille*. Again teasing the boundaries of literary genres, the text is written in epistolary form to Ginette, the sister who died two years before Ernaux’s birth on September 1, 1940. Evoking the pivotal scene when Ernaux learned for the first time, at age ten, that she had been predeceased by this sister, the text treats the notion of an *enfant de remplacement*. In Chapter 5, I will elucidate in greater detail Ernaux’s further promotion of text-image reciprocity in her most recent work.

6. The Process of Writing Memory

In *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, a book-length interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet conducted via email and subsequently published in 2003, Ernaux elucidates the steps undertaken in her writing of memory, which, as I previously stated, serves as the foundation of her entire writerly process. For Ernaux, memory is persistently active, and offers to her audiovisual stimuli that facilitate her realist vocation: “Ces « épiphanies » constantes sont le matériau de mes livres, les « preuves » aussi de la réalité. Je ne peux pas écrire sans « voir », ni « entendre », mais pour moi c’est « revoir » et « réentendre »” (Ernaux and Jeannet 41). In this pre-writing stage, the process of selecting, contemplating and (re)producing memories, rather than simply enumerating them, may be likened to a *montage*.

Regarding the origins of each text, Ernaux designates her starting point as an “arrêt sur image... qu’on se repasse sans cesse” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42). She further informs us that the “freeze-framing” of a certain image is prompted by a phenomenon resembling Barthes’ *punctum*,¹¹ a step that she deems unequivocally necessary for her writing. Ernaux states: “J’insiste sur le fait qu’il y a toujours un détail qui « crispe » le souvenir, qui provoque cet arrêt sur image, la sensation et tout ce qu’elle déclenche” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42). For Ernaux, this disconcerting detail can be “[u]n objet – la serviette de table que ma mère tient dans sa main quand mon père meurt. Une phrase, « il a repris de la force », dite par l’avorteuse en parlant du fœtus dans mon ventre” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42). Jean-Yves and Marc Tadié also acknowledge the catalyst nature of such objects in evoking memories:

L’actualisation des souvenirs se réalise par différents mécanismes [...] Mais bien souvent c’est une association, *un stimulus extérieur*, plus ou moins

¹¹ The *punctum* of a photograph is “ce hasard qui, en elle, *me point* (mais aussi *me meurtrit*, *me poigne*” (*La Chambre claire* 49). See Chapter 4.

proche du souvenir, qui va le faire apparaître, entraînant souvent l'apparition d'une chaîne de souvenirs. (153; my emphasis)

Ernaux's "arrêt sur image qu'on se repasse sans cesse" (Ernaux and Jeannet 42) clearly calls to mind the expression "passer un film," although in this case, we are in the presence of a temporarily static memory-image. Pausing upon that image repeatedly because of the *punctum*-like detail allows Ernaux to reconstruct the significance of the memory-image in question. In this respect, the freeze-frame will subsequently allow the remaining elements comprising it to prepare their unfurling. The *arrêt sur image* thus becomes a catalyst to the subsequently narrated events.

Yet, the frozen memory-image does not remain static. Rather, it is subject to the motion elicited by the next step in Ernaux's writing process, which I shall designate as the pre-textual flashback. Since Ernaux has already introduced cinematic lexicon via the "arrêt sur image qu'on se repasse sans cesse" (Ernaux and Jeannet 42), we may liken her memory to the "reel" of a film. The author's memory will "rewind" so that she may revisit and mull over past scenes. This is an active process by which Ernaux seeks to reproduce, with the maximum amount of precision, the memory-image in question:

Il n'est pas question de prendre telles quelles les images, les paroles, de les décrire ou de les citer. Je dois les « halluciner », les rabâcher...et ensuite je tâche de « produire » - non de dire la sensation dont la scène, le détail, la phrase, sont porteurs pour moi, par le récit ou la description de la scène, le détail. (Ernaux et Jeannet 41)

At this phase, the memory acts as the agent, as Ernaux explains, "ramenant des choses vues, entendues..., des gestes, des scènes, avec la plus grande précision" (Ernaux and Jeannet 41). In Ernaux's literary expression, the image is a dynamic memory re-envisioned as a film

sequence and provides the foundation of the narrative.¹² Thus, Ernaux's writing process itself rests in the domain of the cinematic. Moreover, emphasizing the privileged status of the visual, Ernaux's recognition of "précision" as one of the characteristics of memory reveals memory's privileged status in Ernaux's perspective. Related to precision, memory-images are not only the material of her work, but "les preuves aussi de la réalité" (Ernaux and Jeannet 41).

In this phase of the Ernaux's pre-writing flashback, visual and corporeal elements abound, further reinforcing the parallels between Ernaux's transcription of memory and cinematic tendencies. The evocation of "gestes" with their implicit movement and bodily presence, along with the "choses vues" and the "des scènes" refer to the very ideas of motion and physical dimension that render cinema, and in this case, memory, *real*. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that only one language-related phenomenon is referenced in the process of memory: "[des choses] entendues." It is as if the visual cues of movement and corporality override things said and heard, as if language on its own were deficient in authenticating past experience. Barthes supports that hypothesis, acknowledging the shortcomings of language as compared to the visual renderings. He states, "Le filmique est donc exactement là, dans ce lieu où le langage articulé n'est plus qu'approximatif" ("Le troisième sens" 58). Similarly, Jeanne-Marie Clerc notes that, via the cinematic image, writers express the incapacity of words to translate visual perception and movement (198).

¹² Despite Ernaux's favoring of the visual over the verbal in the memory process, the verbal does not always occupy an inferior status. Language does indeed occupy an important role in the Ernauxian corpus, particularly when comparing the language of her origins to the language she acquired through acculturation. In addition, sometimes, language is the sole means of capturing the truth, as the following passage from *Une Femme* reveals: "Mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu'il s'agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère qui ne peut être atteinte que par les mots. (C'est-à-dire que ni les photos, ni mes souvenirs, ni les témoignages de la famille ne peuvent me donner cette vérité)" (*Une Femme* 23).

Despite Clerc's assertion, I will determine that Ernaux does indeed deploy certain *trucages* to illustrate visual perception and movement within her the vast majority of her texts, including *Les Armoires vides*, *La Place*, *Les Années*.

After Ernaux mentally retrieves the scenes of her past, she seeks to discover and reproduce the sensation, or the memory of the sensation, that a particular scene imparted upon her at the time of its occurrence. Only after uncovering sensation can Ernaux truthfully compose the memory in question. Ernaux states:

Il me faut la sensation (ou le souvenir de la sensation), il me faut ce moment où la sensation arrive, dépourvue de tout, nue. Seulement après, trouver les mots. Cela veut dire que la sensation est critère d'écriture, critère de vérité. (Ernaux and Jeannet 41)

Jean-Yves and Marc Tadié recognize a similar process. Once memory elicits "l'apparition d'une chaîne de souvenirs" (Tadié 153), an individual experiences not only the sensation felt in present time of remembering, but also *the impression* of the sensation actually experienced in the past (153). For Ernaux, such sensations are the final and indispensable catalysts in the authentic writing of memory.

The pivotal role of sensation is clarified in the mise-en-abyme of the writing process revealed in *Les Années*:

C'est une sensation déjà éprouvée, épisodique – les drogues la provoquent peut-être mais elle n'en a jamais usé, plaçant au-dessus tout la jouissance et la lucidité – , qu'elle saisit maintenant dans une sorte d'agrandissement et de ralentissement... Elle y voit un instrument possible de connaissance, non pas seulement pour elle-même, mais de façon générale, presque scientifique – de quoi elle ne sait pas. Dans son projet d'écriture sur une femme ayant vécu de 1940 à aujourd'hui, qui la tient de plus en plus avec la désolation, la culpabilité même de ne pas le réaliser, elle voudrait, sans doute influencée par Proust, que cette sensation en constitue l'ouverture, par besoin de fonder sur une expérience réelle son entreprise. (204)

We may posit, then, that when undertaking a text, Ernaux's writing process consists of three steps. First, voluntary memory is temporarily suspended by an *arrêt sur image*. Then, after pondering the significance of the freeze-frame, the author is able to glean past experiences and sensations. Finally, after retrieving the memory-images and their associated sensations, the act of writing can occur.

7. From "Reel" Memory to "Real" Memory

In recent years, scholars have begun to acknowledge the analogy between cinema and the operations of memory. Since Ernaux presents memory largely in visual terms, a synopsis of some of the major notions connecting memory and visual media, namely photography and cinema, will shed light upon the cinematic devices integrated into Ernaux's narratives.

In her study, *Memory and the Moving Image: French Film in the Digital Era*, Isabelle McNeill seeks to examine ways in which memory, history and the moving image are related (2). McNeill suggests that: "Seeing film as an analogy for memory suggests another way in which film may act as a constitutive element of collective memory: filmic images may shape the form of our memories as well as the content" (32-33). In fact, we will determine at the end of Chapter 2 that in *Les Années*, Ernaux metaphorically designates the process of memory as a cinematic device by which collective history is conveyed. Because of their visual and *visible* nature, memories, much like photographic or filmic images, adopt tangible aspects. Those aspects are then further materialized through the act of writing.

Philippe Dubois deems the photograph as the material equivalent of a memory by stating, "Une photo est toujours une image mentale. Ou, pour le dire autrement, notre mémoire n'est faite que de photographies" (266). Paul Ricœur adopts a similar viewpoint in

observing that “les souvenirs se présentent comme images” (“Définition de la mémoire” 29), but diverges from Dubois in extracting the “photographic” memory-image from the realm of static passivity. Echoing Barthes’ *ça-a-été*,¹³ in *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Ricœur designates the remembered past as “l’ayant-été du passé souvenu, ultime référent du souvenir en acte” (58). In Ernaux’s case, the “souvenir en acte” is tantamount to a series of images originating in the memory as if they were part of an internal motion picture. Envisioning past experiences, particularly those we consider traumatic or violent, as film sequences is hardly an uncommon phenomenon, for as Susan Sontag notes, we tend to express how “real” an event appeared with statements such as, “It seemed like a movie” (161).¹⁴

Since the images visualized within the memory are imbued with movement rather than frozen in the permanent stasis of a photographic image, we might revise Dubois’ assessment in cinematic terms by stating that memory consists not merely of *photographs*, but of *photograms*, the individual photographic images imprinted sequentially on a film reel, then put into motion by a projecting device. Film scholar Jeanne-Marie Clerc defines photograms as “une série de photographies immobiles auxquelles seul le mouvement de l’appareil confère l’apparence de la vie” (160). The impression of motion is significant when associating memory with the mechanisms of cinema in Ernaux’s works, for, as we shall see in Chapter 3, each text presents the narration of *scènes* and *images* from her past, functioning in those cases as what we may also designate as memory-images. These memory-images are set into motion by the operation of memory before being materialized into writing. Ricœur’s

¹³ In determining the essence of the photographic image in *La Chambre claire*, Barthes concludes, “Le nom du noème de la Photographie sera donc : « *ça-a-été* »” (120).

¹⁴ My examination of *La Honte* in Chapter 3 will revisit Sontag’s assertion. In the text, Ernaux persistently refers to the traumatic memory in which her father attempted to murder her mother as a *scène* (*La Honte* 38).

assertions that memories appear to us as images and that the memory is “in action” facilitate situating memory not only in the realm of the cinematic, but more importantly, when considering Ernaux’s professed *quête du réel*, in the very domain of the real. In short, the manner in which Ernaux writes memories and elucidates the operation of memory demonstrates a fusion of literary and cinematic techniques. Examining the notions of movement and corporality that are unique to the cinematic image will facilitate our understanding of Ernaux’s practice.

Isabelle McNeill notes that “a filmic image is a moment from the past given form and movement” (32). Indeed, as I shall determine in Chapter 2, Ernaux’s deployment of cinematic techniques attributes a realist vocation to the visual image. Maureen Turim states: “The ability of cinema to display motion offers another dimension to the realist dimension of photography. Film is an even more powerful medium of realism than photography” (14). Likewise, in his 2009 study entitled *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image*, John Mullarkey recognizes the importance of movement, in conjunction with time, in establishing the “realness” of the cinematic image:

Cinema, with its images, gives us reality rather than some pale imitation of it. *Image is every thing*. The two ways it does this are through time and movement, the latter being the indirect representation of the former. But irrespective of being direct or indirect, the movements shown in cinema are real. And this is so not only on account of everything being an image. Hence, there is a second point to be made, that compounds the first: *every thing is in motion*. In a universe where only ‘duration’ (change) is real, the moving images of film have an equal claim on reality – film gives us immediately self-moving images. (89; emphasis in original)

Christian Metz further elucidates the impression of reality imparted by the filmic image. He tells us that cinema represents reality more authentically than a still photograph not only because of movement, but also due to the corporality instilled by movement:

Compared to still photography, motion-picture photography possesses a higher degree of reality (because the spectacles of real life have motion). Motion imparts corporality and gives them an autonomy their still representations could not have... The object is substantiated... Two things, then, are entailed by motion: a higher degree of reality, and the corporality of objects. (*Film Language* 7)

With regard to corporality and motion, we will find Metz's assertions pertinent when considering Ernaux's writing of memory in cinematic terms in the following chapter.

The process of memory has been metaphorically assigned technical and machine-like characteristics in its capacity to receive, to bear the imprint of and to transmit past experiences. In 1999, brothers Jean-Yves and Marc Tadié, a professor of comparative literature and a neurosurgeon, respectively, published *Le sens de la mémoire*, presenting both the physiological and philosophical aspects of memory. Further reinforcing the visual nature of memory, the Tadié brothers liken the human eye to a camera that records, then transmits images to the visual zone of the brain, which serves as a "receiver," before setting the images in motion. Yet, unlike its electronic counterpart, memory permanently retains the *imprint* of those recordings. The Tadié brothers explain the process as follows:

Des images et des sons se transforment en ondes, puis redeviennent images ou sons. La différence est que, pour notre corps, la caméra ce sont nos yeux, les fils, câbles ou satellites sont nos vies optiques et le récepteur de télévision est la zone visuelle de notre cerveau... Une fois le match de rugby terminé, la télévision éteinte, le récepteur ne garde rien de ce qu'il a reçu, alors que notre cerveau va en conserver la trace. (103)

The emotional effect, whether positive or negative, of certain event leads to that “imprinting” as a memory. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will present such indelible memory-images in Ernaux’s corpus. In *Le sens de la mémoire*, the Tadié brothers explain the origin and imprinting of memories as follows:

Lorsque nous explorons nos souvenirs, la plupart d’entre eux sont restés *imprimés* d’une façon tout à fait indépendante de notre volonté... La plupart de nos souvenirs sont ceux qui, d’une façon ou d’une autre, et en cas uniquement pour nous-mêmes, ont eu une charge émotionnelle ou affective plus importante que le reste de notre vie quotidienne. Ils sont donc restés dans notre mémoire parce que la charge affective a entraîné, d’emblée, un afflux de neurotransmetteurs qui *ont imprimé* le fait ou l’objet dans un nouveau réseau neuronal. (124-25; my emphasis)

In fact, an “imprinted” visual memory is a particularly common result of traumatic incidents. According to Judith Herman, traumatic memories are “imprinted in the brain in the form of vivid images and sensations” (qtd. in MacCurdy 36). We will discover in Chapter 3 that these recorded and imprinted images, along with the numerous photographs in Ernaux’s corpus, enhance the primary flashback narrative.

The theories presented in this introductory chapter, particularly those relating to the corporal presence, movement, reception, imprinting, projecting and freeze-framing of filmic images will facilitate my re-reading of Ernaux’s memory and memory-images as adaptations of cinematic processes.

CHAPTER 2

CINEMATIC DEVICES IN ERNAUX’S NARRATIVES: FLASHBACK, FADE AND VOIX OFF

1. Introduction

Aside from the omnipresence of visual and cinematic lexicon that will be examined in the next chapter, we also note throughout Ernaux’s largely autobiographical corpus the adaptation of a narrative device derived from cinema: the flashback. Ernaux deploys this device in order to underscore the operations of memory. We will recall from the previous chapter that the Ernaux implements the flashback, albeit mentally, during her pre-writing process, while assigning to that process cinematic operations comparable to *montage* and freeze-frame.

Underpinning the similarities between memory and cinematic modes of narration, Susan Hayward classifies the flashback as the “cinematic representation of memory,...and ultimately, a subjective truth (133). Her assessment closely resembles Maureen Turim’s explanation of a flashback, which “is introduced when the image of the present dissolves into an image of the past, understood as either a story being told, or a subjective memory” (1). Both “subjective truth” (Hayward 133) and “subjective memory” (Turim 1) are defining characteristics of Ernaux’s entire corpus. I will return to those notions later in this chapter, but will now explore the origins of the cinematic flashback, as well as its launching devices of the fade and *voix off*, of which I will provide examples extracted from Ernaux’s corpus. I will conclude this chapter with a global analysis of the flashback, fade and *voix off* and other

cinematic techniques as they are adapted to the literary medium in two of Ernaux's texts, *Les Armoires vides*, published in 1974, and *Les Années*, published in 2008.

2. Introduction to the Flashback, Fade and Voix Off

The term flashback, which dates to the dawn of the twentieth century, was initially used exclusively with references to cinematic works (Turim 4). Maureen Turim states that at the time it was coined, the term was “sparked with modern notions of speed, movement, energy, of the relativity of spatiotemporal relationships and the vicissitudes of mental processes” (3). For the purposes of this study, the characteristics of speed, movement and the fluctuation of mental processes will be made evident throughout Ernaux's corpus.

Literature and theater implemented similar retrospective narrative techniques long before the creation of the term flashback. Nonetheless, the application of the term to literary works remained contingent upon its acceptance in film criticism (Turim 4). In the domain of literary criticism, Gérard Genette provides us with a term that is equivalent to the flashback. In “Discours du récit”, he describes *analepse* as “toute évocation après coup d'un événement antérieur au point de l'histoire où l'on se trouve” (82). Thus, in both cinema and literature, the flashback is used to bring the past into the present. The effects analogous to the cinematic fade and *voix off* narration, when combined with the persistent conflation of *souvenir*, *image*, *scène*, and their associated terms, *cinéma* and film (to be examined in Chapter 3), compel us to consider Ernaux's use of the flashback as an adaptation of a cinematic device in a literary medium.

Susan Hayward's explanation of the delivery of a cinematic flashback will allow us to recognize similarities within Ernaux's corpus. Hayward notes:

The spectator is given visual and aural codes to signify the beginning and the ending of a flashback. Normally, there is a fade or a dissolve, and generally a voice-over by a narrator (again usually, but not always, the person whose flashback it is. (133)

Daniel Percheron further elucidates literary equivalents of the dissolve technique, designating the fade as a form of cinematic punctuation: “[La ponctuation] s’apparente plus aux blancs entre paragraphes et chapitres qu’à la ponctuation proprement dite” (Collet et al. 187). Since 1981,¹⁵ Ernaux’s literary version of the fade or dissolve technique is indeed found in the spatial organization of her texts, namely through the insertion of the blank spaces to which Percheron refers. Let us consider an example extracted from *La Femme gelée*, Ernaux’s second work. In the passages that follow, the narrator expresses disillusion when discovering that her mother’s notion that professional success would afford her daughter unlimited freedom is patently false. Here, Ernaux (as a writer) uses the blank space in a very clever manner, even subliminally referring to it, when the narrator returns to the present time to acknowledge that her mother’s advice has turned out to be erroneous:

« Il faut être bien armée contre la vie d’abord . » Naïveté de ma mère, elle croyait que le savoir et un bon métier me prémuniraient contre tout, y compris le pouvoir des hommes.

Il faut dire qu’il y a eu *un blanc* dans son mode d’emploi de la vie. (*La Femme gelée* 40; my emphasis; spacing appears in original)

As seen in the passage above, in Ernaux’s corpus, these blank spaces facilitate and simulate movement between the past and the present recounted in the flashback. Questioned

¹⁵ In *La Femme gelée*, published in 1981, we find Ernaux’s first use of these textual scissions to sequence the various images of her narrative. That said, the technique is used with much less frequency than in works post-1981, from *La Place* in 1983 through *L’Autre fille* in 2011. In addition, the spaces used in *La Femme gelée* are not as sizeable as they are in subsequent works.

by Pierre Fort-Louis on her use of these spaces within her narratives, Ernaux views such spaces as essential for the “editing” of the scenes she represents, even referring to them on a purely visual level. The author states, “Les blancs permettent...à la fois de juxtaposer et de détacher des *visions*” (“Entretien avec Annie Ernaux” 990; my emphasis). The use of blank space on the page establishes, thus, two temporal modes of the fade, one that moves to the past, and the other that returns to the present. Such textual scissions function as the “visual” trigger of the flashback, as described above by Susan Hayward. In other words, the “absence” that they graphically reveal on the page makes them unquestionably visible.

Of particular interest for the present study are Hayward’s references to the visual and aural codes contained in the cinematic fade (or dissolve) and *voix off* narration. Careful examination of Ernaux’s corpus reveals that she does indeed deploy a narrative mode that mimics the effects of the fade and *voix off*, allowing various images and scenes, like those analyzed in the next chapter, to dissolve into each other and occasionally, as in the prologue of *Les Années*, to superimpose upon each other. Let us consider the following example from *La Place*. The passage that follows is situated immediately after the narrator’s description of the CAPES exam in Lyon. In it, she announces her father’s death, exactly two months after her experience in Lyon, before launching the flashback by a substantial blank space in the text:

Mon père est mort deux après, jour pour jour. Il avait soixante-sept ans et tenait avec ma mère un café-alimentation dans un quartier tranquille non loin de la gare, à Y... (Seine-Maritime). Il comptait se retirer dans un an. Souvent, durant quelques secondes, je ne sais plus si la scène du lycée de Lyon a eu lieu avant ou après, si le mois d’avril venteux où je me vois attendre un bus à la Croix-Rousse doit précéder ou suivre le mois de juin étouffant de sa mort.

C'était un dimanche, au début de l'après-midi.

Ma mère est apparue dans le haut de l'escalier. Elle se tamponnait les yeux avec la serviette de table qu'elle avait dû emporter avec elle en montant dans la chambre après le déjeuner. Elle a dit d'une voix neutre : « C'est fini. ». (*La Place* 13; spacing in original)

In this passage, the spacing above “C'était un dimanche, au début de l'après midi” (13) provides to the reader a visual cue (via the blank space) that time is indeed dissolving from the present to the past, while the spacing immediately after her reference to that Sunday afternoon guides us even further into the past. In other words, Ernaux engages in a *visual* spatiotemporal separation, wherein blank space splits the time frame of her narrative.

Yet, textual scissions are not the only means by which Ernaux dissolves time in her texts. As we see, occasionally her fade technique occurs within one paragraph and is detectable only by a change in verb tenses that shifts the perspective from present to past, or, from present to a *future that really represents the past*. Maureen Turim posits:

The literary equivalent to the flashback is often less distinct and abrupt than the cinematic flashback in its temporal shifts. Verbal storytelling can ease temporal shifts through the sustaining power of the narrative voice, whether that of authorial omniscience or of a character in first-person narration. (7)

Let us consider another example from *La Place*, consisting of one of Ernaux's numerous metadiscursive commentaries and that is an exception to Turim's statement. In the passage, the narrator contemplates the ongoing composition of her text, and particularly the regret that she experiences in that its impending completion indicates reliving her father's death. This consequently reinforces her regret at not having attempted to improve their relationship before he died. The narrator begins the passage in the future tense, followed by

the conditional mood and the present indicative. She actually maintains the *future* to recount an event *that has already happened*, namely her departure, along with her toddler son, for a visit to her parents, during which her father died. She then resumes past-time narration fading back into the flashback:

Bientôt *je n'aurai plus rien* à écrire. Je voudrais retarder les dernières pages, qu'elles soient toujours devant moi. Mais il n'est même plus possible de revenir trop loin en arrière, de retoucher ou d'ajouter des faits, ni même de me demander où était le bonheur. *Je vais prendre* un train matinal et je n'arriverai que dans la soirée comme d'habitude. Cette fois je leur amène leur petit-fils de deux ans et demi. Ma mère *attendait* à la barrière de sortie, sa jaquette de tailleur enfilée par-dessus sa blouse blanche et un foulard sur ses cheveux qu'elle ne teint plus depuis mon mariage. L'enfant, muet de fatigue et perdu, au bout de ce voyage interminable, *s'est laissé embrasser et entraîner* par la main... Mon père nous *attendait* dans la cuisine. Il *ne m'a pas paru* vieilli. Ma mère *a fait remarquer* qu'il *était allée* la veille chez le coiffeur pour faire honneur à son petit garçon. (*La Place* 101; my emphasis)

The narrator's assertion that the composition of her book will soon end and the desire to "retarder les dernières pages" as well as to "revenir trop loin en arrière" are tantamount to experiencing her father's death twice, once literally, and a second time via her narrative. Reliving her boarding of the train as if it has not yet happened expresses the narrator's desire to manipulate the temporality of her flashback in order to prolong the narrative, and consequently, the final days of her father's life, at least within the confines of the text. Yet, the dissolving from the future (albeit a "false" future) into the past, recounting her mother's meeting the narrator and her child at the train station, demonstrates that the narrator's flashback – by definition a past-time phenomenon – has resumed control of the temporality. That slippage into the past is focalized and vocalized by the *voix off* narrator, alluded to above by Susan Hayward.

As Hayward states, voice-over, or *voix off*, the term I shall use in this study, is the

second mechanism that triggers the flashback (134). Christian Metz distinguishes two types of *voix off*, narrator: “celle du personnage (« première personne » de Jean-Pierre Charpentier, « voix-Je de Michel Chion) et celle d’un narrateur ou commentateur extérieur” (*Énonciation impersonnelle* 53).¹⁶ Metz provides additional details on the first-person *voix off* narrator that reveal his or her proximity to and subjectivity about his or her story:

[La voix off], celle, par exemple du personnage qui raconte en flash-back un épisode vécu, instaure un position d’énonciation qui est proprement juxtadiégétique (longeant la fable au plus près)...c’est encore la voix d’un personnage qui fait partie de ce qu’il raconte. (*Énonciation impersonnelle* 54)

Ernaux’s literary adaptation of a first-person *voix off* narrator corresponds to Metz’s categorization. In fact, with only one exception,¹⁷ all of Ernaux’s works feature a first-person narrator to convey with objectivity the lived experiences she recounts in her texts.

3. The Flashback as Truth and Testimony

While the notion of an “objective” first-person narration may seem implausible, in cinematic terms, the device has become a tool in the quest for transparency (Clerc 50). Ernaux’s “quest for transparency” is evident in her ubiquitous metanarrative comments, wherein, addressing the reader, she expounds on the content of the work, as well as its methodology. Moreover, given the autobiographical nature of Ernaux’s corpus, we discern the presence of Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact consisting of “l’engagement que prend un auteur de raconter directement sa vie (ou une partie, ou un aspect de sa vie) dans un esprit de vérité” (*Signes de vie: le pacte autobiographique* 31). In fact, Inga Litvinaviciene

¹⁶ Please note that the upper-case “J” in “Je” is in the original.

¹⁷ *Les Années*, published in 2008, *nous*, *on*, and *elle* comprise the narrative voice. I will discuss the narrative process featured in *Les Années* in the final part of this chapter.

states that Ernaux's adaptation of Lejeune's "pact" is present in her metanarrative commentaries:

Quant à Annie Ernaux, si l'on examine le pacte autobiographique de son œuvre, on constate qu'il a perdu sa forme classique en restant suffisamment claire dans la plupart des cas afin qu'il puisse être identifié : d'une part, bien que dispersé, on le retrouve dans les textes sous forme d'intercalations métadiscursives où le personnage s'identifie à écrivain. (138-39)

Within those metadiscursive commentaries, Ernaux insists on a verification process, undertaken by consulting historical archives, photos, or even her personal diaries, to authenticate the dates, times and past perceptions she seeks to convey. All of this is done to counteract the precarious nature of memory and to minimize the risk of an overly subjective, and thus, potentially inaccurate, account. As evidence of Ernaux's desire for veracity, we may consider the following example from *L'Événement*, in which Ernaux recounts the three month period of her pregnancy and abortion. She downplays the possible subjectivity of those memories by informing the reader of the measures she will take to verify her account. She states, "Un agenda et un journal intimes tenus pendant ces mois m'apporteront les repères nécessaires à l'établissement des faits" (*L'Événement* 26). In fact, she even directly quotes the agenda: "Je notais dans l'agenda : « Malaises constants » - « A 11 heures, dégoût à la B.M. [bibliothèque municipale] » - « Je suis toujours malade »" (*L'Événement* 52). In the same text, Ernaux also provides footnotes, typically a practice in objective, "academic" writing, to bolster our credulity in her assertions. For example, when learning the cost of her backstreet abortion, "quatre cents francs" (*L'Événement* 68), Ernaux's footnote provides the amount's equivalent at the time of writing: "Environ six mille francs de 1999" (*L'Événement* 68). The incorporation of diary entries and footnotes, as well as announcing the sources of

her account demonstrate what Chloë Taylor Merleau deems “Ernaux’s valorization of truth”

(71). Merleau continues by stating that:

Ernaux is at great pains in her own work to convince the reader that she is being truthful and that her writing is non-fictional. Some of her efforts to persuade the reader of the veracity of her writing, as if to counteract skepticism as to the fallibility of personal memory, involve mimicking the activities of academic or non fiction authors. (72)

That valorization is at the crux of Ernaux’s flashback narratives, where, according to Francine Dugast-Portes, “les observations tendent à l’exactitude la plus grande possible, à une vérification contrôlée par les documents” (118).

Yet, aside from seeking verifiable information such as dates of times of events, Ernaux also strives to convey authentically feelings or sensations. We may consider the following example from *L’Occupation*, published in 2003, a text that relays Ernaux’s reflections on and subsequent conquering of an obsessive, psychologically debilitating jealousy experienced when her former lover begins a new relationship with a history professor at Paris-III.¹⁸ The passage in question, a metanarrative commentary, states:

J’écris d’ailleurs la jalousie comme je la vivais, en traquant et accumulant les désirs, les sensations et les actes qui ont été les miens en cette période. C’est la seule façon pour moi de donner une matérialité à cette obsession. Et je crains toujours de laisser échapper quelque chose d’essentiel. L’écriture en somme, comme une jalousie du réel. (*L’Occupation* 40)

In that passage, Ernaux’s insistence on tracing and documenting her feelings during this period, as well as the fear that she may omit important elements, thereby undermining the

¹⁸ The narrator experiences this jealousy despite the fact that it was she who ended the relationship: “C’était pourtant moi qui avait quitté W. quelques mois auparavant, après une relation de six ans. Autant par lassitude que par incapacité à échanger ma liberté, regagnée après dix-huit ans de mariage, pour une vie commune qu’il désirait ardemment depuis le début” (*L’Occupation* 13).

veracity of the flashback narrative of her jealousy, make clear her intentions of total transparency.

The *voix off*, along with the fade, as we shall recall from Susan Hayward's assertion above, launches the *flashback* narrative. We can conclude, then, that Ernaux's first-person narrator actually has a dual perspective, one that exists entirely in the present, and a second, the *voix off*, who, by the retrospective narrative she relates, is situated in the past. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the *voix off* is any less transparent than the primary first-person narrative voice. In fact, again drawing an example from *L'Occupation*, the *voix off* narrator admits to obsessively fantasizing about her rather devious behavior in trying to discover the identity of the new partner of her former lover who, despite his new relationship, continues a purely sexual relationship with the narrator:

Quand il venait chez moi et qu'il allait aux toilettes, j'étais attirée invinciblement par sa serviette de cours déposée dans l'entrée. J'étais sûre qu'elle recelait tout ce que je désirais connaître, le nom, le numéro de téléphone, peut-être une photo. Je m'approchais silencieusement et restais fascinée devant cet objet noir, le souffle suspendu, dans le désir et l'incapacité d'y porter la main. Je me voyais m'enfuyant avec au fond du jardin, l'ouvrant et en extirpant une à une les pièces qu'il contenait, les jetant n'importe où, jusqu'à ce que, comme les voleurs de sac à la tire, je trouve mon bonheur.
(*L'Occupation* 44)

In this passage, which comprises a small part of the primary flashback narrative, the first-person *voix off* narrator does not hesitate to reveal – with not so strongly veiled self-deprecation – the adolescent behavior exhibited during this period of unrestrained obsession. This same type of sharing of unbridled truth appears throughout Ernaux's corpus in the *voix off* flashbacks.

Drawing a parallel between the literary flashback and its cinematic counterpart, some

cinema scholars attribute to the flashback a higher degree of veracity than they do to the present-time metanarrative. For example, Marc Vernet states:

Le flash-back est toujours doté d'une valeur de vérité certaine. Qu'il s'agisse d'un témoignage ou d'un simple souvenir, la partie en flash-back est donnée comme « plus vraie », plus essentielle que la partie au présent. (Collet et al. 98)

The flashback, triggered by the *voix off* and the cinematic dissolving technique, becomes a mechanism by which Ernaux relays experiences and memories in a discourse of truth.

Aside from the often brutally honest content of Ernaux's flashback narratives, we also note the presence of certain visual markers, such as italics or direct quotes that demonstrate the narrator's inclination towards veracity. In the following passage extracted from *Une Femme*, a text written in homage to Ernaux's mother, the *voix off* narrator recounts in flashback mode typical scenes of struggle between a mother and an adolescent daughter:

Jusqu'à dix-huit ans, presque toutes nos disputes ont tourné autour d'une interdiction de sortir, du choix des vêtements (son désir répété, par exemple, que j'aie une gaine dehors, « tu seras mieux habillée »). Elle entrait dans une colère disproportionnée, en apparence, au sujet : « Tu ne VAS TOUT DE MEME PAS sortir comme ça » (avec cette robe, cette coiffure, etc.) mais qui paraissaient normale. Nous savions toutes les deux à quoi s'en tenir : elle, sur mon désir de plaire aux garçons, moi, sur sa hantise qu'il « m'arrive un malheur », c'est-à-dire coucher avec n'importe qui et tomber enceinte. (*Une Femme* 61)¹⁹

The use of direct quotes and upper-case letters to demonstrate the emphatic nature of her mother's reproaches authenticate, in a visual manner, the mother's discourse. Furthermore, the assertion, "*Nous savions*" leads us to the realm of testimony, the discourse of truth *par excellence*.

¹⁹ Upper-case letters appear in the original.

The flashback is, by nature, a testimonial and confessional narrative mode (Hayward 133). Returning to the assertions made in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, the “subjective truth” (Hayward 133) or “subjective memory” (Turim 1) inherent in the flashback situates Ernaux’s narrator as a witness offering her narrative as testimony or confession. We can simplify Hayward’s and Turim’s definitions with regard to Ernaux; her narratives are both “subjective memories” *and* “subjective truths” that she feels compelled to share as testimony, as reveals the following passage from *L’Événement*:

Les choses me sont arrivées pour que j’en rende compte. Et le véritable but de ma vie est peut-être celui-ci: que mon corps, mes sensations et mes pensées deviennent de l’écriture, c’est-à-dire quelque chose d’intelligible et de général, mon existence complètement dissoute dans la tête et la vie des autres. (125)

In *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, the extensive, book-length interview conducted over email from June 2001 through September 2002, Ernaux further expounds on her testimonial writerly objectives. In response to a question asking Ernaux’s to explain her desire to understand and to “save” in her writing, the author replies: “Sauver de l’effacement des êtres et des choses dont j’ai été l’actrice, le siège ou *le témoin*, dans une société et un temps donnés, oui, je sens que c’est là ma grande motivation d’écrire” (*L’Écriture comme un couteau* 124-25; my emphasis). This testimonial inclination is a widespread trend in contemporary literature, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub note by stating, “It has been suggested that testimony is the literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony” (5).

Throughout her seventeen works²⁰ Ernaux has provided testimony of socio-cultural

²⁰ Ernaux’s newest text, *L’Autre fille*, written in a quasi epistolary form and addressed to Ginette Duchesne, the deceased sister she never knew, also fulfills her testimonial motivation. Calling to mind the notion presented in

oppression and inequality, familial alienation, gender oppression, mortality, female sexuality and reproductive rights. Recent studies by Ernaux's own critics have also placed at the forefront the testimonial nature of her corpus. Martine Delvaux designates Ernaux's entire corpus as "la narration testimoniale" (137), while Pascale Sardin attributes to Ernaux "a new kind of ethics involving the witness" (301). Likewise, Francine Dugast-Portes posits that Ernaux "assume explicitement le rôle de témoin" (118). In considering Ernaux's flashback narrative, we must also clarify the notion of testimony. In *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, Derrida cautions that there is an important distinction between the concepts of *témoignage*, as bearing witness, and *témoignage*, as experience, proof or certitude (29). Specifically, he wonders why the term proof has "contaminated" the meaning of testimony. In reaction to this, he develops the axiom "témoigner n'est pas prouver" (30). The act of bearing witness does not, in itself, furnish proof, but it does solicit one's sworn affirmation: "cela m'a été ou m'est présent, dans l'espace et dans le temps [...] et vous devez me croire" (31; emphasis in the original). The witness is merely someone whose unique experience attests that some "thing" was or is present to him and is re-presented in his memory (35-36). Ernaux's recounting of actual scenes and images from her memory can certainly be viewed under the optic of Derrida's notion of testimony, for those scenes and images during which she was present are substantiated through the various verification processes alluded to earlier in the current chapter. Considering Ernaux's favoring of memory's visual aspects by evoking

Chapter 3 of a "scène" transformed into a memory, Ernaux provides testimony on yet another pivotal "scène" in her life. At the age of ten, she overheard a conversation in which her mother revealed that she had lost a child to diphtheria before Ernaux's birth. Her parents never told her about. Even worse, her mother informed her interlocutor that she preferred her deceased daughter to Ernaux. Ernaux writes, "A la fin, elle dit de toi *elle était plus gentille que celle-là*" (*L'Autre fille* 16; italics in the original). It is also important to note that this text marks yet another departure from traditional genres. Although presented as a letter, the text contains traits typical of Ernaux's writing, such as fragmented lists, large scissions in the text and the *écriture plate* launched in *La Place*.

various images and scenes from her past, in conjunction with her frequent substantiation of those memories through consulting former diaries or archives, we find that Ernauxian testimony does indeed correspond to Derrida's definition of testimony as affirmation. What was "present" to the narrator is, throughout her corpus, re-presented in her memory while she is composing the text, before it ultimately becomes testimony offered to the reader.

The Ernauxian testimonial narrative never occurs in a vacuum, but is subject to a set-up or "back-story," accompanied by a *mode d'emploi* of sorts destined not only to reveal the objectives of the text, but also to establish the pace of the narrative, either explicitly or implicitly. Certainly, we cannot examine the flashback and its orchestration in every work of Ernaux's corpus within the scope of this study. Therefore, I have chosen *Les Armoires vides* and *Les Années* as works whose set-up and execution of the flashback most clearly, and in the case of *Les Années*, innovatively, reveal Ernaux's adaptation of cinematic processes. The privileging of the vivid, visual aspects of memory, the techniques implying pace (either accelerated or decelerated), and the deployment of processes analogous to *voix off* and cinematic fading are among these tendencies in both texts.

