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Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell, and Ann Miller, eds, *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. 273 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-3631-8.

Review by Alison Rice, University of Notre Dame.

The collective volume, *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, brings together reflections by scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France on the exciting and innovative uses of the visual in autobiographical French-language texts. Editors Natalie Edwards, Amy Hubbell, and Ann Miller provide a useful overview of the major contributions to critical thought on autobiographical writing in France in their introduction. From the outset, they put forth a convincing argument that the genre has taken a “decidedly visual turn in recent years” (p. 1). They effectively trace the ways in which theorists such as Roland Barthes have contributed over the past four-and-a-half decades to a new understanding of the possibilities—and impossibilities—of writing the self, pointing out that the latter’s own 1975 text, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*,<sup>[1]</sup> exemplifies new conceptions of self-representations: “The genre of autobiography itself underwent radical change in the middle of the twentieth century, as the canonical affirmation of unique selfhood, stable across time, gave way to the more fractured subjectivity” found in Barthes’ famous publication (p. 2). This understanding of the challenges of finding an appropriate language to evoke an evolving self, characterized by “fractured subjectivity,” is complemented in this collection by a similar sensitivity to the difficulties of adequately representing the self through images. The resulting book is rich, varied, and provocative in its explorations of criticism and theory alongside practical examples found in autobiographical written texts that incorporate photography, as well as in its attention to the autobiographical aspects of cinematic works and graphic novels.

Since “the inclusion of images: photographic, filmic, or drawn” is increasingly widespread in French autobiographical creations, this recent scholarly publication is timely (p. 4). The work of prominent figures like Sophie Calle, Hélène Cixous, Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Georges Perec, and Agnès Varda is analyzed alongside that of other important writers and artists like Anne Brochet, Marie Cardinal, Jacques Derrida, Camille Laurens, Marie NDiaye, and Marjane Satrapi in a volume that is remarkably balanced for an edited collection. Indeed, both the breadth and depth of these analyses are commendable, bearing witness to an unusually unified collaborative endeavor. The acknowledgements indicate that the book came into existence following discussions and debates at two conferences, the first in England in 2007 and the second in New York in 2008. It is clear that the conversations that took place at these gatherings facilitated the creation of a similar tone and outlook in the chapters that make up this book; the questions that guide these reflections are obviously in harmony, demonstrating a knowledge of and an engagement with the thought of a well-chosen theoretical corpus that is outlined in the introduction and elaborated on in the first chapter.

Titled “Beyond Autobiography,” Véronique Montémont’s contribution explicitly addresses the complicated relationship between the photograph and the text, both in autobiographical works that describe photographs without including them, and in those that feature photos in their pages. In her analysis of the latter, in works that she characterizes as “iconotextual” (p. 34), Montémont argues that

while the “conjunction of text and photograph...might seem to approach some ideal of veracity in autobiography, [it] introduces a certain play through which the two elements enter into contact with each other and sometimes clash” (p. 35). Her comments on truth and referentiality—and, ultimately, enunciation—in this chapter are in conversation with Philippe Lejeune’s 1975 *The Autobiographical Pact*, [2] a well-known work that sought to define autobiography in relatively clear terms, most famously in its establishment of a “pact between author and reader as to the nominal identity between narrator, extratextual author, and textual self,” as the editors explain in the introduction (p. 2).

In the beautifully composed final chapter on “Autobiography in *Bande Dessinée*,” Ann Miller “considers Lejeune’s pact” in light of contemporary innovations in “French-language comic art” (p. 235), taking into account the specificities of “a medium where the self is represented visually” (p. 243). In this context, “the question of resemblance, in the narrowly defined sense of physical likeness, necessarily becomes salient” (p. 243), and the “subjective vision” of the artist stands out in ways that differentiate this medium from film (p. 245). What Miller identifies as “the very instability” of the self as it is “drawn anew in each panel” turns out to be a strong point for “the portrayal of the autobiographical self,” caught in the “dialectic between iteration and transformation” (p. 250).

