(UN-)FRAMING VISION: TEXT AND IMAGE FROM THE NEW NOVEL TO CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

What does one see when he or she looks at a picture? This very broad question has no real answer, because each “he” or “she” will have a different response to the picture that is viewed. Each textual description of a photograph, therefore, will be different, reflecting each individual’s interpretation or sentiment. The goal of this study is to show the result of such interplay between texts and images, how one influences the other.

We will begin with an analysis of the French New Novel that emerged in the decade of the 1950s, and provoked debates on subjective versus objective literature, real versus imaginary, sight versus what is seen by the mind’s eye, among other topics. These binary oppositions allow us to gain a better understanding not only of an image, but also the text that accompanies it and gives it meaning. Since we are not looking at images or texts as isolated structures, there is a necessary interplay of language and images. Thus, arbitrary distinctions in the form of binary oppositions are problematic. The chapters of this study are discussions of such problems. We will present
these problems by using the New Novel and its innovation as a frame of reference for analyses of verbal-visual narrative crossovers that characterize contemporary French literature.

The remaining three chapters will show the dialectical relationship that exists between texts and images. Images in the form of photographs are supposed to relate the truth. However, when these photographs become verbal representations, one must question the message they provide. While the texts we have chosen vary in genre, subject matter, and perspective, they all allow us to problematize the text/image dichotomy. In addition, each text evokes questions of identity that plague the modern era. All of the authors we have chosen highlight the interplay of a text and an image, as well as the way in which images are used for identification. Although their messages vary, the authors we will be discussing all chose to express themselves in terms of their own visual culture while forcing their readers to interpret their works, and see that interpretations are undeniably variable.
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INTRODUCTION

IMAGE AND TEXT: SHOWING SEEING THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE

Images occupy an enormous place in modern society. They are provocative, influential, and dependant: images provoke reactions from spectators, they influence opinions, and they depend on a spectator to give them life and an identity. Although images are often considered elements of vision, they are brought to life and identified through language. Therefore any attempt to analyze images demands a careful consideration of the interaction of three entities: the image itself, the spectator, and the culture and discourse informing the spectator’s vision. Patrick and Kelli Fuery note the important role of the spectator in the creation of meaning: “It is important to recognize that images do not simply exist—they must be made visible. The rendering visible of the image is part of the creation of the spectator. It is how images come to exist, and, significantly, how they come to be seen as meaningful and the bearers of meanings” (Fuery and Fuery xii). It is from this point of view that we see the importance of not only the image, but the interpretation of the spectator that correlates it to a text which substantiates it or brings it to life.
In this study we will use the text/image dichotomy as a foundation for discussions of visual-verbal narrative crossovers that characterize twentieth and twenty-first century writing. W.J.T. Mitchell speaks of this new visually centered focus as the “pictorial turn.” Mitchell uses Richard Rorty’s way of characterizing the history of philosophy as a series of “turns” to go further and add another turn. Rorty identifies the enlightened contemporary philosophical scene with a focus on words (Mitchell 1994: 12). His final “turn” is the “linguistic” one. Mitchell takes his ideas further and adds a “pictorial turn.” For Mitchell, the “pictorial turn” in Anglo-American philosophy can be traced back to the works of Charles Peirce and Nelson Goodman “both of [whom] explore the convention and codes that underlie nonlinguisitic symbol systems and (more important) do not begin with the assumption that language is paradigmatic for meaning” (Mitchell 1994: 12). In Europe Mitchell identifies evidence of this “pictorial turn” in the works of Derrida (grammatology for example), the Frankfurt School’s “investigations of modernity, mass culture, and visual media” (Mitchell 1994: 12), and Michel Foucault’s distinction between what is seeable and what is sayable.

Mitchell has written extensively about images, pictures, and the visual. In *Picture Theory*, he “asks what a picture is and finds that the answer cannot be thought without extended reflection on texts, particularly on the ways in
which texts act like pictures or ‘incorporate’ pictorial practices and vice versa” (Mitchell 1994: 4). Mitchell’s book *Picture Theory* which was published in 1994 and was written, as he explains, in pursuit of three questions: “What is a picture? How do pictures interact with words? Why do the answers to these questions matter?” (Mitchell 1994: 215). Because of the nature of these questions, reviewers questioned Mitchell’s title (*Picture Theory*), and suggested that he should have entitled his book “What Do Pictures Want?”.

Mitchell responds to this suggestion in a 1994 article “What Do Pictures Want? An Idea of Visual Culture” by asking that same question. He begins by noting the dubious proposition that pictures could want something:

> [pictures] can’t want anything because they aren’t persons—aren’t even animate beings. Any notion that pictures want something is a superstitious illusion. It verges on magical thinking—idolatry, fetishism, totemism, and animism. Or it’s just a playful conceit to illustrate the way we project emotions into pictures, allowing ourselves to treat them ‘as if’ they were alive, the way a child treats a doll. (216)

An investigation into the wants and desires of pictures does require a certain personification of them. They would have to have a gender and desires that were expressed as a result of their identity.

In the course of this current study we will be looking at pictures that are representations of the narrator. In this way, these pictures are much like the persons they represent. Thus, we can work from the hypothesis that pictures
have the same desires as their subjects. They are a source of questioning that will lead to answers, or more questions, concerning the truth about their identity. Mitchell concludes his essay on the desires of pictures by saying that what pictures want is to be asked what they want. He also points out that, at times, they want nothing at all. While this may be true, there remains the question of the eye of the beholder of the picture who wants something from it. We need pictures to help us ask and answer questions. Pictures inspire us, they open up multiple meanings for their interpretation, and they make us understand their importance in our visual culture. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but as we will see, this is quite an understatement. Beauty, meaning, and perception are in the eye of the beholder, and each beholder has his or her own words to say it.

While our focus here will be on French writers, the interaction of texts and images is characteristic of the modern novel worldwide. In his study *Literary Modernism and Photography*, Paul Hansom relates photography and literary modernism stating that:

> Literary modernism, like its photographic counterpart, is very much ours: It is our primary way of knowing and understanding the world. It structures and provides the responsive language for our aesthetic relations in the world, and while some of the epistemological certainties behind the modernist credo are eroding in the face of postmodern cultural developments, we largely remain modernists at heart. (Hansom xiv)
Hansom is not alone in noticing a correlation between photography and literary modernism, image and language. Many other critics and theorists, from all corners of the globe, have noted the connection between images and texts (language) in the modern era. Foremost among these theorists are W.J.T. Mitchell, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Victor Burgin, Irit Rogoff, Martine Joly, and Daniel Gronjnowski, to name a few. Images are signs that are in a framed space, and language provides an interpretation of this space; and, at times, it attempts to permeate it.

Various forms of media have taught us to look inside a framed space. This is true of television, computer and movie screens, photographs and so on. As Martine Joly points out:

Le plus souvent rectangulaire (de la photographie à la page de magazine en passant par la peinture, l’écran de cinéma, de télévision ou ordinateur, etc.), il [le cadre] est une limite, une frontière physique qui délimite et sépare deux espaces distincts qui sont l’espace représenté (à l’intérieur du cadre) et l’espace de l’exposition ou de la monstration (à l’extérieur du cadre, le hors-cadre). (Joly 1994 : 109)

Two recent studies on visual culture show the elaborate extent to which this notion of framed space can be taken. Richard Howell’s study *Visual Culture* and Jessica Helfand’s *Screen: Essays on Graphic Design, New Media, and Visual Culture* both address images, and the authors of both works begin each chapter or essay with a text-box summary of what is to follow. This is a way
of capturing the reader’s (spectator’s) attention by providing the central message of a larger text in a form that is familiar and fashionable. Clearly there is an effort to present information in a manner that befits the target audience. Thus, the way one sees has become a central focus in many disciplines from literary theory to psychoanalysis, semiotics, and psychology. More recently neuroscientists have joined in the research on images and the ways in which they influence how we think. In his study *Opening the Mind’s Eye*, Ian Robertson suggests that, paradoxically, “Western societies have largely lost the ability to think in images rather than words” (Robertson 2). He is a proponent of imagery-based thought if it is used wisely, and believes that a focus on images could help one overcome weaknesses: “Imagery-based thought, emotionally evocative and often creative if used sensibly, can help you discover new strengths and overcome old weaknesses. We need to cultivate a balance between logical, language-based thought on one hand, and intuitive, imagery-based thought on the other” (8). In a sense, this is the goal of a vast field grouped under the name “visual culture studies.” While we intuitively interpret certain images, we must go beyond this superficial reading to understand the complex imagery-based messages with which we come in constant contact.
In his study entitled *Visual Culture*, Richard Howells outlines the various theories and vocabulary associated with the study of images such as iconology, form, ideology, semiotics, and hermeneutics. These terms all provide insight into the problematic that is posed by visual culture but imbedded in the term “visual culture” is the term “culture” which has, itself, been under investigation for some time. We are dealing with complicated, multilayered arenas of meaning and, as Howells points out, we must not attempt to isolate “the” meaning of an image (Howells 6). We must, instead, learn how to read these visual images to avoid visual illiteracy which “is something that none of us can afford in the modern world” (1). Howells then proceeds to explain the various media defined as visual media such as fine art, photography, film, television and new media. All of these technological advances have expanded the outlets for the transmission of information. Within criticism, these visual media are explained by language whereby the interpretation of an image is verbalized and made public. To speak of interpretation reveals the importance of considering not only what is visible but its context in visual culture.

W.J.T. Mitchell joins Howells in a quest to understand and define visual culture. He attempts to delineate it as a concept that surpasses visual studies but admits that its boundaries are hard to define as fixed entities. Like
Howells, Mitchell considers vision and visual images as a system of codes that has to be learned: “vision and visual images, things that (to the novice) are apparently automatic, transparent, and natural, are actually symbolic constructions, like a language to be learned, a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the real world” (Mitchell 2002: 91). It is for this reason that critics have begun making the shift from the study of the image to visual culture studies. They seek to accommodate a realm of images, and their impact, that was heretofore little or unexamined.

Images are the basic elements of visual culture discourse and are defined by Irit Rogoff as devices that allow meaning to circulate visually; devices that are multi-faceted and work to “convey information, afford pleasure and displeasure, influence style, determine consumption and mediate power relations” (Rogoff 25). Rogoff presents her idea of visual culture in terms of the signifier, expanding on Derrida’s conceptualization of the signifier in relation to the other. Derrida’s conceptualization of *différance* manifests itself as a critique of Saussure’s “binary logic in which every element of meaning is locked into signification in relation to the other…” (25). As Rogoff explains, we have produced a field of vision version of Derrida’s *différance* that has given the signifier free reign and us “a freedom to
understand meaning in relation to images, sounds or spaces not necessarily perceived to operate in a direct, causal or epistemic relation to either their context or to one another” (25).

The way we understand meaning is exemplary of a link between image and language, because they are both systems of codes that have to be “read” and interpreted to be meaningful. Traditionally, literary critics discussed the notion of readership by emphasizing the reader’s role in interpreting a text. Now, with visual culture studies, it is spectatorship that announces itself as a key concept. Spectatorship, like readership, assumes that there is a (visual) sign and that it is to be interpreted. Rogoff explains how spectatorship is informed by the split between desiring subjects and desired objects and how this opposition was first explored in feminist film theory and carried over into critical discourses of minority cultures. Rogoff does note, however, that “currently such binary separations have been increasingly tempered by the slippages between the ever-eroding boundaries of exclusive objecthood or coherent subjecthood” (Rogoff 31).

Arguably, the boundaries between exclusive objecthood and coherent subjecthood are eroding because of the reader’s inability to discern a clear expression of one or the other. The literary climate of the 1950s and 60s in France provides a valuable site for an investigation into the binary opposition
of subject/object, and it is this moment in French literary history that will serve as the starting point for our current study. In Chapter One we will look at the major misconceptions of the New Novel in order to show how everyday objects are used as visual generators, not as a means for creating “objective” literature. Raylene Ramsey argues that “once these objects are ‘incorporated’ into Robbe-Grillet’s texts, these borrowed visual images become distanced signs of the drives that lie behind their selection and of the fantasies that are formative in their alteration” (Ramsey 1999: 229). Equally, Nathalie Sarraute works to uncover the fantasies and drives that exist prior to verbalization. We will rely on theoretical and fictional works by Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute to show how visual stimuli in the form of banal objects, come to form a perception, a new meaning. These factors, in turn, work to produce a new literary experience.

In Chapter Two we will look at what some have seen as the “subjective turn” in the work of the New Novelists. When the New Novelists published their “autobiographies,” the initial reaction was that they had rejected their previous experiments in literature. However, the shift from New Novel to “New Autobiography” allowed these novelists to continue exploring the visual while creating new forms for autobiographical writing. The New Novelists were not the only autobiographers to use images, notably verbal
representations of photographs, as creative catalysts for their life stories. Photography and autobiography often work in collusion and as Linda Haverty Rugg suggests:

The photographic situation, then, offers the autobiographer a representational image for the autobiographical act of looking at oneself, as well as a metaphor for the intrusive act of reading and interpreting that takes place after the publication of the autobiography. The photographer in such a metaphorical scenario is merely a cipher, a representation of the Eye, which can be either the alienated “I” of the autobiographer or the eye of the other, the reader. (Rugg 5)

In Chapter Three we will continue to show how photographs are important to the autobiographical, or autofictional, writing process. The writing process is, for our chosen authors, a means of self discovery as well as a way to work through trauma or discrimination due to ethnic, gender, or social difference. Georges Perec and Patrick Modiano come to terms with their Jewish identity through the narration of photographs. Hélène Cixous, Marie Cardinal, and Tassadit Imache explore their role as “foreigners” through photographs of themselves and family members. Similarly, Annie Ernaux and Grégoire Bouillier explore their social otherness through photographs. These verbal photographs allow the narrator to distance
him/herself from his/her painful past by expressing him or herself as a seen object. In doing so, the narrators actually become seen and heard all the while becoming a part of a shared discourse.

In Chapter Four we will step away from (straightforward) self-expressive works to show a different function of photographs for identification. Here the narrator struggles with either the process of duplicating a real object (or person), or understanding the way in which this real object is represented in a photograph. For Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Tournier, Dominique Noguez, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint, the novel provides a site for further examination of photographs, what they represent, and how they identify an individual. All of these different functions of images show how complex the visual world can be. The authors we will be discussing not only had an impact on contemporary writing, they—for different reasons—sought to express themselves in terms of visual culture. The various discussions on visual culture addressed here attest to its existence and while we have tried to define this vast concept, “for the moment, it is not so much what visual culture is, but what it can be enabled to do that matters” (107). Throughout the chapters of this study, we will see how focusing on visual culture permits us a more complete understanding of the interrelations
of an image and a text. In the New Novel and beyond we see how text and image collide and this study will attempt to “read” the aftermath of these collisions.

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1 The idea of “showing seeing” comes from Mitchell’s article “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture.”
2 This comes from the article “What do Pictures Want: An Idea of Visual Culture.” It is in this article that Mitchell looks at questions raised in Picture Theory and reassesses his answers.
3 I recently received a copy of Mitchell’s book What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images. Since this book was received in the final stages of my writing, there are references to both the article and the book. All references to Mitchell’s 1994 work refer to the article “What do Pictures Want? An Idea of Visual Culture” while those from 2005 refer to his book cited above.
4 What Howells defines as new media are things like digital technology. He also compares cinema and television, computers and the Internet. However, he considers these to be different modes of delivery more so than completely new forms for transmitting visual images.
5 This quote concludes the first section of essays on visual culture from The Visual Theory Reader. These “Conversations in Visual Culture” involve Raiford Guins, Joanne Morra, Marquard Smith and Omayra Cruz.
CHAPTER 1
GENERATING VISION IN THE MODERN NOVEL

Introducing a New Critical Vision

The focus of this chapter will be the French New Novel and the ways in which it changed how we view and interpret literature. It shall be our goal to show how the innovative techniques of the New Novelists not only opened up debates about literature, but opened our eyes to the importance of the visual in these works, and in the modern world. The themes addressed here in regards to the New Novel can help us to go beyond images produced by language in a text and see how every image has a story that is visible to the naked eye, and one that is very different as seen by the mind’s eye. The New Novel, thus, serves as a turning point in France’s literary history as well as a frame for our current study.

A shift from the traditional novel to the modern novel in France marked the 1950s when a group of novelists was noticed for their experiments in literature. These individuals included such authors as Alain Robbe-Grillet,
Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, and Robert Pinget among others. The members of this “group” shared some common ideas and a vision for the novel. They refused, however, to call their enterprise a school of thought or a formal literary movement. Because of the innovative techniques they introduced to the novel, these writers became known as *nouveaux romanciers*, or new novelists. Moreover, readers and critics of the New Novel often refer to the “school” to which they belonged as *l’école du regard* for the importance of imagery and vision in their novels. The impact of imagery and vision was important in the New Novel, but according to Robbe-Grillet, the novelist must also have an ultimate purpose. That purpose was to invent, or rather reinvent the novel constantly. When asked about his opinion on the notion of a “school” to which he belonged in an interview that was published in *Tel Quel* Robbe-Grillet responds: “C’est seulement une manière commode de désigner tous ceux qui cherchent de nouvelles formes romanesques, capables d’exprimer ou de créer de nouvelles relations entre l’homme et le monde, tous ceux qui sont décidés à inventer le roman. C’est-à-dire à inventer l’homme” (Robbe-Grillet 1963 : 40).

In 1963, Jean Bloch-Michel published a study entitled *Présent de l’indicatif*, in which he points out the power of images in modern society: “On peut dire que dans notre civilisation le bruit accompagne tandis que l’image
s’impose” (85). His study addresses, in part, the New Novel and its use of verbal imagery, allowing Bloch-Michel to assert that images are becoming more fascinating than words. Due to the growing popularity of cinema and television at that time, it is not surprising that these visual outputs for information would have their impact on readership and the written text. Whereas the image used to illustrate a text, it was now the text that was illustrating the image (79).

This concentration on imagery and innovative techniques employed by the New Novelists were often referred to as “objective” since endless descriptions of everyday objects replaced detailed psychological portraits of humans. However, psychology was far from absent in these novels. The new novelists toyed with notions of real and imaginary, opposed subjective and objective perceptions, all the while describing what was seen through a narrator’s mind’s eye. For critics (most notably Roland Barthes) these techniques resulted in a dehumanized novel that was reserved for intellectuals and was incomprehensible to the average reader.⁴ These were just some of the “misunderstandings” to which the new novelists (particularly Robbe-Grillet) reacted in their theoretical essays. Here we will
point out some of these misconceptions of the New Novel in order to better understand what was new about these works and how they forever changed our ideas about literature.

In his 1961 article “Nouveau roman, homme nouveau,” Robbe-Grillet summarizes the most prominent misunderstandings surrounding the New Novel and attempts to explain why each of these ideas formed by critics is actually the contrary of what the novel was for the New Novelists. Robbe-Grillet contends that the New Novel is only interested in Man and his situation in the world:

L’homme y est présent à chaque page, à chaque ligne, à chaque mot. Même si l’on y trouve beaucoup d’objets, et décrits avec minutie, il y a toujours et d’abord le regard qui les voit, la pensée qui les revoit, la passion qui les déforme. Les objets de nos romans n’ont jamais de présence en dehors des perceptions humaines, réelles ou imaginaires ; ce sont des objets comparables à ceux de notre vie quotidienne, tels qu’ils occupent notre esprit à tout moment. (116-17)

Because the real center of the novel is Man and his perception of his surroundings, it is erroneous to say that he has been expelled from the New Novel.
Furthermore, Robbe-Grillet refutes the “public’s” claim that the New Novel “a codifié les lois du roman futur [et] a fait table rase du passé” (114). The New Novelists (Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute in particular) were not trying to impose their fictional works as the new model for the novel; they were, instead, trying to break the mold created by realist and naturalist writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola. By breaking away from the traditional expectations, the New Novel would create a new realism that would constitute “le nouveau roman d’aujourd’hui” (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 13). By employing the word _aujourd’hui_, Robbe-Grillet reiterates his belief that: “Chaque romancier, chaque roman, doit inventer sa propre forme” (11).