4. Setting Up the Flashback in *Les Armoires vides*

Les Armoires vides can be read as a precursor and semi-autobiographical companion piece to *L'Événement*, published twenty-six years later.²¹ In the text, university student Denise Lesur executes a flashback while she awaits, on a Sunday afternoon in her room at the Cité universitaire, the outcome of a clandestine abortion performed the previous day.

²¹ Both texts feature Ernaux's illegal abortion.

Denise reveals that she has had an abortion while informing us of her attempt to find some solace for her current state:

Il y a bien des prières pour toutes les occasions, les naissances, les mariages, l'agonie, on devrait trouver des morceaux choisis sur tout, *sur une fille de vingt ans qui est allée chez la faiseuse d'anges, qui en sort, ce qu'elle pense en marchant, en se jetant sur son lit.* (*Les Armoires vides* 13)

Denise's abortion serves as a sub-plot, for during the majority of the flashback, she gives testimony, or to use Susan Hayward's term, "subjective truth" (133), on the potential causes and consequences of her *déchirure sociale*. She also patently rejects both her working class milieu of origin and the bourgeois class into which she has migrated.

Denise is, as I stated in Chapter 1, a double for Ernaux. The text's clearly autobiographical resonance is manifest in Ernaux's own comments regarding the objectives put forth in this semi-autobiographical novel: "Il s'agit pour moi de retracer et de comprendre la coupure sociale entre mes parents et moi, mon passage dans le monde bourgeois par les études" (Day 234).

Les Armoires vides consists of three parts. The opens with a six-page prologue situated in the present time. The remainder of the narrative contains the flashback returns to Denise's early childhood before returning to the present time. The novel's third sequence is located in the final pages by a return to the present moment, as the expulsion of the fetus has begun to take its course.

The prologue performs two functions that facilitate reading – or perhaps, "viewing" – the flashback presented in cinematic terms. First, the prologue introduces the impressions of movement, at either a hastened or reduced pace, and corporal presence. We shall recall Maureen Turim's assertion that the flashback is imbued with movement and speed (3), as

well as Metz's stating the motion and corporal presences render cinema more "real" than still photographs (*Film Language* 7). Denise Lesur opens the prologue in by evoking her physicality and the pace of the action: "Toutes les heures, je fais des ciseaux, de la bicyclette, ou les pieds au mur. Pour accélérer" (*Les Armoires vides* 11). Denise's anchoring in the present also implicates the reader, who, in the act of receiving her story, will come to focalize on the same temporal plane. Philippe Vilain has noted that the reader is compelled to focus on the text's incipit, much like a camera's lens: "tel un zoom de camera, la description se focalise, dès les premières lignes, sur l'avortement, entraîne le lecteur dans le vif de l'action en medias res" ("Aliénation et inter-dit" 55).

The abdominal exercises undertaken by Denise take effect inside of her body, but also operate in the outside space of the narrative. Serving principally to hasten the abortion process, the exercises also subliminally affect the pace of the prologue through the isolation of the clause, "Pour accélérer" (11). We may consider this clause a type of *trucage* employed by Denise (and Ernaux, of course) to provide direction as to how we are to receive her account.

In *Littérature et cinéma*, Jeanne-Marie Clerc distinguishes two types of temporal manipulation, *l'accélééré*, or fast-forward, and *le ralenti*, or slow-motion, that function in both cinematic and literary narrative modes. Regarding the terms, Clerc notes, "Le cinéma permet des trucages optiques inconnus à la photographie, qui, dès leur apparition, ont fait pressentir en lui une machine à manipuler le temps" (178). However, the camera is not the only device that can carry out temporal manipulation. As Clerc observes, "L'accélééré et le ralenti sont présents dans le roman contemporain à titre de métaphore renvoyant de plus souvent à une durée subjective" (178).²² In Denise's prologue, the *accélééré* - prompted by the abdominal

²² She also cites the following example from Le Clézio's *Le Procès verbal*, where the *accélééré* is deployed to

exercises - occurs on a lexical level and ultimately, unfurls through the actions taking place inside of her body, although they are conveyed metaphorically:

Une chaleur bizarre s'étale aussitôt comme une fleur quelque part au bas du ventre. Violacée, pourrie. Pas douloureuse, juste avant la douleur, un déferlement de tous côtés qui vient cogner les hanches et mourir dans le haut des cuisses. (*Les Armoires vides* 11)

The decision to accelerate or to launch a fast-forward may well represent Denise's to end the abortion as quickly as possible as well as to resolve her inner-conflict. The *accéléré*, prompted by Denise herself, causes not only an immediate surge in the onset of the abortion process, but also, as she lies on her bed, covered in sunlight pondering the process underway inside of her body, a "surge" in her anxiety level that also reveals the rapid changes of her state of mind. Initially, Denise imagines the outcome of the abortion in a highly romanticized manner, using the language encountered in her study of literature to mitigate the violence of the abortion: "Le soleil traverserait la peau, décomposerait les chairs et les cartilages, la bouillie filerait en douceur à travers le tuyau..." (*Les Armoires vides* 12; ellipses in original). Her use of the term "bouillie" to represent the fetus and the amniotic fluids and the verb "décomposer" emphasizes the gruesome reality that she will soon experience. Moreover, the ellipses ending that metaphorical description visually mark the swift and chaotic transition in Denise's state of mind. Denise seems to be aware of the futility and the unreality of this "exercise in style." Immediately after the ellipses ending the quasi-romanticized description of the abortion, Denise reveals her constantly and quickly fluctuating thoughts by stating,

represent the protagonist's increasing anxiety: "tout avait déferlé comme si on avait *accéléré* pendant quelques seconds *les images d'un film*" (qtd. in Clerc 178; my emphasis). Moreover, while certainly coincidental, the repetition of the terms "accélérer" and déferler/déferlement in the Le Clézio passage and Denise's passage is indeed interesting.

“Rien à espérer. Ça ne partira pas comme ça. Ne plus accélérer, retirer mes jambes du mur” (*Les Armoires vides* 12). Finally, a paragraph break indicates yet another rapid change of mindset for Denise, who meets with despair when she attempts to “Travailler un auteur du programme peut-être, Victor Hugo ou Péguy. Quel écœurement. Il n’y a rien pour moi là-dedans sur ma situation” (*Les Armoires vides* 12).

Aside from revealing the highly accelerated pace of the narrative and the abortion through visual cues, the prologue in *Les Armoires vides* also deploys fragmented, abridged flashbacks (both as visual and auditory memories) that, due to their affective impact, operate in much the same way as those that will be discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, these substantially abbreviated flashbacks – not one exceeds a single line of text – actually mimic the fragmentation at work in both the form of the primary flashback and in Denise’s psyche.

Throughout the prologue, Denise’s memory vacillates and dissolves from one event to another. This type of fade occurs as early as the second paragraph of *Les Armoires vides* and is triggered by the intrusion of unidentified speakers, whose direct discourse is only on one occasion distinguished by *guillemets*. These speakers correspond to Metz’s “narrateur ou commentateur extérieur” (*Énonciation impersonnelle* 53) and also remind us of Hayward’s assertion that *voix off* is “usually, but not always, the person whose flashback it is” (133). Although it represents Denise’s flashback, the following passage is actually launched by the external *voix off*:

« Ça vous chauffera une minute, juste le temps d’enfoncer. » Une petite sonde rouge, toute recroquevillée, sortie de l’eau bouillante. « Elle va se prêter, vous verrez. » J’étais sur la table, je ne voyais entre mes jambes que ses cheveux gris et le serpent rouge brandi au bout d’une pince. Il a disparu. Atroce. J’ai engueulé la vieille, qui bourrait d’ouate pour faire tenir. Il ne faut pas toucher ton quat’sous, tu l’abîmeras... laisse-moi embrasser les petits bonbons, là, entre les lèvres... (*Les Armoires vides* 11; ellipses in the original)

In the scene presented above, a flashback preceding the more temporally distant flashback that will follow the prologue, the unattributed quotations serve as preparation for the account about to unfold by introducing the key players, or the “supporting cast” of Denise’s rambling flashback. We are only able to identify these three external narrators by the text preceding and following the unattributed quote. In the first instance, the words of the abortionist, or the *faiseuse d’anges*, as Denise designates her, trigger a fade back to the scene of the abortion. We can identify the abortionist as the external narrator who uttered, “Ça vous chauffera une minute, juste le temps d’enfoncer” and “Elle va se prêter, vous verrez” (*Les Armoires vides* 11) because, immediately after this direct statement, Denise evokes the tube with which the abortion was performed (“Une petite sonde rouge” and “le serpent rouge”). Adding to the auditory memory of the abortionist’s words, Denise then recalls seeing the old woman’s gray hair when looking between her legs, then shouting at her when the pain of the tube’s insertion became unbearable.

On the other hand, it is infinitely more difficult to discern the identity of the other *voix off*, each of whose unpunctuated and unattributed statements are distinguished solely by ellipses. The ellipses indicate both an omission of something from the action and the dissolving into another time (Hayward 97); in this case, Denise omits the context and time frame in which these words were spoken. Only later in the text, when learning of Denise’s devoutly Catholic mother, who considers sexuality as taboo, can we identify her as the person delivering the admonition against masturbation and female sexual pleasure in general: “Il ne faut pas toucher ton quat’sous,²³ tu l’abîmeras” (*Les Armoires vides* 11).

²³ Quat’sous is the euphemistic term by which Denise’s mother refers to female genitalia. The term is also used by the mother of the anonymous narrator of *La Femme gelée* (40) and by Ernaux’s mother in *Une Femme* (28).

Directly opposed to the warning of the impending physical ruin resulting from sexuality is the seductive discourse of Denise's boyfriend, "laisse-moi embrasser les petits bonbons, là, entre les lèvres" (*Les Armoires vides* 11). The words of the mother and boyfriend represent distinct temporal periods, for the mother's "forewarning" against masturbation presumably preceded Denise's sexual encounter with him. Furthermore, these two *voix off* also reveal two disparate moral codes, in that the mother's words represent the shunning of sexuality, while those of her boyfriend represent transgression of that constraint. In her study entitled *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*, Siobhán McIlvanney points out that Denise experiences, at least on a subconscious level, a continuing submission to the values of her sexually conservative mother. McIlvanney points out that in the juxtaposed, *voix off* quotations of the mother and boyfriend, separated only by ellipses, Denise "makes an association between her mother's sexual censorship and what is presumably an expression of her boyfriend's sexual desire" (*The Return to Origins* 20). That dichotomy is the crux of Denise quandary, namely the confrontation between the working-class Catholic world and the bourgeoisie, as well as its resultant *entre-deux* that Denise's flashback narrative will attempt to resolve.

Mirroring the metadiscursive comments deployed to clarify Ernaux's writerly intentions in later texts, Denise announces the objectives of her imminent flashback:

Tout reconstituer, empiler, emboîter, une chaîne de montage, les trucs les uns dans les autres. Expliquer pourquoi je me cloître dans une piaule de la Cité avec la peur de crever, de ce qui va arriver. Voir clair, raconter tout entre deux contractions. Voir où commence le cafouillage. (*Les Armoires vides* 17; my emphasis)

Two elements included in the passage above sustain my argument that memory in Ernaux's corpus is primarily a visual phenomenon that is written in cinematic terms. The

desire to “empiler, emboîter, une chaîne de montage, les trucs les uns dans les autres” (17) suggests the classification, fitting together and the superimposing of various memories (among the *trucs* that Denise evokes), from Denise’s past, establishing a fade or dissolve from one scene to the next. Moreover, the term *montage*, defined in the *Petit Robert* as “choix et assemblage des plans d’un film dans certaines conditions d’ordre et de temps” (1434), is immediately associated with the process of cinematic orchestration, suggesting that Denise’s memories will appear to her in much the same manner as a film. In fact, we may suggest that Denise will reconstruct scenes from her past as a “montage enchaîné,” which calls to mind the cinematic term *fondue enchaînée*, or the fading in and out of filmic images, as well as the notion of memory as “l’apparition d’une chaîne de souvenirs” (Tadié 153).

Returning to the idea of the privileged status of visual memory in Ernaux’s work, it is paramount to note the repetition of *voir* in the passage. Here, we infer from Denise’s objective to “Voir clair...voir où commence le cafouillage” that the ensuing flashback will seek understanding of the past (for *voir* is used here to denote *comprendre*) by re-envisioning its pivotal scenes. This likens the process to the rewinding and replaying of the internally recorded “film” of her past, so that she can make sense of the derision she feels for both of the socio-cultural worlds that she inhabits: “Je ne suis pas née avec la haine, je ne les ai pas toujours détestés, mes parents, les clients, la boutique...Les autres, les cultivés, les profs, les convenables, je les déteste aussi maintenant” (*Les Armoires vides* 17).

Oftentimes, the flashback exposes some issue that originated in the past, yet continues to infiltrate the protagonist’s present-time existence (Hayward 126). In her metanarrative commentary, Denise initially positions the expository and testimonial nature of her forthcoming flashback in the realm of ordered, transparent discourse by using “reconstituer,”

“expliquer” and “raconter.” Such aspirations toward clarity are characteristic in all of Ernaux’s narrators, who “place their faith in the power of deductive reasoning in the establishment of causal links between their recent or distant past and their present socio-cultural situation” (McIlvanney *The Return to Origins* 19).

Typically, both literary and cinematic flashbacks demonstrate circularity and closure, as Deleuze notes: “[Le flash-back] est précisément un circuit fermé qui va du présent au passé, puis nous ramène au présent” (*Cinéma 2: l’image-temps* 67). The notion of circularity remains a central feature of Ernaux’s corpus: “This circular structure, consisting of crisis – explanatory flashback – return to or resolution of the initial crisis, is fundamental to Ernaux’s writing” (Thomas 5). Yet, despite the expressed desire for order and clarity, Denise’s distressed state of mind often impedes the organized, linear delivery of her story. Her current angst is juxtaposed with past feelings of childhood contentment, particularly when she recalls Sundays,²⁴ during which her mother took her to mass, and then to visit the sick, the poor and the elderly in their neighborhood, before returning home for lunch. In the following example, Denise establishes such a juxtaposition:

J’adorais tout, les sardines à l’huile, les visites aux vieux moches, aux crebacks, aux kroumirs dont ma mère raffole. Tout était bien. Aujourd’hui, elle est sûrement encore allée à la messe, elle a bredouillé des prières pour

²⁴ Certainly, Ernaux’s situating of Denise’s flashback and abortion-in-progress on a Sunday is not fortuitous. A day that in Denise’s early childhood symbolized happiness, has been transformed into a day of distress. In addition, regarding Ernaux’s non-fiction works, *La Place* and *La Honte*, we will recall that Sundays are also days of despair. In the first case, Ernaux’s father died on a Sunday in June. In *La Honte*, her father’s attempt on her mother’s life occurred on Sunday, June 15, 1952, while the humiliating experience of her mother’s urine-stained nightgown occurred the following Sunday. Ernaux herself has commented on this in an interview with Lorraine Day. She states, regarding *Les Armoires vides*, “Je ne me souviens pas exactement quand m’est venu ce désir-là, de commencer le récit par l’expérience de mon avortement clandestin, d’en faire le cadre du roman en situant le flash-back de Denise Lesur – cet autre je – dans une chambre de la cité, dans l’attente de la fausse couche, un dimanche (encore un !)” (“Entraîner le lecteur dans l’effacement du réel” 234).

mes examens. Elle n'a pas pensé à demander que sa fille, sa fille unique, ne tombe pas enceinte. (*Les Armoires vides* 46)

We discover in this passage that Denise's memory is not only highly visual, but also highly associative. In the latter case, it associates events not according to similar feelings, but according to antithetical feelings that link the past to the present. For if Sundays during Denise's childhood represent an idyllic period when "Tout était bien" (*Les Armoires vides* 46), the present time marks a reversal of that situation. Denise's shift back to the present, and a speculative present at that (after all, she only *assumes* that her mother has attended mass and has prayed for Denise's scholarly excellence), actually undermines her professed desire for order and fragments the linear structure of her tale. The fragmentation at work in both the prologue and primary flashback operates under the interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique, which also mirrors the chaotic and troubled memory of the distraught young woman. Hayward informs us that the stream-of-consciousness narrative device is also intra-diegetic, because it refers to a presence we do not see but, that we know exists within the story and whose inner thoughts we witness (86). In fact, the flashback itself is intra-diegetic; it is part of the main narrative, while still interrupting the narrative flow initiated in the present time (Hayward 86).

In his essay, "The Stream-of-Consciousness Novel," C. Holman Hughes identifies the stream of consciousness as "an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, *memories*, associations and reflections. [T]hese varied, *disjointed* and *illogical* elements must find expression in a *flow of words, images*, and ideas similar to the *unorganized flow of the mind*" (6; my emphasis). As we determined in the passage above associating tranquil Sundays during her childhood with her current predicament, Denise often demonstrates a disjointedness that likens her memories to unedited film sequences. For example, Denise

describes fond memories of Sundays spent with her mother during her early childhood, well before her contact with the bourgeois educational system. The evocation of her Sunday activities seems to remind Denise of being scolded for her “incorrect” French by the nun (“cette vieille conne” [*Les Armoires vides* 46]) in her Catholic school. Denise juxtaposes two distinct temporal periods of her past, the first comprising the years preceding her contact with the educational system, and the second comprising her school experience: “Dimanches oranges du printemps, linge qui sèche sur la corde au soleil, les poules crêtèlent. Elle disait cette vieille conne, après, à l’école, « n’écrivez pas nous sommes tel jour, c’est très incorrect »” (*Les Armoires vides* 46).

The memories related in the flashback narrative represent three distinct phases along Denise’s trajectory: early childhood, her school years and young adulthood. Examining a selection of key scenes from each of those periods reveals the highly cinematic aspects of Denise’s flashback. Of particular importance, we will determine that her memories are so vivid as to be quite “visible.” In addition, recalling Metz’s assertion that the impression of movement and bodily presences render cinema more “real” than still photography (*Language and Cinema* 7), the hyper-presence and hyperconsciousness of the body and its movements contribute to the visual nature of Denise’s flashback. This is particularly salient when comparing the body of the proletariat to its bourgeois counterpart.²⁵

In addition, regarding the flashback technique itself, including its launching devices of *voix off* and fade, we will note Denise’s lack of linearity within her narrative, prompted by a return to the present through in her metanarrative commentaries. Most of these commentaries demonstrate a scornful, embittered assessment of the situation just recounted.

²⁵ Ernaux makes the same distinction between the bourgeois body and the body of the proletariat in *La Femme gelée*, published in 1981. See Chapter 3 for these images.

Let us consider the following example, which is once again centered around Denise's contact with her bourgeois Catholic school. We learn that, having recognized the social differences between her and her socially advantaged classmates, Denise tries to fit in by sharing amusing stories with her teacher (after all, she has witnessed her classmates doing this). After telling the nun about her father's drunken café patron, who vomited outside of the establishment, Denise notices that the teacher immediately changes the subject, as if to demonstrate that Denise's working class experience is not only of little interest, but more importantly, in bad taste: "Elle a changé tout de suite de conversation, la maîtresse, ce que je vivais ne l'intéressait jamais. *Le goût*" (*Les Armoires vides* 61; my emphasis). Immediately after uttering that sentence, Denise returns to the present moment, with a metanarrative commentary expressing that her life's trajectory, despite her status as a student, has not significantly changed since her early school days: "La sonde, le ventre, ça n'a pas tellement changé, toujours de mauvais goût. La Lesur remonte" (*Les Armoires vides* 61).

Denise ends her prologue by making clear her vitriol for both of her social worlds "A vomir sur eux, sur tout le monde, la culture, tout ce que j'ai appris. Baisée de tous les côtés..." (17; ellipses in original). The ellipses closing the prologue and the page break following them, visually represent the dissolving of the present into Denise's past. Now adopting the role of an intra-diegetic *voix off* narrator, Denise undertakes the primary flashback narrative, evoking the memory of her parents' home and business.

5. The Flashback in *Les Armoires vides*

Denise's flashback is recounted primarily in the present tense, offering a sense of immediacy or "real time" that reinforces the difficulty she experiences in reconciling her present with her past. Much like the expression "Pour accélérer" (*Les Armoires vides* 11) in

the novel's incipit, the combination of fragmented, brief and sometimes long, rambling sentences instill into her account a rapid pace. Denise's earliest childhood memories present, in vivid description, her parents' *café-épicerie* and the clients who populate it:

Le café-épicerie Lesur, ce n'est pas rien, le seul dans la rue Clopart, loin du centre, presque à la campagne. De la clientèle à gogo, qui remplit la maison, qui paie à la fin du mois... Il n'y a pas un endroit pour s'isoler dans la maison, à part une chambre à l'étage, immense, glaciale... Toute la journée on vit en bas, dans le bistrot et dans la boutique. Entre les deux un boyau où débouche l'escalier, la cuisine remplie d'une table, de trois chaises, d'une cuisinière à charbon et d'un évier sans eau. L'eau, on la tire à la pompe de la cour. On se cogne partout dans la cuisine, y mange seulement quatre à quatre vers une heure de l'après-midi et le soir quand les clients sont partis... La maison regorge de clients, il y en a partout, en rangs derrière le comptoir où ma mère pèse les patates, le fromage, fait ses petits comptes en chuchotant, en tas autour des tables du bistrot, dans la cour où mon père a installé une pissotière, un tonneau et deux planches perpendiculaires le long du mur, près de l'enclos aux poules. (*Les Armoires vides* 18-19)

Denise sets the scene of this memory in purely visual terms, situating the various features of the *café-épicerie* as well as, with the exception of the bedroom ("immense"), its very restricted living space. In fact, memory-images often originate with a spatial perception, giving the protagonist a sense of "having been there" (Bernard 33). The bustling activity of the establishment adds to the scene the impressions of speed and of moving bodies that the reader can actually visualize.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the *café-épicerie* is the primordial locus for Ernaux's narrators, for it is the microcosm of their original social milieu, as Denise Lesure stated above: "Le café-épicerie Lesur, ce n'est pas rien, le seul dans la rue Clopart, loin du centre, presque à la campagne. De la clientèle à gogo, qui remplit la maison, qui paie à la fin du mois. Pas une communauté mais ça y ressemble" (*Les Armoires vides* 18). In "Beyond Realism: Protest from Within in the Works of Annie Ernaux," Patricia Mines notes the

importance of this recurring Ernauxian locale that appears in *Les armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée*, *La Place*, *Une femme* and *La Honte*. She argues that it serves as both the backdrop of her narrators' actions and as the root of psychological unrest. For the purposes of my study, it is important to note that this locus actually becomes a visual memory for the narrator:

The dual nature of this combined bar and grocer's shop represents *visually* the dramatic crisis within the principal characters. The narrators attest that as children they lived in conflicting worlds, their working class homes and their middle class schools, and as a fusion of two distinct places, the *café-épicerie* suggests the divergent atmosphere to which the central characters are subjected. (Mines 228; my emphasis)

Mines very justly indicates that the *café-épicerie*, one of several “vivid, almost tangible locale’s in Ernaux’s work” (227), becomes a locus of distress, but she omits one crucial fact. Ernauxian narrators, including Denise Lesur, are not immediately cognizant of the alienating social differences between them and the bourgeoisie. In fact, before the initial collision with bourgeois culture and ideologies in the school setting, the narrators remain unaware of their socio-cultural difference, later perceived as inferiority and resulting in feelings of humiliation and shame. On the contrary, during the pre-school years, the cocoon of the *café-épicerie* affords security, happiness and freedom, as Denise recalls, “Heureuse que j’étais, à l’aise” (*Les Armoires vides* 20).

Also inhabiting the cocoon of her idyllic childhood, Denise’s parents are evoked very early in the flashback. The descriptions of her parents within the space of the *café-épicerie* emphasize their physicality and their movement, thereby rendering the images in Denise’s memory active – as opposed to static – and visually perceptible. The following passage, describing her father reveals his imposing physical presence:

Mon père, il est jeune, il est *grand*, il domine l'ensemble... Le regard fier au-dessus des clients, toujours en éveil, *prêt à flanquer dehors* celui qui bronche. Ça lui arrive. *Il tire la chaise du gars, le lève par le collet et le mène sans se presser jusqu'à la porte.* Magnifique. (*Les Armoires vides* 19-20; my emphasis)

Similarly, the bodily presence of Denise's mother also elicits her admiration as a child. The dynamic and daunting expressions governing the following passage – “massive,” “l'explosion de chair,” “prêts à éclater,” “des robes vives,” “remontent,” “écrasent” and “craquent” – compels the reader to visualize, along with Denise, the image of her mother:

Massive, on dirait que la chaise est trop petite. Quatre-vingt kilos, chez le pharmacien. Je la trouvais superbe. Je dédaignais les squelettes élégants des catalogues, cheveux lissés, ventre plat, poitrine voilée.²⁶ C'est *l'explosion de chair* qui me paraissait belle, fesses, nichons, bras et jambes *prêts à éclater* dans *des robes vives* qui soulignent, *remontent, écrasent, craquent* aux aisselles. (*Les Armoires vides* 24; my emphasis)

In recalling herself as a child, Denise evokes the same unabashed physicality as her parents. In fact, she presents her past-self as an *enfant sauvage* of sorts. As she states, being considered “la gosse à qui tout était permis” (47) and “la petite reine de l'épicerie-café” (62) not only by her parents, but also by their clientele, leads to her virtually abusing the café patrons, while taking great pleasure in doing so:

²⁶ This intertextual reference calls to mind the derisory description of the “Femme fragiles et vaporeuses” evoked in the incipit of *La Femme gelée* (9) and that we will examine in the next chapter. In contrast to those insubstantial, weak women, the mother's dynamic nature is also described. In *La Femme gelée*, we learn that “les choses vibrent près d'elle, éclatent même, jour magnifique et stupéfiant où un cendrier vole par la fenêtre et se pulvérise sur le trottoir devant le livreur hébété qui a eu le tort d'oublier je ne sais quelle marchandise” (19). Ernaux's mother reveals similar traits in *Une Femme*: “Elle claquait les portes, elle cognait les chaises en les empilant sur les tables pour balayer. Tout ce qu'elle faisait, elle le faisait avec bruit. Elle ne posait pas les objets, mais semblait les jeter” (50).

Ils se laissent faire, *marcher sur les pieds, recevoir des coups dans les jambes, des ballons sur la tête*, je suis leur distraction. C'est moi qui profite le plus, *je pince, je griffe, j'arrache leurs trésors* enfouis dans les poches, calepins tout sales, vieilles photos de régiment, papier job pour le gros gris. Ils rigolent. Il n'y a que les nouvelles têtes, ceux qui viennent par hasard, que je ne persécute pas. (*Les Armoires vides* 21; my emphasis)

Aside from the movement conveyed by Denise's unruly behavior, the multiple commas in the passage serve to represent graphically Clerc's previously mentioned *accéléré*, adding speed to Denise's already motion-filled, vivid description of her corporal activity in this memory image.

Yet, if Denise's earliest memories consist of the freedom and happiness experienced in the nest of her family and her social milieu of origin, the next phase of the trajectory recounted in her flashback reveals a marked shift in her perspective in terms of both freedom and in her self-perception. The stifling environment of her bourgeois Catholic school, with its inherent restrictions, becomes the locus in which this transition will occur. Before progressing the flashback to the next phase in her life, Denise returns to the present-time and ponders the following question:

Bon Dieu, à quel moment, quel jour la peinture des murs est-elle devenue moche, le pot de chambre s'est mis à puer, les bonshommes sont-ils devenus de vieux soûlographes, des débris... Quand ai-je eu une trouille folle de leur ressembler, à mes parents..." (*Les Armoires vides* 50; ellipses in original)

In response, a single image springs to her mind: "Il y a eu l'école libre" (*Les Armoires vides* 50).

Previously "la gosse à qui tout était permis" (*Les Armoires vides* 47) and whose movement in and around her home and the *café-épicerie* knew no limits, Denise discovers: "A l'école, je ne pouvais pas manger, pas boire, pour aller aux cabinets, c'était toute une

affaire” (*Les Armoires vides* 55). In Ernauxian texts dealing with the question of acculturation and class migration, like *Les Armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée*, *La Place*, *Une Femme* and *La Honte*, the narrator’s formative encounter the Other’s world and its norms occurs first in the setting of the educational system. This milieu and its language are so unfamiliar to Denise that, in *Les Armoires vides*, Denise designates them as “unreal” in comparison to her own world: “Le vrai langage, c’est chez moi que je l’entends, le pinard, la bidoche, se faire baiser, la vieille carne, dis boujou ma petite besotte... La maîtresse parlait, parlait, et les choses n’existaient pas... Comme le café-épicerie était plus réel!” (*Les Armoires vides* 54).

Language is not the only unknown code that Denise discovers in the educational environment; certain behavioral codes, particularly those embraced by the culturally elite, are also foreign to her. This applies even to children’s play, for upon her arrival at school Denise notices the more restrained games of her bourgeois classmates with relation to her own:

Ce ne sont pas de vrais jeux... Pas un coin pour jouer à cache-cache, pas de casiers pour se construire une maison, jouer à la mère, au crochet radiophonique. Elles ne se tapent pas sur les fesses, elles ne se tirent pas les tifs. (*Les Armoires vides* 50)

Denise’s ignorance adopts a more insidious resonance when it meets with behavior standards imposed by adults who represent the institutionalized educational system. Raised in the *café-épicerie* where clients enter and leave as they please, Denise lacks the knowledge that her teacher assumes she has regarding the “correct” way to enter the classroom when arriving late to school:

Je frappe, je vais au bureau de la maîtresse en faisant un plongeon. « Denise Lesur, sortez ! » Je ressors, sans inquiétude. Retour, replongeon. Elle devient sifflante. « Ressortez, on n’entre pas ainsi ! » Re-sortie, cette fois, je ne fais

plus de plongeon. Les filles rient. Je ne sais plus combien de fois elle m'a fait entrer et sortir. Et je passais devant elle, sans rien comprendre. A la fin, elle s'est levée de sa chaise en serrant la bouche. Elle a dit « ce n'est pas un moulin ici ! On s'excuse auprès de la personne la plus importante quand on est en retard ! Vous l'êtes toujours, d'ailleurs ». La classe pouffe. J'étouffe de colère, tout ce cirque pour ça, pour rien, et en plus j'en savais rien ! « Je ne savais pas, Mademoiselle ! - Vous devriez le savoir ! » Et comment ? Personne, jamais, ne me l'a dit, chez moi. (*Les Armoires vides* 58)

Denise presents her ignorance of this behavioral standard and the feeling of alienation it stirs in her as a visual memory, for after presenting the scene, she states, “Je me vois et je ne ressemble pas aux autres” (*Les Armoires vides* 59). The emotional impact of this scene, instigated by the dynamic of the dominant versus the dominated social class, certainly prefigures and mimics the “scène du lycée de Lyon” (*La Place* 13) where the narrator also reports feeling “colère une espèce de honte” (*La Place* 12). She emphasizes the visual nature of the memory by stating and by momentarily confusing the *scène* with her father's death: “Souvent, durant quelques secondes, je ne sais plus si *la scène du lycée de Lyon* a eu lieu avant ou après, si le mois d'avril venteux où *je me vois attendre un bus à la Croix-Rousse* doit précéder ou suivre le mois de juin étouffant de sa mort” (*La Place* 13; my emphasis).

The harsh reprimands of Denise's teacher and the mocking of her classmates add auditory elements to the scene and seem to exert on her an emotionally crippling form of symbolic violence: “Pourquoi je ne serais pas comme elles, une pierre dure dans l'estomac, *les larmes piquent*. Ce n'est plus comme avant. Ça, l'humiliation.”²⁷ A l'école, je l'ai apprise, je l'ai sentie” (*Les Armoires vides* 59; my emphasis). Furthermore, Denise's repeated entry into and subsequent dismissal from the classroom infuses her memory of this event with the movement and corporal presence characteristic of cinematic images. The

²⁷ In the nine pages following this episode, Denise repeatedly uses the terms *humiliation* (four times), *humilier* (twice) and *honte* (once), emphasizing the traumatic effects of her discovery of socio-cultural alienation.

classroom as the locus of institutionalized bourgeois ideology becomes emblematic of all that is inaccessible to Denise and others like her. It is not until the nun reprimands her by impatiently stating, “Il faut s’excuser auprès de la personne la plus importante quand on est en retard!” (*Les Armoires vides* 58) that Denise understands that she has transgressed some unspoken rule, with which only she is unfamiliar. She falls victim to the dominant class’s persistent shunning of those whom they consider subaltern or ill-mannered. The education system in which Denise is enrolled is seen as “colluding in the perpetuation of certain tacitly accepted standards of behavior – standards which themselves serve to perpetuate the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt methods of segregating the supposed cultured from the uncultured” (Jellenik 87). Likewise, Bourdieu notes the struggle of underprivileged children to adapt to cultural standards with which they have had little to no contact:

The culture of the elite is so near to that of the school that children from the lower middle class (and *a fortiori* from the agricultural and industrial working class) can only acquire with great effort something which is *given* to the children of the cultivated classes – style, taste, wit – in short, those attitudes and aptitudes which seem natural in members of the cultivated classes and naturally expected of them precisely because (in the ethnological sense) they are the *culture* of that class. (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* 39)

However, during the flashback representing her school years, Denise does initiate the difficult acquisition process to which Bourdieu refers. The beginning of Denise’s appropriation of bourgeois culture occurs through her scholarly excellence. When she recognizes her intellectual aptitude, she uses it as a manner of revenge against the classmates who so frequently scorned her. Fading into to this part of the flashback relating to her school years, Denise separates two distinct time periods with the use of ellipses: the first period corresponds to the time when she became aware of her academic potential, while the second,

following the ellipses, shifts from the preceding period to the time when Denise actually exercised her newly discovered abilities:

C'est comme ça que j'ai commencé à vouloir réussir, contre les filles, toutes les autres filles, les crâneuses, les chochotes, les gnangnans... Ma revanche, elle était là, dans les exercices de grammaire, de vocabulaire, ces phrases bizarres qu'il fallait suivre tout entières comme de longues murailles dentelées à travers un désert, sans jamais arriver quelque part. (*Les Armoires vides* 70-71)

By early adolescence, Denise's intellectual prowess affords her the approval her teachers, the spokespersons of the culturally elite, and causes her to reject her parents, as representatives of the social norms that she now deems undesirable. Exhibiting a new-found derision for her parents' behavioral and speech habits, Denise laments, "Pourquoi ne sont-ils pas comme tout le monde? J'en pleurais" (*Les Armoires vides* 113). The *café-épicerie*, formerly that locus of unbridled joy for Denise, now becomes an ignominious place and her parents become equally shameful:

Le soir, ils se colletent avec un saoulot et le poussent sur le trottoir. Toute la soirée, ils parlent, la bouche pleine des différences entre leurs ivrognes. N'avoir rien à dire, le nez dans son assiette, c'est une langue étrangère qu'ils parlent. My mother is dirty, mad, they are pigs! En anglais, que je me permettais de les injurier. (*Les Armoires vides* 114)

Denise's limiting of her blatant scorn for her parents to insults made in English may well suggest a degree of remorse on her part, but it does not prevent her from assigning to her parents responsibility for the alienation she initially suffered in the educational setting:

Manger du bout des dents, dames des salons de thé aux gestes raccourcis... J'aurais aimé la discrétion, la mesure, la pudeur. À la place, la précipitation, le débordement, la saleté, ces bruits de nourriture. Il n'aurait pas fallu juger là-dessus. Pour moi, c'était une différence. « Paysan du 18^e siècle mangeant sa soupe », un tableau du livre d'histoire, on dirait mon père. Toutes les

humiliations, je les mets sur leur compte, ils ne m'ont rien appris, c'est à cause d'eux qu'on s'est moqué de moi. (*Les Armoires vides* 115)

The specific humiliations of which Denise speaks originate from both the linguistic and behavioral patterns learned from her parents. Although she has tried to purge herself of those patterns, because they are ingrained in her, Denise cannot completely escape them:

La faute, c'est leur langage à eux, malgré mes précautions, ma barrière entre l'école et la maison, il finit par traverser, se glisser dans un devoir, une réponse. J'avais ce langage en moi, j'avais fourré mon nez dans les gâteaux à pleines mains, j'avais rigolé devant les saoulots... Je les haïssais d'autant plus, mes parents. (*Les Armoires vides* 115)

At times, Denise realizes that the indignation she expresses for her parents is unwarranted. After all, it is they who insisted that she attend private school, and that, at a great financial sacrifice. When she conveys an unreasonable and unjustified degree anger, such as she does in the two passages above, Denise leads the flashback temporarily back to the present-time, coming out of the *voix off* mode, so that she may attenuate those resentful statements. In this case, she responds to her own diatribe in a self-deprecating manner, also suggesting that she might feel less guilty and more justified in her harsh judgements of her parents if they no longer loved her: "Un monstre, si encore ils ne m'aimaient plus" (*Les Armoires vides* 115).

This vacillation reveals ambivalence on Denise's part, that she nearly immediately continues:

Ce n'est pas vrai, je ne les haïssais pas, quand j'allais à la boîte religieuse je pensais à eux qui restaient à travailler, les casiers, les petits comptes, images grises...je fondais... papa, maman, les seuls qui s'intéressaient vraiment à moi, je n'ai qu'eux... Ils veulent que je réussisse, ils veulent mon bonheur... Les larmes aux yeux, pourquoi suis-je si ingrate. (*Les Armoires vides* 116)

Denise continues to waver in her feelings for her parents, sometimes reprising her accusatory scorn, while at other times expressing guilt that their inability to ascend socially is perhaps *her* fault:

C'est moi que je hais. Je leur suis montée dessus, ils triment au comptoir, et je les méprise... Les mouches tourniquent sur la vieille cloche à fromage bosselée, la même depuis dix ans. C'est peut-être moi qui les ai empêchés de s'acheter une belle épicerie. Pourrissant rue Clopart. Je ne peux rien pour eux, si, ils vont être contents, je vais entrer à la fac de lettres. (*Les Armoires vides* 164)

As noted in earlier in this section, Denise often combines past and present tenses when narrating her flashback, as she does in the preceding passage, using the present tense to render the experience, albeit a past one, immediate. Yet, in this case, she deploys another technique to fade into the next phase of her flashback, namely expressing it in the *future*. This temporal manipulation and disjunction may address Denise's desire to re-experience the temporarily conciliatory feelings towards her parents as well as to relive what will soon discover is an idyllic period of her life: "Je ne peux rien pour eux, si, ils vont être contents, je vais entrer à la fac de lettres" (*Les Armoires vides* 164). However, the temporal disjunction is followed by a paragraph break that facilitates fading into the final segment of Denise's flashback.

In this phase, the shortest in duration, comprising only one-tenth of the novel, Denise evokes her experience as *boursière* at the *faculté de lettres*, depicting the period as primordial in terms of her aspirations toward social ascension. As previously stated, she finds university student life blissful and liberating, much like her memories of early childhood. The *fac* itself is also reminiscent of the always bustling *café-épicerie* of her youth and adolescence: "La

cour de la fac était fourmillante de garçon et de filles intelligents” (*Les Armoires vides* 164).

Yet, Denise, once again rediscovering her disdain for that milieu, notes one important distinction between the university and her former social stratum: “Tout le poisseux, tout le moche, était foutu le camp” (*Les Armoires vides* 164).