In the brief, evocative chapter titled “The Photobiographical Today: Signs of an Identity Crisis?,” Floriane Place-Verghnes points out that the postmodern era has had an influence on textual self-representations that are “concomitant with the increasing prevalence of photography: as the self splits and finds expression through ramification into a multitude of small narratives, photography plays an ever greater role in the representation of this plurality” (p. 103). Like other scholars who have contributed to this book, Place-Verghnes is attentive to the ways in which photographs are viewed today, and argues that rather than providing an objective truth, their inclusion in the autobiographical text leads the reader toward intimate, subjective truths: “our faith in the capacity of photography to offer a transcription of the real has become eroded, and...this is just what has allowed photography to show something different—since it is no longer the guarantee of an external referent, it can move inward” (p. 105).

Shirley Jordan draws inspiration from Serge Tisseron’s understanding of photography as an intimate medium in her chapter,[3] eloquently emphasizing the possibility of creating autobiographies that exhibit “an interest less in seeing the self *in* photography than thinking the self *through* photography” (p. 52). Her analysis of four texts that “narrativize intense relationships, either of romantic and sexual love or of maternal love” (p. 54) leads Jordan to conclude that “the promise of proximity to autobiographical subjects, characterized in recent years by an escalating trend for ever more intimate revelations, is paradoxically both met and challenged by photographs” (p. 75). She notes that the recent phototexts she has chosen to examine in these pages are “elegiac,” replete with a tendency to fixate on “loss,” and on “traces,” rather than exploring “the subtle modalities of photographic self-invention” that we might anticipate will become “an important aspect of photobiographical expression in the near future” (p. 75).

In her analysis of Hélène Cixous’s *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie’s *L’Usage de la photo*,[4] Natalie Edwards addresses the potential of photographs to establish intimacy in the autobiographical text. In her words, not only may the photo serve as “an illustration or verification, it may provide another version of a self, it may provide links between elements of the text and forge a more intimate relationship between autobiographer and reader” (p. 81). It seems surprising that, while Cixous and Ernaux have composed texts that foreground photographs, the body of the autobiographer herself “is conspicuously absent” (p. 81). Edwards argues that this absence serves a purpose: “The refusal to incorporate the physical trace of the self within their autobiographies” is “a mechanism for subverting the way in which a photograph freezes the body within a frame” (p. 89). What’s more, “[b]y refusing to limit themselves in any frame, and by rejecting a series of images of their bodies that would insist upon stasis, these authors use photographs as a way of pointing to the unstable, plural, and evolving nature of

their autobiographical selves” (p. 89).

The evolving nature of autobiographical selves and their intersection with a collectivity is at the heart of Amy Hubbell’s study of “Pied-Noir Photodocumentaries.” The abundant nostalgic “visual memoirs” from Algeria “draw the exiles together” by creating a “sense of unity with a country that is no longer their home” and “simultaneously deconstruct[ing] the past they attempt to unify” (p. 168). Despite their potential to participate in the construction of “a communal autobiography,” texts by Marie Cardinal and Benjamin Stora ultimately lead many to feel, like Jacques Derrida upon viewing unrecognizable scenes from his childhood haunts on screen, “doubly displaced” (p. 181).<sup>[5]</sup> Hubbell calls attention to the role played by multiple media, including internet sites, to contribute to a sense of a “shared past” (p. 182), insisting that despite the deconstruction that intertwining stories bring about, “returning will remain the perpetual game of the Pieds-Noirs” (p. 183).

Returning to the past is an important aspect of Georges Perec’s work, and the particular problem of memory is the focus of Peter Wagstaff’s examination of this innovative writer’s autobiographical creations alongside a documentary film he authored. As Wagstaff puts it, “photographic images” in the autobiographical work of fiction, as in the film, “cut across the continuum [of the passage of time], fixing the instantaneous moment” (p. 192). This leads to a provocative outcome: “The resulting counterpoint of text and image thus provides an insight into the construction and expression of autobiographical memory, its evident uncertainties and unformulated desires” (p. 192).