Sarraute makes similar claims in her theoretical essay _L’ère du soupçon_:

Les critiques ont beau préférer, en bons pédagogues, faire semblant de ne rien remarquer, et par contre ne jamais manquer une occasion de proclamer sur le ton qui sied aux vérités premières que le roman, que je sache, est et restera toujours, avant tout, “une histoire où l’on voit agir et vivre des personnages”, qu’un romancier n’est digne de ce nom que s’il est capable de “croire” à ses personnages, ce qui lui permet de les rendre “vivants” et de leur donner une “épaisseur romanesque.” (59)

It was just such a definition of the novel that the New Novelists were working against and, for Sarraute, to carry on this tradition would constitute the “crime le plus grave: répéter les découvertes de ses prédécesseurs” (79). She did not believe that novels should be venerated forever: “Qu’un livre s’use
après avoir servi, voilà qui est naturel et sain. On le jette et on le remplace” (133). Since, as the New Novelists suggested, novelistic forms must be constantly changing and evolving to represent their era, the New Novel was in no way attempting to overturn the traditional novel and take its place as an absolute model. “Et, que les formes romanesques passent, c’est précisément ce que dit le Nouveau Roman !” (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 144).7

To repeat the discoveries of the traditional novelists would be to write a novel that contained outdated notions that Robbe-Grillet outlines in his article “Sur quelques notions périmées.”8 For the traditional novelist, characters were clearly defined by their names, and as Robbe-Grillet puts it, they could not be an undefined “he” or “she”: “Un personnage, tout le monde sait ce que le mot signifie. Ce n’est pas un il quelconque, anonyme et translucide, simple sujet de l’action exprimée par le verbe. Un personnage doit avoir un nom propre, double si possible : nom de famille et prénom” (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 27).9 The New Novelists did not engage in this means of identification for their characters. Rather, they mixed indefinite pronouns in an effort to resist this traditional way of identifying practiced by their predecessors.

The New Novelists also rejected the idea that the plot was the novel’s raison d’être. In the traditional novel, stories were told in a specific way and chronology was respected. “Bien raconter, c’est donc faire ressembler ce que
l’on écrit aux schémas préfabriqués dont les gens ont l’habitude, c’est-à-dire à l’idée toute faite qu’ils ont de la réalité” (30). On the contrary, in the modern novel “[r]aconter est devenu proprement impossible” (31). The reality of the modern novel would not be situated in some far away land that existed in the past, it would be representative of the here and now, and Man’s perception of his present state: “…au delà de ce que nous voyons (de ce que nous percevons par nos sens) il n’y aurait désormais plus rien” (37).

One final misunderstanding about the New Novel is that it was based on the theoretical writings of the New Novelists. As Robbe-Grillet explains: “En outre, c’est toujours sur nos prétendues intentions que l’on nous condamne : les détracteurs de nos romans prétendent qu’ils sont le résultat de nos théories pernicieuses, et les autres affirment que les romans sont bons, mais parce qu’ils ont été écrits contre elles !” (113). It is probably safe to say that neither was really the case. For the New Novelists, who began writing novels before they began their theoretical essays, the novel was a site for research, a place where there were no rules. In addition, the New Novelists sought to destroy artificial barriers between theory and practice. One was not a direct result of the other. Because of this false idea that the New Novel was a complicated structure reserved for specialists, the “common” reader felt excluded and dominated. However, for Robbe-Grillet, “[i]l suffit sans doute
Real v. Imaginary

In many of the new novels, the authors use ordinary objects as generators for vision and a greater meaning. The mimetic dimension of these works is reinforced by repetitive narrative structures as well as the effect that imagination has on the narrator’s perception of mundane objects. Edward Casey’s study “Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment” establishes a link between absence, repetition, and imagination. He points out how repetition is interpreted as “an element of the objective nature of the work of art” (Casey 250). He goes on to explain how structuralist and formalist trends in criticism presume repetition to be psyche-independent, “an aspect of the literary work understood in its objective being” (250). Casey also reminds us of the undeniable link between imagination and repetition with absence: “We repeat, in the mind or in our behavior, what is not present
or what is about to become non-present (in this latter case, we often repeat
precisely to forestall absence)” (251). The repetition of objects in the New
Novels does seem to inhibit absence just as it allows the narrator (and the
reader) some freedom to imagine. This process is, in part, what keeps the
new novel from becoming purely objective. The New Novelists rely on the
imagined impressions and perceptions produced by the narration to lead to
the production of meaning. Words, however, are complex and cannot be
seen as strictly imagined, thus, Casey says,

[a] visualized object or event is curiously depthless and frontal,
and possesses no hidden structure: it is as it appears and is only
as it appears. In contradistinction to this, each word, phrase, and
sentential unit in literature is at least doubly articulated, in
accordance with the co-essential (but arbitrarily conjoined)
orders of the signifier and the signified. (258)

The repetition and imagination to which Casey refers might be applied to the
object described in the new novels; but, more largely, they might be attributed
to the literary work as a world in and of itself. In this way, the literary work
also becomes an object and “[t]his object—the literary work as experienced—
represents a momentary merging of intending and intended, subject and
world,” author and reader (267). Therefore, author, reader, and literary work
come together to form one perception and one meaning that is momentary and subject to change with each reading, each different moment or place in the world.

Critics such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Robbe-Grillet have noted the effect Raymond Roussel’s work had on the New Novelists.11 Jean-Pierre Faye sees Roussel not only as a source of inspiration for Robbe-Grillet, but a clear ancestor for other novelists such as Camus and Sartre (Faye 1964: 15).12 One of the reasons for this opinion is based on Roussel’s use of repetition and/or imaginary elements. As Foucault notes about Roussel’s work:

Il s’agit de la même figure d’un langage dédoublé à l’intérieur duquel vient se loger une scène visible produite par le seul appel de cette distance. Mais si l’on songe qu’ici les deux homonymes sont présents et perceptible, que la figure est visiblement amphibologique (calvité et chauvinisme s’y juxtaposent de façon claire), qu’elle constitue un rébus à double sens, qu’elle est enfin un masque où se croisent l’être et l’apparence, le “voir” et “l’être vu”, le langage et le visible…C’est là entre ce qu’il y a de caché dans le manifeste et de lumineux dans l’inaccessible que noue la tâche de son langage. (Foucault 1963 : 155)

Raymond Roussel was a pre-Surrealist writer who employed complex generative processes in his writing, which he later “explained” in Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres. Robbe-Grillet, for one, alludes to Roussel’s La Vue in
the title of his own work *Le Voyeur*. *La Vue* is a sixty-page poem that describes a picture of a beach scene set into the lens of a pen-holder and ends with the following verses:  

Rêve, absente, perdue, indécise et forcée  
D’aller vers le passé ; car c’est l’exhalaison  
Des sentiments vécus de toute une saison  
Qui pour moi sort avec puissance la vue,  
Grâce à l’intensité subitement accrue  
Du souvenir vivace et latent d’un été  
Déjà mort, déjà loin de moi, vite emporté. (Roussel 70)  

These verses seem to highlight the relationship between what is seen and how it is perceived and/or interpreted. Therefore a subjective and/or imagined interpretation is implied in what is seen. Since we know that this is a description of a picture or a particular scene, it is a fixed image that now described will enter the realm of the past and represent memories or thoughts that will surely change through time. Once described, a scene cannot be reproduced in exactly the same way because each reader brings his or her own imagination that dictates each impression, each reading. The reading process allows the perception of a literary work to vary from reader to reader/ writer to writer and is used to create a new “world” based on visual catalysts.
The description of a particular scene as we saw in *La Vue* does seem to foreshadow elements of the New Novel. Roussel’s acute sense of sight, presented in his work, is probably the most profound influence on the New Novel:

La vue, sens privilégié chez Roussel, atteint très vite une acuité démentielle, tendant vers l’infini... Roussel décrit volontiers, nous l’avons signalé, un univers qui n’est pas réel, mais comme déjà présenté. Il aime placer un artiste intermédiaire entre lui-même et le monde des hommes... De toute évidence, lui aussi invente, à l’instar de ces nombreux créateurs—de machines ou de procédés—qui peuplent toute l’œuvre. La vue est ici une vue imaginaire. (Foucault 1986 : 76)

At the Cérisy Colloquium dedicated to the New Novel, Robbe-Grillet himself notices the use of the imaginary in Sarraute’s work and how it parallels his own: “...je sens que vous comme moi, ce qui vous intéresse, c’est la création d’un monde qui n’existe pas encore” (Robbe-Grillet 1972 : 51). Jean Ricardou, also present, later explains how the imaginary surfaces within the text: “L’imagination ne vient pas avant le texte, mais dans et par le texte” (151).

In order to produce imagination in and by the text, the authors merge reader, writer, and central character of the text into one, thereby calling for an active participation of the reader in the writing process. This process is evident in texts that were published early in the careers of Robbe-Grillet and
Sarraute (*Instantanés* and *Tropismes* respectively). *Instantanés* is a collection of short essays that describe images that are presented as they are seen without apparent authorial interpretation. Roch Smith describes the reading of these essays in the following manner: “From this collaboration emerges a story, perhaps not always the same one for every reader, much in the same way a narrative can originate from a viewer who examines a photograph” (Smith 12). In the first of these essays, “Le Mannequin,” the description begins in a very banal manner: “La cafetière est sur la table. C’est une table ronde à quatre pieds, recouverte d’une toile cirée à quadrillage rouge et gris sur un fond de teinte neutre…” (I 9). However, the description soon becomes a sort of *mise en abyme* of images as they are, then how they are seen when reflected in a mirror. Hence, the image is actually a “reflected” image, which alludes to the title of the first group of essays (*Trois visions réfléchies*).

In *Tropismes*, Nathalie Sarraute explores similar techniques to create a “visualisation” of what is invisible:

Sous la forme de dix-neuf poèmes en prose, elle [Nathalie Sarraute] décrit des drames microscopiques, des états à la limite de la conscience, multiplie des évolutions furtives, estompe ses personnages par un flou qui n’est pas sans rappeler le mouvement que tente de saisir le photographe.16

This image that the author is trying to capture is presented, as the title would indicate, by “tropisms,” which are defined by Sarraute as:
...des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l’origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu’il est impossible de définir. Ils me paraissaient et paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence. (Sarraute 1956 : 8)

These movements are interesting for our discussion of the visual since they can only be communicated “par des images qui en donnent des équivalents et lui fassent éprouver des sensations analogues” (8).

_Tropisme II_ provides a description somewhat analogous to the one analyzed above from _Instantanés_ since, again, we have the presence of banal objects: “Elle parlait à la cuisinière pendant des heures, s’agitant autour de la table, s’agitant toujours, préparant des potions pour eux ou des plats, elle parlait, critiquant les gens qui venaient à la maison, les amis…” (15). This explanation of a “thought” highlights the real/imaginary dichotomy since what is being thought or imagined is based on tangible objects that seem to represent an everyday reality thus Sarraute’s purpose “consiste précisément à tirer la sensation hors de l’immédiat informe (dit réalité) pour la transposer sur le plan de l’imaginaire” (NR2 13). These prose poems are of interest because Sarraute had started writing them before she began her essays on the problems she saw in the traditional novel, and it is through these tropisms that her entire literary enterprise would be presented. In her study _Nathalie_
Sarraute: Une écriture de l’effraction, Françoise Asso outlines the importance of these movements presented in terms of a dialogue (whether external or internal) to show an opposition between what is real and what is imaginary (or imagined): “Il semble évident, étant donné le caractère dialogique du tropisme, que lorsque Nathalie Sarraute parle d’intérieur et d’extérieur, elle emploie ces termes en pensant à l’opposition de l’imaginaire et du réel” (80).

Through the dialogues Sarraute presents about objects and Robbe-Grillet’s repetitive narration, these two authors allow for an imaginary element that characterizes their novels, thus calling for a continual revival of literature in the mind of the reader. In doing so, they allow the perpetuation of a literary experience, not just the reading of a literary work. “To remain the basis and focus of literary experience, the literary work must be continually revived: re-imagined by means of repetition both within the work and within the mind” (Casey 267). Imagination and repetition are thus inherent characteristics of the New Novel both from the standpoint of the reader and the novelist. They come together to create a presence that is a current, yet fleeting presentation of reality.
Objectivity v. Subjectivity

We have already noted that the New Novelists rejected character developments à la Balzac, and since their focus on objects replaced such psychological portraits of humans, their works were initially deemed objective. Roland Barthes’s article “Littérature objective” most vehemently expresses this opinion. He notes Robbe-Grillet’s focus on objects stating that they are not only “unnatural” but the victims of meticulous optical narration: “Les objets ‘naturels’ sont rares…soustraits d’ailleurs immédiatement à la nature et à l’homme pour se constituer avant tout comme supports d’une réflexion ‘optique’” (Barthes 1954 :29). Barthes sees Robbe-Grillet’s use of objects as purely functional and as a means of destroying poetic expression: “L’écriture de Robbe-Grillet est sans alibi, sans épaisseur et sans profondeur : elle reste à la surface de l’objet et la parcourt également, sans privilégier telle ou telle de ses qualités : c’est donc le contraire même d’une écriture poétique” (30). He goes on to say that the object for Robbe-Grillet is no longer “un foyer de correspondances, un foisonnement de sensations et de symboles: il est seulement une résistance optique” (30). Furthermore, he sees the object as having no function or substance. “Ou plus exactement, l’une et l’autre sont absorbées par la nature optique de l’objet” (31). Robbe-Grillet’s use of objects
does have a function but should not be reduced to “functional.” The objects that are described by Robbe-Grillet—via his narrator’s vision and perception of them—allow him to use repetition and imagination to create subjectivity.

Robbe-Grillet responds to Barthes’ criticism in his 1958 article “Nature, humanisme, tragédie” published in Pour un nouveau roman: “‘si je dis ‘Le monde c’est l’homme’, j’obtiendrai toujours l’absolution; tandis que si je dis: ‘Les choses sont les choses, et l’homme n’est que l’homme’, je suis aussitôt reconnu coupable de crime contre l’humanité’” (47). He poses a question that refutes the critics’ claim that he has dismissed the role of Man in his novels: “Comment, en particulier, un roman qui met en scène un homme et s’attache de page en page à chacun de ses pas, ne décrivant que ce qu’il fait, ce qu’il voit, ou ce qu’il imagine, pourrait-il être accusé de se détourner de l’homme?” (49-50). As we will see, the seemingly “objective” nature of the description disappears when the subjective nature of the narration is considered.

In La Jalousie, the narrator in the text is no longer an omniscient storyteller; but the creator of a mental film. The subject matter of this mental film is the jealousy of the narrator. We are never told the name of the narrator and his wife’s name is reduced to a single letter (A.). We are, however, given names for the neighbors (Franck and Christiane). Franck will
be a far greater part of the description, for it is his relationship with A. that incites the narrator’s jealous crisis. In the novel (143-82), Franck and A. are absent from the house, and it is, to add to the visual aspect of the text, a photograph that provokes the narrator’s jealousy: “Posée sur la table à proximité d’un second verre, près du bord droit de l’image, une main d’homme se raccorde seulement au poignet d’une manche de veste, qu’interrompt aussitôt la marge blanche verticale” (J 125-26).

This photograph is seen by the narrator in his home from which his vision, and consequently, his description, is isolated. Because he never leaves, the home becomes the permanent frame for his point of view. This object (the photograph) thus becomes the catalyst of his jealous crisis and his subjective interpretation follows: “Mais désormais, cette figuration est investie d’une subjectivité jalouse et sert vite de catalyser à l’expression de fantasmes de plus en plus explicites” (Monneyron 117).

It is the subjective perception of the object that rules the description. From this standpoint, we have a plot (if we can even use such a word in this context!) which has removed the importance of the person and has replaced character description with a description of the narrator’s impressions. In Maxime 32, La Rochefoucauld writes: “La jalousie se nourrit dans les doutes et elle devient fureur ou elle finit sitôt qu’on passe du doute à la certitude.”
Since we, as readers, are subjected to the same uncertainty experienced by the narrator, Robbe-Grillet’s work exemplifies another of the major themes associated with the New Novel: *l’incertitude.*

In his analysis of *La Jalousie,* Paul Forestier points out how the creation of this uncertainty is the author’s very goal:

> Un jugement juste de ce qui se passe dans le roman doit nécessairement se fonder sur les événements véritables, non pas sur une image qui pourrait, à n’importe quel moment du récit, être faussée par celui même qui la crée. Mais dans ce texte, il est impossible de distinguer entre les passages où le narrateur décrit les choses exactement et ceux où il déforme ce qu’il observe. Donc, à l’intérieur du monde fictif de “La Jalousie”, il existe un principe créateur d’incertitude qu’aucune interprétation ne saurait résoudre; et ce principe, c’est le point de vue même du texte. (Forestier 79)

True, there is a certain degree of uncertainty associated with the narrator’s description, but this uncertainty is not unique to the jealous perception of our narrator. His actual view is impeded by the blinds on the windows of the house, lending to the overall doubt created for the reader by the impossibility of an accurate description. Therefore, we cannot be sure of the narrator’s vision, and it is this very fact that leads him into a jealous crisis, adding a subjective point of view to his already hindered vision. The shutters that are opened and closed also work to highlight the varying degree of jealousy and
folly that provokes the narrator’s reactions. The shutters also add to the filmic narration because they remind us of the shutter of a camera.

Due to the great deal of uncertainty created by the narration, Michel-Bloch interprets the narrative in terms of an objective, inhuman nature:

…dans La Jalousie, c’est la description des choses vues à travers un objectif. Par conséquent, vues par un oeil indifférent—donc non humain—et qui a pour tâche de relever seulement la disposition des objets les uns par rapport aux autres, leur aspect, leur conformation, jamais ce qu’ils sont pour celui qui, en les décrivant, s’y projeterait lui-même. (Michel-Bloch 95)

Here, Michel-Bloch aptly remarks the camera-eye technique used by Robbe-Grillet, and it is true that the narrative relies on the eye of the narrator, acting as the viewing lens (objectif). However, it is also this type of interpretation that led to the judgment that the New Novel was objective and dehumanized. Since all of the descriptions are provided by a jealous narrator whose view is impeded, we cannot trust any of his subjective judgments. Robbe-Grillet seems to be speaking specifically of La Jalousie in one of his critical essays in which he defends the New Novel as purely subjective:

Non seulement c’est un homme qui, dans tous mes romans par exemple, décrit toute chose, mais c’est le moins neutre, le moins impartial des hommes: engagé au contraire toujours dans une aventure passionnelle des plus obsédantes, au point de déformer souvent sa vision et de produire chez lui des imaginations proches du délire. (Robbe-Grillet 1961 : 117-18)
Due to the very subjective nature of the narration, uncertainty is created, and
the “objective” nature of the novel stems from its lack of character
development and the fact that it was never clearly stated that the sentiment of
jealousy existed.

Another tool used to create doubt and uncertainty is the tactic of
providing only minimal information so as to prevent an accurate
reconstruction of chronology, which is a central theme in another of Robbe-
Grillet’s New Novels: *Le Voyeur*. In *Le Voyeur*, our central character is Mathias
who has come to an island, where he claims to have been born, to sell
watches. The very presence of his product implies a chronological order
leading us into the trap of the author. Were we, as readers, able to recreate
the chronology and prove Mathias’s whereabouts at the moment of the crime,
the puzzle would be much less complicated. It would be easy to condemn
him, because we know he has previously engaged in criminal acts. However,
the author creates uncertainty about Mathias to provoke an interpretation.
This time uncertainty is created, in part, by the absence of information as well
as in the very print of the novel. “La reproduction d’une page, ou même
d’une ligne à l’intérieur d’une autre page permet un découpage optique dont
les propriétés sont toutes différentes de celles du découpage habituel des
citations. Il sert à introduire des tensions nouvelles…” (Butor 155). Since the
crime seems to have happened between parts one and two, this would seemingly be enough to explain the missing hour or so in the chronology of the novel (when the crime was perhaps committed) if we could associate it with the only page break in the text. However, the novel is divided into three parts, eliminating a possible clue from the author. As Foucault points out in his article “Distance, Aspect, Origine,” Robbe-Grillet’s literary enterprise is about the difference between what we think we know and what we do not know for sure: “Si bien que chez Robbe-Grillet la différence entre ce qui a eu lieu et ce qui n’a pas eu lieu, même (et dans la mesure où) elle est difficile à établir, demeure au centre du texte (au moins sous forme de lacune, de page blanche ou de répétition) : elle en est la limite et l’énigme…” (15-16).

Interestingly, Robbe-Grillet’s work, which does contain games and traps for the reader, has critics so far removed from the “norm” that they are looking for clues that are not necessarily present.