The description of la *fac de lettres* and the library, like that of her parents’ home and place of business, also appears as a highly visual and dynamic memory:

Les amphis, je n’en avais vu qu’au cinéma, je me mets au milieu et sur le bord, voir le prof de profil... Les fenêtres immenses ouvertes sur d’autres murs gris, un rien de ciel... Des tas de visages porteurs du signe étudiant évoluent dans les mêmes cercles que moi, les amphis, le restau, la cafétéria. A l’intérieur du cercle, un autre petit cercle, étouffé, silencieux, l’église à livres,²⁸ la bibliothèque, mon grand bonheur. Interdit de fumer, odeur d’ancienneté solennelle, tout accès formellement interdit à ceux qui ne sont pas inscrits... Ouvert du matin au soir, sauf le dimanche. Je monte les marches de pierre, je pîétine les tapis décolorés, c’est le château de la belle au bois dormant. (*Les Armoires vides* 165-66)

Denise situates the spaces of student life in the realm of fantasy and the sacred by likening the lecture halls to movie theaters and the library to both a solemn church and the castle of Sleeping Beauty. These spaces are far removed from her former reality, “loin du bistrot et de la saleté dans les coins” (*Les Armoires vides* 165). Denise initially delights in her educational experience, crediting it for facilitating her assimilation into the bourgeois culture as well as for virtually eradicating the humiliation she felt in her past: “Rien ne trouble ma fête. A la fac, les disserts et exposés m’installent de manière lumineuse dans mon *vrai milieu*. Remarques fines, excellente argumentation... Les profs, eux, ils le savent, ils me jugent sur mon moi” (*Les Armoires vides* 174; my emphasis).

²⁸ The narrator of *La Place* describes the library as even more sacred and solemn as a church: “C’était silencieux, plus encore que l’église” (111).

Having successfully garnered the praise of her professors, which will secure her professional future, Denise also seeks to continue her *embourgeoisement* on a personal level. This entails finding a boyfriend among one of her fellow students. She sets her sights on the “sacred” space of the university library and explains her reasons for doing so. Denise’s choice in a mate has much to do with what this individual can contribute to her continuing acculturation. Fading in to the portion of the flashback presenting her man-hunt, Denise delivers a single line, followed by a paragraph break:

Ça ne pouvait être qu’à la bibli.
Au restau, parmi les chocs de vaisselle, les débordements de légumes à la louche, les plateaux luisants comme les tables du café de mon père, les garçons me paraissent lourdauds et bâfreurs, il y en a trop...A la cafétéria, guère mieux, mais comment accepter de me faire remarquer, de me sentir plus particulière que jamais...Autre distinction que j’apprend à faire, les gars qui font science et les littéraires. Chimistes polards, mal fringués, sans conversation, presque des péquenots. Peut-être qu’ils me ressemblent ? (*Les Armoires vides* 167)

The young men populating the university dining halls, as well as future scientists and literary scholars are of no use to Denise, for they appear too much like her. Denise successfully finds a bourgeois suitor in Marc, an upper-middle class law student, who eventually abandons her when she becomes pregnant after an eight-month courtship. Despite the fact that she perceives Marc to be arrogant and a “maigrichon blondinet” (*Les Armoires vides* 167), Denise overlooks those faults to focus on the one trait that will facilitate her social ascension; Marc is, by his birth into the bourgeois social stratum “prédestiné” (*Les Armoires vides* 167) to succeed and to maintain his socio-cultural status.

When Denise falls pregnant, she initially rejoices, thinking that the pregnancy represents the final and irrevocable step in cementing the bourgeois status she desires. She

views her circumstances in the manner of a ruthless opportunist: “Je l’ai avalé, lui, le petit-bourgeois, la bonne éducation, l’autre milieu. Presque un degré au-dessus de propédeutique” (*Les Armoires vides* 178).

Denise’s triumph is short-lived when Marc gives his response upon learning the news of her pregnancy: “« Quelle couille ! » il était venu à la Cité. « Je n’aurai pas le temps de m’occuper de toi, l’exam... » Il gémissait, il prenait une tête absente, le petit con” (*Les Armoires vides* 179). Marc joins the ranks of the teachers of Denise’s early school years in becoming an agent of dismissive, scornful mistreatment of Denise at the hands of the dominant class: “Il me méprise, il m’humilie” (*Les Armoires vides* 179). Marc’s behavior also prompts a resurgence of the humiliation and anger she experienced during her early school years. Her anger and disgust toward him are transformed into an unquestionably visceral hatred that, despite the nausea she is doubtless feeling as a result of her pregnancy, becomes somatized: “Je suis prête à dégueuler sur ses cheveux, sur l’oreiller, dans le verre de Martini” (*Les Armoires vides* 179). Nora Cottille-Foley views Denise’s reaction as a rebellious, vindictive act aimed at contaminating the dominant class:

When, in the final pages, she threatens to literally vomit on him, Denise reclaims the act imposed on her (abortion or cultural hollowing) to contaminate the bourgeois world around her. As a result, all the acts of vomit mentioned within the text appear retroactively as rebellious and spontaneous acts of contamination. (Cottille-Foley 893)

Cottille-Foley’s assessment is true, particularly when we recall Denise’s reaction to a previous instance of vitriolic and visceral rage towards bourgeois culture in the prologue: “Les autres, les cultivés, les profs, les convenables, je les déteste aussi maintenant. J’en ai plein le ventre. A vomir sur eux, sur tout le monde, la culture, tout ce que j’ai appris” (*Les Armoires vides* 179).

As Denise leads her flashback closer to the present time, she reprises the allusion to the abortion, of which only two lines of direct discourse (those delivered by the abortionist) were given in the prologue. When, after two months of searching, she finally finds a *faiseuse d'anges*, Denise fills in the details of the event, albeit somewhat obliquely: “Il m’a fallu deux mois, dans la ville une maison, dans cette maison une pièce, dans cette pièce un buffet, dans ce buffet un sac et des instruments, des tuyaux...” (*Les Armoires vides* 180; ellipses in original). Denise repeats certain elements from the prologue, such as the “tuyaux,” referred to as both “la petite sonde rouge” (*Les Armoires vides* 11) and “le serpent rouge” (*Les Armoires vides* 11). In addition, recalling that she had shouted at the abortionist because of the pain, Denise provides the woman’s response, “Arrêtez de crier, mon petit” (180). Finally, linking the prologue to this segment of her flashback, Denise re-establishes the association made between her mother’s warnings about sexual pleasure and sexual intercourse with Marc, even adopting the nickname given to her by her parents:

La punition, Ninise, trouée, écartelée. On ne peut pas s’empêcher d’y penser quand c’est le même endroit. Le plaisir, la petite voie pour lui, et couic, le déverrouillage, l’enfonçure (*Les Armoires vides* 180).

Her mother’s admonition against sexual activity, “Il ne faut pas toucher ton quat’sous, tu l’abîmeras” (*Les Armoires vides* 11), is realized, in that, having transgressed her mother’s wishes, Denise is now “trouée, écartelée”. In addition, her evocation of “le plaisir, la petite voie pour lui ” (*Les Armoires vides* 180) calls to mind Marc’s seductive words “laisse-moi embrasser les petits bonbons, là, entre les lèvres” (*Les Armoires vides* 11). Finally, her last reference to the abortion as it was relayed in the prologue occurs when she states, “La douleur, la douleur” (*Les Armoires vides* 180), which, was previously designated by a single word: “Atroce.” (*Les Armoires vides* 11).

Still, the unbearable pain that Denise evokes at the end of the abortion scene might be considered as a marker to end the flashback, leading her narrative back to the present time. For, while she experienced excruciating pain upon the abortionist's insertion of the tube, in the present time, her contractions are in full-force and her water has broken: "Cette espèce d'eau traverse toutes les fissures du ventre, elle a imbibé la couverture" (*Les Armoires vides* 180). When confronted by the idea that she may actually die from the process, Denise's final reflections maintain the ambivalence characteristic of the entire narrative, an ambivalence provoked by a deep, psychological cleavage: "J'ai été coupée en deux, c'est ça, ma famille d'ouvriers agricoles, de manœuvres, et l'école" (*Les Armoires vides* 181). First, Denise reveals a potential change in her perspective regarding her parents' culpability in her socio-cultural alienation. If she were to die, she knows that her parents would never recover from the grief: "Si je crève, ils deviendront dingues" (*Les Armoires vides* 180). Yet, she recognizes the impossibility of return to her origins: "Même si je voulais, je ne pourrais plus parler comme eux" (*Les Armoires vides* 181). In addition, she ponders the possibility that Marc, and by extension, the dominant social classes may indeed bear the brunt of responsibility for her crisis. Denise posits: "Et si c'était à cause de lui, des bourgeois, des gens biens que je suis en train d'extirper mes bouts d'humiliations du ventre, pour me justifier, me différencier, si toute l'histoire était fausse... Enceinte et ça n'aurait pas de sens" (*Les Armoires vides* 182; ellipses in original).

Despite her attempt to "voir clair... voir où commence le cafouillage" (*Les Armoires vides* 17), by linking together the pivotal images from her memory while waiting for the abortion to finally take effect, the understanding that Denise seeks throughout her flashback escapes her. We discover that there are, in fact, two "incomplete expulsions" at work in *Les*

Armoires vides: the abortion-in-progress occurs in tandem with the flashback narrative, which is Denise's attempt at "expulsion" of the past, in the hopes of making the present more tolerable. The two events mirror each other in that their ending is undetermined; the abortion is not yet completed and Denise remains speculative about the causes of her socio-cultural alienation.

In *Les Armoires vides*, Annie Ernaux deploys the flashback as the vehicle with which Denise Lesur will deliver her "subjective truth," to use Susan Hayward's term. Denise's "truth" of socio-cultural and familial alienation that leads to a seemingly permanent state of *entre-deux* is a leitmotiv prevalent in throughout Ernaux's corpus. However, starting with the publication of *La Place* in 1983, the notion of a purely subjective, individual truth is taken over by what Ernaux designates as her "je transpersonnel." This narrative voice undergoes yet another transformation in *Les Années*, a text that also demonstrates an artfully crafted implementation in the writing of memory in cinematic terms.

6. *Les Années*: An Introduction

Published in 2008, *Les Années* is both the most expansive in scope, and the most intricately narrated of Ernaux's works. The flashback recounted captures both individual and collective memories spanning nearly seven decades, starting just after World War II and ending in 2006. Further distinguishing itself from the rest of Ernaux's corpus, *Les Années* is the only text in which we do not encounter a first-person *singular* narrator. Rather, a mise-en-abyme launched approximately one-quarter into the text reveals a *polyphonic* narrator in the gradual integration of *nous/on* with *elle*, all of which are ultimately identified as the future author.

Narration in *Les Années* occurs in two distinct temporal planes, and thus from two

perspectives of the *same* polyphonic *nous/on/elle* referenced above. The first of these perspectives is anchored in the present (and often projects into the future, as we shall see in the opening line and throughout the narrative), while the other sets her point of view in the past. The present-time narrator, who opens the text with the foreboding commentary on the “disappearance” of *images*, will also narrate the photographs and the mise-en-abyme on the conception of the work and the identity of its eventual future author/narrator.²⁹

The second perspective of the narrative voice in *Les Années* slips into a retrospective *voix off* mode, an arrival demonstrated by fading from the present into the past. This fade is implied visually by the numerous blank spaces in the text. We may consider as evidence an example that arises quite early in the text. In the following passage, we encounter the description of a photograph in the present tense, after which a large textual scission leads us to the past. The photograph presents the deceased sister of the *nous/on/elle* narrator, while the passage the immediately follows reports the customary play between boys and girls, specifically that the two sexes were segregated:

La photo floue et abîmée d’une petite fille debout devant une barrière, sur un pont. Elle a des cheveux courts, des cuisses menues et des genoux proéminants. A cause du soleil, elle a mis sa main au-dessus des yeux. Elle rit. Au dos, il y a écrit *Ginette 1937*. Sur sa tombe: *décédée à l’âge de six ans le jeudi saint 1938*. C’est la sœur aînée de la fillette sur la plage de Sotteville-sur-Mer.

Les garçons et les filles étaient partout séparés. Les garçons, êtres bruyants, sans larmes, toujours prêts à lancer quelque chose, cailloux, marrons, pétards, boules de neige dures, disaient des gros mots... Les filles,

²⁹ In fact, the entire text is a mise-en-abyme, since the present-time narrator presents merely the *conception* of the book, always in the future tense or the present conditional mood. Given that, the flashback itself can be seen as unfolding not on the page, but in the *memory* of the *voix off*, much like the process of voluntary memory. Moreover, as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, present-time narrator also implies that her memory is a recording, editing, projection and viewing device for the events recounted in the actual flashback narrated as *voix off*.

qui en avaient peur, étaient enjointes de ne pas les imiter, de préférer les jeux calmes, la ronde, la marelle, la bague d'or. (*Les Années* 40-41; emphasis and spacing in original)

Further clarifying the status of the *voix off*, we shall recall Hayward's assertion description of the intra-diegetic narrative voice (86). First, we discover that the *nous/on/elle* is part of the story and we are privy to her inner thoughts through the metadiscursive commentaries following each photographic image. Moreover, the flashback sequences interrupt the present-time narrative. Those two phenomena establish, following Hayward's definition, that narration in *Les Années* occurs on an intra-diegetic level.³⁰

The fused identity of the *nous/on/elle* narrative voice is manifest in numerous metadiscursive commentaries that I will discuss later in this chapter. In any event, *Les Années* is the only Ernauxian text that does not feature *je* as its narrative voice. In fact, in *Les Années*, *je* is mentioned *only* to be renounced as the inappropriate voice with which to narrate the flashback: "Aucun je dans ce qu'elle voit comme une sorte d'autobiographie impersonnelle – mais « on » et « nous » - comme si, à son tour, elle faisait le récit des jours d'avant (*Les Années* 240). This phenomenon demonstrates the evolution of Ernaux's *je* into a more far-reaching collective voice, as she states in her essay entitled "Vers un je transpersonnel": "Le *je* que j'utilise me semble une forme impersonnelle, à peine sexuée, quelquefois même plus une parole de « l'autre » qu'une parole de moi : une forme transpersonnelle en somme" (221).

³⁰ Following is affirmation of the fused identity of the *nous/on/elle* narrator as it appears in the commentary accompanying a photograph evoked in *Les Années*: "Et c'est avec les perceptions et les sensations reçues par l'adolescente brune à lunette de quatorze ans et demi que *l'écriture ici peut retrouver quelque chose qui glissait dans les années cinquante, capter le reflet projeté de la mémoire individuelle par l'histoire collective*" (*Les Années* 54; my emphasis).

Yet, although *je* is rejected as the text's narrative voice, this is not to say that any notion of a singular, subjective experience is completely excluded from the *Les Années*, for a *nous* always includes a *je*. In *Les Années*, the *elle* described in the text's photographs represents that *je* in terms of an individual memory, whose personal experiences are an optic through which collective experience is captured. Ernaux supports this hypothesis in a 2008 interview, where she explains her choice of narrative voice in *Les Années*:

Avec ce livre, en particulier, j'ai voulu créer une fusion. J'ai utilisé le « on », le « nous », le « elle » comme une forme collective, impersonnelle. Sans pour autant me passer de l'intime. Habituellement, le « je » de la première personne est le signe de l'autobiographie. Mais il est également un moyen de dire le monde qui est autour. A condition qu'il ne s'agisse pas d'autobiographies bêtement centrées sur soi, bien sûr ! (Freniot and Delaroche www.lire.fr)

However, despite those differences, certain Ernauxian trends are still present in *Les Années*. Readers already familiar with even a few of Ernaux's works will notice abundant intertextual references, not only in theme, but also with regard to the photos evoked, but not shown in the text (the exceptions being *L'Usage de la photo*, published in 2005 and *L'Autre fille*, published in 2011). We may indeed view *Les Années* as the continuation, if not the apogee, of the text-image reciprocity that Ernaux has maintained throughout her corpus, particularly in terms of writing the memory (and reality) of her past experiences. We shall determine that Ernaux's writing of memory simulates cinematic processes such as the recording, imprinting and projecting of images. Moreover, *Les Années* relies on blank spaces, serving as the literary equivalent of the cinematic fade or dissolve, and a *voix off* to narrate retrospective events. Finally, like Ernaux's previous texts, *Les Années* begins in the present

time with a prologue that prepares us for the flashback about to be launched.³¹ In the sections that follow, we will explore various elements of the prologue, which itself features abbreviated flashbacks. I will then examine the primary flashback narrative, with particular attention to the narrator's perception and conception of memory in cinematic terms. In both the prologue and the main narrative we will note the visual aspects of memory and simulations of cinematic devices, including the fade and *voix off*, that pervade the text.

7. *Les Années*: The Prologue

The prologue of *Les Années* is divided into two parts; the first focuses on *images*, while the second part focuses on language, establishing immediately the text-image, or perhaps we should say *image-text* reciprocity alluded to above, since *images* take precedence in the order of delivery. In this section, I will discuss the nature of the *images* and words, soon discovered to be memories, or flashbacks-within-the-flashback. I will also demonstrate the sustained presence of death in terms of the lexicon used in the prologue. Finally, I will determine that their manner of delivery, spatial organization and lexicon ultimately uncover Ernaux's incorporation of cinematic devices in her writing of memory.

The prologue opens with an ominous single-line paragraph announcing, "Toutes les images disparaîtront" (*Les Années* 11), clearly conveying the double-meaning of "disparaître," "to disappear" and "to die." The statement is immediately followed by a large scission in the text, which is itself followed by a four-page list of *images*, each of which is surrounded by blank spaces. In conjunction with these blank spaces, the temporal shift in

³¹ *L'Autre fille*, Ernaux's most recent text, published in March 2011, is the only work that does not include a prologue. In fact, it is the only text launched by a description of photographs, rather than by metanarrative commentary. I will address this again in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

narrative perspective to the past indicates the arrival of a *voix off*. Following is a selection of the *images* presented in the prologue:

la femme accroupie qui urinait en plein jour derrière un baraquement servant de café, en bordure des ruines, à Yvetot, après la guerre, se reculottait debout, jupe relevée, et s'en retournait au café (*Les Années* 11)

l'homme croisé sur un trottoir de Padoue, l'été 90, avec des mains attachées aux épaules, évoquant aussitôt le souvenir de la thalidomide prescrite aux femmes contres les nausées trente ans plus tôt et du même coup l'histoire drôle qui se racontait ensuite : une future mère tricotait de la layette en avalant régulièrement de la thalidomide, un rang, un cachet. Une amie horrifiée lui dit, tu ne sais donc pas que ton bébé risque de naître sans bras, et elle répond, oui je sais bien mais je ne sais pas tricoter les manches (*Les Années* 11)

cette dame majestueuse, atteinte d'Alzheimer, vêtue d'une blouse à fleurs, comme les autres pensionnaires de la maison de retraite, mais elle, avec un châle bleu sur les épaules, arpentant sans arrêt les couloirs, hautainement, comme la duchesse de Guermantes au bois de Boulogne et qui faisait penser à Céleste Albaret telle qu'elle était apparue un soir dans une émission de Bernard Pivot (*Les Années* 12)

le nouveau-né brandi en l'air comme un lapin décapité dans la salle d'accouchement de la Clinique Pasteur de Caudéran, retrouvé une demi-heure après tout habillé, dormant sur le côté dans le petit lit, une main dehors et le drap tiré jusqu'aux épaules (*Les Années* 12-13).

The first *image*, “la femme accroupie qui urinait...,” consists of a brief and unquestionably subjective narrative that also contains precise spatiotemporal indications. The information provided, namely, that the *image* occurred in post-war Yvetot, establishes that the narrating voice has witnessed this event, and more importantly, that this *image* and those that follow, are indeed memories. Likewise, the narrator sets the scene of the second *image* in Padua during the summer of 1990. In terms of intertextuality, readers of Ernaux's corpus will

immediately recognize the references to “la dame majestueuse atteinte d’Alzheimer,”³² and “le nouveau-né brandi en l’air comme un lapin décarpillé”³³ from prior works.

Outside of the subjective, individual memories relayed in the opening pages of the prologue, we also note several *images* belonging to the collective consciousness. These images consist primarily of advertisements and events of historical significance:

le type dans une publicité au cinéma pour Paic Vaisselle, qui cassait allègrement les assiettes sales au lieu de les laver. Une voix off disait sévèrement « ce n’est pas la solution ! » et le type regardait avec désespoir les spectateurs, « mais quelle est la solution ? » (*Les Années* 13)

dans une publicité à la télé, le père essayant vainement, en douce, derrière son journal, de lancer en l’air une Picorrette et de la rattraper avec la bouche, comme sa petite fille (*Les Années* 13)

les centaines de faces pétrifiées, photographiées par l’administration avant le départ pour les camps, sur les murs d’une salle du palais de Tokyo, à Paris, au milieu des années quatre-vingt (*Les Années* 13-14)

The insertion of collective memories, such as the two commercials and the public display of the photograph of deportees, foreshadows the content of the primary flashback narrative in terms of viewing collective memory through the optic of individual memory. We will explore examples of this optic in the following section of this chapter.

After the four-page list of memory-images, the first part of the prologue concludes when the *voix off* is temporarily suspended by a return to the present-time. This re-

³² This woman was a patient at the same long-term care facility as Ernaux’s mother. She appears in *Une Femme* (1988) and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » (1997).

³³ In fact, the scene appears nearly verbatim in *La Femme gelée*: “L’éclair d’un petit lapin décarpillé, un cri. Souvent après, je me suis repassé le film, j’ai cherché le sens de ce moment... Je l’ai retrouvé dans la chambre de la clinique une demi-heure après, tout habillé, sa tête couverte de cheveux noirs bien au milieu de l’oreiller, bordé jusqu’aux épaules...” (141).

focalization in the present is facilitated by a page break, another sequencing device serving as the literary equivalent of the cinematic fade (Collet et al. 187). The content of the passage closing this part of the prologue both summarizes and expounds on the incipit. Reprising the foreboding opening statement, “Toutes les images disparaîtront,” the present-time narrator states:

[Les images] s'évanouiront toutes d'un seul coup comme l'ont fait les millions d'images qui étaient derrière les fronts des grands-parents morts il y a un demi-siècle, des parents morts eux aussi. Des images où l'on figurait en gamine au milieu d'autres êtres déjà disparus avant qu'on soit né, de même que dans notre mémoire sont présents nos enfants petits aux côtés de nos parents et de nos camarade d'école. (*Les Années* 15)

The lexical field sustained in the passage above through the association of “disparaître” from the opening paragraph with “s'évanouir d'un seul coup,” “morts” and “disparus” clearly demonstrates a sense of urgency in the face of mortality. In fact, we will encounter additional synonyms of “disparaître” and “s'évanouir” in the remaining portion of the prologue. Those actions refer not only to visual memories, but also to the memory of language. In addition, the reference to “Des images où l'on figurait en *gamine*” finally reveals to us that the present-time narrator is a woman, preoccupied with the instantaneous and irrevocable effect of death.

As I stated in the beginning of this section, the symbiotic relationship between visual and verbal modes of cognition and expression is paramount in *Les Années*, as it is throughout Ernaux's corpus. In keeping with that assertion, the second part of the prologue presents a list of verbal memory phenomena that, like memories of the people, places and things cited in the opening pages, will also be lost. Again, the imminence death and the subsequent loss of memory (in this case, the memory of language) continue to consume the narrator, who

announces, “S’annuleront subitement les milliers de mots qui ont servi à nommer les choses, les visages des gens, les actes et les sentiments, ordonné le monde, fait battre le cœur et mouiller le sexe” (*Les Années* 15).

The presentation of these verbal phenomena mimics that of the previously enumerated *images*, in both form and content. Like the *images* in the opening pages, a *voix off* retrospectively narrates the sequence, presented in list format and surrounded by blank spaces in the text. A brief selection of “les milliers de mots” follows:

les slogans, les graffitis sur les murs des rues et des vécés, les poèmes et les histoires sales, les titres (*Les Années* 15)

les tournures que d’autres utilisaient avec naturel et dont on doutait d’en être capable aussi un jour, il est indéniable que, force est de constater (*Les Années* 15)

les phrases terribles qu’il aurait fallu oublier, plus tenaces que d’autres en raison même de l’effort pour les refouler, tu ressembles à une putain décatie (*Les Années* 16)

que faisiez-vous le 11 septembre 2001 ? (*Les Années* 16)

les marques de produits anciens, de durée brève, dont le souvenir ravissait plus que celui d’une marque connue, le shampoing Dulsol, le chocolat Cardon, le café Nadi, comme un souvenir intime, impossible à partager (*Les Années* 19)

The preceding list encompasses both individual and collective memories of language. The personal pronoun *tu* in the statement “tu ressembles à une putain décatie” (*Les Années* 16) reveals not only that the statement is an auditory memory, but also the memory’s enduring affective resonance on the narrator. On an intertextual level, Ernaux’s own childhood and adolescent struggles to acquire the language of the intelligentsia are recalled in the allusion to “les tournures que d’autres utilisaient avec naturel et dont on doutait d’en être

capable aussi un jour.” (*Les Années* 15) Also functioning intertextually, but this time, having a collective reach, the mention of graffiti calls to mind images previously evoked in Annie Ernaux’s *journaux ex-times*, *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*. In *Journal du dehors*, the narrator states, “Sur le mur du parking couvert de la gare R.E.R. il y a écrit : DÉMENCE. Plus loin, sur le même mur, JE T’AIME ELSA et IF YOUR CHILDREN ARE HAPPY THEY ARE COMUNISTS” (*Journal du dehors* 11; spelling and spacing are in the original text). Reprising the images of graffiti in public spaces, the narrator of *La Vie extérieure* recalls, “Sur le mur du parking de la gare il y a maintenant en lettres immenses **Lehla je t’aime**” (*La Vie extérieure* 141; emphasis in original). Finally, the question regarding September 11, 2001, as is generally the case for internationally significant historical events, affects the collective consciousness. Such questions precipitating a visual memory elicit a response known as a flashbulb memory. This metaphorical term, coined by Roger Brown and James Kulik in the 1970s, presents the hypothesis that the shock-factor of a catastrophic public event increases the brain’s ability to record and imprint- much like a camera- in human memory even the most minute details of that event (Sutton 47). Richard F. Thompson and Stephen A. Madigan explain the precision of flashbulb memories in their study entitled *Memory: the Key to Human Consciousness*. They maintain:

What is remarkable about flashbulb memories is that we remember our own circumstances, where we were and what we were doing upon hearing the news. We remember the trivial everyday aspects of life at that moment in time; they are frozen in memory. (168)

According to Brown and Madigan’s assessment, individual and collective memory are, then, mutually informative. In *Les Années*, the narrator situates individual memory as the lens through which the broader, collective experience of a catastrophic event will be re-envisioned.

In terms of lexicon, the prologue maintains to its very end the foreboding atmosphere established in first two parts. The prologue concludes with a return to the present-time and consequently, a suspension of the retrospective *voix off*. This fading back to the present time is signaled by a blank space and a paragraph break before the present-time narrator proclaims: “Tout s’effacera en une seconde. Le dictionnaire accumulé du berceau au dernier lit s’éliminera. Ce sera le silence et aucun mot pour le dire. De la bouche ouverte il ne sortira rien” (*Les Années* 19). “S’effac[er] en une seconde” and “s’élimin[er],” along with references to “[le] berceau,” “[le] dernier lit” and “la bouche ouverte” (*Les Années* 19) from which not a single sound will emanate (one thinks immediately of a cadaver in this instance) reinforce the omnipresent fear of instantaneous vanishing of memory as a result of aging and/or death in the narrator’s psyche.³⁴ In addition, not only are we at risk of *losing* memories, but also, eventually we may not even *be* a memory for our descendants: “Dans les conversations autour de la table de fête *on ne sera qu’un prénom, de plus en plus sans visage, jusqu’à disparaître dans la masse anonyme d’une lointaine génération*” (*Les Années* 19; my emphasis). This statement features the second use of “disparaître,”³⁵ the verb that both opens *and* closes the narrative’s prologue, thus reinforcing the precarious nature of the *images* and *mots* that will fade away. Moreover, the lexical field in the prologue, including *disparaître* and its synonyms, also bolsters the effects established by structural aspects of the text. Specifically, the choice of verbs refers directly to the blank spaces that represent the fading

³⁴ This obsession is reprised in the final pages, where, after a battle with breast cancer and the announcement that her son is expecting his first child (undoubtedly represented by the *berceau* in the prologue), the narrator evokes “cet entre-deux d’une naissance certaine et de sa mort possible” (*Les Années* 235) as well as “son absence future” (*Les Années* 237). The passages in which these quotations appear will appear in the next section of this chapter.

³⁵ The adjective “disparu” appears in the previously cited “Des images où l’on figurait en gamine au milieu déjà disparus...” (*Les Années* 15).

or dissolving of the *images* and *mots*.

In the prologue, the abundant blank spaces, whose absence is actually “visible” on the page, have the same effect as the dissolving of a filmic image in a cinematic fade; they provide a *visual* cue that we are fading out of one memory and into another. Yet, there is another structural element that we must consider. The presentation of the *images* and *mots* in a list format has an unquestionable effect on the pace with which we receive them. The abbreviated and fragmentary form of the lists (there is little punctuation, even when the image evoked comprises a paragraph) compels us to receive the memories evoked so quickly, that they very nearly become muddled, much like a double-exposure. In her 2009 essay “Effectuer le passage du soi aux autres dans *Les Années*,” Élise Huguey-Léger has made a similar observation:

L’incipit des *Années*, sous l’apparence d’une liste décousue d’images et de mots, nous offre un patchwork de souvenirs qui fonctionnent comme reflet des influences et du parcours familial, personnel et professionnel de l’auteure. Dans les images qu’elle cite, *se mélangent jusqu’à se superposer* des souvenirs personnels et collectifs. (199; my emphasis)

The superimposition of images that Hugueny-Léger references, despite creating possible distortion and confusion, may very well present the rapid, chaotic memory process of an individual in distress, as is the case for the narrative voice in the prologue of *Les Années*. In fact, Ernaux has expressed elsewhere the jumbled nature of memories, both visual and verbal, when she is clearly in an anxious state of mind. In « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », ³⁶ the diary kept during her mother’s battle with Alzheimer’s Disease, the author

³⁶ Let us recall that “*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*” were the last words Ernaux’s mother ever wrote at the time when her Alzheimer’s Disease took a devastating turn. She had started to compose a letter to a friend, but was only able to write that one sentence.

recounts visiting her mother, a patient in a long-term care facility. The anguish in the passage that follows is clear:

Elle est dans la salle, seule à être tournée, dans son fauteuil, contre le mur. Il y a des guirlandes descendant du plafond. Elle me les montre en disant : « C'est la robe d'Annie. » Ne pensant qu'à moi. Le papier peint de la salle me rappelle *brusquement* celui du café d'Yvetot avant 1950. Impression que rien ne s'est passé depuis ma petite enfance, *que toute la vie n'est qu'une accumulation de scènes les unes sur les autres, et de chansons*. (« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit » 95-94; my emphasis)

In the passage above, the narrator's guilt that, despite her illness, her mother thinks only of her, and the anxiety over her mother's deteriorated state of mind, flood her with memories of things both seen and heard in the past. The mixing of auditory memories ("chansons") and visual memories, such as the wallpaper in her parents' café is comparable to the fusing of visual and verbal memories in the prologue of *Les Années*. Moreover, her use of "brusquement" to qualify the pace at which her memory of the café's wallpaper arrives, calls to mind synonymous adverbs used in *Les Années*, although in the latter case, the adverbs denote memory's rapid disappearance.

Returning to *Les Années*, the adverbial expressions "d'un seul coup" (*Les Années* 15), "subitement" (*Les Années* 15) and "en une seconde" (*Les Années* 19) work in tandem with the sparsely punctuated list format and the numerous textual scissions as *trucages* to mimic *visually* the fleeting passage of time and the ephemeral nature of life. In recent years, the theme of mortality has appeared with increasing frequency in Ernaux's corpus, for example, in *L'Usage de la photo*, where eroticism, photography and writing become the means by which Ernaux triumphs over her battle with breast cancer. In a 2005 interview entitled "Entraîner le lecteur dans l'effacement du réel," Ernaux acknowledges the impulse to fight against mortality through the act of writing: "Lutter contre la mort par l'écriture, c'est

quelque chose que je ressens de plus en plus, depuis quinze ans environ” (Day 231). The attempt to vanquish this transience by eventually recording individual and collective memories is the primary objective of *Les Années*, as the narrator announces in the closing, single-line paragraph: “Sauver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais” (252). We shall later discover that the prologue finds its structural and thematic double in a nearly identical list in the final pages of *Les Années*. These two series of lists serve to frame the primary portion of flashback narrative. I will return to those final pages near the end of this chapter, but will now shift focus on the construction of principal flashback comprising *Les Années*.

8. *Les Années*: Structure of the Primary Flashback

The structure of the primary flashback in *Les Années* consists of three elements: the evocation of photographs³⁷ (although the images are not shown³⁸) or video footage of the narrator, a presentation of family dinner scenes, and the reporting of historical, cultural and consumer-related events from the 1940s through 2006. All of these elements fulfill the testimonial role of both the literary and cinematic flashback referenced earlier in this chapter. In the case of *Les Années*, the testimony consists of both individual and collective memory of those decades. In fact, within each decade, the structural elements demonstrate a progressive movement from individual experience (in the photographs and to an extent, the *repas de*

³⁷ A selection of these photos and videos, as well as photos from Ernaux’s other texts will be analyzed as “freeze-frames” in a subsequent chapter. In fact, several of the photographs in *Les Années* have been presented in other texts.

³⁸ As previously stated, from 1983 onward, Ernaux has evoked photographs without showing them, with two exceptions. In *L’Usage de la photo*, all of the photographs appear in the text, while in her most recent work, *L’Autre fille*, four photographs are evoked, and only two of them – featuring the two *café-épicerie*s that her parents own – are shown.

fête), towards collective experience, in the *repas de fête* and particularly in the *nous/on* commentary on the principal historical of that time. Although not always in the same order of photograph/family meal scene/collective experience, these three elements mimic, even frequently in format, the list of *images* and *mots* presented in the prologue. The structural elements are also separated by textual scissions, the largest of which appear before each new photo is evoked, in order to signal visually a temporal fade back to the present, since the photos, despite their status as belonging to the past, are all narrated in the present. A seven-decade flashback is far too expansive for the scope of this study and would lead to redundancy in terms of how fades or *voix off* arrivals are indicated. Therefore, I will present the pertinent aspects of each of the three structural elements comprising the primary flashback of *Les Années*, before concluding this chapter by discussing the cinematic aspects of the narrator's memory.

9. The Photographic Image in *Les Années*

As stated previously, a subsequent chapter of this dissertation will examine the photographic and filmic images as “freeze-frames” serving to supplement the prevalent Ernauxian themes of social alienation, familial alienation, the status of women and more recently, mortality throughout the corpus. Therefore, I will refrain from commenting too extensively on the “meaning” and narrative function of the photographs in this section. That said, it is important to note that *Les Années* marks the inaugural use of the photographic image to launch the primary flashback.³⁹ In other words, the flashback sequence of the

³⁹ In *L'Autre fille*, Ernaux's latest work, the prologue, rather than the flashback sequence, opens with the evocation of a photograph of Ernaux's sister as an infant.

narrative *begins* with a freeze-frame that establishes a spatiotemporal context for the starting point of the flashback, which opens with the following evocation:

C'est une photo sépia, ovale, collée à l'intérieur d'un livret bordé d'un liséré doré, protégée par une feuille gaufrée, transparente. Au-dessous, *Photo-Moderne, Ridel, Lillebonne (S.Inf.re) Tel. 80*. Un gros bébé à la lippe boudeuse, des cheveux bruns formant un rouleau sur le dessus de la tête, est assis à moitié nu sur un coussin au centre d'une table sculptée... Dans cette pièce d'archives familiales – qui doit dater de 1941 – impossible de lire autre chose que la mise en scène rituelle, sur le mode petit-bourgeois, de l'entrée dans le monde. (*Les Années* 21; emphasis in original)

This photograph, narrated in the present situates the starting point of the flashback to follow in Lillebonne, in approximately 1941. In addition, the description of this photograph is immediately followed by three other photographs and each of those photos is dated approximately three years later. The deployment of the photographic image as a trigger for the entire narrative does not merely demonstrate an innovation in Ernaux's use of the visual image in her texts. More importantly, it also reaffirms the relationship that she seeks to establish between the text and the image, whether that image is a fixed, material image, or an immaterial visual image existing in her memory. In fact, as in the prologue of *Les Années*, it appears that Ernaux establishes a hierarchy wherein the image, in this case, visual memory, takes precedence over the text.

Each subsequent decade of *Les Années* also opens with the evocation of a photograph featuring *elle* that is described in the present tense. In all but five cases, the photographs are accompanied by commentary on her memories from the era in which the photograph was taken. Four of these photos, those referenced above, date from age one to age four, a time of which the narrator has no memory. The fifth, a photograph of the narrator's sister, who died two years before the narrator's birth, marks a situation of which the narrator could not

possibly have a memory. Despite the lack of memory that these five photographs provoke, and perhaps more importantly, to counter that deficiency, the photographs presented in the text function much like Ernaux's other methods of authentication and verification of her narrative, such as archive searches, the insertion of footnotes, and the consultation of diaries and journals that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. As Nathalie Froloff observes in her essay, "*Les Années: mémoire(s) et photographie*": "La photo donne une existence, une réalité, même en l'absence de souvenirs et permet ainsi de combler les manques de la vie évoquée et d'en retrouver la linéarité" (39). Thus, these photographs are provided as "proof" of that era in the narrator's life.

There is, nonetheless, a progression in terms of what the narrator can recall, a progression beginning when referencing photographs of the narrator from fairly early childhood. Even the sparse commentary and somewhat uncertain memory accompanying a photograph of the narrator at around age nine reveals this progression:

Difficile de dire à quoi elle pense ou rêve, comment elle regarde les années qui la séparent de la Libération, de quoi elle se souvient sans effort. Peut-être n'y a-t-il plus déjà d'autres images que celles-ci, qui résisteront à la déperdition de la mémoire : l'arrivée dans la ville de décombres et la chienne en chaleur qui s'enfuit, le premier jour d'école à la rentrée de Pâques, elle ne connaît personne. (*Les Années* 35)

The hesitant nature expressed by "Difficile à dire" and "Peut-être" in this passage demonstrates that the corresponding photograph reveals an inadequacy, although not a complete lack, of memory. In *Les Brouillons de soi*, Philippe Lejeune acknowledges that in any *récit d'enfance*, the difficulties and weaknesses of memory are brought to light. He notes the presence of "[des] souvenirs rares, flottants qu'une trame vient relier – mais le doute persiste sur les circonstances et les détails" (36). Nonetheless, the photograph does indeed

serve as objective proof of the narrator's existence in that past state.

The narrator's memories become clearer and more insightful as the narrative advances, thus allowing for expanded commentary. The metanarrative remarks accompanying the photographic images are of central importance because they establish the *mise-en-abyme* that actually comprises the *totality* of *Les Années*, for the narrative is presented from start to finish *not* as a completed work, but in the stages of conception. In that respect, we may view *Les Années* as a demonstration of the operations of voluntary memory, as an *internal* flashback, presented not on the "page," but more importantly, as a series of filmic images displayed in the narrator's memory. At the end of this chapter, I will return to the *mise-en-abyme* with regard to the narrator's memory as a cinematic device, but will now proceed with the second element of the internal flashback: *les repas de famille*.