Marguerite Duras’ autobiographical writing is renowned for its exploration of memory and forgetting, and it is in relation to photographs that much of the past is explored. In her essay, Erica L. Johnson astutely analyzes Duras’ final novel, *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*, published in 1991, not as a rewriting of her 1984 award-winning autobiographical novel, *L’Amant*, but instead as a “corrective rewriting” of the film based on the book (p. 116).<sup>[6]</sup> Johnson makes the following assertion about what this rewriting accomplishes: “In her use of photographic images and through her response to Annaud’s film, Duras demonstrates a characteristic of French life writing by displacing the autobiographical referent and locating her subjectivity in multiple, contradictory, unfixed, and even inaccessible sites” (p. 116). It is noteworthy that, in a move that recalls the absent body in Cixous’ and Ernaux’s texts, Duras manages “to absent herself from her own story” in the interplay of her various autobiographical texts: “Constructing her autobiographical subjectivity in the space-off of photos and films, Duras sets her life into play through a rich and constantly shifting set of intertextual resonances and, more important, absences” (p. 135).

Any study of visual representations with autobiographical dimensions in the French context would be remiss if it did not include the highly inventive photographic work of Sophie Calle and the creative cinematography of Agnès Varda. The chapters Johnnie Gratton and Agnès Clatayud have devoted to these iconoclastic artists, through the respective—and respectful—lenses of illustration and self-portraiture, shed light on the tremendous originality of both Calle and Varda, all while paying close attention to the subtleties of their work. It is significant that these insightful analyses of the work of these two brilliant women should figure prominently in a book that highlights recent influential creations. In fact, it is worth noting that five out of the seven proper names that figure in the chapter titles of *Textual and Visual Selves* designate women. In my view, this is not a reflection of the makeup of the scholars who have come together to publish in this study, though eight of the ten collaborators are women, but instead serves as a testimony to the profoundly impressive contributions women are presently making to opening up new understandings of the textual and the visual in French autobiographical work. From a variety of complementary perspectives on questions that transcend rigid categorizations related to gender *and* genre, this book provides a beautiful and informative study of the phenomenon.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Véronique Montémont, "Beyond Autobiography"

Shirley Jordan, "Chronicles of Intimacy: Photography in Autobiographical Projects"

Natalie Edwards, "The Absent Body: Photography and Autobiography in Hélène Cixous's *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*"

Floriane Place-Verghnes, "The Photobiographical Today: Signs of an Identity Crisis?"

Erica L. Johnson, "Reclaiming the Void: The Cinematographic Aesthetic of Marguerite Duras's Autobiographical Novels"

Johnnie Gratton, "Illustration Revisited: Phototextual Exchange and Resistance in Sophie Calle's *Suite vénitienne*"

Amy L. Hubbell, "Viewing the Past through a 'Nostalgic' Lens: Pied-Noir Photodocumentaries"

Peter Wagstaff, "Georges Perec, Memory, and Photography"

Agnès Calatayud, "The Self-Portrait in French Cinema: Reflections on Theory and on Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*"

Ann Miller, "Autobiography in *Bande Dessinée*"

## NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[2] Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[3] Serge Tisseron, *Le mystère de la chambre claire: Photographie et inconscient* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996).

[4] Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Photos de racines* (Paris: des Femmes, 1994); Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'Usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

[5] Marie Cardinal, *Les Pieds-Noirs* (Paris: Belfond, 1988); Benjamin Stora, *Algérie: Formation d'une nation suivi de Impressions de voyage* (Biarritz: Atlantica, 1998); Safaa Fathy, director, *D'ailleurs, Derrida* (France Arte, 1999).

[6] Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984); Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

Alison Rice  
University of Notre Dame  
[arice1@nd.edu](mailto:arice1@nd.edu)

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