If we revert back to Roussel and his influence on the New Novelists, we can see a potential reason for Robbe-Grillet’s insistence on a final enigma. Robbe-Grillet has been quoted as saying that Roussel was a bad writer because he had nothing to say and he said it poorly. One of the major reasons for this opinion was that Roussel always seemed to provide final order: “Après le rebus vient toujours l’explication, et tout rentre dans l’ordre”
By explaining the enigma and nullifying the game provided by the reading of the text, Roussel provides the reader with the same comfort offered by the traditional novel, and this was exactly what the New Novelists wanted to avoid. As Bruce Morrissette comments, the text cannot fully exist if the enigma does not exist: “Je signale seulement que c’est par, ou à travers, le trou que le récit émerge enfin pour accéder à sa pleine existence…” (NR2 125). Certainly one would not expect Robbe-Grillet to give his reader a clue that would clarify the enigma behind the crime, for that would nullify his entire enterprise. As Jean Alter explains:

Bref, non seulement le crime, mais tout ce qui est vu par le voyageur, sans qu’on puisse au reste départager aisément ces différentes sources du donné, plonge dans l’ambiguïté, entraînant de larges pans de la réalité. Ce qui subsiste de certain, on le doit aux passages présentés dans la perspective objective et impersonnelle de l’auteur. (27)

This uncertainty points out a distance between the way Robbe-Grillet chooses to present the events and what was considered mandatory from an authorial authority. The narration wanders from its principal subject, Violette, to objects encountered by the camera eye that aids the narration. As Jean Bloch-Michel explains, we find in Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur*: “… un roman tout entier construit sur le procédé qui consiste à tourner autour de l’objet principal (la petite fille violée) pour lui faire acquérir sa signification
(99). The traditional novelist provided events in chronological order and did not get sidetracked by the objects seen along the way; he thereby maintained (and perpetuated) the public’s expectations. Robbe-Grillet’s inaccurate representation of chronology forces the readers to go beyond their expectations and interpret the hole in his story. Because the interpretation of each reader can be different, the novel is always being recreated. However, in recreating the novel, one must not go too far and try to reconstruct it. As Gérard Genette suggests: “‘Reconstruire’ un roman de Robbe-Grillet, c’est l’effacer” (Genette 1962: 39).24 Because the New Novelists rejected the “responsibility” of chronologically legitimated narration, they added elements of uncertainty and doubt to their novels.

Like Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute uses objects to catalyze the dialogic narration in her novels. Her use of these objects, however, leads her (and her reader) into a different literary game where vision maintains a key role, and real and imagined impressions and looks are exchanged. Sarraute uses objects, which are sometimes a banal object like a door in *Le Planétarium*, or uses literary works themselves in *Les Fruits d’Or* and *Entre la vie et la mort*. These objects are “discussed” through conversations between ambiguous persons identified by indefinite pronouns. Not only are there dialogues
between these “characters,” but often their thoughts (in the form of sous-conversations) are verbalized as well. Since Sarraute oscillates between dialogue and interior monologue (or subconversation), it is sometimes difficult to determine what is being said and what is being thought. Distinguishing between the two is often difficult, but necessary to Sarraute’s literary endeavors. In order to create a new literary form, the author must not simply describe a scene to recreate an image; he or she must make an image visible. As Sarraute suggests: “[t]out romancier qui se contente pas de ‘restituer le visible’, mais cherche à ‘rendre visible’, crée forcément une forme neuve” (Sarraute 1962: 9). By implementing such strategies Sarraute demands an active participation on the part of her readers to identify each voice and give it meaning.

Françoise Asso points out the important role of discourse in Sarraute’s work stating that it is not only a dialogue but a “discours commun qui fige le sens, recouvre le réel et l’immobilise, celui qui fonctionne comme une image: c’est le discours même de l’œuvre, celui qui ne peut pas se constituer que dans une pluralité de paroles qui s’échangent…” (Asso, 108). This exchange is, indeed, the foundation of many (if not all) of Sarraute’s fictional works. And, to add to the complexity of the dialogues she presents, Sarraute offers a very visual presentation of the attitudes surrounding voiced opinions. She
does this to uncover a new type of reality beneath the banal and superficial restitutions of images that are portrayed through everyday language. Eye movements are constantly being described, from those which scrutinize and mock: “Son oeil nous scrute, il guette la contradiction...il ne peut pas la supporter” (FO : 7)\textsuperscript{26}; “…ce sourire ironique, cette lueur moqueuse qui filtrait des yeux bridés…” (P 163)\textsuperscript{27}, to those which admire : “une grâce naturelle, une élégance qui ne peuvent évidemment pas échapper aux regards avertis des connaisseurs” (EVM 93).\textsuperscript{28} People are perpetually surveilled in order for the observer to gauge the sentiment of their “opponent,” or make a judgment about their conversing abilities which are, in turn, a sign of their intelligence.

The game is thus understood, and being observed becomes a stressful, frightening experience: “Peur d’eux, là bas, qui vous observent” (69); “Mais elle l’a repéré, elle le surveillait, il n’y a pas moyen de la tromper” (89). In Le Planétarium, Tante Berthe is a victim of such looks:

Elle s’était sentie soudain exposée, rosissant, frissonnant sous ce regard d’où coulait sur elle la recouvrait une rancune froide, un mépris d’homme choyé, comblé depuis longtemps de grâce, de jeunesse, de beauté, un dégoût d’amateur délicat pour une femme...mais elle n’avait pas l’air d’une femme, elle était quelque chose d’informe, d’innommable, un monstre affreux, toute décoiffée, quelques mèches tristes, elle le savait, pendaient dans son cou, elle n’avait pas osé lever la main pour les rentrer sous son chapeau, elle s’était sentie toute molle, grise, graisseuse, comme mal lavée...le regard impitoyable traquait en elle une faute, la plus grave de toutes, un crime, une sacrilège...
sentence terrible la menaçait, elle avait essayé de se défendre
avec les moyens dont elle disposait, mais la lutte était inégale,
l’homme avait triomphé, elle s’était enfuie, blessée… (P 163-64)

Her defense mechanism would be to protect herself from the pity expressed
in the eyes of others: “Seulement cette fois ce qui sortait des yeux étroits, ce
qui perçait dans le ton moqueur, avait traversé, brisé cette épaiss carapace
d’indifférence, de dédain un peu apitoyé, derrière laquelle elle se sent
protégée et d’où, d’ordinaire, elle peut sans danger s’amuser à les observer”
(163). Berthe interprets these looks as extreme judgments, and comes to hate
them. The trauma associated with these looks becomes even more
problematic when Berthe realizes that the skills to create them are being
handed down from father to son: “Et l’autre, à côté, le petit homme, avec ce
regard de jeune animal que son père entraîne à guetter, à choisir sa proie,
voyant tout, lui aussi. Elle les avait haïs…” (164). All of these impressions,
and the looks that provoke them, are part of Berthe’s thought process. It is
through such situations that Sarraute makes invisible things visible, much like
Raymond Roussel had done prior to the New Novel: “…[S]on [Roussel]
langage montre que le visible et le non-visible indéfiniment se répètent, et que
ce dédoublement du même donne au langage son signe: ce qui le rend
possible dès l’origine parmi les choses, et ce qui fait que les choses ne sont
possibles que par lui” (Foucault 1963: 156).
Similarly, in *Les Fruits d’Or*, the contemptuous looks of others are feared and, at times, one must shield oneself from them: “Derrière l’écran, protecteur des gestes, des mots” (FO 29). Thus use of the word “écran” is interesting for it acts as a barrier in this situation, but it is also the object on which images are projected in the cinematic world. In both cases, the images refuse to become invisible. In *Les Fruits d’Or*, a novel by the same name is the subject of many of the conversations, and varying opinions of it are exchanged. At first, there is nothing but praise for this novel: “…Mais là, avec ces Fruits d’Or, j’avoue que j’ai retrouvé une joie très rare, comme je pensais pas qu’une œuvre actuelle pourrait m’en donner…Admirable” (35). Admirable is a term that turns up elsewhere in Sarraute’s literary enterprise. A similar comment is made about a work in *Entre la vie et la mort*: “J’ai tout aimé, tout, j’ai été d’emblée conquis. C’est admirable d’un bout à l’autre” (EVM 148). It is probably not by accident that Sarraute chose the adjective “admirable,” for to be admired, something must be looked at. The conversations that follow are satirical constructions of interactions where one must show one’s intelligence through excellent discursive skills all the while promoting the “right” opinion:

Ridicule, complètement grotesque, comme ce personnage, où donc? qui baissait les yeux pour que les autres ne soient pas aveuglés par les rayons de son intelligence…c’est
The opinions seem to change just as quickly as the voice that articulates them, proving how volatile opinions about literature can be. Furthermore, Sarraute uses irony to show how ridiculous and/or absurd people can be as they seek to be accepted by the opinion that dominates: “La passion d’être accepté domine tous les inadaptés de Nathalie Sarraute” (NR2 19). At the beginning, no one dares to criticize the novel, and it is, as we saw earlier, to be admired. When someone begins to question the novel’s grandness, he is regarded with suspicion: “Mais il était gardé à vue. Il est suspect…Que trame-t-il encore là bas, avec cet air de conspirateur, penché vers sa voisine…” (51), and he will later be interrogated: “Qu’est-ce que vous avez encore déniché dans ce livre où tout est admirable ? Qu’est-ce que vous n’aimez pas ?” (51). Hence, by not complying with the dominant opinion, the “order” risks being disrupted: “Les forces de l’ordre, alertées, interviennent aussitôt” (52). Despite this apparent call for order, Sarraute tries to avoid it by maintaining the enigma surrounding the conversations she presents and the opinions they reveal.

In addition to describing eye movements that surveil her “characters,” Sarraute also uses the camera as a monitor that captures unfavorable images and causes distress. She uses photographs to represent clichés and banality,
and this is one of the reasons why the camera causes discomfort or distress for her characters. The banality that photographs represent is analogous to the banality of the banter that surrounds them (as well as the discussions concerning literature). Thus, persons are objectified in photographs only to allow a subjective interpretation of the image, and fixed images are avoided.

In *Le Planétarium*, Aunt Berthe dreads the idea of being forced together with some of her family members: “On est coincés maintenant, ils se sont installées en face, dans le bistrot, ils ont amené un appareil de photo” (160). She fears this encounter because she is stuck in an unpleasant situation, and the camera’s presence adds a level to her fear for it has the power to forever capture this moment. Photographic images, like contemptuous looks and opinions about literature, must be treated with suspicion. For Sarraute, in this “age of suspicion”, everyone is monitored: “…ce jeu constant entre eux et ces apparences, ces lieux communs sur lesquels ils débouchent au-dehors : nos conversations, le caractère que nous paraissions avoir, ces personnages que nous sommes les uns aux yeux des autres…” (Sarraute: 1956: 10). Yet, this constant surveillance by humans and by machines only reveals banalities and clichés. In *Entre la vie et la mort*, a photograph becomes the site of a true representation of banality:
Décidément on a beau chercher, il n’y a rien ici. Rien à découvrir. Rien que de très banal, qu’on trouve partout. Modèle standard. Monsieur-tout-le-monde s’entoure de choses de ce genre. Ils posent un instant les yeux sur une photo placée sur son bureau…sa femme, comme il se doit, et son enfant, qu’il montre fièrement…C’est à se demander devant tant de conformisme, une telle banalité jusque dans le comportement… (EVM 131)

This photograph of a family represents all that one would expect, from the token happy family to their very proper behavior. This is just one of the many ways in which Sarraute uses irony to ridicule her “characters” by providing a concrete image of perfection to which others must strive.

Similarly, in Le Planétarium, the commentary surrounding an image of Alain and Gisèle Guimier, along with Alain’s Aunt Berthe, points out the banal representations captured as fixed images:

Voici les Guimier. Un couple charmant. Gisèle est assise auprès d’Alain. Son petit nez rose est ravissant. Ses jolis yeux couleur de pervenche brillent. Alain a un bras passé autour de ses épaules. Ses traits fins expriment la droiture, la bonté. Tante Berthe est assise près d’eux. Son visage, qui a dû être beau autrefois, ses yeux jaunis par le temps sont tournés vers Alain. Elle lui sourit. Sa petite main ridée repose sur le bras d’Alain d’un air de confiance tendre. (P 197)

This image of a perfect family, like the one in Entre la vie et la mort, does not portray a single reality. The relationship between Alain and Gisèle and Berthe is not as perfect as this image would make us believe, and its authenticity must be challenged: “Il faut essayer de les toucher…Oui, c’est
bien cela, il fallait s’en douter. Ce sont des effigies. Ce ne sont pas les vrais Guimier” (197). This typified image of the Guimiers must be protected like a work of art in a museum: “Attention. Pas de folies. C’est interdit de toucher aux poupées. On doit les contempler à distance. Il y a des gardiens partout…S’ils penchent par-dessus le cordon, s’ils étendent la main vers ces faux Guimier, les gardiens vont actionner le dispositif d’alarme” (197). In these passages, Sarraute exposes the banality of fixed images since they only represent falsified and perfected images. From these problematic encounters with fixed and/or photographic images we begin to see the danger of eternalizing an image because while representing an idealized version of the object, it cannot be trusted. Thus, we should not expect images to be finite, and just like the literary works that include them, they should evolve. And, they are able to undergo such transformations because the perception of them is subjective. This evolution forces authors and readers to go beyond the objective reality of what they see and consider what is seen by their mind’s eye.
La vue v. The Mind’s Eye

The objective nature of the New Novel comes from the presentation of what is seen by the narrator, but the subjective nature is also present. Subjectivity is produced not by describing objects, but by narrating them by representing the way in which humans interact with and interpret them. The narration is not exclusive to describing objects, but stems from the manner in which this object (or person) is viewed by the mind’s eye. The examples and passages cited in this chapter demonstrate the themes being discussed in a particular section, but that is certainly not to say that they are exclusive to that theme. Clearly, what is objective is based on an object or a fact that is later “subjectified” and interpreted leading to an imaginary element that affects what appears to be real. Therefore, despite the omnipresence of objects in the New Novel, every image is presented in the text with some type of distortion. This distortion is the perception of the image in the “mind’s eye.” Vivian Mercier describes this term as what we see, however, it is “not only what is objectively present to the open eye but what memory, dream, imagination, or even hallucination present to the ‘mind’s eye’” (167).

For the New Novelists, who were sometimes criticized for focusing on la vue and the banality of things, it seems more appropriate to explore the
term “mind’s eye” which highlights the subjectivity behind the judgment of the “things” being described. The technique used by Robbe-Grillet in *La Jalousie* has been referred to as “the camera-eye technique” (Weisstein 260). It is true that the narrator in this novel presents things as he sees them, but the interpretation of what he sees is based on his jealousy (and the shutters), which adds additional ambiguity to his judgment. Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that what he sees is expressed through his “mind’s eye.”

Sarraute’s *Le Planétarium* provides another example of this phenomenon. The first chapter of the novel presents the *va et vient* of Tante Berthe’s thoughts. Similar to the situation of Robbe-Grillet’s protagonist in *La Jalousie*, the reader of *Le Planétarium* is not only privy to what Berthe sees, but also what is seen in her “mind’s eye.” As Vivian Mercier explains:

> Clearly, much of this is never put into words by the old lady: she hears the workmen’s soothing words, becomes indignant at their patronage of her, imagines their thoughts; no doubt medieval images of conquering hordes of barbarians float in her mind’s eye [emphasis mine], mingled with modern images of barbarians in the building industry. (142)

Through the various dialogues/monologues, the changing perceptions and/or opinions are expressed, as well, through the mind’s eye. Thus, the New Novel, criticized for its focus on banal objects, actually provides subjective
narration that is based on the “mind’s eye,” working from a catalyst which is usually an object to provide an enigma that includes imaginary elements all of which are left to the interpretation of the reader.

After sight v. After thought

These analyses are only a small opening into the realm of the visual and its impact on the New Novel. They also show only a small part of the work done later in the careers of the concerned novelists. Robbe-Grillet has written screenplays and produced films in addition to his many projects involving photography, autobiography, and painting. It could be said that *Instantanés* alludes, in short, to some of his future projects, but it is probably safe to say that his influences were nearly always the product of visual stimuli. Sarraute on the other hand, stayed closer to imagery and metaphors created by language. Her later works are infused with word games and deformations that occur in language presented to the reader in the form of tropisms. So, clearly these early works defined a vast literary project that was to follow. If we look at these projects separately, we begin to see a possible explanation for a phenomenon to which we alluded in these analyses: the paradox involving an image and its interpretation.
To further prove this, we will re-examine two quotes cited earlier to describe *Instantanés* and *Tropismes*:

~ From this collaboration emerges a story, perhaps not always the same one for every reader, much in the same way a narrative can originate from a viewer who examines a photograph (Roch Smith on *Instantanés*).

~ Sous la forme de dix-neuf poèmes en prose, elle [Nathalie Sarraute] décrit des drames microscopiques, des états à la limite de la conscience, multipile des évocations furtives, estompe ses personnages par un flou qui n’est pas sans rappeler le mouvement que tente de saisir le photographe (Anne Raynouard on *Tropismes*).

These two quotes highlight what is visual with the mention of photography, and if we consider a photograph or a visual image thought to represent what is real, we see that its meaning can change depending on the commentary that accompanies it. Roland Barthes, for one, has written various theoretical texts on photography and in his essay *The Photographic Message*, he reminds us that a photograph is not an autonomous event: “the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text—title, caption or article—accompanying every press photograph” (135). This quote is specific to the press photograph but we can see from this example how any photograph, when given a context, can represent a different reality from the one immediately evident. Susan Sontag also addresses the function of captions in stating that: “And photographs wait
to be explained or falsified by their captions” (Sontag 2003: 10); and later she discusses how captions are needed when the photograph comes to represent the past: “But one day captions will be needed, of course. And the misreadings and misrememberings, and new ideological uses for pictures, will make their difference” (29). Thus, evolving ideologies indicate a different use (and meaning) for pictures as time passes.

We began our discussion of the New Novelists with a look at how Raymond Roussel and his visual texts influenced their work, and if we consider that Robbe-Grillet capitalizes on presenting an image, while Sarraute employs language to make something not visible visible, we begin to see an understanding of the imaginary that is similar to the press photograph as described by Barthes. From this standpoint, it is possible to say that both Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute question the boundary separating the photograph from the commentary that accompanies it by problematizing the subjective/objective, real/imaginary, etc...dichotomies outlined in these analyses.

By presenting literary oscillations between the barriers listed above, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute produced works that are observations. Their characters are much like one observer in *Entre la vie et la mort*: “Il observe avec eux tous cette délicate opération, toute pareille à celle du photographe
qui tire du négatif inscrit sur la pellicule sombre une image claire au dessin parfaitement net” (118). Through their different strategies, the New Novelists bring images to life through language. An image begins the chain of events that follows, and becomes embedded in a frame. The outside of the frame is the commentary that surrounds the image, giving it many different realities. Martine Joly defines two spaces that characterize images as cadre/ hors cadre. She explains that these two areas are defined by their relationship to the many image makers that are rectangular in shape such as paintings, movie screens, televisions, computers and photographs. Space therefore is divided into two parts (one of which is inside the rectangle (le cadre), and the other which surrounds it (le hors-cadre)) that are in constant interaction:

L’interaction entre le hors-cadre et le cadre jouera donc sur la signification et sur l’interprétation du message global. En tant que contexte institutionnalisé de la communication, le hors-cadre infléchira la lecture de l’image en déterminant certains types d’attente chez le spectateur. (Joly 2002 :109)

It is this type of interaction that gives life to the New Novel and serves as a foundation for visual cultures. For Irit Rogoff, visual culture allows us to step away from arbitrary distinctions and see the permeations and interactions of a framed space:

The emergence of a relatively new arena such as visual culture provides the possibility of unframing some of the discussions we have been engaged in regarding presences and absences,
invisibility and stereotypes, desires, reifications and objectifications from the disciplinary fields—art history, film studies, mass media and communications, theoretical articulations of vision, spectatorship and the power relations that animate the arena we call the field of vision—which first articulated their status as texts and objects. Thereby unframing them as a set of conventional values as either highly valued or highly marginalized or outside the scope of sanctioned vision altogether. (27)

Similarly, a focus on visual culture allows us to see the necessary interplay of the binary oppositions we have discussed and how they cannot and should not be separated.

This interplay also allows us to interpret later works by Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Barthes, and Marguerite Duras. In the following chapter we will consider the “subjective” turn in the works of the above mentioned authors by examining their “autobiographical narratives.”