10. Repas de famille in *Les Années*

Various scenes of family lunches and dinners comprise the second structural component of *Les Années*. Like the photographs and the broader historical, social and cultural event reported, these scenes are narrated in the past via *voix off* and are always isolated by blank spaces, visually prompting the fade into and out of the decade in question. Also like their structural counterparts, the *repas de famille* fulfill the testimonial role of the flashback, as noted above by Susan Hayward (133). In these scenes combining both visual and auditory memory, the *voix off* narrator adds another element of polyphony to the flashback, in the form of the attendees. Recalling Derrida's notion of testimony cited above, "cela m'a été ou m'est présent, dans l'espace et dans le temps [...] et vous devez me croire" (31; emphasis in the original), the attendees recount the events they have witnessed, as in the following passage extracted from a dinner scene post-World War II:

Ils parlaient de Pétain en haussant les épaules, trop vieux et déjà gaga quand on était allé le chercher faute de mieux. Ils imitaient le vol et le grondement des V2 tournant dans le ciel, mimaient l'effroi passé, avec des feintes délibérations aux moments les plus dramatiques, *qu'est-ce que je fais*, pour tenir en haleine. (*Les Années* 23; emphasis in original)

The narrator, in keeping with Derrida's notion of testimony, is careful to qualify the testimony of the attendees by stating, "Mais ils ne parlaient de ce qu'ils avaient vu, qui pouvait se revivre en mangeant et buvant. Ils n'avaient pas assez de talent ou de conviction pour parler de ce qu'ils savaient mais qu'ils n'avaient pas vu" (*Les Années* 24). However, the 1950s demonstrate a broadening of the topics discussed during the *repas de famille*. The participants demonstrate an evolution from discussing situations within their family circle to discussing national and international events:

Après les commentaires sur les plats en train d'être dégustés, qui appelaient les souvenirs des mêmes mangés en d'autres circonstances, les conseils sur la meilleure façon de les préparer, les convives discutaient de la réalité des soucoupes volantes, du Spoutnik et de qui, des Américains ou des Russes, irait les premiers sur la lune, des cités d'urgence de l'abbé Pierre, de la vie chère. (*Les Années* 59)

Aside from the collective memories recounted during the family feasts, the narrator occasionally divulges individual memories complementing those that accompany the photographic images. In one instance, taken from a dinner scene in the mid-1960s, the narrator, now a university student, recalls her increasing feeling socio-cultural alienation within the family dynamic:

Malgré soi, on remarquait les façons de saucer l'assiette, secouer la tasse pour faire fondre le sucre, de dire avec respect « quelqu'un de haut placé » et l'on percevait d'un seul coup le milieu familial de l'extérieur, comme un monde clos qui n'était plus le nôtre. (*Les Années* 85)

The behavioral and linguistic codes once shared with her family now seem other-worldly.

The narrator's acculturation through higher education changes her perspective on her milieu of origin; she now examines her family and their dinner guests through the lens of the bourgeois culture to which she aspires.

11. Collective memory in *Les Années*

In the final structural element of *Les Années*, the *nous/on* presents historical events, modes of thinking (and their evolution) and the various objects or technologies that have been born during the twentieth century. These sequences, also temporally organized by blank spaces, purport to recount the collective memory of each era through the *nous/on* perspective. Yet, they do retain a highly subjective angle on more than one occasion. Certainly, since the *nous/on* also includes the singular voice of *elle*, this degree of subjectivity is inevitable. In one sequence of her flashback, the narrator transforms a "collective" memory into one that is highly personal. Having situated the flashback in the early 1980s, the narrator questions the restrictive nature of marriage. In the following passage, she reveals the impression of stagnation felt by married couples of her generation:

Emploi, mariage, enfants, [les couples] étaient allés au bout de l'itinéraire de reproduction scellé maintenant dans la pierre par des traites sur vingt ans. Ils s'étourdissaient dans le bricolage et la réfection des peintures, la pose de tissu mural. Le désir de revenir en arrière les assaillait brièvement. Ils enviaient les jeunes qui, dans l'approbation unanime, pratiquaient une « cohabitation juvénile » à laquelle ils n'avaient pas eu droit. (*Les Années* 137)

Although the monotony of married life is presented as burdensome to both members of the couple, the narrator ultimately reveals that this segment of her flashback will bear witness particularly to the state of married *women*, longing for the freedom of their

unattached days. She quickly makes a transition from *ils* (“les couples”) to *elles*, and emphasizes the married women’s envy of unmarried women, “Elles comparaient leur vie à celle des célibataires et des divorcées, regardaient avec mélancolie une jeune routarde assise par terre devant la gare avec son sac à dos buvant tranquillement une brique de lait” (*Les Années* 137). Yet, the purview of the memory evolves once again, when *elles* becomes *on*:

Selon les jours, elles oscillaient entre l’envie et la peur de tout quitter, de redevenir indépendantes. Pour connaître son vrai désir et se donner du courage, on allait voir *Une femme sous influence*, *Identification d’une femme*, on lisait *La Femme gaucherie*, *La Femme fidèle*. (*Les Années* 137)

In making this transformation from *elles* to *on*, the narrator allows her flashback sequence to present an experience known by many through the lens of her own perspective. In fact, the narrator’s intentional focalization of the collective through her own experience is established early in *Les Années*, and is developed through the mise-en-abyme sustained throughout the text.

12. Memory as a Cinematic Apparatus in *Les Années*

Returning to the commentary accompanying the photographs in *Les Années*, I wish to conclude this chapter with a discussion of the mise-en-abyme established and sustained in those remarks. The mise-en-abyme presents *Les Années* as a work in progress, as is demonstrated by the shift back to the present tense, with frequent projections made in the future and the conditional. On a figurative level, at the point of our reception, we receive the flashback sequences of *Les Années* only as they exist in and are mediated by the narrator’s memory. Therefore, the narrator’s memory is directly associated with cinematic devices, including the camera, the projector and the screen. In her essay “*Les Années : mémoire(s) et photographie*,” Nathalie Froloff establishes the cinematic quality of the *Les Années* by

stating, “Le livre est en effet construit autour de fragments, de séquences qui s’enchaînent comme autant de planches de contact” (40). The notion of fragmentary “séquences qui s’enchaînent” evokes the cinematic term “fondu enchaîné,” or the cinematic fade. Because the mise-en-abyme demonstrates that the text is only at the stage of conception, the “contact sheet” to which Froloff refers can be likened to the narrator’s memory, where the images are imprinted before their eventual and permanent “projection” on the page.

The mise-en-abyme and the association of the narrator’s memory with a cinematic instrument are launched early in *Les Années*. In the metanarrative commentary accompanying a photograph of the adolescent narrator and a schoolmate in the 1950s, we learn that the narrator’s perceptions and sensations will facilitate interpretation of the collective experiences “projected” onto the “screen” of her memory, before ultimately materializing those memories into words:

Même si on ne reconnaît pas dans la brune la petite fille à nattes de la plage, qui pourrait aussi bien être devenue la blonde, c’est elle, et non la blonde, qui a été cette conscience, prise dans ce corps-là, avec une mémoire unique... Et c’est avec les perceptions et les sensations reçues par l’adolescente brune à lunettes de quatorze ans et demi que l’écriture ici peut retrouver quelque chose qui glissait dans les années cinquante, *capter le reflet projeté sur l’écran de la mémoire individuelle par l’histoire collective*. (*Les Années* 54; my emphasis)

This notion of the brain as “screen” is also present in *Cinema 2*, where Deleuze assigns to the brain the ability to mediate various superimposed scenes of the collective, or perhaps *universal* consciousness:

Le monde est devenu mémoire, cerveau, superposition des âges ou des lobes, mais le cerveau lui-même est devenu conscience, continuation des âges, création ou poussée de lobes toujours nouveaux, recréation de matière à la façon du styrène. L’écran même est la membrane cérébrale où s’affrontent immédiatement, directement, le passé et le futur, l’intérieur et l’extérieur. (*Cinéma 2* 164; my emphasis)

In the preceding passage, Deleuze also alludes to the tension between the past and the future as revealed by the narrator in the prologue of *Les Années*. From the very beginning of the narrative, her primary concern is that memory, or as she states, “Toutes les images” (*Les Années* 11) *will* vanish. The future becomes for the narrator the time in which these accumulated individual (“l’intérieur,” in Deleuze’s terms), collective (“l’extérieur,” again, to use Deleuze’s term) and ephemeral images that have been projected onto her internal “screen” will become concrete through the eventual penning of the text.

The narrator’s memory is likened not only to the “screen” onto which both individual and collective experiences are “projected” before materializing in written form, but also to a device that refracts and records the images of those experiences. Contemporary film scholars, such as Jeanne-Marie Clerc, acknowledge the validity of such a connection. In *Littérature et cinéma*, Clerc asserts that the contemporary literary protagonist has become “une forme schématique dont la seule fonction est, semble-t-il, de *réfracter* en innombrables effets de redoublements spéculaires *la réalité qu’il enregistre quasi-mécaniquement*” (195; my emphasis).

In *Les Années* the future author/narrator adopts the very functions proposed above by Clerc. Her memory is a device that “records” and “refracts” past events, whether individual or collective. The narrator demonstrates this by asserting: “Ce qui compte pour elle, c’est au contraire de saisir cette durée qui constitue son passage sur la terre à une époque donnée, ce temps qui l’a traversée, ce monde qu’elle a *enregistré* rien qu’en vivant” (*Les Années* 238; my emphasis). Recalling the notion of the flashback as the narrator’s “subjective truth” (Hayward 133), or ‘subjective memory,’ (Turim 1), the images contained in her memory will

also be subject to a certain mediation, or “refraction,” while she progressively gleans the knowledge that will establish her world view. She states: “Sans doute est-ce aussi à l’état de sensations, de sentiments et d’images –sans traces de l’idéologie qui les a suscitées- *que sont réfractées en elle les informations qu’elle reçoit sur le monde*” (*Les Années* 68; my emphasis).

Aside from being recorded by and refracted through her, individual and collective experiences have indeed left an indelible “imprint” on the memory of the author/narrator, which is also likened to the celluloid or DVD surface of a film. The narrator will then reprint or re-project these internalized through the act of writing:

Ce que le monde *a imprimé* en elle et ses contemporains, elle s’en servira pour reconstituer un temps commun, celui qui a glissé d’il y a si longtemps à aujourd’hui – pour, en retrouvant la mémoire de la mémoire collective dans une mémoire individuelle, rendre la dimension vécue de l’Histoire. (*Les Années* 239)

The narrator’s intention to “rendre la dimension vécue de l’Histoire” is presented as a process of voluntary memory. In one such instance, the narrator feels stifled in her marriage, and as if she is losing her identity. Her yearning for the freedom of her student days is expressed in a diary entry that she provides, “« Je n’ai plus d’idées du tout. Je n’essaie plus d’expliquer ma vie...J’ai peur de m’installer dans cette vie calme et confortable, d’avoir vécu sans m’en rendre compte »” (*Les Années* 99). Whereas in childhood, the future and the prospect of adulthood were her aspirations, the narrator now sees recovery of the past as her primary objective. She deploys voluntary memory as a means to re-explore that freedom:

Elle se retourne souvent sur des images de quand elle était seule, elle se voit dans les rues de villes où elle a marché, dans des chambres qu’elle a occupées – à Rouen dans un foyer de jeunes filles, à Finchley au pair, à Rome en vacances dans une pension rue Servio Tullio. Il lui semble que ce sont ses *moi*

qui continuent d'exister là. Le passé et l'avenir, en somme, se sont inversés, c'est le passé, non l'avenir, qui est maintenant objet de désir: se retrouver dans cette chambre de Rome. (*Les Années* 100; emphasis in original)

Yet, the act of voluntary memory is not an end in and of itself. The narrator transforms voluntary memory into a process of *montage*, whereby she will assemble and assign order to the various *images* of individual and collective memory in order to construct her future text. The narrator expresses the following intention:

Elle voudrait réunir ces multiples images d'elle, séparées, désaccordées, par le fil d'un récit, celui de son existence, depuis sa naissance pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Une existence singulière donc mais fondue aussi dans le mouvement d'une génération. (*Les Années* 179)

The narrator maintains her desire to express the collective consciousness of her generation through the lens of her "existence singulière." Memory even becomes a tangible "space," from which the narrator will excavate and organize the vast array of images, both visual and auditory, that will eventually constitute *Les Années*:

La forme de son livre ne peut donc surgir que d'une immersion dans les images de sa mémoire pour détailler les signes spécifiques de l'époque, l'année, plus ou moins certaine, dans laquelle elles se situent – les raccorder de proche en proche à d'autres, s'efforcer de réentendre les paroles des gens, les commentaires sur les événements et les objets, prélevés dans la masse des discours flottants. (*Les Années* 239; my emphasis)

Once this *montage* is assembled internally through the act of voluntary memory, the narrator determines the format of her future text. The images contained within the text will maintain the cinematic quality of movement, for the narrator states, "Ce sera un récit *glissant, dans un imparfait continu* (*Les Années* 239; my emphasis). The narrator further uncovers her fusion

of literary and cinematic/photographic media by announcing that the flow of her “récit glissant” will systematically be halted certain visual elements:

“Une coulée *suspendue*, cependant, à intervalles réguliers par des photos et des séquences de films qui saisiront les formes corporelles et les positions sociales successives de son être – constituant des *arrêts sur mémoire* en même temps que des rapports sur l’évolution de son existence. (*Les Années* 240; my emphasis)

The expression “arrêts sur mémoire” in the passage above is crucial, in that the narrator blatantly fuses memory processes with a cinematic technique, namely “l’arrêt sur image,” or the freeze-frame. Let us also recall that when undertaking the composition of any of her texts, Annie Ernaux designates her starting point as an “arrêt sur *image*,” located in her memory (Ernaux and Jeannet 42). These internally-operating freeze-frames become the various *images* and *scènes* emerging from her memory, as well as the actual photographs evoked throughout her corpus. Chapters 3 and 4 will examine those phenomena.

Les Années concludes with a list of the “arrêts sur mémoire” cited by the narrator. As I stated at the beginning of my discussion of *Les Années*, the final pages are virtually a mirror image of the prologue, in both content and form. The sense of urgency expressed in the prologue is finally explained when the narrator recalls her bout with breast cancer. The narrator’s illness strips away any thoughts of the future and awakens a sudden terror of mortality that ravages her:

C’est un sentiment d’urgence qui remplace [son sentiment d’avenir], la ravage. Elle a peur qu’au fur et à mesure de son vieillissement sa mémoire ne redevienne celle, nuageuse et muette, qu’elle avait dans ses premières années de petite fille. (*Les Années* 237)

Recalling the mise-en-abyme that comprises the work, we can deduce that this sentiment of urgency, expressed very close to the end of the narrative, is actually what prompts the incipit, “Toutes les images disparaîtront” (*Les Années* 11) and elicits the list of rapidly flashing memory-images that close the text, re-establishing with a visual cue the swift passage of time. The narrator expresses the urge to “save” these images, a short selection of which reveals that, as both personal and collective memories, they are quite similar in content to those that populate the opening pages of the text:

Sauver

le petit bal de Bazoches-sur-Hoëne avec les auto-tamponneuses (*Les Années* 241)

la tireuse de vin au Carrefour de la rue de Parmelan, Annecy (*Les Années* 241)

le film *Des gens sans importance* (*Les Années* 242)

le regard de la chatte noire et blanche au moment de s’endormir sous le piqûre (*Les Années* 242)

l’homme en pyjama et chausson tous les après-midis dans le hall de la maison de retraite à Pointoise, qui pleurait en demandant aux visiteurs d’appeler son fils en tendant un bout de papier sale où était écrit un numéro.⁴⁰ (*Les Années* 242)

The selections above provide the final flashes of memory that are, as we recall from the incipit, in danger of vanishing. However, the final single-line paragraph, mirroring in format the incipit, (itself a single-line paragraph) establishes an obstacle to that risk. Penning

⁴⁰ Like the “dame majesteuse, atteinte d’Alzheimer’s,” (11) referenced in the opening list of memory-images, this man is also evoked in *Une Femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ».

the “future” text, making concrete in writing those transient individual and collective experiences, will ensure that the ultimate goal of *Les Années*, “Sauver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais” (*Les Années* 242), will indeed come to fruition.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated Anne Ernaux’s adaptation of the cinematic flashback in terms of writing memory. We have considered visible *trucages* that perform several functions, including signaling a transition to *voix off*, mimicking the effects of the cinematic fade, and setting the pace of the narrative. Regarding *Les Années*, we have also examined the representation of memory as a cinematic apparatus capable of receiving, recording, mediating, projecting and displaying its images. Throughout Ernaux’s corpus, there are two types of images serving to supplement the content of the primary flashback. The first of such images are detectable in Ernaux’s consistent replacement of the terms *mémoire* and *souvenir* by *image*, *scène*, *film* and *cinéma* in every work from 1981 through 2011. They consist of single “episodes” that are isolated from the primary flashback, but that nonetheless sustain its course. In describing this phenomenon, which provides the content for the next chapter, we may borrow Ernaux’s term “arrêt sur mémoire” (*Les Années* 240), even though she uses it in *Les Années* to designate photographs. In fact, the photograph itself is the second category of images prevalent in Ernaux’s corpus from 1983-2011; they will be analyzed as freeze-frames, or “arrêts sur image” in the final chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 3 LEXICAL FUSION: MEMORY AS *IMAGE*, *SCÈNE*, *FILM* AND *CINÉMA*

1. Introduction

Aside from Ernaux's recourse to cinematic devices such as the flashback, the freeze-frame and *voix off*, the language encountered within her texts reinforces the text-image relationship that populates her work. In addition to the numerous photographs that Ernaux inserts into her narratives, that tendency is also evident in the persistent substitution of the terms *image*, *scène*, *cinéma* and *film* for *mémoire* and *souvenir* throughout the corpus. We may consider, for example, the following passage from *L'Événement*, where the narrator uses the process of voluntary memory to re-envision the events from October 1963, when she realized that she was pregnant, to January 1964, the time of her abortion. Memory is presented not only as an *image*, but also as a space in which she can excavate and explore the events corresponding to that time period:

Je veux m'immerger à nouveau dans cette période de ma vie, savoir ce qui a été trouvé là...Je m'efforcerai par-dessus tout de *descendre dans chaque image, jusqu'à ce que j'aie la sensation physique de la « rejoindre »*, et que quelques mots surgissent, dont je puisse dire, « c'est ça ». (*L'Événement* 26-27; my emphasis)

Recalling Ricœur's previous assertion that "les souvenirs se présentent comme images" ("Définition de la mémoire" 29), Ernaux's choice of terms is significant. Adopting a lexicon specific to the visual medium of cinema allows her to imbue memory with the

impression of movement and corporal dimension, which, as we Christian Metz informs us, renders cinema more “real” than the fixed image (*Film Language* 7). Moreover, the *images*, *scènes*, *films* and *cinéma* evoked throughout Ernaux’s corpus become truncated addenda to the events recounted within the primary flashback narrative; they, along with the photographic images evoked throughout Ernaux’s corpus, are among the “arrêts sur mémoire” (*Les Années* 240) referenced near the end of *Les Années*. The *images* and *scènes* that Ernaux evokes, like the still photographs, become memory-images that provide additional and pertinent details to the principal narrative. For example, in *Une Femme*, the narrator evokes the following *images* of her mother:

Images d’elle, entre quarante et quarante-six ans: un matin d’hiver, elle ose entrer dans la classe pour réclamer à la maîtresse qu’on retrouve l’écharpe de laine que j’ai oubliée dans les toilettes et qui a coûté cher (j’ai longtemps su le prix). (*Une Femme* 48-49).

The preceding memory-image sustains information shared in the main flashback where the narrator presents her mother’s unrestrained personality before succumbing to Alzheimer’s Disease: “Tout ce qu’elle faisait, elle le faisait avec bruit. Elle ne posait pas les objets, mais semblait les jeter. A sa figure, on voyait tout de suite si elle était contrariée. En famille, elle disait ce qu’elle pensait en paroles abruptes” (*Une Femme* 50-51).

Ernaux’s adoption of a visual and cinematic lexicon demonstrates a redefinition of the terms *image*, *scène*, *cinéma* and film. The *image* as deployed by Ernaux is no longer associated with the metaphor or the imaginary. Nor is it merely an image from the media, the most common modern permutation of the term, according to Martine Joly (9). For Ernaux, the term *image* represents what is visible in her memory.

Likewise, the term *scène* undergoes a semantic evolution until it too becomes

synonymous with *souvenir*. According to *Le Petit Robert*, the term *scène* has several meanings. First, on the theatrical level, it denotes “l’emplacement des acteurs; le théâtre, l’art dramatique; le décor du théâtre; la partie d’un acte; action partielle dans une œuvre” (2048). However, *scène* also indicates an “événement qui offre une unité, présente une action, constitue un spectacle remarquable ou éveille les sentiments” (2049). Finally, a *scène* signifies “une explosion de colère” (2049), which suggests immediately the expression “faire une scène.” We will determine that Ernaux adapts several meanings of the term *scène* so that she may emphasize the visually resonant nature of her memories. *Cinéma* and *film*, as terms associated with *image* and *scène*, also promote the attempt to convey objectively what is *seen* in the memory.

Throughout Ernaux’s corpus, these various *images* and *scènes* highlight her most frequent leitmotifs, namely socio-cultural alienation, shame, and sexual inequality. While assigning a privileged status to the notion of visual memory, Ernaux’s deployment of visually evocative cinematic terms such as *scène*, *image*, *cinéma* and *film* also undermines the resistance and instability of memory by concretizing it indelibly through the act of writing. Once the act of writing is complete, the various *images* and *scènes* can be interpreted or “read.” In *L’éloquence des images* (1993), Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle proposes that we do indeed “read” images. He states:

L’image – on l’a souvent dit – peut être légitimement considérée comme un texte au sens fort du terme (Gandelman, 1991), dans la mesure où ses constituants (et leur distribution dans l’espace de la représentation), vont solliciter de la part du spectateur une série d’ajustements dont on pourrait dire qu’ils se ramènent à ce qu’on appelle précisément la lecture. (14)

In the sections that follow, I will undertake an examination of Ernaux’s pervasive conflation of terms *image*, *scène*, *films* and *cinéma*, with memory, focusing on *La Femme*

gelée, *La Place* and *La Honte*, the works in which the fusion of terms is both most prevalent and most emotionally resonant for the narrator in question.

2. Images of Social Ascension, Oppression and Disenchantment: *La Femme gelée*

Memory as *image*, *cinéma* and *film* is explicit virtually from the onset of Ernaux's third of three semi-autobiographical novels,⁴¹ *La Femme gelée*, published in 1981. *La Femme gelée* can be categorized as a *roman d'apprentissage*,⁴² wherein an anonymous thirty-something narrator retraces the years, from childhood to the present, that led to her disillusion with life as a wife and mother. Born into a family where domestic duties were not ascribed according to gender, the narrator grew up unaware of sexist ideologies. The narrator was raised by patrons of a *café-épicerie* and aspires, encouraged mostly by her mother, towards higher education and marriage into the bourgeoisie. Having "arrived" into the intellectual and cultivated bourgeoisie via education and marriage to a man who professes belief in equality between the sexes, the narrator expresses her disenchantment when, little by little, her husband no longer treats her as his intellectual or domestic equal. The narrator feels both duped and frustrated when, very soon after their marriage, she has sole responsibility for the household and child rearing.

In *La Femme gelée*, the anonymous narrator, now a high school teacher, wife and mother, reports, in flashback, disillusionment of her trajectory from the working class to the

⁴¹ *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, released in 1974 and 1977, respectively, comprise the remaining two thirds of Ernaux's semi-autobiographical novels. After *La Femme gelée* Ernaux the novel, even in its semi-autobiographical form, in favor of hybrid texts that served as more appropriate vehicles for her auto-socio-biographical testimonial works.

⁴² Gallimard refused Ernaux's initial choice of title for *La Femme gelée*, *Les Années d'apprentissage*. She explains in an interview with Claire-Lise Tondeur, "Pour *La Femme gelée*, j'avais choisi *Les Années d'apprentissage*. Le titre fut refusé par Gallimard qui estimait que cela faisait croire à l'apprentissage d'un métier." (41).

bourgeoisie. In place of *mémoire* or *souvenir*, the narrator opts instead to use the terms *image*, *imagerie*, *cinéma* and *film*. The work opens by emphasizing the marked contrast between the physical and spiritual characteristics of bourgeois and working class women. In the incipit, she first evokes the *images* of stereotypical bourgeois women:

Femmes fragiles et vaporeuses, fées aux mains douces, petits souffles de la maison qui font naître silencieusement l'ordre et la beauté, femmes sans voix, soumises, j'ai beau chercher, je n'en vois pas beaucoup dans le paysage de mon enfance. Ni même le modèle au-dessous, moins distingué, plus torchon, les frotteuses d'évier à se mirer dedans, les accommodatrices de restes, et celles qui sont à la sortie de l'école un quart d'heure avant la sonnerie, tous devoirs ménagers accomplis ; les bien organisées jusqu'à la mort. (*La Femme gelée* 9)

The present-time narrator's disenchantment with the "model" bourgeois wife and mother is noted both in the descriptors used, all of which render the bourgeois woman insubstantial, "unreal" and submissive, and in the fact that she devotes only two sentences to them. Those sentences provide examples of fairy-like creatures of domestic order, far removed from the familiar memory-images of women in the narrator's childhood. After the very brief description above, the narrator spends nearly six pages describing "images épisodiques" (*La Femme gelée* 15), her memory-images of the proletarian women in her family, particularly her grandmother, aunts and mother. These women, who inhabit the *images épisodiques*, possess identical traits:

Mes femmes à moi, elles avaient toutes le verbe haut, des corps mal surveillés, trop lourds ou trop plats, des doigts râpeux, des figures pas fardées ou alors tout le paquet, du voyant, en grosses taches aux joues et aux lèvres. Leur science culinaire s'arrêtait au lapin en sauce et au gâteau de riz, assez collant même, elles ne soupçonnaient pas que la poussière doit s'enlever tous les jours, elles avaient travaillé ou travaillaient aux champs, à l'usine, dans des petits commerces du matin au soir. (*La Femme gelée* 9)

These rugged, intrepid women, the very antitheses of their acquiescent, restricted bourgeois counterparts evoked in the novel's incipit, serve as role models during the narrator's early childhood. Before being exposed to the more cultivated and seemingly superior milieu represented by the education system, the narrator expects to follow in the footsteps of her female relatives: "Au début, avant d'admirer les institutrices, tellement supérieures et terribles, avant de savoir que ce n'est pas un beau métier de surveiller des pots de cornichons en train de se remplir, je trouvais bien de faire comme elles" (*La Femme gelée* 15). Bethany Ladimer has justly noted that in Ernaux's works, social class and gender roles are revealed "in terms of fixed but veiled codes, which are themselves determined by those who have legitimacy" (57). In the case of the narrator of *La Femme gelée*, the "legitimate" prescribers of appropriate gender roles are the dominant social classes, in the guise of the intellectual bourgeoisie and the Catholic educational system.

For the narrator, one memory-image stands out among "her women," namely that of her mother. She recalls with admiration her mother's edifying role in her life:

Comment, à vivre auprès d'elle, ne serais-je pas persuadée qu'il est glorieux d'être Une Femme, même que les femmes sont supérieures aux hommes. Elle est la force et la tempête, mais aussi la beauté, la curiosité des choses, figure de proue qui m'ouvre l'avenir et m'affirme qu'il ne faut jamais avoir peur de rien ni de personne. (*La Femme gelée* 15)

The mother is a continuous exemplar of feminine strength, and despite the fact that she was unable to complete her education she unwittingly embodied the very first model of feminism for the narrator.

Additional *images* from the narrator's past reveal that her parents did not subscribe to stereotypical bourgeois gender roles of the docile housewife or the father as *chef de famille*. For example, the narrator's father, rather than her mother, prepared all of the family meals and did the household chores, in addition to managing the café portion of their *café-épicerie*. The mother, on the other hand, held fiscal and administrative responsibilities for the entire business.⁴³ In fact, traditional gender roles are reversed within this family. The narrator implies her father's subservience to the mother, for we learn that "Elle entraîne dans son sillage un homme doux et rêveur, au ton tranquille" (*La Femme gelée* 15; my emphasis). When speaking of her father's gentle nature, the narrator's memory again adopts cinematic lexicon and overtones, as light is cast upon the *image*:

Lumière jaune fixe des souvenirs, il traverse la cour, tête baissée à cause du soleil, une corbeille sous le bras. J'ai quatre ans, il m'apprend à enfiler mon manteau en retenant les manches de mon pull-over entre mes poings pour qu'elles ne boulichonnent pas en haut des bras. Rien que des images de douceurs et de sollicitude. Chefs de famille sans réplique, grandes gueules domestiques, héros de la guerre ou du travail, je vous ignore, j'ai été la fille de cet homme-là. (La Femme gelée 19; my emphasis)

The father's personal characteristics closely mirror the compliant nature of the bourgeois women described in the opening passage of the novel. Yet, it is not from her parents that the narrator becomes aware of society's accepted disparities between the sexes. These disparities have even been engrained into the consciousness of some children, likely those who come from more traditional households. One memory-image recounted by the narrator leaves her stupefied. She recalls a Sunday, when, as always, children in the *quartier*

⁴³ "C'est elle qui reçoit les représentants, vérifie les factures et calcule les impôts. Journées de sombres murmures, elle s'installe devant des papiers, égrène ses additions à mi-voix et tourne les factures en mouillant son doigt, surtout qu'on ne la dérange pas" (20).

were at play. She is perplexed because the boys refuse to engage with the girls and unrelentingly attempts to force them to include the girls in their games. She ultimately hurls at them either an off-color word, or at the very least an incendiary comment. The present-time narrator re-envisioned the “moving image” of this memory and its baffling consequences:

Alors je les attaque, je chatouille, je mords mais ils ne se décident jamais à vraiment jouer. Qu’ai-je crié ce jour-là, peut-être un de leurs gros mots à eux que je leur renvoie en provocation. *Dans l’imagerie de la mémoire*, deux garçons de quatorze ans, des grands, se tournent vers moi. L’un des deux lance à l’autre QU’EST-CE QU’ELLE DEVIENDRA CELLE-LA. L’intonation de mépris. La menace... Quel rapport insoupçonnable jusque-là entre aimer se battre, dire des gros mots, comme eux, et devenir une salope. *Je me revois blessée*, et le pire c’était de ne pas comprendre, je n’avais même pas envie de me jeter sur lui et de le battre. (*La Femme gelée* 37-38; my emphasis)

This event from the “imagerie de la mémoire” is the narrator’s initiation into the “boys will be boys” mindset, wherein “respectable” young ladies are forbidden to engage in the rough and tumble play and the vulgar language that is expected, and more importantly, *accepted*, from boys. Although wounded by the boys’ derisory questioning of what kind of woman she would become, the narrator recalls her mother’s influence in ensuring her daughter’s social ascension through education:

Ce que je deviendrai ? Quelqu’un. Il le faut. Ma mère le dit. Et ça commence par un bon carnet scolaire. Le samedi elle fait le compte des dix en dictée et en calcul mais ne moufte pas devant l’inévitable quatre en couture et le passable en conduite. Sourcilleuse à la moindre baisse, et que mon père ne trouve pas d’excuses à sa fille. (*La Femme gelée* 38)

The mother’s advocacy of scholarly excellence as a means of social ascension is not lost on her daughter, who also comes to admire the very women who embody the access to knowledge that will allow her to advance. Memory-images of the teaching nuns at her

Catholic school reveal the narrator's appreciation for their own variety of female strength. Although they are from a different world, the nuns perpetuate the notions the narrator has already gleaned in her home, namely, that strength and knowledge are without gender restrictions. Recalling her educational experience, the narrator again relies on cinematic lexicon. She evokes:

Images plus décolorées que celles de ma mère, les demoiselles de l'école, mais des femmes fortes et actives aussi, toutes-puissantes, avec leurs mains qui écrivent des choses difficiles au tableau, avec leur façon d'attendre, l'œil fixe, les bras croisés « veuillez vous ranger et vous taire ». Elles savent tout, et si je ne les aime pas parce qu'elles me sont trop étrangères par leurs mots et leurs airs discrets, je les admire. Ça ne fait pas un pli pour moi que les femmes sont plus savantes que les hommes. (La Femme gelée 49-50; my emphasis)

The narrator's memory-images of the educational experience from primary school through university convey women's freedom and equality, if not superiority. As a university student, the narrator relishes the boundless freedom afforded to her, and distinguishes it from the repressive, stagnant situation of married women, particularly those with children:

Que peut me faire cette femme derrière une poussette quand en riant et en discutant avec des copains je me rends sans hâte à un cours. Indifférence, lui laisser machinalement la place de passer sur le trottoir, pitié. Elle, toutes les femmes à mari et à mômes font partie d'un univers mort... Prête à jurer que la condition féminine la plus répandue ne sera jamais la mienne. (La Femme gelée 111)

However, the narrator eventually finds herself in the very "condition féminine" that, as a student, she deplored and even pitied. In the present-time of the narrative, she too is a bourgeois wife and mother who evokes the memory her lost freedom as a cinematic phenomenon, or even as a *montage*. Bemoaning the loss of freedom and idyllic existence of a university student immediately following her marriage, the narrator observes:

Des images de découverte et de liberté du temps d'avant, j'en ramasse comme je veux, ça ressemble à un film tourné en extérieur, des rues, des squares et des paysages de mer, ou dans des chambres. Ni cuisine ni salle à manger. (La Femme gelée 111; my emphasis)

In the preceding passage the images replayed in her memory not only adopt cinematic aspects, in that they resemble a film, but more importantly present a clear distinction between two types of space, as well as the movement occurring in those spaces. The outside, both within the city and in vacation destinations, serves as a locus of unrestricted movement. These spaces are “lieux mouvants, vivants, les lieux de rencontres” (*La Femme gelée* 111) for which the narrator pines when she laments, “Poétise, poétise, fais-toi *le cinéma* de ta liberté passée” (*La Femme gelée* 113 ; my emphasis).⁴⁴

On the other hand, inside space, particularly living quarters, offers both freedom *and* oppression. The bedroom is the unrestricted inside space par excellence for the narrator as a student, for there, she is far from parental surveillance. The narrator is aware of this freedom in stating, “Étudiante, même boursière, pour la liberté et l'égoïsme c'était rêvé. Une chambre loin de la famille, des horaires de cours lâches, manger ou ne pas manger régulièrement” (*La Femme gelée* 110). The *chambre* also affords the narrator a refuge from public scrutiny and potential judgment of female sexual freedom. Her boyfriend's bedroom, as well as hotel rooms when they travel, are the spaces in which the narrator moves towards sexual liberation:

Il m'explique posément, naturellement ...dans sa chambre avec des femmes de Modigliani plein les murs, qu'il y a deux sortes de filles, les relaxes et les

⁴⁴ This statement is also self-deprecating; by using the term *poétiser*, the anonymous narrator of *La Femme gelée* seemingly mocks what the narrator of *Les Années* later designates as “son embourgeoisement intellectuel” (*Les Années* 121). In *La Femme gelée* part of the narrator's crisis also comes from the fact that she allowed herself to be duped into playing the role that she most disdains, namely that of a subservient bourgeois wife and mother.

culs-bénits, les unes couchent, les autres, non. Il ne tient qu'à moi de me métamorphoser de cul-bénit en relaxe. (*La Femme gelée* 114)

In stark contrast to the liberating inside space of the bedroom, the kitchen and dining room evoked above are spaces indicative of female servitude in the narrator's marriage. These restrictive spaces, which conform to bourgeois society's ideologies of a woman's "place," contrast with the "images de découverte et de liberté" (*La Femme gelée* 111) of her past as a student as well as with the freedom she knew during her working-class childhood. In *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*, Siobhán McIlvanney notes that "the bourgeoisie exerts more severe limitations on the female individual's potential for development than the working class" (54). Likewise, Bethany Ladimer states that the bourgeois code of femininity "turns out to be more oppressive in its own way than the gender code of the lower class" (63).

The narrator's memory of oppression in her marriage attains its apogee upon the birth of her first child, at which time she reduces herself to an animal state by claiming "j'étais une bête recroquevillée, soufflante" (*La Femme gelée* 140), an exhibit for all to see. The narrator is distracted, if not annoyed, by her husband's presence during the birth, since his pity for her suffering and seemingly noble desire to "participate" in the event, are mixed with the authoritative condescension and reproachful tone also displayed by the doctor. More importantly, she is concerned that the memory-image of her animal-like appearance and suffering as retained by her husband will be unforgettable:

Il fallait bien qu'il voie cette débâcle, qu'il en prenne plein les mirettes de ma souffrance. Qu'il sache, qu'il « participe », affublé d'une blouse blanche et d'une toque comme un toubib. Mais être cette liquéfaction, cette chose tordue devant lui, oubliera-t-il cette image. Et à quoi me sert-il finalement. Comme

les autres, il répète « pousse, respire, ne perds pas les pédales » et il s'affole quand je cesse de me conduire en mater dolorosa stoïque, que je me mets à hurler. «Vous gâchez tout madame!» et lui, «tais-toi, reprends-toi!» (141)

Feeling powerless and wanting simply to end once and for all the physical pain of labor, the narrator delivers a final push. She recalls the experience, again likening the filmic image of the event to a cinematic phenomenon on a lexical level by using the idiom *(re)passer le film*:

Alors, j'ai serré les dents. Pas pour leur faire plaisir, seulement en finir. J'ai poussé comme pour jeter un ballon de football dans les nuages. J'ai été vidée d'un seul coup de toute la douleur, le toubib me grondait, vous vous êtes déchirée, c'est un garçon. L'éclair d'un petit lapin décarpillé, un cri. *Souvent après, je me suis repassé le film, j'ai cherché le sens de ce moment.* Je souffrais, j'étais seule et brutalement ce petit lapin, le cri, tellement inimaginable une minute avant. (*La Femme gelée* 141; my emphasis)

The narrator informs us that she consistently “replays” the experience as a film in her memory, seeking to uncover some profound epiphany validating the suffering, humiliation and scolding that she endured during the delivery. Labor and childbirth become, in effect, a microcosm for the disenchantment as a bourgeois wife and mother expressed throughout the narrative. The narrator is reduced to the submissive object of the hegemonic patriarchal gaze, represented by her husband and the physician, neither of whom, despite their good intentions, can appreciate fully or realistically the narrator's suffering. Yet, replaying this “film” after the fact proves futile, for in the present-time of the narrative she laments, “Il n'y a toujours pas de sens, simplement il n'y avait personne, puis quelqu'un (*La Femme gelée* 141). Much to the narrator's dismay, she cannot edit or alter this scene that is permanently imprinted on the “screen” of her memory, to elicit a more favorable result. In this regard, the experience

becomes a finalized *scène*, permanently imprinted within the narrator's memory, a phenomenon that is also evident in Ernaux's subsequent work, *La Place*.

3. Betrayal and Restitution: *Scènes* and *Images* in *La Place*

The conflation of the term *scène* with *souvenir* appears as early as the second page of *La Place*, published in 1983, two years after *La Femme gelée*. In fact, *La Place* marks the first use of the term *scène* as a substitute for memory in Ernaux's corpus, a use that allows Ernaux to profit from all senses of the term. Two crucial *scènes* of this alienation and tension remain indelibly imprinted in the narrator's memory. I will demonstrate that, in both cases, Ernaux maximizes various meanings of the term *scène*, both literal and figurative, before ultimately transposing *scène* into a visual memory.

As stated in the introduction, *La Place* bears significance in Ernaux's writerly trajectory for several reasons. First, it marks her rejection of the novel as a suitable medium to relay her personal experiences of socio-cultural and familial alienation after her father's sudden death in 1967.⁴⁵ Ernaux finds that the novel, due to its status as an institutionalized, elitist genre entrenched in the cultivated, bourgeois tradition, is deficient in carrying out the objectives of *La Place*: "la réhabilitation d'un mode de vie considéré comme inférieur et la dénonciation de l'aliénation qui l'accompagne" (*La Place* 54). Clarifying fiction's deficiency in telling her father's story, Ernaux explains that this literary form "aurait déréalisé l'existence réelle de mon père" (Ernaux and Jeannet 34) and, even worse, that it would have

⁴⁵ Although the narrator had attempted to write a novel on her father, she realizes the shortcomings of the genre in relation to her intentions. She states, "Par la suite, j'ai commencé un roman dont il était le personnage principal. Sensation de dégoût au milieu du récit. Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible. Pour rendre compte d'une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n'ai pas le droit de prendre d'abord le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de « passionnant », ou d' « émouvant »...Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante. L'écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles" (*La Place* 23-24).

been “une trahison de la réalité” (Vilain “L’autobiographie en question” 143). The intention of *La Place* is, therefore, both conciliatory and corrective, all the while evoking both familial and social tension. In the text, the narrator, returning home after her father’s burial, expresses the desire to come to terms with the socio-cultural alienation that has cleaved the family unit into two distinct social classes:

Plus tard, au cours de l’été, en attendant mon premier post, « il faudra que j’explique tout cela ». Je voulais dire, écrire au sujet de mon père, sa vie, et cette distance venue à l’adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, qui n’a pas de nom. Comme de l’amour séparé. (*La Place* 23)

Exposing the notion of familial socio-cultural alienation through writing *La Place* also becomes a form of restitution for the narrator’s (and Ernaux’s) perceived “betrayal” of her class of origin, a restitution that is also seen in the text’s epigraph citing Genet: “Je hasarde une explication : écrire c’est le dernier recours quand on a trahi.”

Finally, and more importantly for the purposes of the present study, *La Place* is a pivotal work in that it reveals the inaugural evocation of photographic images in Ernaux’s corpus, allowing the reader to establish the text-image reciprocity characteristic of Ernaux’s work from 1983, the year *La Place* was published, onward.⁴⁶ These photographs are embedded into the primary flashback presenting her father’s life, and of course elements of their relationship.

Before tracing the trajectory of her father’s life from farmhand, to factory foreman, to proprietor of a provincial *café-épicerie*, the narrator of *La Place* opens the text with the

⁴⁶ As stated above, my discussion of such photographic images as freeze-frames within the flashback narrative will arrive in Chapter 4. From 1983 to 2008, only five texts do not evoke photographs: *Journal du dehors*, « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », *La vie extérieure* and *Se perdre*.

announcement and linking of two past events: her successful completion of the CAPES exam in Lyon and the death of her father exactly two months later. The juxtaposition of the two events is neither arbitrary nor based merely on their chronological proximity, for they serve as markers of the socio-cultural and family alienation within the narrator's family. As Denis Fernandez-Recatala notes, "Les deux événements nous apparaissent comme dépendants l'un de l'autre, et comme si l'un annonçait symboliquement le second, dans une hasardeuse relation de causalité" (100). In fact, as early as the opening paragraphs, the narrator presents, although implicitly, the dichotomy between the dominant bourgeoisie and the dominated proletariat, her two disparate socio-cultural worlds, and the inhabitants that populate them.⁴⁷ The CAPES experience represents the final step in the narrator's initiation into the bourgeoisie. In direct opposition to this acquired (and newly cemented) social status, we learn that her father was a member of the proletariat, having operated a provincial *café-épicerie*,⁴⁸ an occupation far-removed from the intellectual and privileged profession of his daughter, who has become a "professeur « titulaire »" (*La Place* 12).

Again fusing memory and the cinematic image, the CAPES experience becomes a *scène* for the narrator. When pondering the examination and her father's death in the present time of the narrative, she admits to momentarily confusing their chronology and in her mind's eye, she still *sees* her past-self waiting for a bus after the examination. The narrator states:

⁴⁷ I will revisit the notion of the dominant and dominated social classes in my discussion of memory-images conveyed in *La Honte* in the following section of this study.

⁴⁸ "Il avait soixante-sept ans et tenait avec ma mère un café-alimentation dans un quartier tranquille non loin de la gare, à Y..." (13). Yvetot is designated simply as "Y" throughout the text (as it is in *La Honte*).

Souvent, durant quelques secondes, je ne sais plus si *la scène du lycée de Lyon* a eu lieu avant ou après, si le mois d'avril venteux où *je me vois attendre un bus à la Croix-Rousse* doit précéder ou suivre le mois de juin étouffant de sa mort. (*La Place* 13; my emphasis)

In order to better understand the impact of “*la scène du lycée de Lyon*” (*La Place* 13) on the narrator, during and immediately after the examination, as well as in the present time, I will now undertake an analysis of the entire event, demonstrating how Ernaux artfully maximizes the meanings of the word *scène* before finally redefining it as a surrogate for the term *souvenir*.

First, the CAPES experience might be viewed as a *scène* in that all of the participants perform roles, in this case the prescribed hierarchical roles of examinee and examiners, which are also implicitly the socio-cultural roles of the dominated and the dominant classes. Christian Garaud argues that “Les examinateurs, hautains et distants, ressemblent à des marionnettes. La scène a quelque chose d'absurde et d'irréel” (196).

The narrator provides only sparse details of the actual CAPES practical examination,⁴⁹ focusing instead on the exam committee's commentary and demeaning behavior both during the exam and at the subsequent debriefing, again mimicking the social interaction between the dominant and subordinate classes. The exam committee, consisting of “l'inspecteur et deux assesseurs, des profs de lettres très confirmés” (*La Place* 11), includes a woman who “corrigeait des copies *avec hauteur*, sans hésiter” (*La Place* 11; my emphasis). The haughtiness of the latter, despite her smiling at the narrator after the committee subsequently passes her, sets the ceremonious, almost pretentious tone for the entire experience. The authoritarian role played by the committee, and in particular the

⁴⁹ In fact, the actual examination is summarized in one sentence: “Devant une classe de première, des matheux, j'ai expliqué vingt-cinq lignes – il fallait les numéroter – du *Père Goriot* de Balzac” (11).

female member, in this *scène* of her memory, is not lost on the narrator who notes, “Il suffisait de franchir correctement l’heure suivante pour être *autorisée de faire comme elle toute ma vie*” (*La Place* 11; my emphasis). The narrator seems to recognize the absurdity in the fact that only one hour will determine her professional fate at the hands of this culturally and intellectually elite group of examiners. If she successfully completes the practicum, she will be awarded with a new professional and more importantly, social status. In this hierarchical situation, the narrator is in the subordinate position, much like the socio-culturally inferior position that she and her family occupied throughout her life, until the onset of her social ascension via education and migration into the bourgeois social stratum. Indeed, the CAPES exam appears to be a replaying of an all too familiar *scène* of socio-cultural dominance from the narrator’s and her father’s past. As Siobhán McIlvanney notes, “In many respects, the narrator’s experience of the examination in which she is little more than a passive pawn whose fate is decreed by her ‘superiors’ mirrors her father’s experience of hierarchical relations in society” (*The Return to Origins* 101).

Sustaining the dynamic of dominance and humiliation after the narrator has completed her practicum, the chair of this committee maintains his role in the *scène* by scolding her: “« Vous les avez entraînés, vos élèves », m’a reproché l’inspecteur ensuite, dans le bureau du proviseur” (*La Place* 11-12). Yet, if the *scène* initially consisted of a simple role-play between the dominant and the dominated, it now takes on notes of absurdity and internalized trauma that operate on the linguistic and gestural levels, resulting in embarrassment and eventually anger on the part of the narrator. Although the roles of the participants remain unchanged, as it progresses, the *scène* itself is further nuanced, adopting an additional connotation by transforming into the figurative expression “faire une scène à

quelqu'un.”

As we shall determine by considering significant aspects of the post-practicum debriefing, for the narrator, this new incarnation of the *scène* contains (at least in her psyche) as much absurd, exaggerated and humiliating content as if the exam committee had quite literally “made a scene.” However, in place of the boisterous shouting, the contorted facial expressions and the animated gestures normally found when one “makes a scene,” here, the scene operates on the symbolic level and more specifically in the effusive, pretentious discourse, muted gestures and stone-like, stern facial expressions of the exam committee. Nonetheless, despite the absences of the normal markers, the *scène* is no less dramatic in memory of the narrator.

Included in the ceremonious nature of the committee’s review of the narrator’s performance is verbose, imprecise language, which stands in stark contrast with the language of the narrator’s working class origins, as she reminds us by stating, “on n’y prenait jamais un mot pour un autre” (*La Place* 46). In fact, the examiners are behaving in accordance with the well-established codes of their social stratum. As Pierre Bourdieu indicates, the loquaciousness of the committee is hardly a surprising phenomenon “sur le marché scolaire et dans toutes les situations officielles où le verbalisme et la verbosité sont souvent de rigueur” (*Ce que parler veut dire* 39). Furthermore, the long-winded, imprecise language used by the head of the exam committee and the narrator’s apprehension of being judged by her “superiors” elicit confusion and eventually indignation, albeit unexpressed, in the narrator. While awaiting the results of her examination, rather than providing even a perfunctory summary of the committee chairman’s remarks, the narrator reveals only the following: “Pendant un quart d’heure, il a mélangé critiques, éloges, conseils, et j’écoutais à

peine, me demandant si tout cela signifiait que j'étais reçue" (*La Place* 12). It is significant that the narrator does not even attempt to reconstruct in the text any element of the chairman's discourse, and certainly not only because she was scarcely listening. In short, the vague manner of delivery supersedes what was actually said and corresponds precisely to Bourdieu's notions on the verbosity of the educational profession mentioned above. The narrator's refusal to specify the chairman's "critiques, éloges, conseils," which are further reduced in her brief description to "tout cela," is clearly tantamount to an act of subversion. In omitting his words in this *scène*, she reclaims, for herself, for her father and for all those who share their social origins,⁵⁰ the discursive power, while undermining the tacitly understood, unrestricted access of the dominant social stratum. As Cathy Jellenik has noted, "Ernaux uses defamiliarizing tactics to de-value the legitimate language and to valorize the language of her parents' non-dominant class" (112-113). In addition, although the present-time narrator is now a peer of the examiner and the committee members, she patently refuses any notion complicity with them.⁵¹

⁵⁰ In fact, throughout the entire corpus, Ernaux's exclusion of direct or indirect citations of bourgeois discourse is sparse, whereas her inclusion of words and expressions of the dominated classes is ubiquitous. Indeed, this tendency demonstrates the author's desire to place at the forefront the reality of her social origins. In her 1998 essay entitled "Annie Ernaux: un écrivain dans la tradition du réalisme," Siobhán McIlvanney notes, "Selon la perception d'Annie Ernaux, le discours ouvrier est tout à fait approprié à la représentation réaliste parce que, à la différence de son équivalent bourgeois, il ne contient pas de 'double sens' » (LP, p. 46), ce qui réduit son instabilité" (253).

⁵¹ Similarly, in *La Place*, Ernaux rejects complicity with her reader. When explaining her use of italics to highlight words and expressions from her milieu of origin in one of her numerous metatextual commentaries, she states, "Naturellement, aucun bonheur d'écrire, dans cette entreprise où je me tiens au plus près des mots et des phrases entendues, les soulignant parfois par des italiques. Non pour indiquer un double sens au lecteur et lui offrir le plaisir d'une complicité, que je refuse sous toutes ses formes, nostalgie, pathétique ou dérision. Simplement parce que ces mots et ces phrases disent les limites et la couleur du monde où vécu mon père, où j'ai vécu aussi." (*La Place* 46). In her monograph *Annie Ernaux ou l'exil intérieur*, Claire-Lise Tondeur notes Ernaux's insistence on maintaining her father's reality and particularly avoiding a potentially judgmental reaction on the part of the reader/narratee of *La Place* : "Au narrataire présumé bourgeois, elle donne systématiquement les équivalences des mots mis en italique, et explique des coutumes qui pourraient ne pas être connues ; mais sa grande crainte est que le lecteur voie des doubles sens là où elle s'efforce de présenter une

What is so memorable about “*la scène du lycée de Lyon*” (*La Place* 13) is that it replays in the narrator’s memory past instances of socio-cultural alienation, particularly with regard to language.⁵² This alienation began to plague the narrator in the educational setting. The language used in the narrator’s home and in her social milieu, considered by her private school teachers to be inappropriate, even inferior, resulted in her being continually singled out and reprimanded. Compounding that, the language of the bourgeois educational system was completely foreign to the narrator as a child, prompting feelings of discomfort and emptiness when she tried to mimic that language: “Enfant, quand je m’efforçais de m’exprimer dans un langage châtié, j’avais l’impression de me jeter dans le vide” (*La Place* 64). We can conclude, then, that the verbosity and *langage châtié* of the chief examiner during the *scène* of the CAPES awaken past feelings of humiliation and subordination for the narrator. As Siobhan McIlvanney notes:

The narrator’s feelings of humiliation after the examination may be fuelled by childhood memories of the hierarchical teacher/pupil relations at school, relations aggravated in the narrator’s case by her class origins. Whatever her resentment of the belittling treatment she receives at the hands of the examiners, she remains in her ‘place’, not daring to express criticism of the system. (*The Return to Origins* 101)

The narrator’s reluctance to defend herself against the demeaning behavior of the exam committee also mimics her father’s conduct when he was in the presence of those

image aussi fidèle à la réalité que possible. La peur de trahir la vérité paternelle ainsi que le remords sous-tendent *La Place* de la première à la dernière page” (78).

⁵² When asked about the origins of her socio-cultural alienation in an interview with Claire-Lise Tondeur, Ernaux responded: “C’est à l’école que c’est arrivé... Dans le système hiérarchisé, la langue que j’employais reflétait une infériorité sociale. Il y a ce sentiment de mal parler. Le sujet de conversations est différent, gestes et langage sont différents parce que globalement les deux mondes diffèrent.” (“Entretien avec Annie Ernaux” 38).

whom he considered his social superiors: “Devant les personnes qu’il jugeait importantes, il avait une raideur timide, ne posant jamais aucune question. Bref, se comportant avec intelligence” (*La Place* 60). Like her father, the narrator *does not* “make a scene,” but she does fall victim to the one acted out by the examination committee. The “*scène du lycée de Lyon*” (*La Place* 13), exhibiting both cinematic role-play and overly-dramatic individuals in the form of the examiners, retains traumatic overtones for the narrator, undertones which certainly provoke the ineffaceable imprinting of the *scène* in her memory.

In the narrator’s visual recollection of the CAPES *scène*, the examination committee’s facial expressions also indicate their role of dignified superiority: “D’un seul coup, d’un même élan, ils se sont levés tous trois, *l’air grave*” (*La Place* 12; my emphasis). The serious, by not by any means revelatory, expression of the examiners does little to indicate to the narrator her fate. It is only when the head of the committee uses *concrete language* and *concrete gestures* (as would be the case in her milieu of origin) that the narrator realizes she has indeed passed the CAPES: “L’inspecteur m’a tendu la main. Puis, en me regardant bien en face: « Madame, je vous félicite. » Les autres ont répété « je vous félicite » et m’ont serré la main, mais la femme avec un sourire” (*La Place* 12). The narrator’s initial embarrassment at having been reproached by the chief examiner and her confusion by his vague remarks during the debriefing are soon overtaken by feelings of resentment and humiliation: “Je n’ai pas cessé de penser à cette cérémonie jusqu’à l’arrêt de bus, avec colère et une espèce de honte” (*La Place* 12). Her sardonic designation of the debriefing as “cette cérémonie” fulfills a similar function to her omission of the pretentious and loquacious discourse of the chief member of the committee in revealing her scorn for the pompous nature of the examination assessors and the event itself. The narrator’s feelings of

anger and shame are certainly due to the grandstanding and of the committee members, a pretentious behavior that was eschewed in her original, proletarian milieu. Undoubtedly, she realizes that, in terms of professional (and social) status, this one-hour practical exam and the review of her performance were the *only* things distinguishing her from the committee. The artifice and ceremonious nature of the encounter and the committee are tantamount to overreacting, or in this case, dramatically *over-acting* in this *scène*, which suggests that, despite their formality, the exam committee indeed “made a scene” that, by the end of the encounter, evolves into an indelible memory for the narrator.

The *scène* of passing the CAPES and consequently becoming a “professeur titulaire” (*La Place* 12) is all the more troubling to the narrator in that it becomes emblematic of her guilt-inducing break with her father and with her social origins. This is likely another explanation for the “colère et une espèce de honte” (*La Place* 12) felt by the narrator. In this case, the narrator not only feels anger towards herself for willingly seeking the same status as the committee members, but also shame as a “defector” of her original *place* within her family as well as within society. To that end, Siobhán McIlvanney has justly observed:

La Place’s existence may stem less from the narrator’s desire to fill a literary lacuna through the portrayal of working-class experience than an emotional lacuna induced by guilt at her previous conduct vis-à-vis her father. (*The Return to Origins* 96)

As alluded to above, it is doubtless for this very reason of making amends that Ernaux opens *La Place* by juxtaposing the *scène* or memory of the CAPES exam, an event suggesting the figurative death of her former life and social class, with the memory of the literal death of her father, the very personification of that life and social stratum.

In *La Place*, the shame and anger experienced after the CAPES exam become the

optic through which we can view yet another *scène* of socio-cultural shame and familial alienation in the memory of the narrator. Near the end of the text, the narrator, now fully entrenched in her bourgeois status, recalls a *scène* whose implications of shame and alterity are similar, but in this instance, it is she who plays the role of the “dominant,” while her father adopts the subordinate role.

Recounting a visit to her parents after her marriage, the narrator reports “Je les retrouvais tels qu’ils avaient toujours été, sans cette « sobriété » de maintien, ce langage correct, qui me paraissaient maintenant naturels. Je me sentais séparée de moi-même” (*La Place* 97-98). Certainly, the “« sobriété » de maintien” and “ce langage correct” recall the CAPES committee’s “‘air grave” (*La Place* 12) and overly formal language, both of which the narrator has assimilated through acculturation. Seeing her parents as they always had been also reminds the narrator of her own origins, of her former language and mannerisms, prompting the impression of feeling internally detached from herself. In her 2000 monograph on Ernaux, *Un passé contraignant: double-bind et transculturation*, Michèle Bacholle designates this split-self as Ernaux’s “moi clivé,” that holds within it two completely incompatible worlds (27). As the *scène* of the family visit progresses, we discover that the disparity between the parents and their daughter operates not only in terms of mannerisms and language, but also in terms of taste. Ernaux again takes full advantage of the polysemy of the term *scène*, until this event, like that of the CAPES exam, becomes an ineradicable *souvenir*. Examination of the remainder of the scene, in conjunction with two previous (and very similar ones) will reveal the semantic progression from “making a scene” to cementing a scene in one’s memory.

Initially, the offering of a simple object taints the narrator’s visit, which is

subsequently reduced to the designation the “scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau” (*La Place* 98), with an atmosphere of awkwardness, embarrassment and resentment. Before delving further into this scène, it will be useful to recall the associative power that objects exert on memory cited earlier in this study. Oftentimes, certain objects resemble Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*, that disconcerting and yet utterly significant detail of a photographic image (*La Chambre claire* 49). That object, when recalled, becomes an external stimulus and prompts a series of other memories (Tadié 153). The “mauvais cadeau” offered to the narrator’s father functions in this very capacity. She reports:

Je sors de mon sac le cadeau que je lui apporte. Il le déballe avec plaisir. Un flacon d’after-shave. Gêne, rires, à quoi ça sert ? Puis, « je vais sentir la cocotte ! ». Mais il promet de s’en mettre. *Scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau*. Mon envie de pleurer comme autrefois « il ne changera donc jamais ! » (*La Place* 98; my emphasis)

Both parties have, whether knowingly or unknowingly, “made a scene,” the narrator in her obstinate denial of her father’s unchanging, simple tastes (doubtless corresponding to those of his social stratum), and the father in his perhaps unintentionally derisory mocking of the gift before assuring her that he indeed will use it: “« Je vais sentir la cocotte! » Mais il promet de s’en mettre” (*La Place* 98). The discomfort, disconnection and awkwardness felt by each participant in this encounter, although absent of the animated gestures or shouting typical of “making a scene,” awaken the same feelings in the other party. While it serves primarily as a trigger in the narrator’s memory, the bottle of after-shave, also becomes emblematic of the socio-cultural tension that permeates the family milieu.

As I previously stated, this is not the first time that the narrator expresses frustration at the ever-increasing socio-cultural chasm between father and daughter. Her lamentation “il ne changera donc jamais!” (*La Place* 98) calls to mind similar *scènes* in *La Place*, when,

during her gradual acculturation and migration towards the bourgeoisie, she had hoped that her father would likewise wish to aspire towards the requisite aspects of the “legitimate” culture. We may consider, for example, the following passage, in which she recalls bemoaning both her father’s refusal to abandon the language of his “culture,” as well as her own frustration that his rejection of “legitimate,” institutionalized language might hinder her advancement into the bourgeois social stratum:

Puisque la maîtresse me « reprenait », plus tard j’ai voulu reprendre mon père, lui annoncer que « se parterrer » et « quart moins d’onze heure » n’*existaient pas*. Il est entré dans une violente colère. Une autre fois, « Comment voulez-vous que je ne me fasse pas reprendre si vous parlez mal tout le temps ! » Je pleurais. Il était malheureux. Tout ce qui touche au langage est dans mon souvenir motif de rancœur et de chicanes douloureuses, bien plus que l’argent. (*La Place* 64 ; emphasis, including the unitalicized “n’,” in the original)

The narrator’s condescension in expecting her father to conform to the codes and behaviors of “legitimate” culture and her sustained indignation at his refusal to do so are also evident when she states, “La dispute éclatait à table pour un rien. Je croyais toujours avoir raison parce qu’il ne savait pas *discuter*. Je lui faisais des remarques sur sa façon de manger ou de parler” (*La Place* 83). Her presumed superiority in having mastered the mannerisms, discourse and rhetorical dexterity of the institution is not far removed from the dismissive behavior of the CAPES committee. Both of these passages immediately correspond to the “scène du mauvais cadeau” (*La Place* 98) which occurs several years later.

Returning to the “*scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau*,” we note that here, as in the *scènes* referenced immediately above, the narrator undergoes a role reversal, adopting the disdainful, superiority of the CAPES exam committee, while her father’s uncomfortable laughter (“gêne, rires”) mirrors her feelings of humiliation while under the committee’s

disdainful gaze. It is because of her acculturation that the narrator, at least her past-self, demonstrates dismay that her father is baffled by her gift, an object that is totally foreign to him because it represents bourgeois tastes. Related to this, Claire-Lise Tondeur rightly posits:

Totalement immercée dans son rôle de professeur de lycée et de mère de famille dans un milieu bourgeois dont elle a parfaitement intériorisé le code, elle semble avoir oublié que son père avait dormi entre douze et vingt ans dans une étable à même la paille et que par conséquent, l'usage d'un after-shave était incongru... Elle est aussi irritée qu'il ne soit pas capable de « changer », c'est-à-dire de dépasser son milieu populaire d'origine. (*Annie Ernaux ou l'exil intérieur* 86)

The divide between father and daughter may well be irrevocable, due not only to his death, but also to their mutually incompatible social strata. Yet, this does not impede the now-regretful, present-time narrator from unequivocally de-valorizing the bourgeois ideology, much as she does by omitting the specific details of the CAPES examiner's loquacious debriefing and by refusing complicity with the cultivated reader. For, throughout her life, despite the fact that she has experienced enormous success due to her affiliation within that establishment, Ernaux has always retained a certain degree of ambivalence vis-à-vis institutionalized bourgeois culture. In short, because the present-time narrator acknowledges that it was indeed an inappropriate gift, (it is doubtful that she considered the gift a “*mauvais cadeau*” at the actual time of selecting and offering it), she assumes responsibility for her socio-cultural as well as daughterly insensitivity, which demonstrates tendencies towards reconciliation and reparation. Her desire for atonement through self-reproach at virtually abandoning her parents and their way of life is also seen in the line following the *scène*: “Je ne restais jamais assez longtemps” (*La Place* 98).

An additional detail in the “*scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau*” bears mentioning and will lead to its final transformation into a memory. Opposed to the CAPES *scène*, which is narrated in the *passé composé*, and the two previously cited passages of increasing socio-cultural and familial alienation during the narrator’s adolescence, which are both narrated in the *imparfait*, the actual offering and ultimate acceptance of the bottle of after-shave are narrated in the present tense, rather than the *passé composé*, even though the paragraph immediately preceding it appears in the *imparfait*.⁵³ The use of the present tense reveals that the “*scène du mauvais cadeau*” is still immediately accessible, and thus indelible, to the narrator, as if she replays the scene in her mind as she writes the passage.

Thus, the term *scène*, much like it did relating to the CAPES practicum, operates on two semantic levels. First, it serves to represent awkwardness, absurdity and embarrassment of having “made a scene,” which is further emphasized by the qualifying the *scène* as “ridicule.” Secondly, the *scène*’s narration in the immediate accessibility suggested by the present tense renders the term a substitute for the “*souvenir du mauvais cadeau*” (in the present-time of narration). Finally, in the same manner as in the CAPES passage, the psychological stigma that the scene inflicts upon the narrator removes it from the domain of a forgettable, banal event to an unforgettable, ineffaceable *scène* in her memory.

As stated earlier in this study, *La Place* reveals not only the first use of the term *scène* as a surrogate term for memory, but also the inaugural appearance of the photographic image in Ernaux’s work.⁵⁴ Yet, within the text, there is another type of “photographic” image that

⁵³ This is one of several instances of verb tense-slippage in *La Place*, a phenomenon that I have already associated with the textual equivalent to the cinematic fade in Ernaux’s corpus. See Chapter 2.

⁵⁴ In Ernaux’s first semi-autobiographical work, *Les Armoires vides*, narrator Denise Lesur mentions visiting a photographer to have her Communion portrait taken, but the photograph itself is never evoked or described.

merits discussion, since it too demonstrates the narrator's preoccupation with the socio-cultural and chasm separating father and daughter. The narrator designates this image as an "Instantané de la mémoire" (*La Place* 95) that is frozen in her memory during her wedding reception. This mental snapshot operates in contrast, with the pivotal *scènes* of socio-cultural alienation in *La Place* discussed above. The narrator fears that her father feels shameful and out of place among the bourgeois family of her new husband, for he has already subliminally noticed "l'écart de culture et de pouvoir qui le séparait de son gendre" (*La Place* 95). Additionally, rather than his usual overalls (a far cry from the daily garb of the bourgeoisie), the father's attire consists of a custom-tailored suit, the same one in which he was buried,⁵⁵ and his first set of cufflinks. In recalling her wedding reception, the narrator states:

Au repas de mariage, dans un restaurant avec vue sur la Seine, il se tient la tête un peu en arrière, les deux mains sur sa serviette étalée sur les genoux et il sourit légèrement, dans le vague, comme tous les gens qui s'ennuient en attendant les plats. Ce sourire veut dire aussi que tout, ici, aujourd'hui, est très bien. Il porte un costume bleu à rayures, qu'il s'est fait faire sur mesures, une chemise blanche avec, pour la première fois, des boutons de manchette. *Instantané de la mémoire.* J'avais tourné la tête de ce côté au milieu de mes rires, certaine qu'il ne s'amusait pas. (*La Place* 95; my emphasis)

Like the "scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau," (*La Place* 98) analyzed above, this image is narrated in the present tense even though the passages surrounding it are recounted in the past. This demonstrates the attempt to express immediate recall of an image of her

The astute reader of Ernaux will recall that this Communion portrait is, in fact, evoked in *La Honte*. I will analyze this photograph as a freeze-frame in the Ernauxian flashback narrative in Chapter 4.

⁵⁵ As the narrator's aunt and uncle aid her mother in preparing her father's body before his burial, we learn that, "Ma mère a pensé qu'on pourrait le revêtir du costume qu'il avait étreint pour mon mariage trois ans avant" (*La Place* 14). Likewise, in *Les Années*, the narrator informs us that, "Dans l'insoutenable de la mémoire, il y a l'image de son père à l'agonie, du cadavre *habillé du costume qu'il n'avait porté qu'une seule fois, son mariage à elle*, descendu dans un sac de plastique de la chambre au rez-de-chaussée par l'escalier trop exigü pour le passage d'un cercueil" (*Les Années* 122).

father, thereby bringing him into closer temporal proximity. Furthermore, the designation of the memory as an “instantané,” or fixed image, certainly bears significance, for seeing the memory as a *static* image provides even more permanence than the *scènes* previously discussed. This moment in time awakens in the narrator the same level of emotional impact as the previous *scènes* in *La Place*, but there is one crucial difference. Unlike the CAPES practicum and the occasion on which she offered her father an inappropriate gift, the image from the narrator’s wedding reception is indelibly marked on her memory *not* because it carries any traumatic signifiers of alienation, but because it reveals her overwhelming relief that her father is, in fact, enjoying himself. In this “memory-snapshot,” the narrator has a “permanent record” of one moment, albeit brief of father-daughter unity during which their socio-cultural estrangement is diminished.

As a principal Ernauxian leitmotiv, the notion of socio-cultural alienation appears throughout the author’s corpus. In *La Honte*, published in 1997, Ernaux re-examines the theme from a more narrow angle. In this instance, rather than focusing on the alienation operating within her family from her adolescence onward as she slowly migrates towards the bourgeoisie, she concentrates on a traumatic event and several others immediately following it during the course of one summer. In the mind of the narrator, those events position the entire family as inferior with regard to traditional bourgeois behavioral standards.

4. The Traumatized Memory: *Scènes* and *Images* in *La Honte*

In *La Honte*, Ernaux persists in her replacement of the term *souvenir* by the terms *scène* and *image*, both of which appear with great frequency throughout the narrative. *Scène* appears no less than sixteen times in total and figures on pages 16-20; 30-31; 36, 38, 110, 131, 133. *Image* appears on pages 123, 125-126. In addition, the term *scène* undergoes a

semantic transformation, similar to the one enacted in *La Place*. Furthermore, the *images* evoked near the end of *La Honte* are residual effects of one pivotal *scène*, designated by the narrator as “la scène indicible de mes douze ans” (38), and by Ernaux critic Claire-Lisa Tondeur as a “tsunami psychique” (“Trajectoire sociale, honte et écriture” 176). Regarding the prior impossibility to publicly transcribe that *scène indicible*, Ernaux writes:

J’écris cette *scène* pour la première fois. Jusqu’à aujourd’hui, il me semblait impossible de le faire, même dans un journal intime. Comme une action interdite devant entraîner un châtement. Peut-être celui de ne pouvoir écrire quoi que ce soit ensuite. (Une sorte de soulagement tout à l’heure en constatant que je continuais d’écrire comme avant, qu’il n’était rien arrivé de terrible. (*La Honte* 16; my emphasis)

The *scène* in question is a psychologically traumatic memory of near-fatal violence during which her father, in an uncharacteristic fit of rage,⁵⁶ attempted to murder her mother. We may view this as an ironic reversal of the roles typically undertaken by this couple, since Ernaux has presented her mother as short-tempered and somewhat confrontational throughout her corpus. The narrator provides the following background information on this event, which occurred on June 15, 1952. Having purchased pastries after attending mass, she returns home to have lunch with her parents, as she does every Sunday. However, these mundane actions serve as the backdrop contrasting the sudden, unanticipated shift in the normalcy of the family’s typical Sunday. During and after the meal, her mother persists in arguing with her father, whose loss of composure, of bodily control, occurs swiftly and quite unexpectedly:

⁵⁶ Despite the socio-cultural alienation between daughter and parents, before *La Honte*, Ernaux consistently presented her father as the more docile parent, nothing that it was he played with her when she was a child, cared for her when she was ill and prepared all of her meals.

D'un seul coup, il s'est mis à trembler convulsivement et à souffler. Il s'est levé et je l'ai vu empoigner ma mère, la traîner dans le café en criant avec une voix rauque, inconnue. Je me suis sauvée à l'étage et je me suis jetée sur mon lit, la tête dans un coussin. Puis, j'ai entendu ma mère hurler : « Ma fille ! » Sa voix venait de la cave, à côté du café. Je me suis précipitée au bas de l'escalier, j'appelais « Au secours ! » de toutes mes forces. Dans la cave mal éclairée, mon père agrippait ma mère par les épaules, ou le cou. Dans son autre main, il tenait la serpe à couper le bois qu'il avait arraché du billot où elle était ordinairement plantée. Je ne me souviens plus ici que de sanglots et de cris. Ensuite, nous nous trouvions de nouveau tous les trois dans la cuisine. (*La Honte* 14-15)

Traumatic memories are distinct from other memories because they are vivid, unchangeable and can be recalled with extreme precision (Willging *Telling Anxiety* 82). For the narrator, the *scène* is recalled with vivid adverbs (“d'un seul coup,” “convulsivement”), with adjectives (rauque, inconnue) and violent, aggressive verbs (empoigner, traîner, agripper). Those qualifiers and verbs allow the reader to visualize the event. In addition, the lexicon used to narrate the *scène* reflects the affective power that this iconic image continues to exert on the narrator:

Cette scène figée depuis des années, je veux la faire bouger pour lui enlever son caractère sacré d'icône à l'intérieur de moi (dont témoigne, par exemple, cette croyance qu'elle me faisait écrire, que c'est elle qui est au fond de mes livres. (La Honte 30; my emphasis)

The omnipotence of the *scène* and its designation in visual terms as a “sacred” iconic image can be explained by its violently traumatic nature as well as by the emotional impact it exerted on the narrator, particularly at the time of its occurrence. As Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy indicates:

Trauma produces something called “iconic memories,” mental pictures that can be stored deep within the brain...where they are linked to the emotions with which they were encoded...[T]hese iconic memories are stored in parts of

the brain that not only retain these memories but are responsible for attaching emotional weight to them (21).

In Ernaux's case, the emotional weight of which MacCurdy speaks in the passage above consists not only of the initial terror of the *scène*, but more importantly, of the residual and enduring shame that it elicits. In *Le Sens de la mémoire*, the Jean-Yves and Marc Tadié also expound on the lingering influence of emotion in the (usually involuntary) preservation of our memories:

La décharge affective face à une situation présente donnée est indépendante de notre volonté et c'est elle qui conditionne en grande partie le fait que nous allons nous souvenir parfois toute notre vie, de telle ou telle *scène*. (125; my emphasis)

The potency of traumatic events in terms of memory acquisition and retention, particularly on the visual level, has been documented. Jean-Yves and Marc Tadié assert that such events are often marked by violence and unpredictability, and note the following primordial aspect: "l'agression soudaine par une vision imprévisible et violente qui se déroule en quelques secondes et pourtant va s'imprimer dans ma mémoire pour toute ma vie" (114).

The lasting impact of a trauma is also powerful enough to imprint on the memory details of the events immediately preceding and/or following it, even if those details are completely banal. (Tadié 114). The narrator of *La Honte* reveals that very phenomenon by admitting that she has not retained in their entirety the events leading up to the *scène*:

Avant de commencer, je croyais être capable de me rappeler chaque détail. Je n'ai retenu, en fait, que l'atmosphère, la position de chacun dans la cuisine, quelques paroles. Je ne sais plus quel était le motif initial de la dispute, si ma mère avait encore sa blouse blanche de commerçante ou si elle l'avait enlevée en prévision de la promenade, ce que nous avons mangé. Je

n'ai aucun souvenir précis de la matinée du dimanche, en dehors du cadre des habitudes, messe, pâtissier, etc. – bien que j'aie dû, comme le ferai plus tard pour d'autres événements, revenir souvent en arrière, dans le temps où la scène n'avait pas encore eu lieu. (*La Honte* 17)

While she cannot recall the actual source of her parents' initial dispute, or anything outside of habitual actions, the narrator has retained two precise memories: "Je suis sûre, cependant, que je portais ma robe bleue à pois blancs, parce que les deux étés où j'ai continué de la mettre, je pensais au moment de l'enfiler "c'est la robe de ce jour-là. Sûre aussi du temps qu'il faisait, un mélange de soleil, de nuages et de vent" (*La Honte* 17-18).

While that Sunday morning's activities are remembered only because of their routine nature, and certain details of the moments immediately before the traumatic memory are vague, it is interesting to note that the elements about which the narrator is unwavering, "la robe bleue à pois blancs" and the weather, "un mélange de soleil, de nuages," are both *visual* in nature. More importantly, one of those visual memories, the dress, retains an unquestionable affective resonance, for it is forever designated as "la robe de ce jour-là."

Related to the importance of visual aspect of traumatic memories, we must note that the narrator's recollection of the event is immobilized upon the terrifying image of her father holding the scythe. In other words, the mental "freeze-framing" of the *visual* nature of this scene triggers an abrupt black-out of its remaining elements, by the narrator's own admission: "Je ne me souviens plus ici que de sanglots et de cris. Ensuite, nous nous trouvons de nouveau tous les trois dans la cuisine" (*La Honte* 15).⁵⁷

The long-term ability of a traumatic memory to disturb the psyche distinguishes it

⁵⁷ I designate this as a mental freeze-frame in order to differentiate it from my treatment of photographs as freeze-frames within the primary flashback narrative of Ernaux's work later in this study.

from other types of memories. In their essay entitled “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” Bessel A. van der Kok and Onno van der Hart state,

When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience “speechless terror.” The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks. (qtd. in Willging *Telling Anxiety* 83)

The narrator’s recalling the *scène* without comprehensible language demonstrates that “the emotional power of traumatic, iconic images helps log them into the part of the brain that is nonverbal, which is why survivors use language such as, “I was speechless with terror,” or “I was struck dumb,” because they literally were” (MacCurdy 21). The traumatic visual elements that persist in the narrator’s memory preceding the black-out impede written, and in some cases, oral, articulation of the event, emphasizing that its horror is indeed *indicible*:

Mais parce que j’ai toujours eu cette scène en moi comme une image sans mots ni phrases, en dehors de celle que j’ai dite à des amants, les mots que j’ai employés pour la décrire me paraissent étrangers, presque incongrus. Elle est devenue une scène pour les autres. (*La Honte* 17)

Yet, the inability to articulate her/her traumatic memory in no way indicates that the survivor cannot remember or eventually provide a narrative of his/her experience. As Marian Mesrobain MacCurdy informs us, the individual’s difficulty in articulating a traumatic memory reveals that “the iconic nature of the traumatic image often takes precedence over language, which can make it difficult to both “feel” the image and construct a narrative about it at the same time” (MacCurdy 21). In her reflections about the *scène*, the narrator of *La Honte* reveals the very difficulties that MacCurdy references with regard to composing a

narrative. She states: “Depuis plusieurs jours, je vis avec la *scène* du dimanche de juin. Quand je l’ai écrite, je la voyais en « claire », avec des couleurs, des formes distinctes, j’entendais les voix” (*La Honte* 30; my emphasis). Initially, the narrator deems successful the act of extricating the scene through the act of writing. Strongly insisting on the visual and cinematic aspects of the scene in terms of color, dimension and sound, the narrator’s primary designation is that her memory, immediately after writing it is “claire.” However, trying to demystify the event through writing becomes an illusory endeavor at best, for if the *scène* revealed clarity, color, dimension and sound upon writing, within days, its inscription becomes “grisée, incohérente, muette, *comme un film sur une chaîne de télévision cryptée sans décodeur*” (*La Honte* 30; my emphasis). Although still imbued with cinematic qualities, the *scène* has lost its color and its sound. More importantly, because the narrator’s consciousness, likened to the “chaîne de télévision cryptée sans décodeur,” is unable to process it, the *scène* loses the clarity the narrator initially believed to have captured by writing. Regarding the seemingly fruitless endeavor of constructing a narrative of “la scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38), Nancy K. Miller observes: “The retrospective account does not erase the original shock of traumatic experience. Moreover, if trauma always means a blow to body or soul, trauma always also means its lived effects in memory” (40). The *scène* is just as inexplicable, just as unspeakable in its terror and just as ineffaceable in its affective resonance as when it actually occurred. The narrator of *La Honte* acknowledges: “Elle est toujours ce qu’elle a été en 52, une chose de folie et de mort à laquelle j’ai constamment comparé, pour évaluer leur degré de douleur, la plupart des événements de ma vie, sans lui trouver d’équivalent” (*La Honte* 30).