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1 Interview with Robbe-Grillet published as “La littérature aujourd’hui, VI.” *Tel Quel* 14 (Summer 1963): 40.
2 We will discuss Roland Barthes’s article “Littérature objective” in a later section for it sparked the debate on subjective versus objective literature. We will also discuss Robbe-Grillet’s reaction to that article.
3 This essay was written just before Barthes published his article “Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?” in 1962 (which was also published in translation as the preface to Bruce Morrissette’s book *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet*). The question mark at the end of Barthes’s title is significant because it shows the evolution that occurred in Robbe-Grillet’s writing. We will discuss this more in Chapter Two.
4 Published in *Pour un nouveau roman*.
5 The term “public” is intentionally vague. Robbe-Grillet introduces the misconceptions he outlines surrounding the new novel in the following manner: “La voici donc cette charte du Nouveau Roman telle que la rumeur publique la colporte…” (PNR 114).
6 See also the various interviews published in *Tel Quel* in which authors such as Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Butor, des Forêts, and others addressed the question of what literature was today. Jean
Ricardou, who also theorized about the novel, was among the first to join the telquelians, and serves as a link between the New Novel and the criticism it incited.

7 This comes from Robbe-Grillet’s article “Du réalisme à la réalité” (1955 and 1963) published in Pour un nouveau roman.

8 This essay was written in 1957 and serves as a theoretical justification of the techniques Robbe-Grillet uses in his novels. It might be read as a partial response to Barthes’s criticism of his works followed by a more direct response in 1958 with “Nature, humanisme, tragédie”.

9 This comes from Robbe-Grillet’s article “Sur quelques notions périmées” (1957) published in Pour un nouveau roman.

10 Bruce Morrissette has attempted relentlessly to provide concrete interpretations of some new novels. For example, he proposed a floor plan for the narrator’s home in La Jalousie. Robbe-Grillet, of course, dismissed Morrissette’s “explanations” claiming that no explanation was possible and certainly not necessary.

11 Raymond Roussel also had a profound effect on Michel Foucault, and represents the only author to which Foucault dedicated an entire book.

12 Faye’s comments come from a debate on the novel published as “Débat sur le roman” (directed by Michel Foucalt) in Tel Quel 17 (Spring 1964).

13 This project of describing photographs was not unique to La Vue, and as Roussel divulges in Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres, Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique was to contain a descriptive section that would have included a verse description of two other photographs. This project was, however, never finished (18).

14 This comes from the Cérisy Colloquium on the New Novel (1972).

15 I = Instantanés


17 Published in the preface to L’ère du soupçon.

18 All references to “NR2” come from volume 2 of the collected papers from the Cérisy Colloquium (1972).

19 J = La Jalousie

20 Robbe-Grillet does provoke uncertainty in his writing, but this is intentional. Critics like Bruce Morrissette have tried to find solutions to Robbe-Grillet’s “puzzles,” but the pieces are not made to fit together.

21 From “Nouveau roman, homme nouveau” published in Pour un nouveau roman.

22 Uncertainty is created by the missing chronology but the active participation of the reader is highlighted since some clues alluding to the crime are provided (such as the dead frog).

23 Bruce Morrissette, for one, has tried to explain Robbe-Grillet’s works. He even drew a floor plan of the house described in La Jalousie that Robbe-Grillet later said could not be accurate for the house did not exist.


25 Published as “La littérature, aujourd’hui II” in Tel Quel 9 (Spring 1962) : 48-53.

26 “FO” = Les Fruits d’Or

27 “P” = Le Planétarium

28 “EVM” = Entre la vie et la mort
CHAPTER 2

AUTOFICTION AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FETISH

Fact, Fiction, or Fetish?

In the previous chapter we disputed early claims that the New Novel was a manifestation of objective literature even in the early stages. However, critics hold on to that assessment and prefer to speak of two distinct categories for the works of the New Novelists, most notably Robbe-Grillet. In his 1962 article “Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?”, Barthes defines two Robbe-Grillet’s (although the question mark at the end highlights the ever-evolving practices of Robbe-Grillet and suggests that others are sure to be identified later). The first one is a “chosiste,” the second a “humaniste.” But, as Barthes points out, Robbe-Grillet does not provide a clear answer to questions about his literary goals, and the ambiguity surrounding his work is, in part, a testament to the fragility of language: “Aucune littérature au monde n’a jamais répondu à la question qu’elle posait, et c’est ce suspens même qui l’a toujours constituée en littérature: elle est ce si fragile langage que les hommes
disposent entre la violence de la question et le silence de la réponse” (203).

For Gérard Genette, the rupture between the two Robbe-Grillets occurred after his screenplay project L’Année dernière à Marienbad (later made into a film in collaboration with Alain Resnais). As he states in his article “Sur Robbe-Grillet,” “Depuis Marienbad, il s’est produit dans la réputation d’Alain Robbe-Grillet un singulier renversement de perspectives” (Genette 1962 : 34).

Robbe-Grillet’s work did evolve constantly, and if Marienbad made critics believe Robbe-Grillet had become a “humaniste,” imagine what reaction they would have had to his autobiographical trilogy!

In 1984 Robbe-Grillet published the first volume of his Romanesques. This was the same year Duras published L’Amant and just one year after Sarraute published Enfance. In this chapter we will discuss passages from Roland Barthes’s Roland Barthes, Robbe-Grillet’s Romanesques, Sarraute’s Enfance, and Duras’s L’Amant. We will pay particular attention to textual representations of photographs and how they help the narrator uncover information about his or her past. By portraying photographs in prose, these writers are able to continue exploring new techniques in literature that characterized their earlier works. Photographs are effectively analyzed by the dichotomies that we used to outline the new novel such as objective/subjective, real/imaginary, cadre/hors cadre and so on. Equally they provide
an excellent example of the importance of the union of text and image
because a commented photograph cannot represent a unique reality. Once a
photograph or an image is contextualized or rendered visible by language, it
holds a particular meaning and that meaning comes to represent the “truth”
of the photograph.

Photography is not new to the twentieth century, but our understanding
of it has evolved due to advanced media that highlight its stillness. Christian
Metz has studied the photographic medium, and in his article “Photography
and Fetish”, he shows how photographs are capable of becoming fetishes. He
does this by analyzing photography in contrast with film pointing out the
different spatio-temporal size of the lexis, their different social uses, and their
different signifiers. He focuses on the stillness of photography to show how it
lacks other stimuli that usually accompany a film such as sound, movement,
and plurality. Because films are based on movement, they are in a universe
where nothing can be kept and “the emergence of a fetish is thus made more
difficult” (Metz 15).

Metz also explores photography’s kinship with death to reinforce his
argument that photography is prone to fetishism. He explains how
photography is linked to death in many different ways. One of these links is
related to the social practice of keeping photographs as souvenirs of lost
loved ones. Secondly, he explains that once a person is photographed, he or she is an effect of time and vanishes, or as Philippe Dubois puts it, the person is “dead for having been seen” (quoted in Metz 16). The third common factor between photography and death is the snapshot, for “the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time” (16). Photography “by virtue of the objective suggestions of its signifier (stillness, again) maintains the memory of the dead as being dead” whereas film’s movement revives them (16).

Metz is not the only theorist to notice the commonalities between photography and death. Roland Barthes’s canonical study La chambre claire also explores this notion. And, as Metz points out: “It is not only the book [La chambre claire] itself but also its position of enunciation which illustrates this kinship, since the work was written just after (and because of) the death of the mother, and just before the death of the writer” (15). In this work, Barthes discusses a photograph of his mother that could not be represented in the book.1 As Mary Anne Hirsch explains in Family Frames: “Barthes cannot show us the photograph because we stand outside the familial network of looks and thus cannot see the picture in the way that Barthes must” (2). The photograph of Barthes’s mother only exists through the words he is using to describe it and his reaction to it. The photograph thus becomes what W.J.T.
Mitchell has called an “imagetext.” An imagetext is a photograph that only comes to existence through the prose used to describe it. An imagetext implies opposition between fact and fiction because there is no visual proof to substantiate the textual image. Thus, we begin to see a complex relationship between image and text due to the large number of possibilities for interpretation. The photograph of which Barthes creates this imagetext even has a title, “La Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver,” and represents his mother at her home when she was five years old. This photograph was found, along with others, in Barthes’s mother’s apartment after her death: “J’allais ainsi, seul dans l’appartement où elle venait de mourir, regardant sous la lampe, une à une, ces photos de ma mère, remontant peu à peu le temps avec elle, cherchant la vérité du visage que j’avais aimé. Et je la découvris” (CC 105-06). Barthes’s search for the truth about his mother reveals the complex nature of the truth photography is able to provide. The other photographs that Barthes viewed were what “la phénoménologie appellerait des objets ‘quelconques’…mais la Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver, elle, était bien essentielle, elle accomplissait pour moi, utopiquement, la science impossible de l’être unique” (110). From this statement, we can conclude that Barthes is not looking for the truth, but a truth. He is seeking a photographic representation that allows him to see the truth about his mother the way he wants to see it.
In this way Barthes has turned this particular photograph into a fetish. Karl Marx has written extensively about the Fetishism of commodities. While he argues that there is a physical relation between physical things, he sees commodities as functioning differently. Since “[commodities] have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom,” commodities are different from things (Marx 2). Marx then evokes how the human brain works to portray things as independent beings endowed with life because “[t]here is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (2). For Barthes, as for the other authors we will be discussing here, the photograph becomes a medium for showing the relationship between the subject and object of the photograph, the relation between Man and things.

*La chambre claire* goes a long way toward furthering our understanding of the relationship between fact and fiction, Man and things, when analyzing photographs. This study defines the instantaneous nature of photography with the “ça a été” of a photograph. The “ça a été” is the apparent truth that a photograph represents because as Barthes points out “…je ne puis jamais nier que la chose a été là” (120). Like Barthes, Metz and Dubois see the photograph as a pure index that “stubbornly point[s] to the print of what was,
but no longer is” (Metz 14). Because photography differs from film, painting and other art forms in its representation, it must be defined differently. Barthes refers to the object which is photographed as the referent and explains how it is situated in the realm of the real: “J’appelle ‘référent photographique’, non pas la chose facultativement réelle à quoi renvoie une image ou un signe, mais la chose nécessairement réelle qui a été placée devant l’objectif, faute de quoi il n’y aurait pas de photographie” (120). Therefore, a photograph proves that an object was placed in front of the camera to be photographed, that it existed. However, it can never exist in exactly the same way for when an object — whether it be an object or a person that becomes an object — becomes the subject of the photograph the object is now dead since the exact moment can never be recaptured.

Photography is linked to death because once the photograph is taken, the particular moment it represents is over, and cannot be recreated. The social use of photography also testifies to this link to death, and in many autobiographical narratives, the authors ponder photographic images of themselves, and of their parents. Because these authors are creating textual inscriptions of photographs, they have, in a sense, freed themselves from
reality. They are no longer talking about people, they are talking about objects. It is in this way that photographs act as fetishes, becoming a sort of Proustian madeleine that provokes a flood of memories.

Photographs allow something to be seen, but what they say depends on the spectator, for as Barthes explains: “Telle est la Photo: elle ne sait dire ce qu’elle donne à voir” (156). Barthes puts his theory into practice in his “autobiographical” narrative Roland Barthes. This text examines the relationship between text and image by presenting commented photographs all the while defying traditional genres. The first forty or so pages of Roland Barthes are filled with photographs which express moments in Roland Barthes’s life, members of his family, etc. These photographs are, for the most part, commented as in a photo album and seem to construct a solid foundation for the “autobiography” that follows. However, as Maryse Fauvel reveals: “La stratégie avec les photos est d’utiliser donc l’apparente véracité du médium photo contre lui-même, de créer une fiction à travers la pseudo ou la fausse réalité de l’image, de proposer une parodie d’album traditionnel de photos de famille, de sortir du cliché (aux deux sens du mot)” (195).

Barthes has implemented two strategies that make his narrative appear straightforward. He uses photographs that seem to prove their captions, and he has engaged in a literary endeavor that tells the life story of a man
(Barthes) signed by the very same person. The reader can thus read the text and trust its credibility. However, this type of rationale, as we might imagine, is not accurate for as Louis Marin suggests:

Dans un cas, le livre est sans auteur; paradoxalement, à cause du redoublement même des noms [Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes], c’est un anonyme; dans l’autre et tout aussi paradoxalement, le redoublement devient coïncidence fortuite; le livre est un homonyme; il se trouve que l’auteur de cette biographie portait mêmes nom et prénom que celui dont il narre la vie. (5)

Furthermore, as Paul Jay points out in his study Being in the Text: “Barthes’s text is a sustained denial of the fiction that the subject is anything other than a creation of human consciousness and human language” (175). Thus, more than a traditional autobiography, Roland Barthes is a “creative text, the subject within it a textual production” (175). This creative text, like the other narratives that we will be discussing, is developed from fragments. The text is divided into a large number of fragments that come from a list of names, topics, and concepts. Jay suggests that this fragmentation signals a deconstruction of the self making it impossible to attain an absolute truth about the author (174). Barthes contends that his book is different from earlier confessions because the knowledge of authors today is different from “yesterday” and “the fragmented form of each work becomes a conscious image on the representational plane of the breakdown of an old epistemology.
of the literary and psychological subjects, a textual adjustment to the emergence of a new conception of the self as ‘heaped together’ from ‘dispersed’ fragments” (179). Fragments are, indeed, the subject of at least three entries in Roland Barthes and as Barthes explains: “Écrire par fragments: les fragments sont alors des pierres sur le pourtour du cercle: je m’étale en rond : tout mon petit univers en miettes ; au centre, quoi ?” (89). This type of questioning is clearly typical of “autobiographical narrative” and represents the puzzle that these writers are trying to piece together.

Barthes addresses other topics such as memories of his childhood, what constitutes an author, a work, and the list goes on. He also focuses on the relationship between language and vision. It is in this text that Barthes proclaims: “J’ai une maladie, je vois le langage” (141). For Barthes, as for the New Novelists, there is a complex relationship between language and vision which explains why it is so difficult to decipher a clear perception of one or the other. Each time an image or a photograph is contextualized by a commentary, it takes on a particular meaning, and this meaning is constantly evolving. Susan Cohen highlights some of Barthes’s ideas of the denotative and connotative nature of photographs and their captions:

Barthes notes that despite their connotative nature, captions usually try to pass themselves off a denotative, as the factual explanation of what photographs represent. Therefore, the presence of the two together tends to undermine the captions’
fictional status. Whenever a photograph is present, the denotative element predominates, even if the caption belies the image. One may conclude that in literature this remains true, so that in books containing photographic illustrations a hybrid structure is produced in which the balance tips toward the factual register. (Cohen, S. 99)

Due to the complex nature of language and images, as well as the relationship linking them, we must not attempt to isolate them. Language provides authors with a variety of textual strategies such as the ability to intermingle fact and fiction, the oscillation between narrative voices and the use of factual and imaginary elements. This wide array of textual strategies “testif[ies] both to the writer’s resiliency in the face of such a confrontation and to language’s uncanny ability to lure him again and again into its web” (Jay 183). This web is made up of the interweaving of the dichotomies we have discussed throughout. Barthes, along with the New Novelists, is constantly creating traps (or webs) for the reader, and for this reason it is important to consider the role of the reader in interpreting these texts. Raylene Ramsey reminds us of the importance of the reader in the introduction to her book on the New Autobiographies in saying: “Reading (understanding) these re-writings of history, story, and gendered self involves hidden movements between specific and individuated gendered bodies (the desires, fantasies, and disavowals) of these authors in text and the gendered reader’s (my) own body
and text” (Ramsey 1996: 9). Thus, the barriers created to divide the various dichotomies that exist are so porous that separating them becomes a sort of “mission impossible.”

The New Novelists engaged in this impossible mission by publishing their “autobiographies” beginning in the early 1980s. In 1983 Sarraute published *Enfance*, Robbe-Grillet published the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy *Les Romanesques* in 1984, the same year in which Duras published *L’Amant*. In these texts, the authors challenge traditional autobiography, and the textual descriptions of photographs help them to do this. In a sense, they count on the factual nature of the photograph to legitimize what they are writing, but the ambiguous nature of photography allows them literary freedom. The use of photographs in literature—whether they be actual photographs like in *Roland Barthes*, or textual descriptions of photographs as in the works of the New Novelists—were common during this period. As Maryse Fauvel emphasizes: “Les années 70 et 80 en France ont vu pourtant une pléthore de textes littéraires accompagnés de photos ou s’y référant…qui s’interrogent sur la relation mot-image et le problème de la re-présentation” (38).
Photographs allow the novelist to interrogate the relationship between word and image, as well as the relationship between the past and the present. As Raylene Ramsey explains:

Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras are all explicitly at grips with the (im)possibility of recovering the past in the present; the imposition of their present knowing selves on their unknowing past selves. This impossibility (repressed by traditional autobiography in the interest of the realist illusion) has become part of the subject matter of their texts. (Ramsey 1996: 27)

Only a very superficial judgment of these texts would lead to the conclusion that they were pure autobiographies in the traditional sense. Ramsey herself vacillates between terms to qualify what she calls in the title of her book “new autobiographies.” This indeciveness between categories is the principal inspiration for Thomas C. Spear in his critique of Ramsey’s book. As he notes: “’Autobiography’ is used (with or without quotation marks) in a very broad manner, and ‘autobiographical fiction’ is not seen as oxymoronic. When a work is deemed either ‘autobiography or autofiction’ (71), a confusion has clearly set in” (111). This confusion is indicative of the complexity of these works. However, if we take the definition of autobiography from Philippe Lejeune and his explanation of the autobiographical pact, we see that these works, indeed, fail to follow it; and thus, should not be called autobiographies.
Philippe Lejeune who has become “le spécialiste incontesté de l’autobiographie et de toutes les formes de l’écriture intime” believes that a work must guarantee its autobiographical, non-fictional status to become part of the canonical autobiographical opus (Delon 20). As Alex Hughes explains in her introduction to *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography*:

The ‘pact’ in question—a key focus of Lejeune’s metanarrative speculations—constitutes a contract of identity, in which the reader partakes and which s/he must accept. Sealed, generally, by an intradiegetic deployment of the proper name, the autobiographical ‘pact’ is set up inside the (canonical) autobiographical opus as the emblem and guarantee of its autobiographical, non-fictional status. The elements that establish it function to encourage us to construe the text in which they feature as one whose author, narrator and protagonist share an identitarian connection; as one that is therefore an exercise in ‘proper’ self-representation; and as one that communicates, veraciously, some aspect of its creator’s existence and essence.

(2)

Since the “autobiographies” of these authors do not fully comply with this pact, due to the fictional elements employed, they are not “true” autobiographies. All of these works combine factual and fictional elements, and the author, narrator, and protagonist do not always share a common identity. They are, however, representative of *l’écriture du moi* which has flourished in contemporary French literature. *L’écriture du moi* is simply a more encompassing term than autobiography. It includes works that, for different reasons, do not comply with the criteria essential to an
autobiography. For example, Lejeune’s definition of autobiography states that the text must not only be factual, but it must be written in prose. This excludes such works as Raymond Queneau’s autobiographical poem *Chêne et chien*. Other forms of self expression such as memoirs, autoportraits, and diaries are excluded because they do not, like autobiographies, privilege the past, and they do not always follow the chronological order typical of autobiographical narrative.

In May 2002, *Magazine Littéraire* published a special issue dedicated to some of these diverse forms of self expression, and traced these different forms throughout history. Autobiography has been viewed as a difficult genre, and has long been mistrusted. While many texts may seem straightforward, the author is not always telling the reader everything, and sometimes s/he is not even telling the truth, for it is not an easy task to completely remove one’s mask:

> Les écrivains ne tombent pas si facilement le masque. L’autobiographie est un genre littéraire qui a longtemps inspiré méfiance ou mépris. Bien après saint Augustin, Montaigne et Pascal, qui ont parlé de leur moi sans pour autant livrer de véritables autobiographies, il a fallu attendre Rousseau pour qu’un écrivain ose se révéler dans son intimité et ses secrets. Ces *Confessions* ne manquèrent pas de choquer. En réaction se développa un autre modèle d’écriture de soi dans lequel l’auteur brouille les cartes, pratique un subtil dosage de mensonge et de vérité, et remanie le matériau de sa propre vie. L’ultime avatar de cette pratique est l’autofiction, cette ‘mise en fiction de la vie personnelle’ telle que Serge Doubrovsky l’inaugura à la fin des
années 70. Souvent refoulée ou pervertie, la pulsion autobiographique irrigue néanmoins une vaste littérature et a donné maints chef-d’œuvre—que l’on songe, pour le XXe siècle, à Gide, Sartre ou Malraux. Elle est aussi un pratique sociale, qui n’est pas le seul fait des écrivains… (ML 19)

The term “autofiction,” as defined by Doubrovsky, seems to be more accurate for describing the works we will discuss in this chapter because they combine the real (real life events and photographs) and imaginary/imagined elements (distortions of the real) to tell a story that has multiple truths. Autofiction is defined as follows: “néologisme créé par Serge Doubrovsky en 1977, désigne une variante moderne de l’autobiographie romancée. En anglais, le même genre littéraire s’appelle “faction,” de l’addition des facts et fiction” (http://autofiction.com). Since the texts we will be discussing in this chapter do not follow the criteria for the “pact” as defined by Lejeune, a new category must be created for them. Mounir Laouyen points out the difficulty Lejeune encountered when attempting to categorize the writing of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet,

[car chez Barthes comme chez Robbe-Grillet, l’auteur, le narrateur et personnage principal se confondent. Mais, jugeant incohérente la combinaison d’un pacte Romanesque d’ordre péritextuel avec la condition onomastique de la triple identité, Philippe Lejeune s’est empressé de hacher la case nord-est du tableau, dont les textes de Barthes et de Robbe-Grillet revendiquent l’ouverture. (Laouyen 1)
The stories these authors are telling, and the multiple truths that result from their new literary practices, are created by the interactions between the dichotomies we discussed in Chapter One for the particular image being discussed (especially in the form of a photograph) can be transformed by the text (or the *hors-cadre*). This is because the text is influenced by one’s lived experience and the impact of a shared history. In a sense, writers begin to deconstruct History as they present historical events through fragmented *tranches de mémoire* that are intertwined with the complication of remembering. As Ramsey points out: “History, like Autobiography, becomes the material of the fiction and the instrument of its own destruction” (Ramsey 1996: 82).

Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Duras and Barthes all write about childhood experiences. These experiences obviously differ, but the techniques they use to express them share a lot of common factors. One factor is the use of photographs (as we have already mentioned) and the other is the use of multiple narrative voices. There are also moments when one of the narrative voices acts as an alter ego of the author allowing him or her to distance him/herself from the experience. This technique allows for an oscillation between fact and fiction, and the reader is left to decipher the truth. Because both factual and fictional elements are presented, the reader is led into a trap.
This “trap” forces the reader to participate actively in the story not only by making a distinction between the two voices, but also by engaging in an interpretation of the events.

Language, like photography, is instantaneous, for its messages can vary from moment to moment, reader to reader, spectator to spectator. For Robbe-Grillet, language and writing are linked with death due to their fleeting nature. As he points out in Le miroir qui revient, “C’est ça la mort… construire un récit, ce serait alors—de façon plus ou moins consciente—prétendre lutter contre elle” (MQR 27). In the conclusion of his study on the New Novel, Arthur E. Babcock quotes Robbe-Grillet from a television appearance during which he makes a similar comment about literature:

[The novelist] speaks, and at the same time nothing remains of what he says since everything is destroyed as he speaks it, as though the only interesting thing were the movement of language, and not at all what it says; it is the creative movement of language that believes in nothing apart from what it is saying at the moment. (138)

From this remark, we can see how text and image/photograph unite in their similar functions. They both represent indexical proof of a moment, which now expressed, ceases to exist in the same way.
Robbe-Grillet and *Les Romanesques*

Between 1984 and 1994, Robbe-Grillet published three works to which *Magazine Littéraire* refers as the crowning achievement of his literary enterprise, and in which he explicitly problematizes the distinction between fiction and autobiography since, as he says, he utilizes once more these themes; as a result, “cette vraie-fausse autobiographie en dit beaucoup sur son auteur mais laisse à la fiction tous ses droits” (de Montremy 63). The title attributed to the trilogy, *Romanesques*, reiterates Robbe-Grillet’s refusal of the term “autobiography” although he did admit near the end of the 1950s that all of his works had autobiographical elements, and that these elements were crucial to the production of his texts: “[J’]ai, dès la fin des années 50, affirmé le caractère autobiographique de mes romans : même si les aventures qui y étaient racontées ne ressemblaient que partiellement à ma propre vie, elles avaient des points de contact, un ancrage et souvent un ancrage crucial et précis” (Robbe-Grillet 1991 : 275-76). One of the examples he provides is the crime to which he alludes in *Le Voyeur* and which is not narrated. This “crime” takes place in Brittany, Robbe-Grillet’s homeland, and is sexual in nature. Furthermore, Robbe-Grillet has never denied his sexual obsessions, and one might believe that he was acting them out in his narrative. However,
he explains that the uncommitted crime in *Le Voyeur* represents the crime he (also) did not commit (277). Catherine Robbe-Grillet affirms the “autobiographical” nature of her husband’s works stating that: “Tout le monde le [son mari, Alain] prend pour un homme parfaitement heureux, équilibré, sans histoires ; seule, je sais qu’il est Mathias et le mari de *La Jalousie*” (33). While Robbe-Grillet recounts events that seem to mirror his life, the goal of his *Romanesques* is not to simply recount the life of a man who was born in 1922 in Brittany, traveled extensively, and was trained to be an agronomist.

Robbe-Grillet’s “shift” from new novelist to autobiographer seems to be confirmed early on in *Le miroir qui revient* with his declaration: “Je n’ai jamais parlé d’autre chose que de moi” (MQR 10). However, his trilogy cannot be considered an autobiography because he openly refuses to sign the autobiographical pact. This refusal manifests itself in two ways—in terms of Lejeune’s understanding of the premise of the autobiographical quest and of his stated need for authenticity in autobiographical works. For Lejeune, one cannot begin one’s autobiography unless one has come to understand the sense of one’s existence. Robbe-Grillet argues that if he understood his existence he would not need to write about it (Robbe-Grillet 1994: 295).9 Secondly, he refuses to comply with Lejeune’s belief that an autobiography
should be authentic for he cannot guarantee authenticity even if he is allowed
the freedom to make an honest mistake: “[I]l [Lejeune] ne va pas jusqu’à dire
de ‘vérité’, car on peut se tromper; mais il faut se tromper honnêtement” (295).
Since it is not Robbe-Grillet’s goal to present a factual account of events from
his past, he is able to construct parts of his story around the Count Henri de
Corinthe “qui a sans doute aussi une existence historique, mais elle a disparu
complètement dans une création romanesque, par moments délirante” (296).

Henri de Corinthe has been given multiple identities by critics of this
work; they range from the friend of the father to Robbe-Grillet himself. For,
as Rosalind Epps proposes in her article “Il n’est pas un autre: Alain Robbe-
Grillet et l’identité du Comte Henri de Corinthe”: “le Comte Henri de
Corinthe n’est pas un ‘autre’, n’est personne d’autre que Robbe-Grillet lui-
même!” (204). This hypothesis is not ground breaking since it has become the
consensus among critics that Henri de Corinthe does, indeed, represent the
alter ego of Robbe-Grillet. However, from this standpoint, Robbe-Grillet
continues to evoke uncertainty in his works. Since Comte Henri de Corinthe
acts as Robbe-Grillet’s alter ego, the character allows him to mystify the
reader by mixing fact and fiction. As Eileen Angelini aptly notes in her
chapter on Robbe-Grillet:
The narrative voice that recounts the fictional/historical stories of Corinthe is distinct from the narrative voice that recounts “traditional” childhood memories and from the narrative voice that makes metacommentaries on the autobiographical writing process at the level of énonciation. Corinthe plays an essential role since he becomes the alter ego, the double in literature, of Robbe-Grillet himself. (Angelini 91)

By introducing another character in his novel, Robbe-Grillet is able to separate his tales, making the reader responsible for deciphering between fact and fiction, or finding a connection between the two. The name of this character, and alter ego of Robbe-Grillet, is also of interest because it is from this assigned name that we derive the famous anagram rien de cohérent. In adding elements that create uncertainty in his works, Robbe-Grillet undermines the importance of uncovering an absolute truth about his life.

Robbe-Grillet, in fact, never claims to be telling a factual account of his life: “Il ne faudrait donc pas attendre de ces pages quelque explication définitive que ce soit, ni seulement véridique...Je ne suis pas homme de vérité, ai-je dit, mais non plus de mensonge, ce qui reviendrait au même...Et c’est encore dans une fiction que je me hasarde ici” (MQR 13). He holds that he has always spoken of himself all the while explaining that, even in his “autobiographical” trilogy, he is not respecting the genre:
C’est un autre problème qui se pose, du fait que je parle aussi de moi; ou même: uniquement de moi, comme toujours. Mes parents, c’est déjà moi en train de prendre forme. A qui veut l’entendre, j’affirme récuser l’entreprise autobiographique, où l’on prétend rassembler toute une existence vécue… (58)

Nevertheless, there are authentic elements in this autofictional narrative. Robbe-Grillet writes about his previous works, comments on other authors (like Barthes) and includes textual descriptions of photographs. The use of photographs is interesting because they provide an apparent truth, and for this reason, should justify the event they represent.

The photographs described in this text can be divided into two categories: those representing the protagonist and his family (from great grand-parents, grand-parents, mother and father), and those representing real events that were depicted in the news and are (often) linked to death. Because photographs capture a moment, they are often confused with an absolute truth, however, if the photos are not present in the text one can question their authenticity just as one can question the authenticity of the fragmented stories they incite.

A photograph of the narrator allows him to delve into memories pertaining to his past: “Un agrandissement photographique, de teinte sépia et un peu flou, où l’on reconnaît le château en arrière-fond au milieu de frondaisons déjà dégarnies, me représente à sept ou huit ans…” (106). This
description is “floue,” like memories themselves, and provokes a story about his uncle which may or may not be completely factual. Another passage describes his parents and is used to explain why one writes and why one must reflect on one’s parents to understand one’s point of view: “Se refuser à classer, ce serait donc se refuser à être, en se contentant d’exister. Alors, pourquoi écrire?” (57). Telling one’s story, therefore, necessitates a reflection on one’s past and one’s family:

Mon père et ma mère ont beaucoup vécu pour leurs enfants, ils nous ont consacré la meilleure part de leur travail, de leurs soucis, de leurs projets. Cette menue monnaie que je leur rends n’est-elle pas misérable en comparaison ? Ne suis-je pas en train de dessiner seulement un père pittoresque, comme le deviennent tous les gens dès qu’ils sont peints ? Est-il acceptable que toute une vie d’homme ne laisse que ces maigres traces, oubliées au fond d’un tiroir avec quelques photos jaunies de son visage dissymétrique, de sa grosse moustache et de ses molletières ? (57)

This quote is rich in suggestions pertaining to the contradiction associated with the memories of one’s parents. The narrator’s allusion to the picturesque image of his father as in a painting is telling for it seems to clearly conflict with the worn photographs that represent the same person. Photography captures an image of a person that is not only fading, but indicative of a certain period due the description of the father’s mustache and the way in which he is dressed.
This description of the narrator and his parents is followed by yet
another fragment relating to his life. The story involves an art exhibit at the
Museum of Modern Art in New York where: “une vaste toile où l’on me voit
(un titre descriptif le précise) au milieu de fragments épars” (58). This
representation depicts the narrator among recognizable objects that are
historically and culturally defined (like memories): “comme le sphinx de
Gizèh, la figure de Frankenstein, ou quelques fantassins de la première guerre
mondiale, mélangés à des éléments brisés tirés de mes propres récits, romans
ou films…et jusqu’à mon propre visage” (59). And, further :

Je me reconnais volontiers dans cette allégorie pleine d’humour.
Mais, après les avoir nettoyés avec soin, ne suis-je pas ici
sournoisement occupé à mettre ces morceaux en ordre ? Peut-
être même à les recoller ensemble, pour constituer un destin, une
statue, les terreur et les joies du petit garçon formant une base
solide pour les thèmes ou les techniques du futur écrivain. (59)

As the narrator finds himself amidst fragments of his life and his work, he
sees this as an allegory of his life which he must rearrange in order to
construct his destiny. This destiny comes from memories, or fragments that
attest to the life of the narrator, and which he sets in order and restores—both
figuratively through the image and literally through the construction of his
autofictional narrative. The restoration process of fragmented memories both
real and imaginary will continue throughout the trilogy.
In the second volume of this trilogy, *Angélique*, underlying themes associated with the New Novel (and Robbe-Grillet’s entire literary enterprise) recur. Robbe-Grillet’s works often provoke a sense of uncertainty for the reader, and the techniques he employs he himself often considered excessive:

Deux adjectifs, dès le premier feuillet, se sont répétés sous ma plume : incertain, excessifs. Ce n’est sans doute pas le fruit du hasard ni d’une coupable négligence. L’excès de présence qui fige les choses et les met en suspens (cette neige qui tombe maintenant, immobile, au-dessus du paysage hivernal sur quoi donne ma fenêtre, cadre en attente, écran, page blanche) n’a d’égal en effet dans sa dérisoire précision que l’incertitude des liens unissant les images entre elles — chevaliers errants ou navire mort — comme à d’éventuelles significations, sans cesse remises en cause, épaves à la dérive que le flot submerge à chaque lame, soulève une seconde et menace aussitôt d’engloutir, tant elles sont fragiles, passagères, aléatoires. (A 10-11)

Here Robbe-Grillet highlights the uncertainty present in his works by explaining how images are linked by uncertain elements. He also shows how it is the excess of presence that immobilizes things and objects, making them subjects of narration. These comments reveal how images, when framed, take on certain significations that are eternally questioned. They also point out the fragility of images and their instantaneous nature. For once a moment is captured and framed in a photograph, on a screen, or on the page of a book, it can never be reproduced in exactly the same way, just like memories. Thus, there is always ambiguity accompanying a text, and as Robbe-Grillet writes in
Angélique: “L’auteur, c’est l’être qui n’a pas de visage, dont la voix ne peut pas passer que par l’écriture et qui ‘ne trouve pas ses mots’” (30). So, the author must write to discover the truth, which in turn, remains inaccessible.

The final volume of the trilogy, Les Derniers jours de Corinthe, continues to question the writer’s point of view when creating his/her autobiography and the genre itself: “…car l’autobiographe le plus lucide ne sait pas ce qu’il fait ; et même, de jour en jour, il sait qu’il ne peut pas le savoir, à moins d’être déjà mort” (DJC 18).13 Since, as Robbe-Grillet claims, an autobiographer cannot know what he is doing until he is (already) dead, there is a certain truth that comes with death. We might say that with textual descriptions of photographs the autobiographer is searching for this truth, since the photographs represent the person as if they were dead. The paradoxical proof that an autobiography seems to represent is, at times, reinforced by photographs; however, these photographs do nothing to add to the authenticity of the text. As Robbe-Grillet himself points out: “Il arrive aussi qu’une image perçue de façon irréfutable ait été si fugitive, et en même temps si improbable, qu’on doute aussitôt de sa véracité” (DJC 155). Even photographic proof is refutable.
The final pages of Robbe-Grillet’s autofictional enterprise consist of the description of seven photographs: “Sept splendides photographies, reproduites en couleurs (ce qui est exceptionnel) à la page centrale du Globe, le lendemain matin, donne une bonne idée de la scène” (DJC 221). The photographs represented here, and the stories that follow, provoke a series of memories which all begin with “Je me souviens…” and recount other important fragments in the protagonist’s life up to the final sentence: “Le moment est donc venu. Selon ce qui a été prescrit, je signe ici mon mémoire inachevé” (229). His memoir could, in fact, not be any other way because the author is still living and his version of his life will change throughout time, thus nullifying any attempt to relate an absolute truth. Clearly, portraying an absolute truth that would serve as an authentic version of his life is not Robbe-Grillet’s goal here. As he explains: “S’il existe un ‘nouveau roman’, il doit exister quelque chose comme une ‘nouvelle autobiographie’ qui fixerait en somme son attention sur le travail même, opéré à partir de fragments et de manques, plutôt que sur la description exhaustive et véridique de tel ou tel élément du passé” (Robbe-Grillet 1991 : 285).14 An exhaustive description of one’s life that represented only the facts would not only be against what Robbe-Grillet was trying to do, it would be virtually impossible.
Sarraute’s *Enfance*

Sarraute’s *Enfance* recounts memories from her childhood through two alternating narrative voices that have been defined in many different ways. Gaetan Brulotte defines them as oppositions of positive and negative: “The first voice is heard as unauthentic, as a reflexive consciousness or ‘supernarrator,’ who, like the superego, speaks the language of order, of social knowledge, and of convention” whereas “it is the second voice of the disordered flux of emotion, of the felt, and of the passion that is the ‘authentic’ voice, operating at the level of masks removed” (Ramsey 1996: 121). Françoise van Roey-Roux, on the other hand, sees them as masculine and feminine with the masculine voice representing the psychotherapist giving it more validity (121). Ann Jefferson provides still another conception of these two voices, dividing them as passive and active with the second voice representing a reader within the text who validates the authenticity of the narrative (130). Instead of agreeing with a single definition from those mentioned above, Ramsey holds that the two narrative voices do, in fact, shift between all of these categories to produce what can “only be labeled as Sarrautean voice” (140). While *Enfance* is included in Ramsey’s work under the title of a new autobiography, and is studied along with Sartre’s *Les Mots*
in Loïc Marcou’s anthology on autobiography, it is far from being a
traditional autobiography. Philippe Lejeune sees some of the minidramas in
this text as “metatextual reflections on an aspect of the writing process in
which it is, in fact, language that is worked on patiently and stubbornly, or
‘liquified’” (127). Sarraute does, indeed, have high expectations for language.
She uses language to extricate images that express a present feeling. Many
critics have noted the use of metaphor in Sarraute’s work. This usage occurs
in the form of tropisms which have come to define the Sarrautean literary
universe. As Leah Hewitt points out, it is a method that is meant to
accomplish a particular purpose:

Sarraute’s tropisms have much in common with Irigaray’s
fluids and Kristeva’s semiotic in the way they afford a stylistic
breakdown of conventional forms of representation…Like
Irigaray and Kristeva, Sarraute forces her readers to reassess
their relationship to the text, never letting them rest comfortably
in one position from which to determine meaning once and for
all. The textual resistances—which require that the reader work
on and in their texts—undo attempts at mastery, of possessing
an objective truth. (Hewitt 66)

Sarraute’s use of tropisms does make it difficult for the reader to immediately
establish an objective truth, and her “autobiography” is no exception in this
regard.
*Enfance* is a selection of fragments from Sarraute’s childhood. In them, she recounts some painful moments from her childhood, which was spent between her parents who had separated. Sarraute was born in 1900 in Ivanova, Russia. Therefore, despite growing up in France, she had to overcome her “otherness.” Sarraute studied to become a lawyer, and actually came to the writing process later in her life. Through the representation of fragmented moments from her childhood in *Enfance*, Sarraute is attempting to capture (or recapture) them before they are lost forever. Thus, as Eileen Angelini proposes: “The most important objective for Sarraute is to render the *sensations* rather than the events from her childhood. She claims not to believe in autobiography per se because... in every book an author will include many experiences, lived or imagined” (18). To achieve her autofictional narrative, Sarraute continues to use the same literary devices that are found in her novels. In *Enfance* tropisms are expressed by two narrative voices, and these distinct voices appear to operate in somewhat the same manner as Robbe-Grillet’s narrator and his alter ego, Henri de Corinthe. The two voices which narrate Sarraute’s childhood do, in fact, have a specific function. Angelini proposes a task for each voice: “Since language is used as a form of meditation, a distinction must be drawn between what was prefabricated and the present sensation that Sarraute has about this past
event and is able to render in such a way that is as close as possible to the
‘truth’ of the past” (34). Statements are made by one voice, and then verified
by the other.

Loïc Marcou situates *Enfance* in the category of “naissance de la vocation
littéraire,” and one of the “conversations” of the narrative reflects this theme.
Young Natacha had been keeping a notebook that contained what was to be a
novel. At her mother’s urging, the young girl shows the notebook to a male
friend. The mother’s male friend is referred to as ‘l’oncle’ because “c’est ainsi
qu’en Russie les enfants appellent les hommes adultes” (E 84).15 The man’s
reaction provokes a traumatic moment not only for the young girl, but for the
future writer. He tells her that before writing a novel, she should first learn to
spell (85). One of the narrative voices reacts to this memory: “Oui, pour
répondre, pour donner des raisons à ceux qui me demandaient pourquoi j’ai
tant attendu avant de commencer à ‘écrire’… C’était si commode, on pouvait
difficilement trouver quelque chose de plus probant : un de ces ‘traumatismes
de l’enfance’” (85). And, the other voice interrogates the first, probing for
more information : “Tu n’y croyais pas vraiment?” (85). An analysis of the
sentiment ensues and when the first voice claims to bear no grudge toward
the man, the other voice questions this by saying that it must not have been
the case when it happened, for he had been brutal (86). The first voice admits
that her present interpretation of the situation is not the same as it was at the moment when it happened: “Cela ne pouvait pas m’apparaître tel que je le vois à présent” (86). In these passages, the first voice relates information about past events, and the other voice interrogates them. The conclusion to which the two voices arrive is as close to the truth as the author can come, being so far removed from the actual moment of the event.