The narrator in *La Honte* is a textbook case of an individual plagued with a traumatic

memory. She is able to recall *images*, emotions and sounds (in the form of “sanglots et cris”), but not the precise words. The emotional magnitude of a trauma often results in fragmented, imagistic memories that are difficult to assemble into a coherent narrative (MacCurdy 33). As Jennifer Willgining indicates:

In attempting finally to create a verbal narrative out of her wordless memories, *La Honte*'s narrator hopes to accomplish the work that her mind was unable to do at the time of the scene's occurrence. This work is to assign meaning to her impressions so that they may be integrated into the coherent store of past impressions that make up her life story (*Telling Anxiety* 84)

As stated above, the narrator seeks to extract the traumatic icon from her consciousness, but as she discovers, attempting merely to put words to the image without a context is deficient in this task. Her second attempt to release the grip with which the image holds her takes her on a journey outside of herself. Specifically, she decides to consult the 1952 issues of *Paris-Normandie* in the Rouen Archives in the hopes that finding objective, temporal connections between the news events reported in 1952 and the *scène* will provide a context in which can dismantle the insidious influence of this memory. Yet, this attempt too is doomed to failure, as the narrator reports: “Je ne pouvais relier « Six bicyclettes à plastic font explosion à Saïgon » et « Duclos est encroué à Fresne pour atteinte à la sureté de l'État » à aucune image de moi en 52” (*La Honte* 32). The narrator's attempts to contextualize the scene and her former self through “real” events fail because the scope of these events is too large. These news events are “signs whose reality, though verified in the newspaper, pales in comparison to the vividness of her memories of the scene. The ‘objective’ reality in which she had tried to anchor her subjective experience had curiously proved to be made of much less solid material than the latter” (Willgining “Shameful Narration” 101).

Since consulting the archived newspapers of 1952 becomes fruitless in offering to the

narrator the tangible proof necessary to make sense of and ultimately dislodge the *scène*, she shifts her focus toward a strategy that is simultaneously subjective *and* objective. In this strategy, she will excavate her memory to delineate the geographical, socio-cultural and educational elements of her life in Yvetot in 1952:

Pour atteindre ma réalité d'alors, je n'ai pas d'autre moyen sûr que de rechercher les lois et les rites, les croyances et les valeurs qui définissaient les milieux, l'école, la famille, la province, où j'étais prise et qui dirigeaient, sans que j'en perçoive, les contradictions, ma vie. (*La Honte* 37)

Focusing on her milieus and their behavioral codes is the only viable manner in which to evaluate the *scène* and its resulting shame, as Ernaux herself explains in an interview with Philippe Vilain:

Il me semble que si la mémoire reste évidemment le premier « moyen » de l'écriture en général et de l'écriture autobiographique en particulier, elle ne fournit que des images, des scènes (comme celle du 15 juin 1952 ou celle du dimanche qui suit, ma mère apparaissant en chemise de nuit), fixées dans la mémoire par une émotion (ici, la douleur, la honte). *Il manque autour les structures du monde où s'inscrivent ces images and ces scènes*, notamment les langages dont disposait alors ce monde, traversés par des règles et des codes implicites. ("L'Autobiographie en question" 147)

Providing the socio-cultural, socio-historic and socio-linguistic context in which to ponder the *scène* affords to the narrator of *La Honte* the ability to transform her own memory- images into veritable sociological documentation. In one of the ever-present metanarrative commentaries in which Ernaux clarifies the content and approach of her works, she announces her strategy to "dissoudre la scène indicible de mes douze ans dans la généralité des lois et du langage" (*La Honte* 38) as follows:

Naturellement pas de récit, qui produirait une réalité au lieu de la chercher. Ne pas me contenter non plus de lever et transcrire les images du souvenir, mais traiter celles-ci comme des documents qui s'éclaireront en les soumettant

à des approches différentes. Être en somme ethnologue de moi-même. (*La Honte* 38)

Undertaking that task of self-ethnographer,⁵⁸ Ernaux painstakingly dissects the topography Yvetot as well as the social norms of its inhabitants. She then explores the codes and customs of the other world in which she participated: her private Catholic school, “le monde de la vérité et de la perfection” (*La Honte* 80). However, this ethnographical exploration still does nothing in the way of liberating herself from the *scène*’s influence:

J’ai mis au jour les codes et les règles des cercles où j’étais enfermée. J’ai répertorié les langages qui me traversaient et constituaient ma perception de moi-même et du monde. Nulle part il n’y avait de place pour la scène du dimanche de juin” (*La Honte* 108)

While the *scène* still retains its insidious resonance, the narrator finally reveals its most important effect and the emotion that will forever be associated with it: *la honte*. After viewing the *scène* alongside the socio-cultural behavioral codes corresponding to the same time, the narrator reveals the sole discovery of this quest:

Nous avons cessé d’appartenir à la catégorie des gens corrects, qui ne boivent pas, ne se battent pas, s’habillent proprement pour aller en ville. Je pouvais bien avoir une blouse neuve à chaque rentrée, un beau missel, être la première partout et réciter mes prières, je ne ressemblais plus aux autres filles de la classe. J’avais vu ce qu’il ne fallait pas voir. Je savais ce que, dans l’innocence sociale de l’école privée, je n’aurais pas dû savoir... Je suis devenue indigne de l’école privée, de son excellence et de sa perfection. Je suis entrée dans la honte. (*La Honte* 108-09)

⁵⁸ Anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danely asserts that the term *autoethnography* defines two processes: writing on one’s own social group and writing on oneself, with an ethnological emphasis (2). She also notes that autobiography increasingly reflects a cultural and/or social frame of reference (9), as is manifest in *La Honte*.

The nefarious effects of *la scène* on the narrator are evident. Moreover, sustaining the analogies previously established in this study between cinematic and memory functions, the narrator likens the memory of the *scène* of Sunday, June 15, 1952 to a filter that altered her perceptions. She announces, “Après, ce dimanche-là s’est interposé entre moi et tout ce que je vivais comme *un filtre*. Je jouais, je lisais, j’agissais comme d’habitude mais je n’étais dans rien. Tout était devenu artificiel” (*La Honte* 18; my emphasis). Since the term *souvenir* has been replaced by the cinematic term *scène*, we are immediately prompted to think of a filter placed upon a camera’s lens in order to alter the reality of the image captured. In that capacity, the *scène* as a filter will distort the narrator’s ability to process the subsequent events that unfold around her. This notion will be salient in particular with regard to the additional *scènes* and *images* that traumatize the narrator’s psyche in *La Honte*. Regarding the memories of that *scène*, Jennifer Willging states, “They seem therefore to float somewhere in her brain, acting as a filter between perception and cognition – between her apprehension of present events and her interpretation of them” (*Telling Anxiety* 93). This potentially impaired cognitive ability compels the narrator to assume that, after “la scène indicible” (*La Honte*), nothing but shame will befall her.

More than a state of mind, the narrator’s shame permeates every aspect of her existence and subsequently, becomes a somatic entity: “La honte est devenue un mode de vie. A la limite, je ne la percevais plus; *elle était dans le corps même*” (*La Honte* 131; my emphasis). The passage above provides a lens through which the narrator seeks to explain subsequent memory-images of shame triggered by the initial *scène* of June 15, 1952.

In the final thirty pages of the *La Honte*, the narrator continues to deploy the terms *scène* and *image* to elicit additional events occurring within the weeks and months that

followed. In doing so, and clearly influenced by the *scène* as a reality-altering filter, she establishes what we might deem an inevitable chronology of shame. For she informs us, “Il y a ceci dans la honte: l’impression que tout peut vous arriver, qu’il n’y aura jamais d’arrêt, qu’à la honte, il faut plus de honte encore” (*La Honte* 113) and “La honte n’est que répétition et accumulation” (*La Honte* 131). The unavoidable accumulation of the narrator’s shame is based on an insidious perception of inferiority, particularly with regard to the educated, dominant social stratum. In one additional *scène* and a series of *images* shortly after the “*scène indicible*” (*La Honte* 38), the narrator depicts the enduring effects of her cumulative shame.

Near the end of *La Honte*, the narrator recounts her participation in an out-of-town Catholic youth festival that occurs exactly one week after “*la scène indicible*” (*La Honte* 38). While she reveals no details of the festival itself, the narrator transforms the meaning of the term *scène*. With regard to the tension between proletarian and bourgeois behavioral codes, the term will convey a degree of humiliation similar to the *scènes* evoked in *La Place* (“*la scène du lycée de Lyon*” [*La Place* 13] and “*la scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau*” [*La Place* 98]).

In this *scène*, the narrator’s teacher, a nun referred to as Mlle L. and classmates accompany her to the door of her parents’ *café-épicerie* late at night upon their return from the youth festival. When, after an inordinate amount of time, the narrator’s mother finally opens the door, the narrator, her teacher and her schoolmates witness a *scène* that perpetuates and exacerbates the shame of the narrator:

Après un temps assez long, l’électricité s’est allumée dans le magasin, ma mère est apparue dans la lumière de la porte, hirsute, muette de sommeil, dans une chemise de nuit froissée et tachée (on s’essuyait avec après avoir uriné). Ma mère a bredouillé un bonsoir auquel personne n’a répondu. Je me suis

engouffrée dans l'épicerie pour faire cesser *la scène*. (*La Honte* 110; my emphasis)

The “spectacle” of the mother’s disheveled appearance and urine-stained nightgown stun the bourgeois “spectators,” whose presence triggers a dramatic shift in the narrator’s own perception. She expresses the “normalcy” (in her household) of that stain on the nightgown (“on s’essuyait avec après avoir uriné”) and provides further evidence that a bathrobe, which would have covered the stain, was not useful attire for a woman in her mother’s position. She states, “Mais la robe de chambre ou le peignoir étaient considérés dans notre milieu comme des accessoires de luxe, incongrus, voire risibles pour des femmes s’habillant aussitôt levées pour travailler (*La Honte* 111). The narrator discovers that she has subconsciously appropriated the bourgeois code of acceptable, modest behavior, as she reveals by stating, “Je venais de voir ma mère avec le regard de l’école privée” (*La Honte* 110). Much worse than that, the narrator realizes that her teacher and classmates, a microcosmic representation of “legitimate” behavioral and cultural codes, are now aware of “Notre vraie nature et notre façon de vivre” (*La Honte* 110). Warren Johnson has also recognized the nefarious influence of the school system on the narrator’s perception of shame. He argues that *La Honte* “makes clear the nature of shame as a social construct--even while producing the impression of being alone in feeling this humiliation--arising from her parents' marginal position in the town's social stratification and the bourgeois values of the religious school she attends” (galegroup.com).

The narrator’s desire to “faire cesser la scène” (*La Honte* 110) may well indicate two objectives. First, by quickly taking refuge in the home, she halts – albeit temporarily – the humiliation of being judged by the scornful gaze of her bourgeois classmates. Moreover, it

appears that the narrator has longer-term ambitions in putting a stop to this *scène*. That is, by stopping the scene in its immediacy, she may seek to prevent its becoming imprinted in her memory. However, the narrator *cannot* prevent the impression of this *scène* upon her memory, for, despite its entirely different content, its proximity with “la scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38) inserts this new *scène* in the narrator’s chronology of shame. The narrator acknowledges this by stating, “Dans mon souvenir, cette scène, qui n’a aucune commune mesure avec celle où mon père a voulu tuer ma mère, m’en paraît le prolongement” (*La Honte* 110).

It is interesting to note that the term *scène*, although appearing frequently in *La Honte*, is only used when relating memories of the narrator’s parents and that both *scènes* occur in the family home. In texts published prior to *La Honte*, such as *Les Armoires vides*, *La Place* and *Une Femme*, Ernaux’s narrator situates the origins of her socio-cultural alienation and shame in a sort of primal contact with bourgeois codes of language and behavior in the educational system. This is also the case in *La Honte*, in that the second scene establishes the power of the dominant class, represented here by the nun and the other children, over the dominated class, represented by the narrator and her mother. However, in *La Honte*, the narrator adds another element to the origin of that shame, this time a familial element, in the form of her parents. In *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*, Siobhán McIlvanney makes a similar assessment. She states that in this text, “the narrator’s schooling may aggravate her sense of alienation, but it is her parents who are portrayed as the catalysts for it” (155). Ernaux closely associates the “scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38) and the scene of the stain on her mother’s nightgown, not only in terms of causality, but also in their agents, her father and mother, respectively. The parents’ *scènes* have provoked an enduring sense of

unworthiness in the narrator as a young girl, an unworthiness that she then assigns to the family unit in general. It is not until after both *scènes* are revealed that she states, “Il me semble que tout ce qui a suivi pendant l’été est confirmation de notre indignité : « Il n’y a que nous » qui sommes ainsi” (*La Honte* 111).

Returning to the mother’s *scène* of humiliation, it can be reduced to a single *image*, that of the stain, without which the event would have been so unremarkable that “le regard de l’école privée” (110) would have nothing to judge. Consequently, the *scène* would have vanished from the narrator’s consciousness, as she observes:

Naturellement, il ne m’est pas venu que si ma mère avait possédé une robe de chambre, qu’elle avait enfilée sur sa chemise, les filles et la maîtresse de l’école privée n’auraient pas été saisies de stupéfaction et je n’aurais aucun souvenir de ce soir-là. (*La Honte* 110-111)

From this perspective, it is clear that the power of this second shameful memory rests entirely on the visual image of the stain,⁵⁹ much like the narrator’s freezing the image of her father holding the scythe in the “*scène indicible*” (*La Honte* 38). Thus, both parents have “made a scene,” in the sense of *faire une scène à quelqu’un*, and the traces of those *scènes* display their indelible, visual imprint on the narrator’s memory. While the trauma of the stain *indigent* is not nearly as menacing, she is as speechless after that *scène* as she is after the attempted murder. That said, there is a distinction to make regarding their participants and spectators. The attempted murder scene is visible only to the family, who comprise the lone participants. However, the scene of the stain becomes a spectacle, in the sense that the

⁵⁹ Stains from bodily fluids are a frequent leitmotiv in Ernaux’s corpus, particularly in *Les Armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée*, *Une Femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». Additionally, in her essay, “Fragments autour de Philippe V.,” Ernaux describes how she and her former lover, Philippe Vilain, traced designs using her menstrual blood and his sperm onto drawing paper. Vilain subsequently displayed these images on his wall.

mother, albeit unintentionally and not violently, has “made a scene” in the presence of the disdainful bourgeois spectator.

Still operating within the chronology of shame mentioned above, approximately two months after the stain incident, the narrator again confronts the critical, objectifying gaze of the bourgeoisie. While on a bus tour with her father, the narrator presents a series of *images* of accumulating shame and socio-cultural inferiority. As she states, “C’était la première fois que nous étions amenés à fréquenter de près, pendant dix jours, des gens inconnus *qui étaient tous, à l’exception des chauffeurs de car, mieux que nous*” (*La Honte* 116; my emphasis). During the trip, the narrator seeks the companionship of a young girl named Élisabeth, whom she had met on the trip, and who was approximately the same age. The narrator recounts being cautiously optimistic that the two girls will be compatible, since Élisabeth, despite her elevated social status as the daughter of a wealthy landowner, is only one year older and also attends Catholic school. Yet, the encounter with Élisabeth quickly sours:

Un jour, j’ai mis la jupe et le chemisier de mon costume de gymnastique, qu’il fallait user une fois la fête de la jeunesse passée. Elle l’a remarqué : « Tu es allée à la fête de la jeunesse ? » J’ai été fière de dire oui, prenant sa phrase accompagnée d’un grand sourire pour une marque de connivence entre nous deux. Ensuite, à cause de l’intonation bizarre, j’ai senti que cela signifiait, « tu n’as rien d’autre à te mettre que tu t’habilles en gymnastique. (*La Honte* 119)

Her derision of the narrator renders Élisabeth yet another representative of the institutionally-sanctioned, contemptuous gaze of the dominant social stratum. Still perceiving each event through the “filter” of the *scène* as an inexorable accumulation of shame, the narrator reports similar experiences of disparity between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat during the remainder of the voyage she took with her father. In one case, the disparity revolves around the narrator’s ignorance of *ce qui se fait* and *ce qui ne se fait pas*.

In this *image*, the daughters of a wealthy jeweler, who brought refreshments to snack on while with their tour guide. The narrator, on the other hand, reports, “A l’exception d’une bouteille d’alcool de menthe avec des sucres en cas de malaises, nous n’avions rien emporté à manger, *pensant que cela ne se faisait pas*” (*La Honte* 122; my emphasis). Additional instances establish that the narrator and her father are out of their element. Despite her father’s informing her of the contrary, the narrator does not believe that their hotel actually charged guests for their show-polishing service:

Un soir, à Lourdes, voyant les chaussures alignées devant les portes des chambres, j’y ai posé les miennes. Je les ai retrouvées le lendemain aussi sales que la vieille et mon père s’est moqué de moi: « Je te l’avais bien dit. Il faut payer pour ça. » Ce n’était pas une chose concevable pour nous. (*La Honte* 122)

The narrator also evokes *images* from the return portion of their journey. In one notable episode, she reports, “A une halte sur un plateau, peut-être en Auvergne, je viens de déféquer loin du groupe, installé dans une buvette. Pensée alors que j’avais déposé quelque chose de moi dans un endroit où je ne reviendrais peut-être jamais” (*La Honte* 123). Oddly, the present-time narrator feels no shame in reporting this episode. While we may consider the act as a gesture of defiance against middle-class codes of “decent” conduct, I propose an alternate reading, wherein the expelled excrement represents the narrator’s perceived shame, which, she designates as part of her: “elle était dans le corps même” (*La Honte* 131). The purging of the excrement, “cette chose de moi,” (*La Honte* 123) symbolizes the subconscious act of purging herself of her shame. Moreover, she undertakes this action “loin du group,” in other words, far from their scornful gaze.

The final *image* evoked, the one deemed as “la plus nette” (*La Honte* 126), describes the father and daughter’s experience at an elegant restaurant in Tours. Both class and familial

tensions are at the source of this memory. In the restaurant, the narrator notices a father and daughter dining, making special note of their ease and comfort with each other:

A une petite table près de nous il y avait une fille de quatorze ou quinze ans, en robe décolletée, bronzée, avec un homme assez âgé, qui semblait être son père. Ils parlaient, ils riaient, avec aisance et liberté sans se soucier des autres. (*La Honte* 124)

Unlike this bourgeois adolescent, the narrator remembers herself as “pâle, l’air triste avec mes lunettes” (*La Honte* 125). Furthermore, whereas the bourgeois girl cheerfully converses with her father, the narrator recalls being “silencieuse, à côté de mon père, qui regardait dans le vague” (*La Honte* 125). The narrator is cognizant of the stark differences between the two father-daughter dynamics, as well as between the levels of ease that each pairing expresses in this social setting. However, she lacks the knowledge of the behavioral codes that might allow her to acquire the same pleasant, effortless demeanor: “Je voyais tout ce qui me séparait de cette fille, mais je ne savais pas comment j’aurais pu faire pour lui ressembler” (*La Honte* 125).

The narrator explicitly connects the final part of this *image* to the “scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38) during which her father’s loss of control was abnormal. After remarking on the disrespectful behavior of the waiters, the narrator recalls her father’s complaint about the restaurant: “Mon père s’est plaint ensuite avec *une violence inhabituelle* de ce restaurant où l’on nous avait donné à manger de la purée faite avec « de la pomme de terre à cochons », blanche et sans goût” (*La Honte* 125; my emphasis). In fact, the narrator recalls her father’s sustained, residual anger even weeks later: “Plusieurs semaines après, il manifestait encore *une hargne* profonde vis-à-vis de ce dîner” (*La Honte* 125). The father’s reaction can be read as an act of defiance and a conveyance of disgust at the dismissive treatment to which they

were subjected. The narrator notes that this demonstrates his “Façon de dire sans dire... toute l’offense subie, avoir été traité avec mépris parce que nous ne faisons pas partie de la clientèle chic « à la carte »” (*La Honte* 125).

This very clear *image* has gained its significance, and therefore its status as an inefaceable memory. Here, the dynamic of familial and social shame is once again played out in a public forum. The narrator’s embarrassment at the awkwardness both she and her father reveal in this chic restaurant “tapissé de glaces, brillamment éclairé, fréquenté par une clientèle élégante” (*La Honte* 124) is a perpetuation of the chronology of shame that she considers inevitable.

While the narrator concedes that perhaps only chronology joins the “scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38), the scène of the stained nightgown and the *images* retained from the bus tour, she recognizes the nefarious influence of that the primal scene of June 15, 1952 on the *scènes* and *images* that follow it:

Il n’y a peut-être pas de rapport entre la scène du dimanche de juin et ce voyage autre que chronologique, mais comment affirmer qu’un fait survenant après un autre n’est pas vécu dans l’ombre portée du premier, que la succession n’a pas de sens. (*La Honte* 126)

In the preceding passage, she also reprises the notion of the *scène* as a “filter,” designating it here as “l’ombre portée du premier.” In other words, everything she experienced after the traumatic event on June 15, 1952, is viewed under the optic of shame. That event not only altered her perceptions as a twelve-year-old girl in the summer of 1952, but continues to pervade her current life: “Je n’ai plus rien de commun avec la fille de la photo,⁶⁰ *sauf cette scène du dimanche de juin qu’elle porte dans sa tête et qui m’a fait écrire*

⁶⁰ The photographs evoked in *La Honte* will be analyzed in the next chapter of this study.

ce livre, parce qu'elle ne m'a jamais quittée" (*La Honte* 133; my emphasis).

While it is clear that the memory of June 15, 1952 will never completely vanish from the narrator's consciousness, she has finally succeeded in applying words to an event that was previously unspeakable and seemingly far removed from the realm of verbal articulation.

This chapter sought to shed light on Ernaux's transformation of the visual and lexical terms *image*, *scène*, *instantané de la mémoire*, *film* and *cinéma* into *souvenirs*, or "arrêts sur mémoire" (*Les Années* 240). We have determined that, because of the significant emotional effect on the narrator, each *image* or *scène* evoked becomes an indelible visual memory that sustains the content of the primary flashback narrative. These visual memories are partnered throughout the Ernauxian corpus with another type of image, namely, the photograph. In the final chapter of this study, I will present a selection of photographs evoked by Ernaux as "arrêts sur image" that, although interrupting the flashback, are ultimately essential in sustaining the narrative thread.

CHAPTER 4

FREEZE-FRAME: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE IN ERNAUX'S CORPUS

1. Introduction

In Chapter 3, I presented the first of two types of “arrêts sur mémoire” (*Les Années* 240) populating Ernaux's corpus. The memory-images and scenes from *La Femme gelée*, *La Place* and *La Honte*, while distinct from the primary narrative in terms of spatial organization (they are often separated from the flashback by blank spaces), are nonetheless an integral component of the flashback. In fact, we may consider them as abridged, embedded flashbacks. Yet, along with *images* and *scènes* emerging from the memory, Ernaux also incorporates the still photograph into her corpus. These photographs usually appear between the textual scissions, which mimic visually the fading or dissolving into a different temporal perspective. In the case of the photographs, the fade leads us back to the present moment of narration, as the photographs themselves are narrated in the present tense, and are followed by metanarrative commentaries.

The photo's description and commentary inevitably suspend the flashback, creating a literary adaptation of the freeze-frame. However, this suspension does not impede the narrative. On the contrary, like the memory-images presented in Chapter 3, Ernaux's freeze-frames comprise a vital element of her corpus, particularly in those texts that rely on the flashback as a narrative device.⁶¹ To demonstrate that the

freeze-framed photograph is strategically placed and contributes to the flashback narrative, we will consider an example of actual flashback narrative and the freeze-framed image that is associated with it. In *Une Femme*, the narrator evokes her parents before their marriage:

Pour une femme, le mariage était la vie ou la mort, l'espérance de s'en sortir mieux à deux ou la plongée définitive... Mon père travaillait à la corderie, il était grand, bien mis de sa personne, un « petit genre ». Il ne buvait pas, gardait sa paye pour monter son ménage. Il était d'un caractère calme, gai, et il avait sept ans de plus qu'elle (on ne prenait pas un « galopin » !). En souriant et rougissant, elle racontait : « j'étais très courtisée, on m'a demandée en mariage plusieurs fois, c'est ton père que j'ai choisi. » Ajoutant souvent, « Il n'avait pas l'air commun. » (*Une Femme* 35-36).

Immediately after that passage, the narrator describes her parents' wedding portrait, which completes the story of their courtship by providing visual proof of their marriage:

Sur la photo du mariage, elle a un visage régulier de madone, pâle, avec deux mèches en accroche-cœur, sous un voile qui enserre la tête et descend jusqu'aux yeux. Forte des seins et des hanches, de jolies jambes (la robe ne couvre pas les genoux)... Lui, petite moustache et nœud papillon, paraît beaucoup plus vieux. Il fronce les sourcils, l'air anxieux, dans la crainte peut-être que la photo ne soit mal prise. (*Une Femme* 37)

The photographs serving as freeze-frames in Ernaux's works from 1983 onward are certainly far too numerous for the scope of this chapter. Therefore, I will analyze those that sustain the flashback narratives treating issues of familial, social and personal alienation. I will also examine the commentary of a photograph that reveals Ernaux's fairly recent preoccupation with mortality.⁶² Since the freeze-framed images within the corpus actually

⁶¹ The flashback is deployed in all of Ernaux's works, with the following exceptions: the diary publications of *Se Perdre*, "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*," *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*. In addition, *L'Usage de la photo* does not rely on the flashback as its narrative device.

⁶² *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* reveal this preoccupation, due to Ernaux's battle with breast cancer.

work in tandem with the memory-images evoked in Chapter 3, I will examine the key photographic images from both *La Place* and *La Honte*. I will also investigate the narrative function of select photos appearing in *Les Années*. In all cases, the freeze-frame aims to bolster the narrative by demonstrating veracity and capturing the reality of the account in question.

As Roland Barthes states in *La Chambre claire*, the photographic image represents the reality of a past state (130). For Ernaux, photographic images are vestiges of her past reality. These vestiges seek to “show” what words are inadequate to express. In this respect, Ernaux’s deployment of the photographic image is indeed an adaptation of the cinematic device of freeze-frame. In his 2010 study entitled “La réflexion photofilmique écrite,” Charles Grivel elucidates the function of the freeze-frame in the medium of cinema. Regarding photographic freeze-frames, he states, “De telles images « exposent » le film, « réfléchissent » sa matière et font comprendre d’où celle-ci provient” (178). In terms of the narrative function of the freeze-frame, Grivel continues:

De telles images-photos fixées comme arrêtées dans le continuum filmique (dans le récit) expriment *ce que nous ne pourrions pas percevoir simplement considérer le déroulement de la bobine. Les photographies, dans ce cas, « sortent » une vérité que le film ne dit pas, et peut-être même évacuent.* (178; my emphasis)

The ability of a non-verbal medium to provide testimony is specifically manifest in Ernaux’s deployment of photographic images as freeze-frames. Before pursuing a discussion of the freeze-frame, I will focus first on the aspects of the photographic image that are pertinent when considering Annie Ernaux’s writing of memory and reality.

2. The Photographic Image, Memory and Documenting Reality

Exploring Ernaux's textual use of the visual image from an interdisciplinary perspective allows us to consider valuable insights put forth by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and more recently, André Rouillé. Their thoughts on the relationship between photography, reality, memory and the scriptural qualities of the photographic image will be salient regarding the adaptation of the freeze-frame device discussed in this chapter.

In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes offers both objective and deeply subjective reflections on photography.⁶³ Specifically, he seeks the *noème*, or essence of a photograph, that which precisely distinguishes it from other types of visual images. In keeping with the tenants of semiology, Barthes informs us that we can indeed distinguish a signifier, a signified and a referent in photographs. The referent, referred to in *La Chambre claire* as the *Spectrum*, consists of the person or thing photographed, and functions as a “sorte de petit simulacre” (22-23). Barthes uses the term *Spectrum* not only because of its relationship to the word *spectacle*, but also to reinforce the idea of a specter, indicating “le retour du mort”, which is present in all photographs.⁶⁴ In fact, when examining a photograph of himself, Barthes determines, “je deviens vraiment spectre” (*La Chambre claire* 30). We will evaluate the presence of a photographic “specter” in one of the freeze-framed photographs evoked in *La Honte*.

Barthes also recognizes the communicative abilities of the photographic image. He reminds us: “l'objet parle, il induit, vaguement, à penser” (*La Chambre claire* 65; emphasis

⁶³ Throughout his text, Barthes analyzes and publishes photographs which have no real bearing on his personal experience. In seeking the noeme of a photograph, Barthes examines, without showing them to the reader, photographs of his recently deceased mother.

⁶⁴ We will revisit the notion of the *Spectrum* in Chapter 5 with regard to a photograph of Ernaux's sister.

in original). Clearly, this process is at work in Ernaux's metanarrative commentaries accompanying the freeze-framed photographs, as well as in the memory-images examined in the previous chapter. In particular, two elements that often coexist in a photograph encourages the *Spectator* to reflect upon a photographic image.⁶⁵ Operating on a culturally, socially and/or intellectually coded level, the *studium* (Barthes' emphasis) invites the *Spectator* to engage with the image.⁶⁶ While the spectator plays an active role with regard to the *studium*, it is the disconcerting detail inherent in the *punctum* that virtually leaps from the image and provokes the *Spectator's* response.⁶⁷

When considering Ernaux's use of the visual image, we discover that the evocative power of the *punctum* is not limited to the visible, but also extends to the audible. Furthermore, the *punctum* is also at work for images generated in the memory. Ernaux expresses her awareness of the far-reaching power of the *punctum* in *L'Ecriture comme un couteau*, when she states: "J'insiste sur le fait qu'il y a toujours *un détail qui « crispe » le souvenir*" (42; my emphasis). Within this chapter, we will investigate the manner in which the *punctum* strengthens many of the freeze-framed images suspended within Ernaux's flashback narratives.

In the second part of *La Chambre claire*, Barthes contemplation of photography takes a personal turn when he seeks to define the essence of the photographic image through

⁶⁵ Barthes designates le *Spectator* as the viewer of photographs, while l'*Operator* is the photographer (Barthes' italics).

⁶⁶ Barthes states: "C'est par le *studium* que je m'intéresse à beaucoup de photographies; car c'est culturellement (cette connotation est présente dans le *studium*) que je participe aux figures, aux mines, aux gestes, aux décors, aux actions" (*La Chambre claire* 48).

⁶⁷ Barthes likens the *punctum* to an arrow, which pierces the spectator and "punctuates" the photograph: "Le *punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, *me point* (mais aussi *me meurtrit*, *me poigne*)" (*La Chambre claire* 49).

snapshots of his late mother. Barthes discovers that this “essence” does not rely on chronological time. In fact, in more recent images of his mother, or even in some images in which she also appears as a child, Barthes does not perceive her “essence”. At most, recognition occurs in a fragmentary manner, almost as if in a dream.⁶⁸ Moreover, although the objects present in these photos, such as a perfume decanter, an ivory powder box, or his mother’s handbag, might well awaken certain sensations, they are ultimately powerless in providing the fundamental nature of the *Spectrum*, in this case, his mother. Ironically, it is in a photograph taken when his mother was a child that Barthes rediscovers her. Her “innocence souveraine” (*La Chambre claire* 107) and gentleness, the very essence of her character, are revealed by her expression and pose.⁶⁹ Ernaux evokes a similar experience in *Une Femme* when she states, regarding a photograph of her mother: “Seules, sa main large, serrant les gants, une façon de porter haut la tête me disent que c’est elle” (38). Barthes’ image, designated as “justice et justesse: juste une image, mais une image juste,” allows Barthes to uncover the essence of photography itself.

Photography superimposes reality and the past, leaving us incapable of denying the irrefutable evidence that “la chose a été là” (*La Chambre claire* 120). The confirmation that the “thing was there” leads Barthes to determine that, “Le nom du noème de la Photographie sera donc: « ça-a-été »” (*La Chambre claire* 120). In Ernaux’s corpus, the *ça* of Barthes’ formula may represent an individual, a location, an object, or even an event, and may be found in actual photographs or images moving through the memory.

⁶⁸ “Je ne la reconnaissais jamais que par morceaux, c’est-à-dire que je manquais son être, et que, donc, je la manquais toute. Ce n’était pas elle, et pourtant ce n’était personne d’autre” (*La Chambre claire* 103).

⁶⁹ This photograph, entitled *Jardin d’hiver*, is not shown in the text. Barthes states that while it might appeal to the reader’s *studium*, s/he would be largely indifferent to it (*La Chambre claire* 115).

Like Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag equates the photographic image with authentication and proof of existence. In *On Photography* she states that photographs are “pieces of evidence in an ongoing biography or history” (166). Photographs are not only “experience captured” (Sontag 3), but also material traces of the subject (Sontag 154), the *Spectrum*, in Barthes’ terms. Sontag also posits that, although photographs cannot “explain” anything, they do invite the spectator to “think – or rather feel, intuit – [...] what the reality must be if it looks this way” (Sontag 23). This invitation to engage in deduction or speculation is virtually identical to Barthes’ previously mentioned assessment.⁷⁰ Moreover, such a reflective posture is manifest in the metanarrative comments that Ernaux implements to elucidate her writing process, memory-images and the photographs serving as freeze-frames in her corpus.

Sontag contends that the photographic image is superior to both writing and other mimetic systems (such as painting or drawing), for these systems are mere subjective interpretations, whereas photographs mimic reality (4). Except for the photographer’s initial set-up and “click” of the button, photography does not rely on the human hand to capture reality; the process is strictly chemical or electronic (Sontag 158), and therefore, objectively uninvested. According to Sontag, modern society perceives reality as a type of “writing” to be recorded (160).⁷¹ Yet, the real strength of the photograph lies in the fact that it is *itself* a material reality (Sontag 180), which calls to mind Barthes’ assertion that a photographic image, unlike language, is authentication itself (*La Chambre claire* 134-35).

⁷⁰ [L]’*objet parle*, il induit, vaguement, à penser” (*La Chambre claire* 65)

⁷¹ Sontag points out the photography and writing had indeed been associated in the past. Nicéphore Niepce designated his early attempts at photography as “heliography,” or light-writing, while Fox Talbot, inventor of the negative/positive photographic process, likened the camera to “the pencil of nature”. (160).

In his 2005 study entitled *La Photographie: entre document et art contemporain*, André Rouillé examines the manner in which photographic images produce reality, although he cautions that exactitude and truth are not inherent in photography.⁷² In a manner similar to Barthes and Sontag, Rouillé posits that the photographic image prompts the spectator to reflect upon the past. In this capacity, the photo can precipitate voluntary memory, which Rouillé describes as follows:

Celle qui va d'un actuel présent à un présent qui a été, qui opère dans le présent vivant de l'action, qui tente de recomposer le passé au travers de la succession de ces présents suspendus, fixés, figés, sidérés que sont les instantanés. (293)

During the first one hundred-fifty years of its existence, photography functioned in a primarily documentary capacity.⁷³ However, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, an expressive mode superseded the documentary status of photography.

Rouillé's "photographie-document" relies on direct reference to a material thing and seeks to record faithfully its traces or imprints. The photographie-document has become "un nouvel inventaire du réel" (120). This is particularly true in terms of historical photographs, as notes Daniel Grojnowski. Grojnowski states, "Lorsque l'historien interroge une photographie, il la considère comme un document qui appartient à un ensemble formant « archives ». Elle apparaît comme une « documenteuse », une fiction vraie, puisque la « fiction » est invention, création, interprétation" (199).

⁷² Rouillé is quick to indicate that photography "captures," rather than represents the real. Moreover, it produces and reproduces "*du visible*", rather than "*le visible*" (38; Rouillé's emphasis).

⁷³ Rouillé notes that industrialized society became the paradigm of photography. Associations existed between the progress represented by expansive urban development, a thriving economy and the mechanical nature of photography, which was seen as an "image-machine" (29).

More than a mere “record” or archive, “la photographie-expression”, as defined by Rouillé, always consists of and *communicates* an event (175; my emphasis), thereby affirming a sort of “écriture photographique” (217). The narrative power assigned to Ernaux’s freeze-frames qualifies her use of the photographic image primarily as “la photographie-expression.”

In his study Rouillé also revisits certain notions put forth by Barthes in *La Chambre claire*, at times taking issue with them. Most importantly, Rouillé rejects the notion of *ça-a-été* as the essence of photography. He remarks that the *ça* in the formula *ça-a-été* represents the material “thing” that existed before the image was made (289). Moreover, further reevaluating Barthes’ observations on the photographic image, Rouillé states that, at best, the formula *ça-a-été* provides a mere foundation or “support system” for the image (289). In order to extricate the photograph from the passivity inherent in the verb *être*, Rouillé offers an alternate formula, “*ça s’est fait*” (289), which transforms the photograph into an active event, or in his terms, a “photographie-expression” (175).

Rouillé also presents two approaches for the interpretation of a photograph. His “mode affirmatif” corresponds to the concept of *ça-a-été*, while the “le mode interrogatif” attempts to address what actually occurred in the photo. The “mode interrogatif” serves in the writing of reality through voluntary or involuntary memory (292).

The theories put forth by Barthes, Sontag and Rouillé, specifically the notions of the *punctum*, the *photographie-expression* and the role of the photographic image in eliciting memory, become tools in analyzing Ernaux’s freeze-frames. Specifically, we shall determine the extent to which the *punctum* affects her narrator’s interpretation of the photographic

image. In addition, we will determine the precise details that the photograph adds to the flashback; in other words, we will discern the “story” told by the image.