For Sarraute, *Enfance* was not a factual account of her life but a literary articulation of fragments of her life. And, as Leah Hewitt notes, “…turning to autobiography does not represent a fundamental change in Sarraute’s attitudes about the relationship between life and literature” (56). Sarraute has demonstrated mistrust of autobiographies, criticizing Gide, Leiris, and Sartre among others because she exposes, in her works and in interviews, a belief that a factual autobiography is impossible. As Angelini suggests: “Sarraute believes that it is impossible for an adult to fully recall and accutately narrate a childhood. Any attempt to do so, would and could only result in a fake autobiography” (19). Clearly many factors have an impact on childhood memories and they cannot be trusted to represent the facts.

Like Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute adds textual representations of photos and other factual elements that seem to help ground her tale in the realm of the truth. However, confusion remains regarding the intermingling of fact and
fiction. Among the fragmented memories of her childhood, Sarraute describes photographs that provoke a memory of the trauma she endured as a young child, which is a key element in this autofictional narrative. Shuffled between the homes of her father and her mother, young Natacha reveals traumatic childhood events. She explains these events, however, from an “adult” point of view, having reflected upon her childhood and the feelings she had as a child. In one of the conversations between the voices, Natacha explains that she was learning to write with both her right and left hands at school. She wrote a letter to her father in which she shared this information, and he responded that it seemed to be a waste of time. After that time, Natacha stopped going to that school or any other. When the second voice asks for an explanation, the following response is provided: “Vraiment j’ai beau chercher… Peut-être pour qu’on n’ait pas l’air ici de céder à mon père sur ce point. Mais jamais un pareil soupçon ne m’a effleurée en ce temps là” (72). The idea of suspecting her parents was not part of the child’s reasoning, but as an adult she begins to analyze such past events making the use of the imperfect tense appropriate in the following quote: “Et ma mère était toujours pour moi, aussi bien que mon père, au-dessus, au-delà de tout soupçon” (72). But, as we will see through an analysis of the photographs
mentioned in *Enfance*, both the presence and absence of her mother and her father at different moments in her life influenced Sarraute’s writing.

During time spent with her father Natacha keeps a photograph of her mother. “Mes soirées, quand j’étais dans mon lit, étaient consacrées à maman, à pleurer en sortant de sous mon oreiller sa photo, où elle était assise auprès de Koila, à l’embrasser et à lui dire que je n’en pouvais plus d’être loin d’elle, qu’elle vienne me chercher…” (E 114). This reaction to the photograph reveals the pain endured by Natacha in the absence of her mother. Just four pages after the child verbalizes the fantasy that she is able to tell her mother that she no longer wishes to be separated from her and that she wants her mother to come and take her back, another photograph provokes a painful memory. This memory is of Natacha’s sister who died, provoking a deep sense of grief for her father. This memory makes Natacha feel even more unloved, more rejected:

C’est un souvenir de la petite fille qui était née trois ans avant moi et qui est morte de la scarlatine avant ma naissance. J’avais vu sa photo à Ivanova. Elle était dans les bras de la nourrice coiffée d’un haut bonnet brodé de perles…Elle ressemblait à maman, mais ses yeux étaient immenses, comme emplis d’étonnement…On m’avait dit que papa l’avait lui-même soignée, bercée dans ses bras et que sa mort lui avait fait tant de chagrin qu’il en était tombé malade. (118)
In the description of this photograph, it is the *hors-cadre* that gives it a specific meaning (at this particular moment). In the first photograph, the child’s desire to be desired by her mother transforms the meaning of the image; and in the second, it is the commentary surrounding the photograph that deepens the sense of abandonment and loss. The child has not only been abandoned, she is made aware of the fact that she will never be loved as much as the other child, and so she is made to suffer in a more profound manner. To add to this suffering, commentaries from various observers who express pity for the child only serve to heighten her sense that she has been abandoned, disregarded: “C’est alors que la brave femme qui achevait mon déménagement s’est arrêtée devant moi, j’étais assise sur mon lit dans ma nouvelle chambre, elle m’a regardée d’un air de grande pitié et elle a dit : ‘Quel malheur quand même de ne pas avoir de mère’” (120-21).

Thus, through alternating narrative voices, Sarraute is able to investigate moments from her childhood. These moments are presented from a present perspective, but the other voice questions this perspective. This technique allows Sarraute to recapture the sensations of her childhood. Because Sarraute focused on a very particular period in *Enfance*, her narrative does not include as many descriptions of photographs. The photographs that are described simply reinforce the traumatic events that pervade the
narration. *Enfance* ends rather abruptly because, as one of the narrative voices tells us: “Je ne pourrais plus m’efforcer de faire surgir quelques moments, quelques mouvements qui me semblent encore intacts, assez forts pour se dégager de cette couche protectrice qui les conserve, de ces épaisseurs blanchâtres, molles, ouatées qui se défont, qui disparaissent avec l’enfance…” (277). In a sense, Sarraute gives a physical representation of herself at about the same age as her narrator at the end of *Enfance*. The cover of the 1983 Folio Edition of this work is a photograph of young Natacha. However, this image of the author will not be discussed in the narrative. Once again, the reader is left to interpret an image and the text that substantiates it.

*Duras’s Lover*

Duras is, at times, grouped with the New Novelists due to her non-traditional literary techniques even though she guarded her distance from the group and has often denied any affiliation. This distance was possibly due to the fact that her early works already exhibited an inclination toward autobiography. The subject matter of *L’Amant* is not new, Duras had already written about her childhood in colonial French Indochina (where she was born in 1914) in other novels such as *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and would
write about it later in *L’Amant de la Chine du nord*. But, as Angelini reveals, *L’Amant* differs from these other works in the ways it is similar to the autofictional narratives of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute: “Yet unlike these narratives [*Un Barrage contre le Pacifique, Des Journées entières dans les arbres, L’Eden cinema, and L’Amant de la Chine du nord*], where a female character is the subject of the third-person narration, in *L’Amant* we can distinguish alternating narrative voices” (Angelini 52). Thus through alternating narrative voices, Duras combines fact and fiction, lived and imagined experiences.

Furthermore, the creative catalyst for this autofictional narrative is a photograph, and more perplexing, a photograph that was never taken. This photograph of Duras, aged fifteen, taken in the town of Cholon would have represented a crucial moment in her life. For Janice Morgan, the imaginary photograph that inspires this narrative becomes powerful because, never taken, it represents an absolute:

> In its silence, then, Cholon and all that it represents rejoins the imaginary photograph that opens the book, the one of the seductive young girl on the ferry crossing the river, the one that was never taken. Because it was never taken...the tenuous, remembered image holds a great power, that of representing an absolute: it is precisely because their content was never expressed, never acknowledged or fixed in either image or words that both the absent photograph and the silent nights in Cholon have come to hold—much later in the author’s life—an inexhaustible richness. (81-82)
As Leah Hewitt reveals, the imaginary photograph has a specific function and its absence does not entirely negate the autobiographical parts of this novel: “The status of the imaginary photo insists on autobiography’s creative construction of the self-image, without, however, completely undermining the reference of a lived past” (112). Susan Cohen reinforces this argument stating that: “If the absolute image existed, it would preclude others, and inhibit imagination (93)… Its visual referential power had to be neutralized in order for it not to inhibit the flow of textuality imposing a finite, documentary image” (94-95). Duras’ own description of this photograph is telling:

C’est au cours de ce voyage que l’image se serait détachée, qu’elle aurait été enlevée à la somme. 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…C’est pourquoi, cette image, et il ne pouvait pas être autrement, elle n’existe pas. Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée…C’est à ce manque d’avoir été faite qu’elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d’en être justement l’auteur. (LA 16-17)\textsuperscript{18}

From this description, it becomes obvious that, for Duras, to comment on an actual photograph would invalidate the experience. Because photographs are linked to death, the actual photograph (had it been taken) would “kill” her imagination and her perception. In her article “Photographie et autobiographie: Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes et L’Amant de Marguerite Duras,” Maryse Fauvel describes this type of absent photograph as former
presentations of the real, and not re-presentations of these same events: “Ce type de photo fait oublier, stoppe l’imagination, aplatit la réalité, l’homogénéise, uniformise, elle tue. Elle tue la vie, elle tue le souvenir, elle tue l’immortalité” (197). While this absent photograph serves as the creative catalyst for the novel, other photographs are discussed in passages which seem to follow the pattern used by Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute in that they elicit fragments of the life of the narrator, childhood events, and a discussion of family members captured in a fixed, photographic image.

While the consensus among critics seems to be that the absence of this photograph enables the text to flow freely without a finite description being attached to it, the fact remains that we are unsure whether, in its manner of functioning within the text, this photograph is really any different from the others. After the presentation of the absent photograph, other photographs are discussed: “J’ai retrouvé une photographie de mon fils à vingt ans…Il se veut donner une image déjetée de jeune vagabond…C’est cette photographie qui est au plus près de celle qui n’a pas été faite de la jeune fille du bac” (LA 20-21). This photograph takes the narrator back to her own youth as she reflects on her son’s image. And, a few lines further down in the text, another photograph is the subject of the narration. This photograph is of the narrator’s mother when she was younger: “Celle qui a acheté le chapeau rose
à bords plats et au large ruban noir c’est elle, cette femme d’une certaine photographie, c’est ma mère. Je la reconnais mieux là que sur des photos plus récentes” (LA 21). Since the narrator can more easily recognize her mother from past photographs, she once again exhibits a disassociation between her present and past selves, thus all of these images from the narrator’s past are more easily recognized than those from her present (at the moment when she is writing). In this passage, and others that recreate the narrator’s past, she feels closer to the former self that lived that moment. Moments like this are often narrated in the present tense as the narrator goes back in time to relive the event or experience.

These photographs inspire the fragments which recount the life of the narrator (and the narrative voices) in the text. Because the photograph represents a moment that no longer exists, it allows the author to write about it, and about what it represents. For example, the narrator is able to write about her mother because she is no longer alive: “C’est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C’est pourquoi j’en écris si facile d’elle [de ma mère] maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante” (38). The photographs that (apparently) exist thus differ from the absent photograph that opens the book, or so the reader is led to believe. As Raylene Ramsey notes: “Although some scenes are generated in part from photographs of the past, a representation of
the central scene of the meeting between the Chinese lover and the little girl on the ferry, cannot, indeed, must not, preexist” (Ramsey 1996: 42). Through mixing absent and present photographs, Duras constructs one version of her life by alternating narrative voices/ fact and fiction, allowing her to create an image of herself that is partially true, leaving her some freedom from the pain of the (real) past. Since none of the photographs mentioned in the text are represented, the narrator may or may not be referring to an actual photograph. This doubt and uncertainty surrounding the authenticity of photographs is just as omnipresent as the doubt surrounding the authenticity of memories and is reminiscent of early new novels.

The works and the authors we have discussed here are of interest because they have forced readers to go beyond conventional boundaries in their interpretation of a literary work and, as Angelini suggests, these authors will certainly have an effect on how future texts will be received:

From the reader’s point of view, there is no longer a clear demarcation between fact and fiction, world and text. The juxtaposition of different frames of reference inevitably gives rise to a different reading context. Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet have definitely changed the face of autobiographical writing…(126)

And we could add Roland Barthes to Angelini’s list of names. It is clear, then, that Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras have changed the face of autobiographical writing by implementing new strategies. As we have noted,
one of these strategies is based on the prominence given to the photographic image, textual or real. Michael Sheringham notes the use of photographic images as well as “the notion of the trace, the interaction of individual and collective memory” (195). He attributes these strategies to women writers, but as we have shown, they are not exclusive to female authorship. Instead, writers of both sexes engage in a sort of self-scrutiny through verbal descriptions of photographs. As Sheringham notes: “Absent or present, real or imaginary, the photograph of oneself in the past generates a potentially endless process of self-scrutiny driven by the way we see ourselves and the way we think others see us” (194). Anytime past events are narrated, they are inevitably marked by the cultural baggage that the narrator has accumulated, thereby making it impossible to recount one unilateral truth. And, in any case, these authors are in no way trying to present a truth. Rather, they are telling a version of their life story that will change over time and through the eyes of each reader.

The authors we have discussed in this chapter are not the only ones to have modified Lejeune’s conception of the autobiographical pact. Furthermore, they are not alone in using textual inscriptions of photographs to recount their pasts. In their autofictional texts, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras all use photographs as factual markers; however,
fictional elements remain present. The veracity of the story they are recounting cannot be entirely substantiated because the narrator, author, and protagonist are not always the same entity. The photograph as a fetish allows the author to express excessive attachment or regard to a former self. In speaking of oneself in a photograph, the narrator can fictionalize the story of the photograph and create a story for an “other” which is freed of the painful truth of the “self.” In the next chapter we will continue to look at authors who use photographs to enable them to express themselves as “other” in order to uncover their “self.”

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1 In La Chambre claire, some photographs are represented in the text and serve as a point of departure for Barthes. Others serve as proof of his theories, while some of the photographs that are commented are simply described in prose.
2 CC = La Chambre Claire
3 The term “index” was first defined by Charles Sanders Peirce who called indexical the process of signification in which the signifier is bound to the referent by an actual connection in the world (Metz 14).
4 The term “autobiography” is admittedly problematic. However, we will examine other terms for these works as the discussion progresses.
5 Enfance is, arguably, the most factual account with which we are dealing. Sarraute only narrated a short period of her life in the hopes of finding some truth to the events of her childhood.
6 MQR = Miroir qui revient
8 This was published as “Je n’ai jamais parlé d’autre chose que de moi” in Le Voyageur (2001).
9 This was published as “Du Nouveau Roman à la Nouvelle Autobiographie” in Le Voyageur (2001).
10 Raylene Ramsey, for one, comments on this: “The movement between History and Fiction becomes vertiginous. (Is Corinthe simply Robbe-Grillet playing games, “rien de coherent” as the anagram invented in Parisian literary circles suggests?)” (86).
11 This painting entitled Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object in Sight is included in a catalogue of paintings by Mark Tansey (1993). The story that accompanies the painting, “A Graveyard of Identities and Uniforms”, has for its central character Henri de Corinthe. It also includes a reference to a photograph of Marie-Ange which, like the painting, is commented upon in Le Miroir qui revient. For more on this see the introduction to Marjorie H. Hellerstein’s Inventing the Real World: The Art of Alain Robbe-Grillet.
12 A = Angélique
DJC = Derniers jours de Corinthe
This was published as “Je n’ai jamais parlé d’autre chose que de moi” in Le Voyageur (2001).
E = Enfance
Again, the use of “autobiography” to qualify Enfance is problematic.
Rousseau’s Confessions being the only exception since Sarraute considers them to be outstanding.
LA = L’Amant
CHAPTER 3

WRITING THE MARGINS: SEX, LIES, AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Photo Speak\textsuperscript{1}

In this chapter we will continue to examine authors whose works challenge the traditional conception of autobiography as defined by Philippe Lejeune. In the previous chapter we considered works in which the authors use photographs of themselves and their parents to present a version of their life story. However, the uncertainty that is evoked due to a lack of cohesion between the author, narrator, and protagonist calls for their removal from the autobiographical genre. By defining these works as autofictional narratives, we have established a clear pattern of mixing fact and fiction which prevents these authors and their readers from signing the autobiographical pact. The question that remains is whether an autobiography can ever be completely factual. Perception of—and reactions to—past events necessarily evolve as
time passes. This is just one of the problems with which we are dealing. The genres and methods of expression that we will be addressing in this chapter have problematic pasts themselves.

Autobiography and photography have both been identified as marginal art forms. Lejeune, and other scholars, assert that autobiography cannot be considered art because it is not fiction. Likewise, the photographs that come to life verbally in “autobiographical” works are considered as marginal in respect to high art forms. Pierre Bourdieu and Martine Joly are two critics who articulate reasons for this assessment. In this chapter we will discuss autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works by several authors who all use verbal descriptions of themselves and their parents to recount parts of their lives. In addition to using verbal descriptions of photographs they all express their marginality or otherness.

In three sections, we will show three different kinds of otherness based on ethnic, gender, or social distinctions. Firstly, we will use passages from Patrick Modiano’s *Livret de famille* and George Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* to show how they use images of themselves and their parents to recount moments from their painful childhoods. The pain and trauma that characterize both of these works stem from a lack of knowledge about their pasts and, therefore, a lack of history. By recounting their life story and
retracing their history, these authors come to grips with painful moments of
their own pasts and find a way to express their Jewish identity. Secondly, we
will discuss works by Hélène Cixous, Marie Cardinal, and Tassadit Imache in
order to point out a different sentiment of otherness. All three of these
women struggle with their identities both in regards to their gender and their
nationality. While their sense of marginality is different, these women use
similar strategies to narrate history, and find their place in it. Finally, we will
discuss social otherness via the works of Annie Ernaux and Grégoire
Bouillier.

These diverse authors represent, admittedly, very different problems.
But, in highlighting their similar narrative strategies, we are able to focus on
fundamental issues associated with the representation of one’s life story.
Through autobiography and photography, these authors are able to express
their own marginality through language. This, in turn, allows them to
become a speaking subject who takes power from language and creates a
discourse that can be shared. The description of photographs allows these
authors to play with relations of the self and the other though the text/image
dichotomy.
Interestingly, these authors all refer to photographs of themselves, and of their parents in their autobiographical narratives. The combination of photography and autobiography, both considered marginal art forms, forms a premise for the life stories of these marginal writers. The 1970s represent a moment in History when autobiography had an impact on how individual subjects were viewed. As Michael Sheringham remarks in his study “Changing the script: Women Writers and the Rise of Autobiography”:

The new-found prestige of autobiography in the late 1970s involved more than the development of a heritage. It marked one of those points in intellectual history when the potential of autobiography to map and probe important aspects of human reality matched new currents in the way the constitution of the individual subject was viewed. (187)

Equally, he notes the influx of autobiographies written by women writers and writers from the ethnic margins that were “in search of new ways of articulating a new sense of identity” (187). These comments work to dispel the posited misconception that autobiography is not real art because it is not fiction, and point out the importance of these works for forming new voices.

According to a traditional kind of literary criticism, any form of expression that is aimed at the masses does not require a real talent, and is thus of no real value. The photographs that come to life verbally in these works are seemingly of no real value either for they only represent acts that
are considered banal to members outside the family unit. These photographs are of family members and often capture important events in the life of the narrator. These events include family vacations, family portraits, first communions, weddings, etc. Because these events are considered mundane, the photographs that represent them are not considered high art. Furthermore, Martine Joly distances photography from other art forms considered high art by pointing out how it is automatic, and easily reproduced: “Non seulement la photographie se distingue ontologiquement de l’art parce qu’elle se fait mécaniquement et automatiquement, mais aussi parce qu’elle est reproductible et qu’elle perd alors l’unicité constitutive de l’œuvre d’art” (Joly 1994 : 62). In addition, due to technological advances, taking a photograph has become increasingly simple. The type of photographs we are discussing here are taken as souvenirs, not with the intention of creating works of art. For us, the photograph is important because it is a medium serving to motivate ekphrastic encounters. Critics who dismiss all photographs as mundane are failing to see the value of permeations occurring through arbitrary barriers. The interpretation of the literary function of photographs is one example of such permeations. Thus,
we should not try to see a work of literature, a work or art, or a photograph as an isolated structure. Instead, we will use photographs which are described textually to show how authors use them to express moments of their life that have shaped who they have become. This self exploration requires a consideration of the family unit; and, thus, the photographs that come to life in autobiographical literature are often representations of family members of the narrator engaging in ordinary events.

Self expression comes from personal experience, at least to some extent; and, at times, (logically) takes its roots from common or quotidian events:

La photo de famille ou de voyage, quant à elle, a une fonction primordiale de cohésion du groupe qui s’opère grâce à la verbalisation collective que provoquent la photo et le souvenir commun qui lui est lié. Cette verbalisation orale se retrouve d’ailleurs souvent consignée en partie par écrit dans l’album de famille ou de vacances. (Joly 19)

Family photographs or those taken during vacation serve as proof of an event, but when these images are commented upon after the fact, they fall victim to the shared memory surrounding their content. All photographs and images are interpreted based on the current perception of the spectator, but the photographs to which Joly refers are particular examples that are common to the writers we will be discussing in this chapter. Furthermore, there are limits to one’s ability to recount past events: “Le fait que la mémoire soit
défaillante et qu’elle puisse transformer — voire passer sous silence — des moments importants d’une vie est, comme on voit, un élément qui contredit ouvertement l’idéal de sincérité de l’autobiographe” (27). Since the authenticity of one’s memories cannot be guaranteed, one must rely on souvenirs such as photographs to fill in the missing pieces.