3. The Freeze-framed Image as Testimony

As I stated in Chapter 2, the flashback in both literature and cinema is understood as a testimonial or confessional narrative mode. I have also alluded to and provided examples of Ernaux’s strategies to ensure the veracity of her narrative by consulting diaries, agendas and archives, as well as by infusing her text with traits of “academic” writing, such as footnotes. The photograph serves as yet another strategy in Ernaux’s quest for authenticity. In fact, Ernaux considers photographs as “des sortes de preuves objectives d’une époque, d’un moment dans la vie de quelqu’un” (“Sur l’écriture” 14). The “objective proof” that Ernaux evokes in her assessment of the photograph validates the information recounted in the flashback, as well as in the memory-images examined in Chapter 3.⁷⁴ In fact, related to those memory-images, Siobhán McIlvanney posits that the photographs inserted into the Ernauxian narrative serve to “neutraliser la nature inexacte d’une image mentale, un « instantané de la mémoire »” (“Annie Ernaux: un écrivain dans la tradition du réalisme” 266).⁷⁵

Barthes reminds us that while language can only authenticate itself through discursive and rhetorical devices, such as taking an oath or applying logic, a photograph is *itself* authentication (*La Chambre claire* 134-35). In this respect, the photo becomes a sort of visual testimony.

Sylvie Jopeak has established the important association between the testimonial

⁷⁴ Let us recall the wedding photograph featured in *Une Femme* and cited earlier in this chapter. The photo provides “proof” of the parents’ courtship and marriage, as narrated in the actual flashback.

⁷⁵ McIlvanney also states that the photograph may be designated “l’équivalent visuel du réalisme” (266).

power of the photo and the autobiographical text. She touches on several aspects that facilitate our understanding of the photographic image in Annie Ernaux's corpus.

First, Jopeak finds autobiographical texts and photo albums to be similar in that their shared goal is to express both reality and intimacy (38).⁷⁶ Related to testimony and maintaining the reader's credulity, Jopeak explains that when a photo bears witness to an event, the metanarrative commentary that accompanies it requires the reader to accept the autobiographer's subjectivity (92). Certainly, this calls to mind Hayward's notion of flashback as a subjective truth, as well as Derrida's explanation of testimony cited in Chapter 2.⁷⁷ In order to mitigate the degree of subjectivity, Jopeak states that the metatextual commentary of the photographic image must forego emotions (93), which is certainly characteristic of Ernaux's writerly practice since 1983, when she introduced "l'écriture plate" and the emotionally neutral tone in *La Place*. One final observation put forth by Sylvie Jopeak will facilitate our understanding of the narrative role of the freeze-frame. Jopeak cautions that we must distinguish between the *reality* and the *truth* of an image. In order to resolve that dilemma, Jopeak adapts Barthes' *ça-a-été*, determining that his formula expresses only the photo's reality. Jopeak's revision of this formula, "C'est ça" (158), functions as an affirmative, present-time (as opposed to the past-time reflected in Barthes' expression) variation that represents the truth of the photograph (158).

When considering both the description of the photographs and their metatextual discourse that pause the flashback narrative throughout Ernaux's corpus, Jopeak's postulations are quite salient. In the sections that follow, I will determine the extent to which

⁷⁶ Jopeak assigns an additional shared goal to photography and autobiography: "Fixer les limites de la représentation humaine" (38).

⁷⁷ See pages 32 and 46.

the freeze-frame *La Place*, *La Honte* and *Les Années* contributes to the flashback and bears testimony, while maintaining objectivity and focusing on truthfulness.

4. Freeze-framed Photographs in *La Place*

As the first text in which Ernaux evokes photographic images, we may consider *La Place* as the experimental period of her freeze-frame technique, for unlike subsequent texts, the photos are by and large embedded within the flashback, although they are separated by the visual cue of the paragraph break. In only two cases does blank space on the page visually cue the arrival of the freeze-frame. Francisca Fomeral Rosel notes the importance of *La Place* in terms of Ernaux's appropriation of text-image reciprocity. Rosel states that:

La Place est le premier texte organisé physiquement en fonction d'une stratégie scripturale visant l'insertion d'un véritable album dont les photos sont présentées en rigoureux ordre chronologique... Le choix même de ces crêtes et des détails dans leur description semble obéir à une intention bien nette : dresser un portrait du milieu prolétaire (102).

Recalling Chapter 3, where I analyzed two important scenes in *La Place*, namely “la scène du lycée de Lyon,” (13) and “la scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau” (98), Rosel's assertion that *La Place* seeks to create a rendering of working-class culture is indeed accurate. Ernaux herself conveys in *La Place* the desire to portray objectively her father's (and her) social *place*: “Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, *tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée*” (24; my emphasis). Claire-Lise Tondeur has made a similar observation. In *Annie Ernaux ou l'exil intérieur*, Tondeur notes, “Ces photos que l'auteur cherche à déchiffrer lui donnent l'occasion de faire des remarques ethnologiques” (79). This is particularly true, given that Ernaux's intended title for *La Place* was *Éléments pour une ethnologie familiale* (Ernaux and

Jeannet 34).

When we examine the four freeze-framed photographs of *La Place*, we cannot ignore Ernaux's persistent implication of sociological undertones, for these undertones are instrumental in sustaining the purpose of the text. Rosel posits that the very selection of these photos attributes to the narrative the quality of a "drame de l'humiliation" (104). Indeed, if the photos are carrying out a "drama," they can be classified as an "event," and as such, fall into the domain of André Rouillé's "photographie-expression" (175).

The evocation of the first of four photographic images arrives early in the narrative. After her father's death, the narrator reports having discovered in his wallet an old photograph in which he appears with his former colleagues at a factory. In terms of viewing the photo as a freeze-frame, we must consider the narrative immediately preceding its evocation. After the father's funeral, the narrator assists her mother with various tasks, including publicly registering the death, compensating the funeral directors and gathering his clothing so that it may be donated to the needy. During this time, the narrator recalls thinking, on several occasions, « Je suis une grande personne » (*La Place* 22). The narrator's recollection of her sudden realization of adulthood after her father's death leads to a suspension in the narrative so that she may address, via a photograph and a newspaper clipping, a new discovery about her father and more importantly, about her father's unspoken pride in her achievements.

Rosel further hypothesizes, regarding the gaze of the narrator: "il s'agit d'un regard sélectif qui recherche expressément le *punctum*-détail déshonorant dans lequel la construction de la fiction ne pourrait avoir lieu" (102; emphasis in original). The inclusion of Barthes' *punctum* will be relevant for all of the freeze-frames operate within *La Place*. As we

shall determine, there is always at least one detail that captivates the narrator's attention, and often the *punctum* contributes to the freezing of the image within the narrative.

The first photo in *La Place* counts among the most poignant and profound photographs evoked in all of Ernaux's works, in that it confirms the socio-cultural alienation between a proletarian father and his socially-ascending daughter. This alienation and the narrator's attempt to portray accurately and objectively her father's underprivileged socio-cultural status provide the crux of the flashback. The narrator describes the content of the photo in the following manner:

La photo, ancienne, avec des bords dentelés, montrait un groupe d'ouvriers alignés sur trois rangs, regardant l'objectif, tous en casquette. Photo typique des livres d'histoire pour « illustrer » une grève ou le Front Populaire. J'ai reconnu mon père au dernier rang, l'air sérieux, presque inquiet. Beaucoup rient (*La Place* 22)

In a manner reminiscent of Barthes' recognition of his mother, the narrator recognizes her father in this snapshot, first by "l'air inquiet et sérieux" that he normally had in photographs. The *punctum* inherent in this image doubtless leads to the narrator's revelation that her father is located "au *dernier rang*." This revelation of social setting, specifically of the father's socio-cultural alienation from his daughter, is reinforced by additional information that the narrator shares in the metanarrative commentary: the presence of a newspaper clipping in which the photograph was enclosed. The narrator reveals the content of that clipping:

La coupure de journal donnait les résultats, par ordre de mérite, du concours d'entrée des bacheliers à l'école normale d'institutrices. Le deuxième nom, c'était moi. (*La Place* 22)

The photographic image contributes details to the narrative. In this case, the father's keeping together the photograph and the newspaper clipping demonstrates his awareness of the two distinct worlds that he and his daughter inhabit, and the inevitable alienation that this fact elicits. Likewise, the discovery of the photo and the newspaper clipping reveal the narrator's sense of guilt because of the distance that had grown between them.

The description of the photograph is followed by a significant blank space on the page, after which the narrator recalls having a sudden thought while returning to Annecy after her father's funeral: "D'un seul coup, avec stupeur, « maintenant, je suis vraiment une bourgeoise » et « il est trop tard" (*La Place* 23). Although the photo and clipping are a painful sign of the chasm between them, her father's possession of the two items confirms the narrator's impression: "Peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même la justification de son existence: que j'appartienne au monde qui l'avait dédaigné" (*La Place* 112).

The narrator of *La Place* wishes to explain: "Cette distance venue à l'adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, *qui n'a pas de nom*" (*La Place* 23; my emphasis). The inability to categorize or to "name" that distance confirms the failure of language to address its significance. In addition, the cause of the alienation is indeed the narrator's acculturation into the bourgeois social stratum. She would be unable to address the alienation without taking note of the class difference that initiated the rift in the father-daughter dynamic.

In the second of four freeze-frames embedded in the flashback in *La Place*, the narrator evokes a photograph that demonstrates her father's *place* in French society. However, in this instance, the narrator simultaneously acknowledges her own social

ascension. This second photograph dates to shortly after the death of the narrator's sister. The image is introduced as follows:

Une photo prise dans la courette au bord de la rivière. Une chemise aux manches retroussées, un pantalon sans doute en flanelle, les épaules tombantes, les bras légèrement arrondis. L'air mécontent, d'être surpris par l'objectif, peut-être, avant d'avoir pris la position. (*La Place* 47)

After describing the general setting, her father's clothing and his facial expression, the narrator provides more pertinent details, particularly as regards the *punctum*:

Il a quarante ans. Rien dans l'image pour rendre compte du malheur passé, ou de l'espérance. Juste les signes clairs du temps, un peu de ventre, les cheveux noirs qui se dégarnissent aux tempes, *ceux, plus discrets, de la condition sociale, ces bras décollés du corps, les cabinets et la buanderie qu'un œil petit-bourgeois n'aurait pas choisi comme fond pour la photo* (*La Place* 47; my emphasis)

The significance of Ernaux's freeze-framed photographs often operates at the level of the *punctum*, for there always some detail that the present-time narrator is apt to point out, either subtly or explicitly. In most cases, this *punctum* is a sign of the social difference between the narrator and her father. In that respect and as I have suggested previously, the freeze-frame bolsters the primary flashback by providing truths that cannot attain articulation through the language encountered within the primary narrative space. In the photograph evoked above I argue that for the now-bourgeois narrator, the signs of her father's social position are not at all discreet and that those very signs comprise the *punctum* of the image. As in the first photograph, where the father appeared with his factory worker colleagues, the question of class is brought to the forefront and the narrator tacitly admits to the socio-cultural alienation between her and her father in the form of the "œil petit-bourgeois." This bourgeois gaze is a metonymic reference to the present-time narrator herself, who, because of

her *embourgeoisement* has acquired aesthetic sensibilities that the proletariat seems to lack. Related to this, Francisca Romeral Rosel suggests that, in *La Place*, the narrator adopts the esthetic values of the bourgeois class into which she ascended (102). Yet, I posit that this stance is necessary in order for the narrator to effectively deploy the photographs as freeze-frames within her narrative. She designates the supposedly subtle, although disconcerting, details of the photograph's *punctum*, "les bras décollés du corps, les cabinets et la buanderie" (*La Place* 147), as unsuitable content of a photograph, at least for the bourgeois ethos, the bourgeoisie acting as the creators and guardians of appropriate aesthetic taste. Bourgeois ideologies of prosperity and virtue are considered, after all, "reliable categories of distinction; cultural conventions sew them into the law of the land. When differences are defined, they can be pictured" (Bernard 3). For the narrator, the photograph is far more an indication of class signifiers and two disparate strata of society than it is an innocuous snapshot.

The third seemingly banal freeze-frame in *La Place*, evoked shortly after the photograph examined above, also serves as evidence of the father's social class and suspends the flashback. Immediately preceding this image we find a metanarrative reflection regarding the narrator's objective in composing *La Place*. Her objective carries both sociological and personal significance. The narrator's goal consists of "la réhabilitation d'un mode de vie considéré comme inférieur et la dénonciation de l'aliénation qui l'accompagne" (*La Place* 54). She also indicates that happiness and humiliation *simultaneously* characterized her family's way of life: "Ces façons de vivre étaient à nous, un bonheur même, mais aussi les barrières humiliantes de notre condition" (*La Place* 54). The photograph that we will analyze momentarily is the first of two in *La Place* to be isolated by a substantial scission in the text. The photo describes the narrator's father "Alentour de la cinquantaine, encore de la force de

l'âge, la tête très droite, l'air soucieux, comme s'il craignant que la photo ne soit ratée" (*La Place* 55). Again, the father's "air soucieux" appears to be his defining characteristic in photographic images, since the narrator cites it not only in several photographs in *La Place*, but also in the wedding photograph appearing in *Une femme*.⁷⁸

Nonetheless, the narrator is once again able to discern the *punctum* of this freeze-framed image. In this case, the *punctum* consists of the father's attire, which is markedly different from his daily garb:

Il porte un ensemble, pantalon foncé, veste claire sur une chemise et une cravate. Photo prise un dimanche, en semaine, il était en bleus. De toute façon, on prenait les photos le dimanche, plus de temps, et l'on était mieux habillé (*La Place* 55)

This freeze-frame sustains the narrative in that bears witness to the cultural precepts of the working class, a task that the narrator has assigned to her flashback. Included among these precepts is the pride of being photographed with one's possessions, such as the narrator's new bicycle and the *café-épicerie*. We also note that:

Je figure à côté de lui, en robe à volants, les deux bras sur mon premier vélo, un pied à terre. Il a une main ballante, l'autre à sa ceinture. En fond, la porte ouverte du café, les fleurs sur le bord de la fenêtre, au-dessus de celle-ci la plaque de licence des débits de boisson. On se fait photographier avec ce qu'on est fier de posséder, le commerce, le vélo, plus tard la 4 CV, sur le toit de laquelle il appuie une main, faisant par ce geste, remonter son veston. Il ne rit sur aucune photo. (*La Place* 55-56)

⁷⁸ In *Une Femme*, the narrator's description of her father in the wedding photo is nearly verbatim: "Il fronc les sourcils, l'air anxieux, dans la crainte peut-être que la photo ne soit mal prise" (37). Likewise, other photographs in *La Place*, the narrator notes: "J'ai reconnu mon père au dernier rang, l'air sérieux, presque inquiet" (22) and "L'air mécontent, d'être surpris par l'objectif, peut-être, avant d'avoir pris la position" (47). The narrator's ability to discern a distinct feature in photographs of her father is calls to mind Barthes' experience in *La Chambre claire*.

Francisca Romeral Rosel assigns a testimonial power to the photographs evoked in *La Place*. She states, “La sélection du *punctum*-détail...se fixera sur les éléments qui témoignent de l’orgueil populaire d’un ouvrier ayant accédé à un modeste confort” (104; emphasis on *punctum* in original).

In this photograph, the narrator evokes a *second* one, namely the photograph of the father with the family’s new vehicle. She again discerns her father’s anxious expression, the one constant in the freeze-frames the narrator has evoked thus far.⁷⁹ Moreover, this is one of two photographs in which the narrator appears with her father. Since the narrator sets herself the task of understanding the distance that came between them starting during her adolescence, this photograph also contributes to the primary flashback narrative in that it represents the period before that alienation. Recalling the metatextual commentary preceding the evocation of this photograph, in which the narrator announces the desire to portray both the humiliation and the happiness of her family’s way of life (*La Place* 54), we see that the narrator does indeed achieve this goal, since she deems this photograph as “l’évidence du bonheur” (*La Place* 56).

If the preceding freeze-frame image has an overall tone of contentment, the final photograph evoked in *La Place* suggests the narrator’s burgeoning *embourgeoisement* and the onset of the father-daughter alienation that the present-time narrator wishes to redress. The narrator has not yet completed her appropriation of the bourgeois ethos, for while she now understands the best pose and facial expression to ensure a flattering photograph, she

⁷⁹ The narrator of *La Place* can name only one “image” in which her father did not bear his normally solemn expression. In one of the memory-images, or “instantané de la mémoire” (*La Place* 95) during her wedding reception, examined in Chapter 3, the narrator notices that “il sourit légèrement, dans le vague” (*La Place* 95).

admits that its setting, functioning as the *punctum*, reveals her still-developing aesthetic judgment during adolescence:

Une photo de moi, prise seule, au-dehors, *avec à ma droite la rangée de remises, les anciennes accolées aux neuves*. Sans doute n'ai-je pas encore de notions esthétiques. Je sais toutefois paraître à mon avantage : tournée de trois quarts pour estomper les hanches moulées dans une jupe étroite, faire ressortir la poitrine, une mèche de cheveux balayant le front. Je souris pour me faire l'air doux. (*La Place* 78; my emphasis)

This photograph strongly suggests the genesis of the familial and socio-cultural alienation that occurred during the narrator's adolescence. It is hardly coincidental, for example, that she cites her age in the photo as "J'ai seize ans" (*La Place* 78). Nor is it gratuitous that she mentions her father's apparent ineptitude in taking photographs: "Dans le bas, l'ombre portée du buste de mon père qui a pris la photo" (*La Place* 78). Rouillé's interrogative mode of the photographic image, specifically the mode that seeks to discover "what happened," is addressed by this freeze-frame. For Rouillé, the interrogative mode relates to events both within and without of the photograph (292). "Within" the photo, we encounter the narrator's slow but steady acquisition of "good taste." However, the elements outside of the photograph will prove far more revealing. This freeze-frame is followed by a textual scission, then a page break, which precipitates the return to the flashback. In the flashback, the narrator reveals details of her increasingly distanced stance within the family unit:

Je travaillais mes cours, j'écoutais des disques, je lisais, toujours dans ma chambre. Je n'en descendais que pour me mettre à table. On mangeait sans parler. Je ne riais jamais à la maison. Je faisais de « l'ironie ». C'est le temps où tout ce qui me touche de près m'est étranger. *J'émigre doucement vers le monde petit-bourgeois*" (*La Place* 79; my emphasis)

The narrator's use of the present tense to describe her social ascension is crucial, for it

implies that the socio-cultural chasm between father and daughter is without remedy. In addition, her statement, “J’émigre doucement vers le monde petit-bourgeois” (*La Place* 79), responds to Rouillé’s interrogative mode. This mode is also a mode of memory and writing; it both accomplishes and accompanies the perceptions of the spectator, for perceiving requires active interrogation and remembering (Rouillé 292). In this case, the present-time narrator is the spectator for whom the photograph initiates recollection. In response to Rouillé’s interrogative mode, we can deduce that the narrator’s acculturation is “what happened” in provoking the onset of familial alienation.

The photographic images evoked in *La Place* establish the evolution of the alienation between the narrator and her father. By providing “photographic proof,” the narrator successfully displays her father’s social position, before she inserts herself into the equation in the final two photographs. This allows her to “show” the alienation in addition to simply “narrating” it. *La Honte* will also demonstrate the use of freeze-framed photographs to temporarily pause the flashback narrative, while still contributing significant details to the account.

5. Freeze-framing Shame: The Photographic Image in *La Honte*

In Chapter 3, I analyzed a scene of primordial importance in establishing the narrator’s perception of social and personal shame. We shall recall from Chapter 3 that this event is subsequently designated by the narrator as “la scène indicible de mes douze ans” (*La Honte* 38). The narrator informs us that this near-fatal confrontation between her parents instigated in her young mind a series of shameful events, each of which was also likened to a *scène* or *image*, ineffaceably imprinted in her memory. *La Honte* also provides two photographic images that work in tandem with the events of that time in her life, namely the

summer of 1952. In fact, these two images surround the events much like a picture frame. As I stated in the previous chapter, the narrator wishes to finally diminish, if not eradicate, the magnitude of the *scène* by constructing a narrative around it. Hoping to gain perspective about the violent act she witnessed, she expresses the desire to reintegrate her present self and the pre-pubescent self that existed in the summer of 1952.

Regarding the narrator's dual objective of normalizing the event and reintegrating the self, Jennifer Willging notes that the narrator of *La Honte*:

Hopes to accomplish the work her mind was unable to at the moment of the scene's occurrence, which is to assign meaning to her impressions so that they may be integrated into the coherent store of past impressions that make up her life-story" ("Annie Ernaux's Shameful Narration" 89)

The narrator's reintegration of her past and present self is sought by evoking and describing, among other "traces matérielles,"⁸⁰ (*La Honte* 26) two photographs that coincide temporally with "la scène indicible" (38). These photos appear sequentially, but are isolated by scissions on the page. The first of these photographs is her Communion portrait, taken ten days prior to "la scène indicible," (*La Honte* 38), while the second, depicting father and daughter during a bus trip to Biarritz, dates approximately two months later, at the end of August 1952.

The two photographs are essential to the narrative in that they frame what I designated in Chapter 3 as the chronology of shame. The *scène* of June 15, 1952 essentially cleaved the narrator's life into two segments. She recognizes this by stating that the photos are "deux bornes temporelles, l'une, la communiant, à la fin de l'enfance qu'elle ferme,

⁸⁰ In the attempt to reorient herself spatiotemporally, the narrator also evokes postcards, a sewing kit, a musical score and a missal (*La Honte* 26-28).

l'autre, inaugurant le temps où je ne cesserai plus d'avoir honte" (*La Honte* 25). In the following section we will examine how the narrator's (and consequently our) interpretation of the photos ultimately determines the extent to which the reintegration of the past and present self sought in the primary flashback is possible.

Although the narrator begins the passage related the photo using a first-person reference, "L'une me représente en communiant" (*La Honte* 22), she shifts to the third-person in its actual description:

On voit une fille au visage plein, lisse, des pommettes marquées... Elle est agenouillée sur un prie-dieu, les coudes sur l'appui, rembourré, les mains, larges, avec une bague à l'auriculaire, jointes sous la joue et entourées d'un chapelet qui retombe sur le missel et les gants posés sur le prie-dieu. (*La Honte* 22-23)

Regarding this self-alienation inherent in the third-person narration, Pierre Fort-Louis has noted:

Cette photographie se trouve coupée de toute référence *extra-picturale*: elle ne semble susciter aucun souvenir particulier chez la narratrice d'où, vraisemblablement, la distance prise pour la décrire. ("A l'épreuve de la photographie" 132; emphasis in original)

The impression of detachment from the self continues when the narrator describes the remaining elements of the Communion photograph:

Caractère flou, informe, de la silhouette dans la robe de mousseline dont la ceinture a été nouée lâche, comme le bonnet. Impression qu'il n'y a pas de corps sous cet habit de petite bonne sœur parce que je ne peux pas l'imaginer, encore moins le ressentir comme je ressens le mien maintenant. Étonnement de penser que c'est pourtant le même aujourd'hui. (*La Honte* 23)

This photo reveals not only “l’avènement de moi-même comme autre: une dissociation retorse de la conscience d’identité” (Barthes *La Chambre claire* 28), but also the ghostly quality of the *Spectrum* (Barthes *La Chambre claire* 23). Barthes states: “La photographie est le moment où on n’est ni sujet ni objet, mais sujet qui se sent devenir objet; on vit alors « micro-expérience » de la mort (de la parenthèse) : je deviens vraiment spectre” (Barthes *La Chambre claire* 30).

Initially, it may seem that the photograph will not enhance the flashback sequences of the narrative, due to the narrator’s inability to establish any type of connection with it. However, considering its context will shed light upon its significance. Throughout this study, I have alluded to the Catholic school system as the primordial locus for Ernaux’s cognizance of social difference – even *before* the violent scene of June 1952. As we shall recall from the previous chapter, part of the narrator’s strategy to reconstruct that summer consists in implementing voluntary memory to recreate the elements that comprised her universe. Her Catholic school experience is an unquestionable part of that experience. In fact, the once the narrator completes a *survol* of the various codes and institutions of her life, she is able to establish reciprocity between this photograph and the rest of the narrative:

En déployant l’univers scolaire de cette année-là, le sentiment d’étrangeté que j’éprouve devant la photo de communiant diminue. Le visage sérieux, le regard droit, le petit sourire, moins triste sans doute que supérieur, perdent leur opacité. *Le « texte » éclaire la photo, qui en est aussi l’illustration.* (*La Honte* 90; my emphasis)

In fact, the reciprocity of the text (her writing about the Catholic school system) and the image (the Communion photograph), actually awakens the perception she held of herself at the time of the photograph, *before* she witnessed the attempted murder: “Je vois la bonne élève du pensionnat, dotée de pouvoir et de certitudes dans un univers qui est pour elle la

vérité, le progrès, la perfection et dont elle n’imagine pas qu’elle pourrait démériter” (*La Honte* 91). Pierre-Louis Fort has also remarked on the narrative potency of the both photographs in *La Honte* by stating that they facilitate the narrator’s realization of her perceptions before and after the pivotal violent scene (“A l’épreuve de la photographie” 133), even if complete reintegration of the self is only possible via the scene of June 15, 1952.

The second photograph that suspends the narrative features the narrator and her father while traveling in Biarritz, the actual events of which are recounted near the end of *La Honte*. Demonstrating the behavior of those who rarely travel, the narrator and her father are disconcerted by their encounter with the more wealthy voyagers. As we recall from Chapter 3, a single detail helps to contextualize the photograph when the narrator states, “C’était la première fois que nous étions amenés à fréquenter de près, pendant dix jours, des gens inconnus qui étaient tous, à l’exception des chauffeurs de car, mieux que nous” (*La Honte* 116).

Unlike the previous image, the narrator deploys the first-person in her description: “Je porte une jupe et un chemisier blancs, l’uniforme que j’avais lors de la fête de la jeunesse des écoles chrétiennes... Dans cette tenue, je ressemble à une petite femme” (*La Honte* 24). We will recall from Chapter 3 that these are the very same clothes for which the young bourgeois girl mocked her during the bus excursion. Furthermore, the “image” that the photo attempts to project rings false for the narrator. Recalling that it was taken *after* her experience of shame and social inferiority, it is hardly surprising that when the narrator assesses the photo, she concludes: “nous apparaissions comme ce que nous n’étions pas, des gens chics, des villégiaturistes” (*La Honte* 24).

The adoption of the first person to describe the photograph suggests a manner of

reintegration with the former self, and more importantly, demonstrates that shame continues to haunt the present-day narrator. The photo's importance to the narrative is also evident in that it closes the text. As a vestige of a time when the awareness of social inferiority entered her life, the photo still resonates with the narrator, and does indeed enhance the details provided in the primary flashback, primarily, the "scène indicible" (*La Honte* 38). For she states:

Je n'ai plus rien en commun avec la fille de la photo *sauf* cette scène du dimanche de juin qu'elle porte dans la tête et qui m'a fait écrire ce livre, parce qu'elle ne m'a jamais quittée. C'est elle seulement qui fait de cette petite fille et de moi la même" (*La Honte* 133; my emphasis)

In *La Honte*, the two freeze-framed images evoked do indeed imbue additional clarity and truth into the narrative, a process that occurs through Ernaux's strategic text-image reciprocity. In fact, the freeze-framed photographs frame her perception of shame, yet simultaneously cleave it into two distinct temporal zones.

6. Freeze-frames in *Les Années*

Annie Ernaux's seminal text, *Les Années* reveals the apex of her experimentation with the text and the image, whether that image is fixed or moving. From the incipit, we encounter a veritable blitz of images, and discover that they actually emerge from the narrator's memory. These memory-images, which are menaced by the inevitable weakening of memory as well as by death, become objects of the narrator's obsession. She seeks to "save" them by materializing them into written form. Yet, the preservation of individual memory is only part of the narrator's concern; she also sets herself the task of preserving *images* of collective memory. In that respect, the narrator is not only an author; more importantly, she becomes an archivist or even an historian – a guardian and transmitter of

intimate and collective memory-images.

Working in tandem with the highly visual memory-images, the photographs evoked and described in *Les Années* serve as freeze-frames that furnish additional information on the narrator's trajectory. The most important detail revealed on her trajectory is the development of her writerly project through the mise-en-abyme. In these photographs, the visible elements, namely the physical description of the narrator functions on a merely secondary level. It is the metanarrative commentary, the "inside information" on the invisible aspects that establish the importance of these freeze-framed devices. In fact, the commentaries provided after the photographs in *Les Années* demonstrate Barthes and Sontag's assertion that the photographic image prompts the spectator to reflect.

The photographic images in *Les Années* are not by any means nostalgic markers; rather, they are evoked to authenticate the rest of the narrative (Froloff 39). Of far greater importance is the manner in which the invisible elements serve as catalysts. In the case of *Les Années*, photographs expand the narrative in that they usually precipitate reflections on the social status, thoughts and aspirations of the narrator, all of which are intimated by what she designates as "l'invisible des photos" (*Les Années* 121). Like the photographs previously analyzed in this chapter, many of those evoked by the narrative voice in *Les Années* address questions of social status and alienation. In the interest of continuity with the previous photographs examined, I will discuss those that consider the same issues. I will also examine a freeze-frame appearing early in the text, an image that specifically addresses the problematic nature of memory. Finally, I will investigate the final image that suspends the narrative in the final pages. In fact, this image is the catalyst that precipitates the very creation of *Les Années*.

In the first of photographs juxtaposing the visible and the invisible, the narrator appears as an adolescent with a classmate in a photograph taken outside of their school. The information immediately “visible” is limited to a brief physical description of the young girls as well as the setting of the photograph at the pensionnat Saint-Michel. Through the “invisible,” internal elements, we learn that, from a socioeconomic standpoint, and with the exception of her school chum, she does not enjoy the same economic advantage as her classmates:

Peut-être ne perçoit-elle pas l'écart qui la sépare d'autres filles de la classe, celles avec qui il serait unimaginable de se faire prendre en photo. Un écart qui se marque dans les distractions, l'emploi de temps à l'extérieur de l'école, la façon générale de vivre, et qui l'éloigne autant des filles chics que de celles qui travaillent déjà dans des bureaux ou des ateliers. Ou bien elle mesure cet écart sans s'en préoccuper... Elle n'est jamais allée encore à Paris, à cent quarante kilomètres, ni à aucune surpat, elle n'a pas de tourne-disques. (*Les Années* 55)

The fact that the photo is set in a schoolyard also bears relevance, for the narrator's perceptions of social difference are conveyed with relation to classmates, rather than neighbors or society as a whole. In this case, the setting of the pensionnat Saint-Michel, serving as a microcosm of the educational system, implies that this system is a locus of socio-cultural alienation.⁸¹ That notion is perpetuated in the subsequent photograph of the narrator:

Elle connaît maintenant le niveau de sa place sociale – il n'y a chez elle ni Frigidaire, ni salle de bains, les vécés sont dans la cour et elle n'est toujours pas allée à Paris --, inférieur à celui de ses copines de classe.

⁸¹In a 1995 interview with Claire-Lise Tondeur, Ernaux acknowledges that her experiences within the education system prompted her feelings of social alienation, particularly in terms of language and lifestyle. She states, “C’est à l’école que c’est arrive... Il y a un rapport entre la langue et ce que l’on vit... Dans le système hiérarchies la langue que j’employais reflétait une infériorité sociale.” (“Entretien avec Annie Ernaux.” 38).

Elle espère que celles-ci ne s'en aperçoivent pas, ou le lui pardonnent, dans la mesure où elle est « marrante » et « relaxe », dit « ma piaule » et « j'ai les pétaches » (*Les Années* 66)

The obvious difference between the “invisible” information precipitated by this photo and the one immediately preceding is the narrator’s admitted cognizance of social difference and of being “hors de la fête” (*Les Années* 68). Yet, overriding that awareness is her desire for acceptance by her infinitely more privileged classmates. By adopting their linguistic codes, as well as by ingratiating herself to them by her personality traits (she is “marrante” and “relaxe,” after all), the narrator, seeks entry into their world.

Continuing to establish the trajectory of *elle*, the narrative voice evokes a photo informing us that she has become a university student:

Sur cette photo en noir et blanc, au premier plan, à plat ventre, trois filles et un garçon, seul le haut du corps est visible, le reste plongeant dans une pente. Derrière eux, deux garçons, l'un debout et penché se détache sur le ciel, l'autre est agenouillé, semblant agacer l'une des filles de son bras tendu. ..Au dos de la photo : *Cité universitaire. Mont-Saint-Aignan. Juin 63. Brigitte, Alain, Annie, Gérald, Annie, Ferrid.* (*Les Années* 86)

The reflections following the setting of the photo and the physical description of the narrator unveil another shift in her perception, in that her previous yearning for admission into the bourgeoisie becomes a source of disenchantment. Recalling her earlier feeling of being an outsider, we learn:

Elle est entrée dans la fête et elle s'ennuie. Les deux filles qui l'entourent appartiennent à la bourgeoisie. Elle ne se sent pas des leurs, plus forte et plus seule. À trop les fréquenter, à les accompagner dans les surbours, elle a l'impression de déchoir. Elle ne pense pas non plus avoir rien de commun maintenant avec le monde ouvrier de son enfance, le petit commerce de ses parents. Elle est passée de l'autre côté mais elle ne savait pas dire de quoi [...] *elle ne se sent nulle part.* (*Les Années* 87; my emphasis)

The narrator's realization of distaste for her acquired culture is exacerbated by the fact that she no longer feels an affinity with her culture of origin. The "invisible de la photo" (*Les Années* 121) represents her disillusion with both cultures. Furthermore, the sense of belonging nowhere is tantamount to permanent suspension in the *entre-deux*.

Examining and describing photographs in order to reconstruct the past corresponds to a process similar to voluntary memory, according to André Rouillé (293). This process transpires in the metanarrative commentary accompanying the photographs of *Les Années*. Near the end of the narrative, after evoking a photograph of a middle-aged *elle*, the narrator recalls images of her mother and in particular, her mother's battle with Alzheimer's Disease:

Des phrases lui viennent souvent spontanément aux lèvres, que sa mère utilisait dans le même contexte, des expressions qu'elle n'a pas le souvenir d'avoir utilisées avant, « le temps est mou », « il m'a tenu le crachoir », « chacun son tour comme à confesse », etc... D'autres fois surgissent des phrases que sa mère a dites pendant sa maladie d'Alzheimer et dont l'incongruité révélait son altération mentale, « tu m'apporteras des chiffons pour m'essuyer le derrière ». En un éclair le corps et la présence de sa mère lui sont donnés. (*Les Années* 177)

We will determine, however, that the endeavor to reconstruct the past is not always fruitful. Recalling the incipit of the text examined in Chapter 2, memory is ephemeral, as is life, and falls prey to deterioration. In addition, at times it is merely impossible to remember details of our lives.

In evoking and describing a photograph of the narrator at Sotteville-sur-Mer, the narrator is able to easily recall some details, while others are completely lost to her. She does recall, "Elle va avoir neuf ans. Elle est en vacances avec son père chez un oncle et une tante, des artisans qui fabriquent des cordes. Sa mère est restée à Yvetot, tenir le *café-épicerie*, qui

ne ferme jamais” (*Les Années* 35). Nonetheless, the narrator does not hesitate to point out the ambiguity of her feelings, or the fallibility of her memory when she ponders the photographs. In these cases, conjecture in the terms “either/or,” “perhaps,” or “It is difficult to say,” or explicitly admitting to memory loss is her only recourse. Drawing on the same photograph of the nine-year-old narrator, we learn that:

C’est sa mère qui tresse ses cheveux en deux nattes serrées et les fixe en couronne autour de sa tête, avec des barrettes à ressort et des rubans. *Soit* ni son père ni sa tante ne savent attacher ses tresses ainsi, *soit* elle profite de l’absence de sa mère pour les laisser flotter. *Difficile de dire* à quoi elle pense ou rêve...*Peut-être* voit-elle comme une immense étendue le temps de l’école derrière elle. (*Les Années* 35-36; my emphasis)

The notion of memory loss in the commentary surrounding that photo relates both to the incipit of the text and to the final photograph evoked. In the latter case, the very thought of a weakening memory, coupled with a brush with death, inspires in the narrator the determination to concretize the multitude of images populating her memory.

The final photograph in *Les Années* is of primordial importance within the flashback narrative. The narrator informs us of its privileged status by stating that this particular image was “*prélevée parmi des centaines*” (*Les Années* 232; my emphasis). In this photo, which is a veritable catalyst for the writing of the text, the narrator appears on Christmas 2006 with her young granddaughter:

Sur cette photo, prélevée parmi des centaines contenues dans des pochettes Photo-service ou stockées dans un fichier informatique, une femme d’un certain âge aux cheveux blond-roux, en pull noir décolleté, est assise, presque renversée, dans un gros fauteuil chamarré et entoure de ses deux bras une petite fille en jean et pull de camionneur vert pâle, installée de guingois sur ses genoux croisés, dont l’un seulement est visible, gainé de noir. (*Les Années* 232)

When pondering this photograph, the narrator experiences an onslaught of memory images, which elicit in her a sudden trepidation regarding her own mortality. Among those images is the following:

un cancer qui semblait s'éveiller dans le sein de toutes les femmes de son âge et qu'il lui a paru presque normal d'avoir parce que les choses qui font le plus peur finissent par arriver. Au même moment, elle a reçu l'annonce qu'un enfant se formait dans le ventre de la compagne de son fils aîné – une fille, a révélé l'échographie, alors qu'elle avait perdu tous ses cheveux à cause de la chimio. *Ce remplacement rapide, sans délai, d'elle dans le monde, l'a extrêmement troublée.* (*Les Années* 235; my emphasis)

Her granddaughter's presence in the Christmas photograph reminds her of one crucial quasi-photographic image and one important event. First, she recalls the ultrasound photograph of her granddaughter (evoked in the passage above), which awakens within her the memory of her breast cancer treatment that coincided temporally with the taking of the ultrasound. The narrator situates herself in "cet entre-deux d'une naissance certaine et de sa mort possible" (*Les Années* 235). Realizing the precariousness of memory (because of the transience of life) awakens in the narrator a sense of urgency, for: "Peut-être un jour ce sont les choses et leur dénomination qui seront désaccordées et elle ne pourra plus nommer la réalité, il n'y aura que du réel indicible" (*Les Années* 237). We must recall that the final freeze-framed photograph in *Les Années*, dating from 2006, precipitates the immediate desire to immortalize her individual and collective memories of the last seven decades. In fact, that desire is soon transformed into action, if not obligation, as the narrator makes patent by stating, "C'est maintenant qu'elle doit mettre en *forme* par l'écriture son absence future" (*Les Années* 237; emphasis in original). Thus, the final freeze-framed image serves the ultimate narrative function in that it instigates the creation of *Les Années*.

This chapter has proposed the re-reading of the photographs that Ernaux incorporates into her flashback narratives as freeze-frames. Recalling Charles Grivel's assertion that the freeze-frame reveals truths that the primary narrative cannot express (178), we have determined that Annie Ernaux's freeze-framed images operate in an analogous fashion. The Ernauxian freeze-frame, flashback and the *images* and *scènes* that are ubiquitous in her corpus demonstrate that Annie Ernaux continues to innovate the reciprocity between the text and the image throughout her corpus.