In W.J.T. Mitchell’s discussion of the 1988 NEH report entitled *Humanities in America*, he points out the tensions between visual and verbal representations and how they cannot be separated from struggles in cultural politics and political culture. As he explains: “It [the NEH report] argues that issues like ‘gender, race, and class, ‘the production of ‘political horrors,’ and the production of ‘truth, beauty, and excellence’ all converge on questions of representation” (Mitchell 1994: 3). Since the authors we will be discussing here all identify themselves by their race, gender, or class, they see their “self” as somehow “other” meaning that it deviates from the dominant order. By dominant order we mean those who hold a privileged place in society due to their race, gender, or class. Mitchell goes on to define “self” and “other” as phenomenological concepts calling the self “a speaking and seeing subject” that opposes the “other” which is “a seen and silent object” (162). This is where verbal descriptions of photographs become important and complex. By describing photographic representations of the “self,” these authors are
creating a new voice via the medium of the subject of the photograph which is now a seen and silent object or the “other.” This adds a new dimension to the narrative goal, which is the addressee of the writer’s ekphrastic encounter. Again, Mitchell provides valuable insight into the triangular relationship necessary to bring such ekphrastic encounters to life: “The ‘working through’ of ekphrasis and the other, then, is more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a ménage à trois in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed” (164). By creating verbal representations of what is visible, authors present images that are products of the triangular relationship to which Mitchell refers. A text describing an image can never capture the same picture that is presented visually. The presentation of the image textually also allows the narrator some freedom to control the description. It should also be noted that when these images are narrated, they are the “victim” of the evolution that has occurred in the narrator’s own perception. This is especially true of photographs that represent the narrator since, in this case, the subject of the photograph is a former “self” or “other.”

As Clive Scott points out in his study The Spoken Image: Photography and Language, “Images are by definition the ‘language’ of an interpretive
community, and can be interpreted by the language of that (speech) community” (3). As we will see in the following analyses, being part of a community happens categorically—often at birth—and identifying with that community is often done through the writing process. Often arbitrary barriers between communities are problematic for questions of identity. The authors we will be discussing are attempting to break down barriers as a means of understanding and expressing their identity. The writing process allows our authors to possess and praise the images they are describing to offer a gift to their reader (Mitchell 1994: 164).

The (Post)occupations of Patrick Modiano and George Perec

Two of the major themes that preoccupy Patrick Modiano and George Perec in their literary endeavors is the German Occupation of France and their Jewish heritage. Both writers have attempted to come to terms with some of the negative experiences and memories associated with this period in their autobiographical narratives and in their fictional works. Their writing is rich in memories, and in the verbal description of photographs to substantiate them, or so it would seem. However, photographs from this period—especially photographs meant to identify someone—can not always be
trusted. The Occupation was a time when counterfeit passports abounded and switching identities was as common as it was necessary. Jews living in France were obligated to renounce their heritage and their name for security purposes. Living under false identities, and lying about them, was necessary for survival. This was the case for Modiano’s father and, in part, the reason for the mystery that surrounds him: “Figure obscure, dont l’identité a été soigneusement cachée, ce père était Juif d’origine orientale qui aurait passé la guerre dans une clandestinité trouble, à trafiquer du côté du Marché noir, à vivre d’expédients” (Nettlebeck and Hueston 5). In his work, Modiano repeatedly seeks out friends of his father to help him answer questions. The responses to these questions will provide information that is important to Modiano’s own identity.

Patrick Modiano was born in 1945. His mother was of Belgian origin and met his father in Paris where they were married under false identities during the Occupation. Although Modiano was born after World War II, thus after the Occupation, his works are testaments to this dark time, and the years during this somber period “traverse his writings like a plaguing leitmotif” (Dickstein 145). From La place de l’étoile, Modiano’s first novel, to his most recent works such as Rue des boutiques obscures and De si braves garçons, his heroes share a distinct trait. They are all searching to recover their identities
which come from unknown information about their past, and their missing parents. In his article “Collaboration, Alienation, and the Crisis of Identity in the Film and Fiction of Patrick Modiano,” Richard Golsan aptly notes the absence of any real sense of identity among Modiano’s protagonists. He also attributes this absence of any roots to a greater societal problem associated with the Occupation: “In short, it [the German Occupation] is that moment in history when Frenchmen as a whole were deprived of their roots, their past, and their traditions and were forced to wonder who and what they were” (109). Thus, Modiano is just one of many Frenchmen to feel this sense of disorientation associated with unclear details about their pasts.

Another striking feature common to almost all of Modiano’s novels is the use of photographs. Here, we will focus primarily on Livret de famille for it provides an excellent commentary on identity, past, present, and future. The title of this work is indicative of some of the themes it presents. Before the biographical information about the author, there is a note explaining what a livret de famille is: “Qu’est-ce qu’un ‘livret de famille’? C’est le document officiel rattachant tout être humain à la société dans laquelle il vient au monde. Y sont consignés avec la sécheresse administrative que l’on sait une série de dates et de noms : parents, mariages, enfants, et, s’il y a lieu, morts” (Ldf 8). The concept of the livret de famille is important because it serves as a
record of one’s past; however, in this autobiographical narrative we will see that the facts that are documented in the *livret de famille* are questionable.

*Livret de famille* begins with the birth of the protagonist’s daughter, and his trip to the courthouse to record the event. This occasion allows the narrator to comment on the documentation of his own birth, and the inaccurate information recorded concerning himself, and his parents:

> Je l’ignore en effet où je suis né et quels noms, au juste, portaient mes parents lors de ma naissance. Une feuille de papier bleu marine, pliée en quatre, était agraffée [sic] à ce livret de famille : l’acte de mariage de mes parents. Mon père y figurait sous un faux nom parce que le mariage avait eu lieu pendant l’Occupation. (12)

The absence of concrete facts surrounding the narrator’s birth, and the identity of his parents becomes a motive for re-examining memory. As memories resurge, we see how uncertain they are, even when photographs would seemingly prove their veracity.

There are at least a dozen references to photographs in this book, often of persons from the narrator’s past, or those associated with his parents in their past. We will, however, limit our discussion to the photographs of family members. In Chapter III of *Livret*, the narrator discusses his grandmother and the uncertain details of her life: “Ma grand-mère a habité cette rue Léon-Vaudoyer. A quelle époque? Au cours des années trente, je crois” (43). And, to add to the lack of any real, concrete information about
this woman, the narrator is not even sure what she looks like: “Elle vivait là, peut-être. D’elle, je ne sais presque rien. Je ne connais pas son visage car toutes les photographies—s’il y en avait—ont disparu” (43). Because the narrator never knew this woman, and there are no photographs to document her existence, he is left to question her identity.

Contrary to the narrator’s grandmother, his mother is much more visible. Her career as a film actress actually ensures her existence eternally, in some form or another. At eighteen, Modiano’s mother began a cinematic career, and starred in several films. Due to her profession, her image would be eternalized in film, and with each film, she would play a different role. These various roles represent a sort of mise en abyme of the diverse identities she would take on in her real life.6 One of the photographs that the narrator of Livret claims to possess is a testimony to his mother’s film career. Modiano’s mother signed a contract on April 21, 1940 to shoot the films in which she starred (LdF 50). After she signed the contract with father and son Openfield, they invited her to dinner, and during the evening a photograph was taken. “Au cours du dîner, ils prirent une photo, que j’ai, là, sur mon bureau…la jeune fille qui ressemble à Vivien Leigh, c’est ma mère” (50). Here, the mother is compared to a well-known actress, and in a photograph of both parents, his father is also compared to a known figure (who is,
incidentally, also foreign). The only reference to a photograph of Modiano’s parents in this novel comes near the end, and is described as follows:

J’ai conservé une photo au format si petit que je la scrute à la loupe pour en discerner les détails. Ils sont assis l’un à côté de l’autre, sur le divan du salon, ma mère un livre à la main droite, la main gauche appuyée sur l’épaule de mon père qui se penche et caresse un grand chien noir dont je ne saurais dire la race. Ma mère porte un curieux corsage à rayures et à manches longues, ses cheveux blonds lui tombent sur les épaules. Mon père est vêtu d’un costume clair. Avec ses cheveux bruns et sa moustache fine, il ressemble ici à l’aviateur américain Howard Hughes. (206-07)

The comparison of his father to an aviator is interesting since, in an earlier passage, one of the vague characters presented in the text states: “On peut être juif et être un as de l’aviation, monsieur” (109). This comment allows the narrator to explore stereotypes about Jewish people and provide a positive image of them. The description of this photograph reminds us of a cliché of professional photography in its description of a pose, and it must be questioned. As the narrator himself ponders: “Qui a bien pu prendre cette photo, un soir de l’Occupation?” (207).

Throughout Livret de famille the narrator pieces together information that is based on both autobiographical and imaginary elements that form a possible identity for him. By examining the lives of his parents from photographs, and other documents, the author hopes to come to grips with
his own identity. This is particularly important because, now that he is a father, it is his duty to pass on the family legacy to his child. The story opened with the birth of the narrator’s daughter, and ends with her father taking her in his arms as she sleeps peacefully. She is able to do so because, as Modiano writes to conclude this work: “Rien ne troublait son sommeil. Elle n’avait pas encore de mémoire” (215). This statement reaffirms Modiano’s relationship with memory, revealing the trauma that is attached to his past.

Georges Perec has a similar relationship with memory, and a strategy to deal with it. In W ou le souvenir d’enfance, Perec writes:

‘Je n’ai pas de souvenir d’enfance’ : je posais cette affirmation avec assurance, avec presque une sorte de défi. L’on n’avait pas à m’interroger sur cette question. Elle n’était pas inscrite à mon programme. J’en étais dispensé : une autre histoire, la Grande, l’Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place : la guerre, les camps. (17)

Clearly, l’Histoire with sa grande hache takes on a double meaning. It is both the collective history shared by people living during the Occupation, and la grande hache that has axed away the narrator’s past. Because Perec has associated History with the war and the concentration camps, it is, for him, the very entity that has deprived him of his roots.
Perec was born in Paris in 1936 to Polish-Jewish parents. *W* recounts his childhood through the interweaving of fact and fiction. Two stories are being told, but these apparently separate entities are bound together, unable to exist in isolation. One is written in normal font, while the other is in italics; one is fictional, the other autobiographical. Nevertheless, Perec invites his reader to piece together the puzzle he has created, and see that the two tales are mirror images of each other. Joyce Lazarus points out how Perec uses complex narrative strategies to protect himself from his past: “Through the use of allegory, Perec attempts to elucidate events of his childhood and to suggest what is unsayable while maintaining a safe distance from reality” (82). This protection mechanism comes from the fictional story. This fictional part of the book is based on a village, *W*, where the inhabitants live by rigorous ideals. It is a sort of Olympic village that is based on a story created by young Perec, aged thirteen. And, as Jamie Brassett aptly remarks: “The ideal Olympic community soon becomes an image of the concentration camps: History—that *grand récit*—has intervened on little Perec’s story” (152). *W* serves as a fictional (and less painful) representation of Auschwitz, and it is only through this fictional tale that Perec can allude to the deportation of his mother and the last months of her life. As Lazarus notes: “The nightmarish vision of *W* is Perec’s identification with his mother’s destiny; it is an
allegorical journey Perec must make in order to find his Jewish roots and his sense of wholeness” (86). Perec is not unlike many other contemporary writers searching for their identity. He must re-examine his life through the lives of his parents to find his roots, and his Jewishness.

In Chapter VIII of W, Perec begins the presentation of his parents, and how he remembers them: “Je possède une photo de mon père et cinq de ma mère…” (45). The following passage reveals that Perec has little or no memory of his parents:

De mon père, je n’ai d’autre souvenir que celui de cette clé ou pièce qu’il m’aurait donnée un soir revenant de son travail. De ma mère, le seul souvenir qui me reste est celui du jour où elle m’accompagna à la gare de Lyon d’où, avec un convoi de la Croix-Rouge, je partis pour Villard-de-Lans : bien que j’aie rien de cassé, je porte le bras en écharpe. (45)

This passage seems to indicate the moment of separation between Perec and his parents. He was possibly sent away to a safe place, and because of his parents’ tragic fate, he would not be reunited with them.

Before proceeding to a description of the photographs of his parents, Perec explains the source of this part of the text: “Le projet d’écrire mon histoire s’est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d’écrire. Les deux textes qui suivent datent de plus de quinze ans. Je les recopie sans rien y changer, renvoyant en note les rectifications et les commentaires que j’estime aujourd’hui devoir ajouter” (45-46). The two texts to which Perec
refers are a sort of intrusion into the other two tales being told. They are written in bold type, and explain—among other things—some of the photographs that were mentioned earlier. These texts are also quite bold in terms of the information they divulge (W 46-53). It is in these few pages that Perec is the most straightforward about the facts surrounding his parents. It is here that he speaks of their deaths, and their true identities. He portrays his father as a carefree man with a nice name: “J’aime beaucoup dans mon père son insouciance. Je vois un homme qui siffle. Il avait un nom sympathique: André. Mais ma déception fut vive le jour où j’appris qu’il s’appelait en réalité—disons, sur les actes officiels—Icek Judko, ce qui ne voulait pas dire grand-chose” (47). The note that was written to clarify this statement goes through the many names and nicknames of Perec’s father such as Isie ou Izy. Perec notes that he was the only one to believe his father’s name was André: “Je suis le seul à avoir cru, pendant de très nombreuses années, qu’il s’appelait André” (55). The rest of this note shows the complexity surrounding the Perec family. In fact, as the narrator points out, “le nom de ma famille est Peretz. Il se trouve dans la Bible” (56). An entire page follows that explains the origin of the family name and all the ambiguity surrounding it.
Again, it is History that demands this ambiguity. During the period between 1940 and 1945, Jews living in France were forced to play this identity game, attempting to be as French as possible. As Perec explains:

Pour ma part, je pense plutôt qu’entre 1940 et 1945, lorsque la plus élémentaire prudence exigeait que l’on s’appelle Bienfait ou Beauchamp au lieu de Bienenfeld, Chevron ou lieu de Chavranski, ou Normand au lieu de Nordmann, on a pu me dire que mon père s’appelait André, ma mère Cécile, et que nous étions bretons. (55)

But, of course, this was not the case, for Perec’s mother’s real name was Cyrla:
“Cyrla Schulevitz, ma mère, dont j’appris, les rares fois où j’entendis parler d’elle, qu’on l’appelait plus communément Cécile” (49). For Perec, his mother’s real name is so foreign to him that he has difficulty spelling it correctly. In the note concerning this passage about his mother, he writes: “J’ai fait trois fautes d’orthographe dans la seule transcription de ce nom: Szulewicz au lieu de Schulevitz” (59). This difficulty identifying with the real identity of his parents highlights the problem with many memories Perec describes. Throughout his tales, Perec exhibits a poignant awkwardness towards his memories (Sheringham 323). There is even a moment when he realizes that a story he has told about himself that recounts an accident in which he broke his scapula actually happened to someone else, Philippe, of whom he has no other recollection. It is, however, through the writing
process that he comes to grips with memory, identity, and loss. Perec’s autobiographical narrative provides a monument to his parents all the while affirming his own existence and identity: “Leur souvenir est mort à l’écriture; l’écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l’affirmation de ma vie” (64).

Composing the tale of W allows Perec to distance himself from the painful truth of his childhood and as the two tales unfold, Perec’s open denial of the truth becomes less obvious in his writing. As Lazarus explains: “[I]t is through his nightmarish journey to W that Perec ultimately affirms his identification with Judaism” (87).

For both Perec and Modiano, writing helps them remember, and gives them power to explore their personal histories as they take on their painful pasts. Their autobiographical works can be viewed as a set of binary oppositions such as childhood/adulthood, fact/fiction, identity/Other, etc. which are not uncommon in contemporary expression of the self. While they employ different narrative strategies, they share a common factor that makes up part of their History. And, through the writing process, they try to recreate what has been axed out of their memory.
Finding a Common Ground

In their autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) narratives Hélène Cixous, Marie Cardinal, and Tassadit Imache try to come to grips with their “otherness” through literary expression. Cixous deviates from her theoretical works to tell part of her life story through photographs in “Albums et Légendes.” She recounts the discrimination she has faced both as a woman and as a Jew, although she denies these identities for the one she finds most important. It is her identity as a writer that supercedes all others. Similarly, Cardinal and Imache write about their struggles with oppression due to their gender and their ethnicity, for they were both “foreigners” in their native lands. In *Au pays de mes racines* and *Les Mots pour le dire* Cardinal reveals aspects of her life as a *pied-noir* and attempts to do this in a language that is accessible to all (particularly all women). Imache represents the other side of the sea since she must overcome her “otherness” as a Beur. Michael Sheringham has outlined four features that are typical of female writers of autobiography which can be applied to our three chosen authors. They are as follows: “1) The prominence given to the relationship with significant others, especially parents; 2) Empowerment through writing; 3) The search for new autobiographical forms; and 4) The grounding of the individual experience in
history and material reality” (188). While these are all attributes of female-authored autobiography, they really apply to any autobiography, at least partially. Very often autobiographers are expressing their “otherness” to become a speaking subject. Whether the autobiographer is “other” because of gender, race, or class, he or she is seeking to find a common discourse and identity through the writing process.

In her theoretical works, Cixous calls for an écriture féminine that would allow the expression of a female point of view and the rejection of phallocentric discourse. Cixous is well known for her contribution to feminist criticism, but here we will focus on a lesser studied work. This work, Hélène Cixous, photos de racines, is divided into several sections beginning with an “entre tiens” between Mirielle Calle-Gruber and Cixous. The next section is an essay on Cixous’s writing, and the final section—which is of particular interest to us—is a text written by Cixous that is accompanied by photographs of her family.

These texts and images are grouped together under the title “Albums et Légendes,” and Cixous’s opening remarks reveal her relationship to her racines: “Elles ont toujours été là. Je ne les regarde pas. Ne les ai jamais regardées. Je les ‘sais’ là. Leur présence. Racines. Miennes? Mes si étrangères racines” (181). In this opening passage, she speaks of her roots
and how she is aware of their presence. She knows of them from her memories, and the photographs and their commentaries attest to this knowledge. Cixous presents her ancestors, and through this presentation she exposes her heritage, grounding her roots in Algeria: “Oran. Ma ville natale” (183), and the plight of her paternal family members who “[ont] suivi le trajet classique des Juifs chassés d’Espagne jusqu’au Maroc” (183). Not only does her family tree imply diversity, but Cixous describes her childhood experience as multicultural: “Quand j’étais petite, j’habitais dans une ville pleine de quartiers, de peuples, et de langues. Il y avait les Espagnols, catholiques ; les Arabes ; les Juifs. Et les Français. Il y avait les Français français de France. Et dans les Français il y avait aussi les Juifs et les Espagnols. C’était mon Ouest” (183-84). Cixous can certainly relate to diverse backgrounds. She was born in 1937 to a French colonialist father and an Austro-German mother. However, the expression of her Jewish heritage opens up a vast problem that plagues persons of Jewish-Algerian heritage.

Cixous, who has lived in France for a number of years, expresses difficulty identifying with a particular nationality: “Cette logique de nationalité s’accompagnait de comportements qui me sont insupportables” (206). She goes on to explain the illogical nature of being from France—a country “qui colonisait le pays algérien alors que je savais que nous-mêmes
juifs allemands tchécoslovaques hongrois étions d’autres arabes” (206)—a country to which she claims to have no ties. She does not know, however, where she is meant to be. And so it was the French language that led her to Paris (206). Cixous’s inability to accept a French identity is for obvious reasons. Since Crémieux’s legislation in 1870 which gave French citizenship to Algeria’s Jews, these persons have had to leave their own history behind and accept the “gift” of citizenship that was offered to them.9 Nancy Wood’s study examines the problem of Algerian Jews and questions why claims of Jewish-Algerian specificity are surfacing now. Wood believes that such claims are an attempt to express “solidarity with Algeria’s beleaguered democratic forces” (Wood 178).10

In France, Cixous continued to investigate her own identity as masks began to fall, or more accurately, to be replaced:

En France, ce qui est tombé de moi d’abord, c’est l’obligation de l’identité juive. D’une part, l’antisémitisme était incomparablement plus faible à Paris qu’à Alger. D’autre part, j’ai brusquement appris que ma vérité inacceptable dans ce monde était mon être femme. Tout de suite, ce fut la guerre. J’ai senti l’explosion, l’odeur, de la misogynie. Jusqu’ici, vivant dans un monde de femmes, je ne l’avais pas sentie, j’étais juive, j’étais juif. (Cixous 207)

This commentary highlights how Cixous identified herself as a Jew above all else until her arrival in Paris where a different kind of oppression would take
over. She ends her “Albums et Légendes” with an affirmation of her new identity which she adopted in 1955: “A partir de 1955, j’ai adopté une nationalité imaginaire qui est la nationalité littéraire” (207). By adopting a literary nationality, Cixous’s places an importance on the writing process for expressing her identity. Through the writing process one seeks out an identity, becoming part of a defined community, and once a community is established, it shares a discourse and this discourse allows collective history to be explored and explained.