Yet, Ernaux's simultaneous experimentation with verbal and visual media is not the only innovation that she has undertaken. In her desire to capture her reality (as well as a more collective reality), Annie Ernaux has engaged in a writerly project that reveals even the most intimate details of her personal life. Finally, Ernaux has also blurred the genre boundaries to the extent that one cannot classify her texts within just one category. We will revisit several of Ernaux's innovations in the final chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Since the release of her first work, *Les Armoires vides* in 1974, Annie Ernaux has progressively established herself as one of the most ground-breaking authors in the Hexagon in terms of both content and form of her corpus. As we approach the end of this study, let us recapitulate Ernaux's most pertinent content and structural innovations of the literary medium and conclude on the most significant redefinition and innovation at work in her corpus: the persistent experimentation with cinematic and photographic lexicon and devices to convey the memories of her past experiences.

With relation to the subject matter of her texts, Ernaux has never refrained from controversy or potential accusations of obscenity.⁸² On the contrary, she has written openly and quite graphically of taboo subjects, such as her clandestine abortion in 1964 in *Les Armoires vides* and *L'Événement*, the explicit sexual details of an adulterous affair with a Russian diplomat thirteen years her junior in *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*. Ernaux has also displayed her eroticism and sexuality as a means to overcome mortality in *L'Usage de la photo*. Finally, as we saw in Chapter 3, Ernaux reveals a traumatic instance of domestic violence when her father very nearly murdered her mother in *La Honte*. We will touch upon several precise examples of her content and structural innovations content momentarily, but

⁸² This is not to say that Ernaux is indifferent to the reception of some of her texts, as she states in the incipit of *L'Occupation*: "J'ai toujours voulu écrire comme si je devais être absente à la parution du texte. Écrire comme si je devais mourir, qu'il n'y ait plus de juges" (11).

will first determine why Ernaux portrays such controversial subjects throughout her corpus.

Incorporation of these contentious topics into her texts demonstrates not only Ernaux's preoccupation with conveying her reality without fabrication, but also her desire to subvert the tenets of what is considered admissible content in literature, for as Ernaux herself states: "Mon écriture concourt à la subversion des visions dominantes du monde"⁸³ (*L'Écriture comme un couteau* 54). In his recent study on Ernaux, Sergio Villani qualifies her subversive gesture as an "esthétique de choc" (113) in which the reader, albeit unintentionally, also participates. Villani explains:

L'esthétique de choc vise à fasciner et à déconcerter son lecteur qui devient participant à la *transgression* et agent de transmission dans la société des réalités dures, incommodes, honteuses, auxquelles il est exposé. (113; my emphasis)

The literary transgression referenced by Villani meets Ernaux's goal of simultaneously portraying the "worthy" and the "unworthy" in her texts. Ernaux also assigns to the *quotidien*, the extraordinary and the philosophical equal importance in her narratives. As a matter of fact, Ernaux clarifies her authorial objectives as:

Le désir de bouleverser les hiérarchies littéraires et sociales en écrivant de manière identique sur des « objets » considérés comme indignes de la littérature, par exemple, les supermarchés, le RER, l'avortement, et sur d'autres, plus « nobles », comme les mécanismes de la mémoire, la

⁸³ Ernaux's transgressive writing is certainly related to her status as a class-migrant. Pierre-Louis Fort reports that Ernaux wrote the following entry in one of her diaries: "J'écirai pour venger ma race" ("La filiation inversée" 188). Here Ernaux uses the term *race* to designate her humble social origins, plainly inserting the issue of class distinction into her authorial intentions. Her use of the term *race* also calls to mind Taine's notion that the individual is determined by his/her *race*, *milieu*, and *moment*, a notion utilized by Zola in his vast *roman social*, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, of which several volumes give voice to the dominated social stratum (*L'Assommoir*, *Le ventre de Paris*, *La Terre*). It is not implausible to propose that Ernaux was inspired by the notion of *race* for the very same reason.

sensation du temps, etc., et en les associant. (*L'Écriture comme un couteau* 80-81)

This tendency to overturn convention is apparent from Ernaux's very first work, the semi-autobiographical *Les Armoires vides*, wherein the protagonist Denise Lesur's backstreet abortion provides the subtext for her diatribe against both her class of origin and the bourgeois class into which she has ascended. In addition, despite adopting the institutionalized genre of the novel as a form for this narrative, Ernaux's undermining of bourgeois literary standards is clear in the vulgar language that her narrator uses.⁸⁴ For example, when referencing her unwanted pregnancy, Denise describes herself as being "pleine comme une chatte de cramouille... Une fontaine de cramouille qui dégouline partout, lavée au sperme à m'en dégoûter pour toujours" (*Les Armoires vides* 171).

Ernaux's abortion is reprised twenty-six years later in *L'Événement*, only in this instance, the graphic details of the expulsion of the fetus are indeed revealed. Always wishing to proceed to the very limits of what is deemed "acceptable" in the literary venue, Ernaux does not hesitate to vividly depict the body in turmoil, as she does when relaying her 1964 abortion:

J'ai ressenti une violente envie de chier. J'ai couru aux toilettes et je me suis accroupie devant la cuvette. Je voyais le carrelage entre mes cuisses. Je poussais de toutes mes forces. Cela a jailli comme une grenade, dans un éclaboussement d'eau qui s'est répandue jusqu'à la porte. J'ai vu un petit baigneur pendre de mon sexe au bout d'un cordon rougeâtre. (*L'Événement* 100)

⁸⁴ Regarding the language in Ernaux's early works, such as *Les Armoires vides*, Loraine Day has pointed out a "stylistic virtuosity" that simultaneously critiques the elite social class and Ernaux's class or origin ("The Dynamics of Shade, Pride and Writing" 85).

Far from euphemizing this “event,” Ernaux accurately reveals the expulsion of the fetus as a violent act carried out on her body and that of the fetus. As Michèle Bacholle-Boskovic states: “La narratrice, qu’elle s’appelle Denise Lesur (*Les Armoires vides*) ou qu’elle soit anonyme (*La Honte*, *L’Événement*), mais de toute façon toujours double de l’auteur, n’est pas à l’abri des besoins et vérités corporels” (“Confessions d’une femme pudique” 91). Furthermore, aside from the reader’s astonishment at the “vérités corporels” (Bacholle-Boskovic “Confessions d’une femme pudique” 91) revealed in the description of the abortion, s/he is also taken aback when Ernaux objectifies the fetus as “cela,” “une grenade,” “un petit baigneur” (*L’Événement* 100), or even as “une bête maligne” (*L’Événement* 78) earlier in the narrative.

Yet, the shock factor that is so prevalent in Ernaux’s corpus is not limited to the gruesome reality of bodily suffering through her abortion. In *Passion simple* and again in *Se perdre*, Ernaux recounts sexual acts without shame or self-censure. We shall note in both cases that these acts are presented visually, either as “real” filmic images or images replaying in the memory.

Breaching the codes of what the literary institution deems acceptable, Ernaux evokes scenes from an X-rated film in the incipit of *Passion simple*, the account in which Ernaux records an eighteen-month adulterous liaison with a Russian diplomat thirteen years her junior. Although blurred because her television set is without a decoder, the images of the film are clear enough to reveal the following explicit details of the sexual act:

Le sexe de l’homme en érection, qui s’est glissé dans celui de la femme. Pendant un temps très long, le va-et-vient des deux sexes a été montré de plusieurs angles. La queue est réapparue, entre la main de l’homme, et le sperme s’est répandu sur le ventre de la femme. (*Passion simple* 11-12)

In *Se perdre*, the diary corresponding to the events of *Passion simple*, Ernaux presents her memory of their sexual encounters as *scènes*, immediately establishing that these memories indeed adopt cinematic overtones. Yet, her content-related “esthétique de choc” (Villani 113) is also manifest in one particular incident, for Ernaux fuses the memory-image of a sexual encounter her lover with a memory-image of her dying father:

Tout l’après-midi, revu ces deux *scènes* où il est penché, regardant ma main le branler (je suis par-derrrière). Je sens qu’il retrouve une attitude de son adolescence, peut-être plus tôt, un fantasme...*Image* aussi : mon père sur le lit, deux jours avant de mourir, la tête penchée. (*Se perdre* 131; my emphasis)

Ernaux’s association in those two memory-images of the impending *petite mort* and *vraie mort*, represented by her lover and her father respectively, is certainly unexpected and unquestionably incongruous for the reader.

Likewise, Ernaux audaciously discloses her rather intimate experiences as a woman in her sixties who uses sexuality and eroticism to overcome the fear of mortality as she battles breast cancer: “J’étais accroupie sur M., sa tête entre mes cuisses, comme s’il sortait de mon ventre. J’ai pensé à ce moment-là qu’il aurait fallu une photo. J’avais le titre, *Naissance*” (*L’Usage de la photo* 197). As if writing the *image* of this sexual encounter were insufficient, Ernaux incorporates into the act of writing the desire to further visually materialize a memory through photography.

In addition to openly redefining traditionally “acceptable” literary content, Ernaux also admits to a political objective in abandoning conventional modes of literary expression, specifically, the novel, in favor of the forms she has implemented over the past three decades. In *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, the author states: “Les différents aspects de mon travail ne peuvent pas être dépouillés de cette dimension politique: qu’il s’agisse du refus de la fiction

et de l'autofiction, de la vision de l'écriture comme recherche du réel" (80). Ernaux's earliest formal experimentation and innovation consists of her patent rejection of the novel after 1981. As stated earlier in my dissertation, this rejection coincides with the publication of *La Place* in 1983 and more, importantly, with the inaugural evocation of the photographic image in her texts. Ernaux considers photographs as "des sortes de preuves objectives d'une époque, d'un moment dans la vie de quelqu'un" ("Sur l'écriture" 14). Thus, it is not surprising that, throughout her corpus, she deploys the "visual proof," provided by the photographs, to bolster her writing of reality.

However, aside from the rejection of fiction and the deployment of the photographic image that persists in all but a few texts,⁸⁵ the most significant innovation undertaken by Ernaux, and what distinguishes her from several of her contemporaries, including Guibert, Duras, Redonnet and Sebbar, all of whom have experimented with photography in their texts from 1981 onward, undoubtedly lies in her pervasive adaptation of cinematic devices and lexicon into her narratives. The cinematic revisions and redefinitions of the authorial project undertaken by Ernaux place her at the avant-garde of her generation of writers.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated various manners in which Annie Ernaux creates and sustains throughout her corpus an amalgamation of literary, cinematic and photographic techniques, particularly with regard to her treatment of memory as the means to convey reality.

In Chapter 1, I presented scholarship from various domains of study as a springboard for Ernaux's cinematic and photographic treatment of memory. For example, we shall recall

⁸⁵ Let us recall from the Introduction that Ernaux's diaries *Journal du dehors*, *La Vie extérieure*, « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » and *Se perdre* do not include photographs, nor do they deploy the flashback as a narrative mode. We must note that while *L'Usage de la photo* does indeed feature photographs (and is the first of two Ernauxian texts to do so), the text does not rely on the flashback as a narrative mode.

that Paul Ricœur, Philippe Dubois and Jean-Marc and Yves Tadié all insist upon the visual and highly visible nature of human memory. The receiving and permanent “imprinting” of memory-images is even likened to processes analogous to filmic techniques.⁸⁶ I also demonstrated that even at the level of conception of her texts, Ernaux makes it clear that memory, particularly visual memory, is at the forefront of her writing process. She seeks to materialize her past by selecting the images and scenes that she wishes to write, as if she were creating a cinematic *montage*. The process of recollection by which she recovers those images and scenes can be understood as an “internalized flashback.”

During the retrieval of her memory-images, Ernaux also adopts a specifically cinematic lexicon by stating that certain scenes prompt “arrêts sur image” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42). In a manner reminiscent of Barthes’ *punctum*, these internal freeze-frames are provoked by some disconcerting detail present in the memory-image. Ernaux temporarily pauses upon these details, whether visual or auditory in form,⁸⁷ gleaned from them the information that will help her to reproduce and set into motion the *image* or *scène* comprising the flashback narrative.

Chapter 2 focused on the flashback, or to be more precise, on Ernaux’s adaptation of the cinematic flashback in the literary medium. I revealed that throughout her corpus, Ernaux deploys visual and verbal *trucages* in order to mimic effects such as the cinematic fade, *voix*

⁸⁶ See introductory chapter, where the Tadié brothers explain that: “Des images et des sons se transforment en ondes, puis redeviennent images ou sons. La différence est que, pour notre corps, la caméra ce sont nos yeux, les fils, câbles ou satellites sont nos vies optiques et le récepteur de télévision est la zone visuelle de notre cerveau... Une fois le match de rugby terminé, la télévision éteinte, le récepteur ne garde rien de ce qu’il a reçu, alors que notre cerveau va en conserver la trace” (*Le sens de la mémoire* 103).

⁸⁷ Ernaux cites examples of the *punctum* that aided her composition of *La Place* and *L’Événement*. Regarding *La Place*, Ernaux recalls “la serviette de table que ma mère tient dans sa main quand mon père meurt” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42), whereas her composition of *L’Événement* was sustained by recalling a statement made by the abortionist in reference to the fetus: “« il a repris de la force »” (Ernaux and Jeannet 42).

off and even the narrative's pace. These visual *trucages* become cues that transform the reader into a sort of spectator. S/he *sees* the fade, or the dissolution of one temporal sphere into another by the blank spaces on the page, before the words of the narrator confirm that the flashback has begun. We noted this phenomenon very clearly in a passage cited from *La Place* in Chapter 2, when the narrator announces her father's death exactly two months after her CAPES practicum.

Mon père est mort deux après, jour pour jour. Il avait soixante-sept ans et tenait avec ma mère un café-alimentation dans un quartier tranquille non loin de la gare, à Y... (Seine-Maritime). Il comptait se retirer dans un an. Souvent, durant quelques secondes, je ne sais plus si la *scène* du lycée de Lyon a eu lieu avant ou après, si le mois d'avril venteux où je me vois attendre un bus à la Croix-Rousse doit précéder ou suivre le mois de juin étouffant de sa mort.

C'était un dimanche, au début de l'après-midi. (*La Place* 13; my emphasis; spacing in original)

With regard to the passage above, I argued in Chapter 2 that the textual spacing visually signifies the fade, whereas the verbal cue announcing "C'était un dimanche, au début de l'après-midi" (*La Place* 13) signals *voix off* by removing the narrator, via the use of the *imparfait*, from the present-moment of her narrative.

Chapter 2 also included an analysis of *Les Armoires vides* and *Les Années*, both of which rely on the visual and verbal *trucages* to deliver the flashback. These *trucages* distinguish Ernaux from her contemporaries. Although there are no photographs in *Les Armoires vides*, I presented evidence of visual cues, in the form of ellipses, that are implemented to shift temporal perspective via the fade, and thus to precipitate *voix off*

narration. Before protagonist/narrator Denise adopts the *voix off* perspective,⁸⁸ she makes plain the objective of her pending flashback and emphasizes the visual nature of her process of recollection by repeating the desire to “see her past.” She wishes to: “Voir clair, raconter tout entre deux contractions. Voir où commence le cafouillage” (*Les Armoires vides* 17; my emphasis). Denise’s repetition of the verb “voir” (*Les Armoires vides* 17) bears significance when considering the very vivid, dynamic fashion in which she presents her memories. In the emphasis on bodily presence and movement of her parents’ *café-épicerie* clients, the *images* in Denise’s memory actually call to mind Turim and Metz’s assertion that the cinematic image possesses a stronger impression of “reality” than the fixed photograph (Turim 14; Metz 7). Denise reports:

Ils arrivent à sept heures du matin. Quand je descends l’escalier en chemise, je les aperçois déjà. Harnachés de canadiennes, de sacs bosselés par la gamelle. Ils écrasent leur main contre le verre, ils s’y cramponnent sans parler. (*Les Armoires vides* 21)

As in *Les Armoires vides*, the memory-images presented in flashback are imbued with the impression of movement in *Les Années*. This movement is achieved through list format of the memories, compelling us not only to receive these images at a rapid pace, thereby suggesting the transience of memory, but also suggests that they are superimposed upon one

⁸⁸ In Chapter 2, I noted that the prologue ended with ellipses, serving as visual cues that signal the dissolving of the present into the past. Denise Lesur ends the prologue by expressing the feeling that she is “Baisée de tous les côtés...” (*Les Armoires vides* 17; ellipses in original). In addition, the page break following the ellipses separate Denise from the present time, and lead to her hometown, and more precisely, to her parents’ place of business: “Le café-épicerie Lesur, ce n’est pas rien, le seul dans la rue Clopart, loin du centre, presque à la campagne” (*Les Armoires vides* 18). This change in time and space “changes the scene” for Denise’s narratee, who receives the flashback via her *voix off* narration.

another. We have already examined several of these fleeting *images* in Chapter 2, but will reinforce the effect of this *trucage* by considering additional examples:

les cabinets installés au-dessus de la rivière, dans la cour derrière la maison de Lillebonne, les excréments mêlés au papier emportés doucement par l'eau qui clapotait autour (*Les Années* 14)

toutes les images crépusculaires des premières années, avec les flaques lumineuses d'un dimanche d'été, celles des rêves où les parents morts ressuscitent, où l'on marche sur des routes indéfinissables (*Les Années* 14)

celle de Scarlett O'Hara traînant dans l'escalier le soldat yankee qu'elle vient de tuer – courant dans les rues d'Atlanta à la recherche d'un médecin pour Mélanie qui va accoucher (*Les Années* 14)

Like the examples cited in Chapter 2, the *images* appearing immediately above reveal a fragmentary, rapidly fleeting nature that is manifest through the lack of punctuation and capitalization. This, in addition to their spatial organization, gives the impression that they are blending into one another, much like a superimposed filmic image.⁸⁹

Finally, I demonstrated in Chapter 2 that the actual operations of memory adopt various cinematic techniques in the mise-en-abyme that comprises *Les Années*.⁹⁰ The narrator's memory records, imprints, projects and displays on the "screen" of her brain a multitude of *images* and *scènes*, both individual and collective, from the last seven decades.

⁸⁹ In fact, even before *Les Années*, Ernaux makes this association between memory-images and rapidly passing filmic images. In *L'Occupation*, when recalling the relationship with her former lover, she states:

"Soudainement apparaissent dans ma mémoire, sans relâche et à une vitesse vertigineuse, des images de notre histoire, telles des séquences de cinéma qui se chevauchent et s'empilent sans disparaître. Rues, cafés, chambres d'hôtel, trains de nuit et plages tournoyaient et se télescopaient. Une avalanche de scènes et de paysages...J'avais l'impression que mon cerveau se libérait à jets continus de toutes les images engrangées dans le temps de ma relation avec W. sans que je puisse rien faire pour stopper l'écoulement » (22; my emphasis).

⁹⁰ Let us recall from Chapter 2 that the *elle* perspective of *Les Années* is established through the mise-en-abyme as the *future* author/narrator of the work still at the stage of conception.

The writing of *Les Années* seeks to: “*capter le reflet projeté sur l’écran de la mémoire individuelle par l’histoire collective*” (54; my emphasis).

Drawing examples from *La Femme gelée*, *La Place* and *La Honte*, in Chapter 3 I established that *image*, *scène*, *film*, *cinéma* are the terms abundantly deployed as surrogates for *souvenir* in Ernaux’s corpus, thereby confirming that she considers memory a primarily visual, if not cinematic, phenomenon. The *images* are no longer to be understood as metaphors; rather, they are always dynamic and feature the cinematic (versus photographic) impression of movement. Let us recall that the narrator of *La Femme gelée* juxtaposes static *images* of bourgeois “Femmes fragiles et vaporeuses” (*La Femme gelée* 9) with *dynamic images* of the proletarian women that inhabited her childhood, namely her mother, who is “la force et la tempête” (*La Femme gelée* 15). With relation to her shopkeeper mother, the narrator reports that “les choses vibrent près d’elle, éclatent même, jour magnifique où un cendrier vole par la fenêtre et se pulvérise sur le trottoir devant le livreur hébété qui a eu tort d’oublier je ne sais quelle marchandise” (*La Femme gelée* 19).

I analyzed two *scènes* from *La Place*, both of which contribute to the flashback relaying the narrator’s *entre-deux classes* and the socio-cultural alienation that provoked familial alienation between her and her father. The “*scène du lycée de Lyon*” (*La Place* 13; my emphasis), during which the narrator endured dismissive treatment at the hands of her CAPES examination committee, reinforces the humiliation she experienced as a former member of the dominated social stratum, and provokes within her a disdain for her newly acquired dominant social status. Yet, I noted a degree of ambivalence on the part of the narrator, for during “la scène ridicule du mauvais cadeau” (*La Place* 98), the narrator adopts the bourgeois perspective when she expresses frustration at her father’s bewilderment and

slight derision when receiving a bottle of after-shave. While this gift would not have been questioned by a cultivated, bourgeois recipient, it is incongruous with her father's *place* as a member of the proletariat. That "scène ridicule" (*La Place* 98) advances the narrative of alienation between father and daughter by providing a concrete sub-narrative of the socio-cultural differences between them.

Nonetheless, in *La Place*, the narrator also wishes to relay the happy moments of her relationship with her father. I indicated that the final memory-image evoked, an "instantané de la mémoire" (*La Place* 95), is intentionally presented as a static, inalterable *photographic* image in order to emphasize her father's happiness on the day of her wedding to a middle-class student, and more importantly, to relate that he did not feel out of place among the bourgeois guests at the narrator's wedding reception dinner.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I investigated "la scène indicible" (*La Honte* 38) of June 15, 1952, during which Ernaux's father nearly killed her mother. This scène is ineffaceable not only because of its traumatic disruption the family dynamic, but more importantly because it indelibly marks the narrator with the stain of socio-cultural shame. As we shall recall, she adopts the perspective that the "scène indicible" (*La Honte* 38) is inextricably linked to her family's social class. That scène becomes a filter, resembling the apparatus that one might place upon a camera's lens, in that it alters her perception other *scènes* and *images* from that summer. We shall recall that the narrator becomes acutely aware of the judgmental bourgeois gaze, when, in the presence of her teacher and schoolmates, she describes her mother's disheveled appearance and urine-stained nightgown. I also investigated the narrator's memory-images from a bus excursion to Lourdes, where she and her father are cognizant that, for the first time, they are outnumbered by members of the dominant social class. The

“scène indicible” (*La Honte* 38) thus envelops the remaining *scène* and *images* from the summer of 1952 with a residue of shame. The affective potency of that *scène* is also likened to a photographic image, or a permanent mental freeze-frame, for the narrator refers to it as “cette scène figée depuis des années” (*La Honte* 30). The cinematic device of freeze-frame of real, photographic images has also become a defining characteristic of Ernaux’s corpus.

In Chapter 4, I proposed that we interpret the photographs in Ernaux’s works as cinematic freeze-frames. I selected and analyzed photographs from *La Place*, *La Honte* and *Les Années* to fulfill this task. Like the various evocations of *images* and *scènes* examined in Chapter 3, the photographic images throughout Ernaux’s corpus are hardly gratuitously embedded in the narrative. On the contrary, they are to be understood as visual cues that often reveal additional elements of truth, as Charles Grivel has observed in his essay on the use of freeze-frames in film.⁹¹ They also elucidate what photography theorist André Rouillé has termed “le mode interrogatif,” (292) of the photographic image, in that they present a response to the question, “What happened?” and are transformed into what Rouillé has designated as “la photographie-expression” (175) because they actually “narrate” an event. In the freeze-frames studied in Chapter 4, the “event” in question centers around the narrator’s burgeoning socio-cultural alienation.

I began Chapter 4 by examining four photographs from *La Place*, all of which serve to present the trajectory of the father’s life as well as to advance the narrative of father-daughter alienation. I argued that the narrative power assigned to those freeze-framed images transforms them into Rouillé’s “photographie-expression” (175). I also noted Barthes’

⁹¹ In the previous chapter, I note that Grivel assigns to freeze-framed images the task of revealing additional truths within the filmic narrative. He states: “Les photographies, dans ce cas, « sortent » une vérité que le film ne dit pas, et peut-être même évacuent” (178; my emphasis).

punctum in photographs. For example, the *cabinets de toilettes* and laundry facilities figuring in the background of a photograph of the narrator's father in *La Place* (47) would certainly not be present in photographs orchestrated by an aesthetically-trained bourgeois eye. In all cases, the photographs inserted into the narrative flow of *La Place* "tell the story" of familial and socio-cultural alienation.

I analyzed two freeze-framed photographic images from *La Honte* in Chapter 4. These images represent two temporal periods. The Communion portrait evoked precedes the "scène indicible" (*La Honte* 38), and thus the narrator's realization of shame, while the photograph featuring the narrator and her father on their bus trip belongs to a time when the narrator is governed by a pervasive and insidious perception of shame. I argued in Chapter 4 that the two photographs are essential in framing what I designated in Chapter 3 as the chronology of shame and are implemented as tools in the narrator's attempt to reintegrate her past and present self.

I emphasized the crucial role of the freeze-framed image in *La Honte* by indicating that the photograph of the narrator taken during the voyage with her father actually closes the narrative and reveal the sole source of reintegration possible between the past and present self: Ernaux's permanent impression of shame and socio-cultural alienation (*La Honte* 133).

Having moved away from the leitmotif of socio-cultural alienation between 2002 (*L'Occupation*) and 2005 (*L'Usage de la photo*), Ernaux reprises that leitmotif when tracing socio-cultural trajectory of the narrator via the freeze-framed photographs evoked in *Les Années*. In Chapter 4, I examined several of those photographs, with particular attention to the somewhat paradoxical "*invisible des photos*" (*Les Années* 121; my emphasis). I indicated that those "invisible" elements, appearing in the metanarrative commentary

accompanying each freeze-framed image, actually contribute to the nearly seventy-year individual and collective flashback comprising *Les Années*. Specifically, aside from establishing the identity of the future author/narrator, those unseen elements relay three distinct phases of her trajectory: the gradual cognizance of socio-cultural difference vis-à-vis the dominant social stratum, her subsequent *embourgeoisement* through higher education and finally, her disenchantment with the acquisition of bourgeois culture.

I concluded Chapter 4 by positing that the last photograph evoked in *Les Années* is actually of primordial importance, in that it precipitates the fruition of the narrative. We shall recall that the photograph in question features the narrator and her granddaughter and dates from Christmas 2006. When “freezing” upon this photograph, the narrator recalls her battle with breast cancer, a battle that coincided with the revelation that she would soon be a grandmother. Rather than the typical Ernauxian *entre-deux classes*, at the end of *Les Années* the narrator confronts another incarnation of the *entre-deux*: “cet entre-deux d’une naissance certaine et de sa mort possible” (*Les Années* 235). It is this realization of the ephemeral nature of life – elicited by the visual, freeze-framed image from Christmas 2006 – that prompts the narrator to put into material, written form all of the *images* and *scènes* that comprise “ses années.”

In considering the extent to which Ernaux redefines the literary paradigm in *Les Années*, first by creating “une sorte d’autobiographie *impersonnelle*” (*Les Années* 240; my emphasis), but more importantly by cementing the symbiotic relationship between the text, cinematic and photographic devices, one must wonder if she can introduce additional innovations into to her writerly project. Will she continue to explore new terrain in her endeavor to write the reality of her experiences by excavating and relaying in flashback form

the memory-images and still photographs from her past?

The deployment of the photographic image and of cinematic devices in Ernaux's latest work, *L'Autre fille*, published in March 2011, confirms that the author has indeed maintained the text-image reciprocity that has defined her corpus since 1983, while still continuing to innovate each new writing project. In *L'Autre fille*, and for the first time in her thirty-seven year career, Ernaux experiments with the epistolary form. In the text, she addresses not a live recipient, but the deceased sister she never knew and of whose existence she was unaware until the age of ten.⁹²

Embedded within the "letter" in *L'Autre fille* is a flashback to a *scène* from Ernaux's memory, namely the circumstances under which she discovered her sister's existence and death. Before we briefly examine that scene, we will ascertain the degree to which Ernaux maintains cinematic and photographic processes in *L'Autre fille*.

In order to establish that the visual and verbal *trucages* continue to be defining factors of Ernaux's corpus, let us consider the manner in which Ernaux orchestrates the flashback in *L'Autre fille*. By examining the visual and verbal cues in the passage that will soon follow, we will determine that the language implemented and a textual scission initiate fading into the flashback as well as the *voix off's* manifestation. In preparation of that flashback to the summer day on which she discovers that she had an older sister who died, Ernaux provides background information regarding the time and place of the pending narrative. She announces that "La scène du récit se passe pendant les vacances 1950, le dernier été des grands jeux du matin au soir entre cousines, quelques filles du quartier et des citadines en

⁹² Ernaux's sister, Ginette Duchesne, died of diphtheria in 1938, two years before Ernaux's birth. The "Affranchis" Collection of NiL éditions furnished its authors with the following directive: "Écrivez la lettre que vous n'avez jamais écrite."

vacances à Yvetot” (*L’Autre fille* 13). Ernaux continues by explaining the nature of her playmates’ games:

On jouait à la marchande, aux grandes personnes, on se fabriquait des maisons dans les nombreuses dépendances de la cour du commerce des parents, avec des casiers à bouteilles, des cartons et des vieux tissus. On chantait chacune à son tour, debout sur la balançoire, *Il fait bon chez vous Maître Pierre et Ma guêpière et mes longs jupons*, comme au crochet radiophonique. (*L’Autre fille* 13)

Ernaux then expresses the desire to delay the flashback before we encounter a substantial blank space in the text. We shall discover that the passage immediately following that space reprises her previous announcement that “La scène du récit se passe pendant les vacances 1950” (*L’Autre fille* 13), by situating us in another place (“au début de la voie qui longe l’arrière de l’épicerie et du café des parents, la rue de l’École” [*L’Autre fille* 14]) and time (“un dimanche en fin d’après-midi [*L’Autre fille* 14]). Ernaux states:

Je voudrais continuer à décrire ces vacances-là, retarder.

C’est un dimanche en fin d’après-midi, au début de la voie qui longe l’arrière de l’épicerie et du café des parents, la rue de l’École, appelée ainsi à cause d’une école maternelle privée qu’il y aurait eue au début du siècle, près du jardinet de roses et de dahlias, protégé par un haut grillage qui court tout le long du mur au dessus d’un talus de mauvaises herbes. (*L’Autre fille* 14)⁹³

In the passage above, we receive the *visual cue*, provided by the textual scission after her desire to delay the flashback, and the *verbal cue*, expressed by the return to the her parents’ courtyard late on a Sunday afternoon, both of which indicate that the space and time

⁹³ The entire flashback in *L’Autre fille* is narrated in the present tense, undoubtedly to demonstrate its still-lingering effects on Ernaux. I will touch upon the indelibility of this memory in the final section of this final chapter.

in which the narrative operates has changed. The shift to the past in both space and time reveals Ernaux's distance from her present-time commentary (the desire to postpone entry into the flashback, for example) and mimics *voix off* narration.

Ernaux continues the flashback in *voix off* by revealing the conversation during which her mother revealed that she had indeed lost a child:

Depuis un moment indéterminé, ma mère est en grande conversation avec une jeune femme du Havre qui passe les vacances avec sa petite fille de quatre ans chez ses beaux-parents, les S., dont la maison se trouve à une dizaine de mètres plus loin dans la rue de l'École... Je joue près d'elles avec la petite fille, elle s'appelle Mireille, à courir et nous attraper. Je ne sais pas comment j'ai été alertée, peut-être la voix de ma mère plus basse d'un seul coup. Je me suis mise à l'écouter, comme si je ne respirer plus... Elle raconte qu'ils ont eu une autre fille que moi et qu'elle est morte de la diphtérie à six ans, avant la guerre, à Lillebonne. Elle décrit les peaux dans la gorge, l'étouffement. Elle dit: elle est morte comme une petite sainte. (*L'Autre fille* 16)

Like those evoked in Chapter 3 of this study,⁹⁴ this *scène* is inefaceable because of its affective impact on Ernaux, namely the realization that Ernaux is indeed the “*other*” daughter, as her mother's wounding words reveal: “elle dit de toi *elle était plus gentille que celle-là*. Celle-là, c'est moi” (*L'Autre fille* 16; italics in the original). In yet another *scène* of familial alienation, Ernaux is confronted for the very first time with an alterity provoked by an unknown and quite literally ghostly entity in the invisible traces left behind by her sister. This is undoubtedly why Ernaux attempts to make her sister “visible” by adopting another innovation of cinematic-photographic-textual reciprocity in her corpus. *L'Autre fille* is actually launched with a freeze-framed photograph – and is the only Ernauxian text thus far whose incipit describes (without showing) a photograph. In this photographic evocation, we encounter an image in which Ernaux's sister appears as an infant:

⁹⁴ For *scènes* in *La Place* and *La Honte*, Chapter 3.

C'est une photo de couleur sépia, ovale, collée sur le carton jauni d'un livret, elle montre un bébé, juché de trois quarts sur des coussins festonnés, superposés. Il est revêtu d'une chemise brodée, à une seule bride, large, sur laquelle s'attache un gros nœud un peu en arrière de l'épaule, comme une grosse fleur ou les ailes d'un papillon géant. (*L'Autre fille* 9)

Recalling Barthes' assertion in *La Chambre claire*, Ernaux's sister, Ginette, becomes the referent or the *Spectrum* of the photograph. Barthes employs the term *Spectrum* not only because of its association with "spectacle," but more importantly, to connote the notion of a specter (*La Chambre claire* 23). When viewing and describing for us the opening photograph and the *scène*, Ernaux indeed confronts "le retour du mort" (*La Chambre claire* 23).

The significance of launching the narrative with this "frozen," spectral image becomes clear within several pages of its evocation, when Ernaux states: "Pas plus qu'une photo, la scène du récit n'a bougé" (*L'Autre fille* 16).⁹⁵ In this instance, the freeze-frame mimics the indelible nature of the traumatic *scène* in which Ernaux overhears her mother's apparent favoring of Ginette, the deceased sister, over Ernaux. Transcribing the photograph and the *scène* in *L'Autre fille* becomes, thus, a means by which Ernaux can "Lutter contre la longue vie des morts" (*L'Autre fille* 77).

Further promoting the relationship between the image and the text, Ernaux *explicitly* associates her writerly task in *L'Autre fille* with that of a photographer: "Faire le récit de ce récit ce sera en finir avec le flou du vécu, *comme entreprendre de développer une pellicule photo* conservée dans un placard depuis soixante ans et jamais tirée" (*L'Autre fille* 14; my emphasis). "Developing," or writing the *scène* becomes the sole manner in which Ernaux will liberate herself not only from the apparent indelibility of the memory-image during which her mother revealed she preferred her deceased daughter to Ernaux, but also from the

⁹⁵ The permanence of this *scène* certainly calls to mind that of "la scène indicible" (*La Honte* 38) in *La Honte*.

haunting traces of her sister.

When developing a photograph, the photographer's task is to make tangible and "real" the transient image captured by the camera. Likewise, a cinematographer "realizes" and enlivens the images before their projection on the screen. For Ernaux, the act of writing becomes analogous with photographic and cinematic processes. From the stage of conception through the final product of her corpus, Ernaux visually materializes and presents through writing both the moving and fixed *images* and *scènes* inhabiting her memory. The symbiotic relationship between the scriptural and the visual modes of expression that Ernaux deploys is nothing short of an *entre-deux du texte et de l'image* that mirrors the *entre-deux identitaire*,⁹⁶ a leitmotiv that so frequently informs her *œuvre*.

The objective of Ernaux's *œuvre* is, as stated in the opening of this dissertation, *la quête du réel*. The *réel* that Ernaux seeks to convey includes, but is not limited to, her own experiences. In this regard, Ernaux redefines autobiographical writing in a manner that does not correspond to the categorization assigned to the genre by Philippe Lejeune: "Le récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu'un fait de sa propre existence, quand il met l'accent principal sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier, sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (*Signes de vie: le pacte autobiographique* 13). On the contrary, Ernaux adopts a hybrid autobiographical form that she designates as "*auto-socio-biographie*" (Ernaux and Jeannet 21; my emphasis) to fulfill her "recherche du réel" (Ernaux and Jeannet 80). Distinguishing herself from contemporary writers like Duras, Ernaux bristles at the notion of autofiction. In fact, she refuses to accept the suggestion of any similarities between her writing and that of Duras, insisting: "Ce qui nous sépare le plus, c'est l'absence d'historicité et de réalisme social de ses

⁹⁶ Let us recall that Michèle Bacholle designates Ernaux's *entre-deux identitaire* as the "moi clivé" (*Un Passé contraignant* 20), while Claire-Lise Tondeur speaks of "exil intérieur" ("Entretien avec Annie Ernaux" 38).

textes” (Ernaux and Jeannet 94). Ernaux’s auto-socio-biographical form integrates into her narratives sociological, historical, and therefore collective elements.

The transition towards a more collective *je* has become more and more prevalent in contemporary autobiographical writing (Perreault 2). In fact, the *je* employed by Ernaux, much like the other elements of her corpus, also adopts a hybrid form. I have previously stated that Ernaux deploys a “*je* transpersonnel” (Ernaux “Vers un *je* transpersonnel” 221)⁹⁷ in order to paint her personal experience in a collective light. Ernaux further explains her curiously non-subjective *je* in *L’Écriture comme un couteau*:

Je me sers de ma subjectivité pour retrouver, dévoiler des mécanismes ou des phénomènes plus généraux, collectifs. Quelquefois, j’ai aimé dire : « Je vis comme tout le monde les choses sur un mode particulier, mais je veux les écrire sur celui du général ». (43-44)

Given her insistence on objectivity and the subversive political inclinations of her *posture d’écriture* mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ernaux’s *auto-socio-biographical* corpus may also be read as a contemporary and hybrid adaptation (since it rejects *fiction*) of *le roman social*. Ernaux brings to the forefront both individual and socio-historical events, while offering a voice – and an authentic one at that, recalling Ernaux’s own status as a upwardly-mobile class migrant - to the subjugated classes, including, of course, women.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ “Le *je* que j’utilise me semble une forme impersonnelle, à peine sexuée, quelquefois même plus une parole de « l’autre » qu’une parole de moi : une forme transpersonnelle en somme” (“Vers un *je* transpersonnel” 221).

⁹⁸ Reinforcing the notion of Ernaux’s auto-socio-biographical corpus as an iteration of *le roman social*, Cathy Jellenik has noted that “Ernaux brings with her an entire social class as well as the uniqueness of her personal experience as a female member of that class” (75-76). Lyn Thomas and Emma Webb have also noted the dual personal and political slant of Ernaux’s corpus. Regarding *Une Femme*, which is dedicated to the author’s mother, they note, “Ernaux makes the combination of political and personal motivation in her writing abundantly clear; she is concerned to bring her working-class culture of origin into literature, through the account of her mother’s life” (29).

The fusion of *auto-socio-biographie* and *le roman social* from 1983 onward, in conjunction with Ernaux's persistent insertion of photographic and cinematic devices into the text places the author in a unique position vis-à-vis her contemporaries. Penning *auto-socio-biographical* flashback narratives sustained by evidentiary memory-images and photographs, in addition to considering her memory as a recording and projecting device, as we see throughout *Les Années*, situates Ernaux as the very seat of collective and individual memory for her entire generation.

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