In the twenty six pages that comprise Cixous’s narrative, she examines images of world maps, official documents, and photographs of herself and her ancestors. She relates facts about these people and documents in chronological order beginning with her great-grand parents, her grand parents, her parents, and the final photograph is a picture of herself. Through the writing process she has told her story, ending it with a photograph of herself, a writer. By entitling her work “Albums et Légendes,” Cixous is able to play with two meanings of “legend.” Since a legend can be an explanatory caption accompanying a map, illustration, or chart, the word seems straight forward. However, the term can also be an unverified story or a romanticized myth of modern times. The idea of photographs taking on the status of a myth is reminiscent of Barthes’s autobiographical narrative. It is interesting
that two writers known for their theoretical works seemingly recount their
pasts in a traditional manner, providing photographs and captions. These
works are, nevertheless, rich in commentary on the ambiguous nature of fact
and fiction that is associated with both photography and autobiography.

Many critics have compared Marie Cardinal to Cixous, maintaining that
their goals are similar. For example, Daria Roche explains:

Both authors, writing at the height of the Women’s Movement in
France, link language and women’s creativity with the female
body, which they consider the ultimate prisoner of phallocentric
discourse...In order to move past their status as object and
become “subjects,” women must create a new discourse which
would re-claim the female body as subject, and they must do so
by writing about the body. (vi)

While Roche sees Cardinal’s writing as a manifestation of écriture féminine,
citing passages in which she writes about the female body (primarily her
own); others, like Colette Hall, note one fundamental difference between the
two. As she remarks, “Contrairement à Hélène Cixous, Cardinal rejette les
pratiques d’avant-garde, ou l’écriture expérimentale, car elle veut pouvoir
partager ses expériences avec toutes les femmes” (94). It might be said, then,
that the two writers have similar goals but the way they express them is not
identical. One major similarity is that they were both born in Algeria, and
must establish their roots in Algerian soil. In addition, Cardinal, like Cixous,
seeks out her identity as a woman, and must do this through an analysis of
her position in a wealthy pied-noir family. All of her experiences were different from those of the Muslim children and women around whom she was raised.

During her adult life, Cardinal embarks on a voyage that takes her back to her roots, and the literary testimony of this voyage became a novel entitled *Au pays de mes racines*. Not only is this voyage to her natal land necessary for finding her roots, it is necessary for her to express her experiences through language to make them real: “Il faut que j’écrive pourquoi je remplis ces pages. Il faut que je dise quel enjeu est ce voyage. Retrouver mes racines. Me confronter avec moi-même” (APR 83).11 Two conflicting passages describing photographs allow the reader to see the distance between the proof of a past, and the current sentiment of the narrator. Removed from the daily life in Algeria, the narrator’s voyage puts her in the position of a tourist:

Cette fois-ci le choc du passé me tombe sur la tête et je n’ai pas envie de visiter la nouvelle cité touristique où les amis qui m’ont accompagnée tâchent de m’entrainer. Je ne veux que la regarder de l’extérieur. C’est très beau, c’est très bien, ça ressemble aux photos du Club Méditerranée. (140)

Embracing activities that should be reserved for tourists would be like renouncing her heritage. Therefore, the narrator must refuse these clichés. Because she has been away from Algeria, her adult life conflicts with her childhood and the photographs that represent herself and her ancestors:
Cette terre était à moi, c’était chez moi, depuis toujours. D’ailleurs je n’avais qu’à me référer aux portraits de famille et aux photos pour m’en persuader. Même les plus anciennes, même les daguerréotypes représentaient un grand-père, ou une grand-mère, ou un arrière-grand-père, et même plus, dans ces lieux où je vivais mon enfance. Les mêmes murs, les mêmes arbres, les mêmes vallons, la même vigne...les mêmes Arabes. (13)

Here, the photographs seem to prove that she belongs in Algeria, that she has earned this right from her ancestors. Her repetition of the word “même” not only underscores the fact that she is entitled to consider it her land, but she also seems to be trying to convince herself and her reader. Throughout her voyage, the narrator becomes one—once again—with her roots. This reunion with her homeland allows the narrator to come to grips with her childhood and her Algerian identity while preparing her to hand down this past to her daughter who joins her on this voyage.

This collective identity shared by mother and daughter is important to Cardinal, and in her acclaimed novel Les Mots pour le dire she examines her relationship with her own mother. Before her pilgrimage to her motherland, she wrote Les Mots pour le dire in which she recounts her psychoanalytical cure of la chose which is driving her to madness. As Colette Hall puts it:

In this text, the narrator—the author’s alter-ego—undergoes a long psychoanalysis in order to cure a crippling psychosis. In therapy the narrator finds the words to talk about herself and
free her from her madness; at the same time, she discovers the words she needs to write about her old and new self in a secret diary. (59)

Because it is her diary that “allows” her to be cured—and incidentally becomes her first book (Les mots)—Cardinal gives birth to herself as a woman and as a writer. She does this by examining her own oppression as a woman, and on a larger scale, the oppression of all women: “The narrator thus uncovers her personal oppression as well as the collective oppression of women exacerbated by the colonial situation” (60). Her mother perpetuated paternalistic and racist views at home. In addition, the views her mother taught her were based on a French (and Catholic) mentality that conflicted with the behavior witnessed by the narrator among the Algerian women with whom she came in close contact. In Au pays de mes racines, Cardinal explains how her childhood was a very feminine one: “Je viens d’une famille de femmes” (APR 170). She also continues to speak of the oppression of women citing rituals common to Algerian women such as hanging bloody sheets in the doorway of the home of newlyweds. These sheets serve as proof that the new wife was still a virgin, and has thus given herself emotionally and physically to her husband (64-65). The situation of Algerian women distresses the narrator, and she often alludes to her goal to write about women and revolution. She is, again, seeking power through writing: “Envie
de parler de la révolution. Envie de parler des femmes. De ce que sont, en Algérie, la révolution et les femmes” (160). This desire does not leave her as she expresses it again a few pages later : “Envie de parler des femmes. Envie de parler de la révolution” (166). Writing about the situation of women is important for the narrator because it allows her to identify parts of herself. Other important details about her roots must come from her parents.

During her cure, the narrator retraces her childhood and her relationship with her parents. As childhood memories resurface, the narrator must begin to make connections that link her to the young girl she once was: “J’étais là, sur le divan, les paupières serrées pour retenir encore la petite fille. J’étais vraiment elle et vraiment moi” (LMPD 70). The narrator begins to narrow the gap between her present-day self and herself as a child. Part of assuming her role as that child is accepting her sense of being unwanted. She explains that she was conceived in the middle of her parents’ divorce, and that her mother “[l]’avait toujours inconsciemment reproché [s]a naissance” (48). Her mother also sees her suffering during childbirth as a punishment from God: “Finalement tu es née, car c’était toi que j’attendais. Le Seigneur m’a sûrement punie d’avoir voulu un peu aider la nature parce que tu es née en occipitosacré, toute la face en avant, au lieu de ne présenter que le fond de ton crâne. J’ai souffert le martyr, beaucoup plus que pour ta soeur ou ton
frère’” (137). The mother goes on to explain that her daughter was a beautiful child, but the situation of the narrator’s birth would not be forgotten or forgiven (by either of the two women). Due to her untimely birth, the narrator barely knew her father:

De mon père, que j’ai très peu connu, puisqu’il ne vivait pas avec moi et qu’il est mort au cours de mon adolescence, je gardais le souvenir d’un homme fringant, portant guêtres, chapeau et canne. Petites moustaches, belles mains, sourire éclatant. Il me faisait peur. Je ne savais rien de l’univers masculin. (52)

The idea of her father is lost in the traditional definition: “Pour moi Père est un mot abstrait qui n’a aucun sens puisque Père va avec Mère et que ces deux personnes dans ma vie sont distinctes…” (63). In fact, the narrator only saw her parents together three times. Once for her first communion, the second to attend the ceremony for her girl scout oath (promesse de Guide de France), and the third just before her father’s death (53). The fourth and final time she saw them “together” was at her father’s funeral (57). Her father is, however, remembered as the narrator occasionally looks at old photographs of him: “Il m’arrive parfois de regarder des photos de lui que je possède. A celles qui le représentent à la fin de sa vie, tel que je l’ai connu, cravaté, lustré, tiré à quatre épingles, je préfère celles de sa jeunesse, à l’époque où il n’avait pas encore composé son personnage” (65). These comments could be viewed as the narrator’s rejection of what he became, and what her mother still represents.
Because their status as wealthy land owners compromised real affinities with the Algerian people, it was more difficult to belong to a community. The mother is presented as a malefic figure, but through her therapy, the narrator "discovers that her mother is not just an ‘executioner’ who has warped her, trying to fit her daughter in the mold of femininity prescribed by their class, but that the mother herself has been a victim of those very values" (Hall 60). The evolving sentiment toward her mother is revealed in the narrator’s diary: “C’est entre cette femme qu’elle avait voulu mettre au monde et de moi que la chose s’était installée” (LMPD 71). The narrator sees her inability to be what her mother wanted her to be as a failure, and this becomes the root of her psychosis. It is only after the narrator’s decision to ask her mother to leave that her treatment can come to an end: “De ma mère, maintenant, j’ai le souvenir de l’avoir aimée à la folie au cours de mon enfance…puis de l’avoir haïe et enfin de l’avoir volontairement abandonnée très peu de temps avant sa mort qui a d’ailleurs mis un point final à mon analyse” (71). It was necessary for the narrator to come to terms with her feelings toward her mother and relinquish her inverted role as the caretaker to be cured. Because of her mother’s illness, the narrator takes her into her home to care for her. One day, she decides that the only way to preserve her own family, and her sanity, is to ask her mother to leave: “Je tenais à vous dire que j’ai pris une
grave décision: nous allons nous quitter. D’une part je ne veux plus vivre ici et d’autre part je veux vivre seul avec mes enfants. Je veux les élever à ma manière” (262). When the narrator enters her mother’s room to make this announcement that would end her therapy, her mother is “sur son lit, entourée des reliques de ses morts: des photos, des portraits, des objets” (262). This fact is important for the rejection, both actual and symbolic, by the narrator. She seems to be rejecting the power that has influenced her entire life by releasing herself from the proof of her unhappy past. This decision will allow her to assume her own life, and her role as a mother in a different way.

Interestingly, the narrator does not mention any photographs of her mother, as if she is trying to dissolve the painful memories that she represents. Family relationships are complicated by one’s past, and as the narrator explains, she wanted to change her destiny by not perpetuating the values of her mother, and the lack of two parents—that caused her so much pain—onto her own children: “J’ai eu trois enfants. Je voulais leur donner un bonheur, une chaleur, une attention que je n’avais jamais eus, un père et une mère toujours présents, amoureux” (51). For the narrator, her roots come from her motherland more than from her parents, for as she explains; “l’Algérie c’était ma vraie mère. Je la portais en moi comme un enfant porte
dans ses veines le sang de ses parents” (92). Through her writing, Cardinal searches for answers to questions concerning her identity. Her novels help her to examine collective history all the while finding her own place in it, creating a universe that is hers alone: “Non seulement j’avais découvert le moyen de m’exprimer mais j’avais trouvé toute seule le chemin qui m’éloignait de ma famille, de mon milieu, me permettant ainsi de construire un univers qui m’était propre” (220). Early in her life, she did not feel worthy of being a writer: “Le fait même d’écrire me semblait être un acte important dont je n’étais pas digne. Jamais ne m’était venue à l’esprit la prétention d’écrire” (207). Through self expression in her diary, Cardinal uncovers a talent, a means of discovery, understanding, and fulfillment, or according to her: “une satisfaction importante, voilà tout” (207). By finding the words to say it, Cardinal takes the power away from the forces that dominated her childhood, overcomes them, and finds herself.

Imache’s protagonist, like Cardinal’s, will embark on a voyage to Algeria to come to grips with her true identity and lost heritage. Imache’s alter-ego Lili is the daughter of a French woman, Huguette, and an Algerian father, Ali. Une fille sans histoire begins with the death of Ali, and as Lili goes through his belongings she finds documents attesting to his life in France, and his Algerian citizenship:
C’est par hasard que j’étais tombée sur le portefeuille. Machinalement, je l’avais vidé. J’en avais sorti de vieux papiers : une carte de Sécurité sociale… un certificat de résidence… une carte de nationalité algérienne… une lettre de la Caisse d’assurance vieillesse qui informait le père qu’on procédait à la liquidation de ses droits, datée de deux mois avant sa mort… et la photographie. (9)³

These items are what make up, according to the government, one’s identity.

Lil also finds his suitcase in the closet which provokes the memories that follow. In this way the suitcase takes Lil on a metaphorical voyage to her past. As she narrates her past, Lil uses different narrative voices which underscore her struggle with her identity.

The narrator’s name is Lil: “[E]t moi Lil, je regardais ma mère” (12). However, she oscillates between first and third person narration which indicates an incoherent sense of identity as well as an alternating desire for closeness and distance with her family, thus with her roots. As Daphne McConnell explains:

The novel is characterized by a certain narrative instability. It switches back and forth between first and third person, which signals Lil’s unstable sense of identity and her alternating desire for closeness with and distance from her family. Though the novel begins in the first person, indicating Lil’s individualized sense of identity, the narrative voice becomes less stable when she discovers the photograph; she addresses her family in the first, third, and second person, expressing her ambivalence about rediscovering her collective history. (255)
The discovery of the photograph is of importance because it reminds Lil of her forgotten past. This past comes from events related to her family, especially her parents. After Lil’s father’s death, her mother addresses her by her French name, Lili, which seems to completely erase her Algerian heritage. Her sister also struggles with this bicultural identity: “Sur les papiers, c’est Ouarda, après c’est Isabelle” (49). “Frenchifying” Arab names is common to Beurs, for they are attempting to adapt to French society. It also causes them to suffer a sort of identity crisis because in accepting a French name, they must renounce their Algerian (or other) heritage. For Lil, who grew up in France with her French mother, it is obvious that she would have a French name. However, her last name marks her as “other” to the French ear.

Even though children of bicultural parents can go by French first names, the name of the father prevails for their identification in society. Though she went by Lili and Lil, the narrator was not able to escape the implications of her family name. Lil’s last name will be of equal importance: Elle avait dû s’appeler ainsi. Elle avait si longtemps été cette Lili-liliane... aussi vrai qu’elle avait si souvent tablé sur l’ambiguïté de son nom de famille, lorsqu’on l’interpellait : ‘Hasard ? comme c’est original ! et Lili, c’est quelle origine ?’” (122). Her name was also the subject of a memory from when Lil was 11:

‘Non mais Lili ! t’as vu comment elle t’a appelée? c’nom-là, c’est pas toi ?... alors quoi ! réponds !’

Elle avait fini par lever la main. (123)

Just as the narrator oscillates between ‘je’ and ‘elle,’ she shifts between her French and Algerian cultures, and it is the French language that allows this expression. Imache, master of the French language, begins Une fille sans histoire with a photograph that was found par hasard. And, coincidentally, her narrator’s last name is pronounced the same way highlighting the fact that one does not choose one’s identity. This is especially true when we consider that a signed photograph is sufficient for identifying someone in most societies.

Throughout Une fille sans histoire Lil recounts memories from her past to come to terms with her present-day identity. Her name serves as a testament to her Algerian identity, but her physical attributes come from her French mother. At one point, Lil is chosen to be photographed for a calendar, and the photographer remarks her atypical Algierian appearance: “Pourtant, les yeux de Lil étaient aussi clairs que les siens [ceux du photographe] et ses cheveux avaient la même couleur dorée” (59). Thus the writing process
becomes crucial for the protagonist to understand her roots. By exploring her family history, Lil comes to understand her own history. McConnell comments on this similarity among Beur writers: “Consequently, the protagonist in many Beur novels attempts to ‘write,’ or come to terms with, their parents’ stories in order to address more fully the question of their own cultural and national identity” (254). Toward the end of the novel, Lil packs her bags in preparation for her trip to Algeria which is reminiscent of the moment when she found the suitcase at the beginning of the novel. However, Lil does not return to Algeria in an attempt to idealize her past and find her true identity. Rather she “returns to Algeria in order to make peace with the part of her father’s history that will be lost to her forever” (McConnell 261-62). At the end of the novel Lil returns to her true origins which are in Nanterre where she grew up. The stabilization of narrative voice reinforces the fact that Lil has found her true roots. As McConnell aptly remarks: “The return of the first-person narration at the end of the novel reveals that Lil’s reconciliation takes place when she visits Nanterre, where she grew up. Nanterre represents Lil’s true ‘return to origins’” (262). Through this process of reconciliation, the narrator rediscovers her true family history and reclaims her own history thus becoming at the end *une fille avec une histoire*. 
The question of Lil’s history is a complicated one, just as is Imache’s. Frédérique Chevillot discusses the problem of history for Beur writers in her article “Identi-double contre mauvaise doublure: Tassadit Imache n’est pas un/une auteur/e beur/e.” The very title of this article indicates a multi-faceted problem with identity. Chevillot recounts an interview with Imache during which the writer reveals her reaction to the way in which Une fille sans histoire was classified at the FNAC: “Tassadit Imache m’a confié qu’elle avait vécu comme un rejet le fait que son premier roman ait été répertorié à la FNAC sous la catégorie ‘Littérature du Maghreb-Proche Orient’ et non sous celle de ‘Littérature française’” (57). It is as if Imache’s heritage is decided for her. Despite her French nationality, she is considered a foreigner. As Chevillot remarks about multi-ethnic writers in France: “La plupart de ces auteur/e/s sont de nationalité française, vivent en France et contribuent par leurs écrits et leur engagement socio-politique à l’élaboration d’une vaste littérature multi-ethnique et multi-culturelle d’expression française en France” (49). Lil, like Imache, is far from being a fille sans histoire: “Et de toute façon, être ‘sans histoire’, c’est encore en avoir une, c’est en tout cas être en quête de celle que la narratrice tente de façonner pour son héroïne” (53-54).

Cixous, Cardinal and Imache all express their need to recount elements that make up their history, or at least to express themselves through the
writing process. They do this by examining their roots through photographs of their parents, but even if they can understand their parents’ past and their part in it, they still have complex pasts of their own. The loss of their homeland is another factor that complicates their past and influences their works. Due to their complex heritage, they feel like outsiders. Therefore, they seek to express themselves in a shared discourse finding their place in a unified group, whether it be Algerian, French, Beur, pied-noir, woman, or writer.

Annie Ernaux and Grégoire Bouillier and Their Search for a Place in (French) Society

In their autobiographical narratives, Annie Ernaux and Grégoire Bouillier work through their “otherness” just as the other authors we have discussed in this chapter. For Ernaux, it is her social class that alienates her while Bouillier must question his identity due to the uncertain facts surrounding his birth. What they have in common is a story that was provoked by a traumatic event that happened on a Sunday afternoon.
During the summer months of 2001, *Le Monde* published a series of short stories, each composed of fifteen pages. These stories appeared as special sections once a week in order to celebrate selected authors. One of the authors chosen was Annie Ernaux. Ernaux’s short story, “L’Occupation,” begins with a short passage that seems to summarize many of the main themes found in her literary enterprise. She begins: “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. Bien que ce soit une illusion, peut-être, de croire que la vérité ne puisse advenir qu’en fonction de la mort” (3). The search for a truth is a recurring theme in the personal testimonies that characterize the literary endeavors of this writer. Because the narration is, in large part, autobiographical, the reader is privy to a version of this truth which is sought out through the writing process. However, the truth being represented is contaminated by many factors such as the narrator’s judgment and the judgment of her by others, her mobility between social classes, and her evolving (evolved) point of view which is the result of these transformations.

Very often, Ernaux begins her récits with monumental events that have impacted her personal life, and these events serve as the creative catalysts for the memories that resurge. Along with the presentation of memories, Ernaux
provides textual descriptions of photographs. The presence of textual photographs is interesting, because these descriptions represent both indexical proof and identification. Furthermore, they help Ernaux to oscillate between narrative voices showing a distinct difference between her present-day self and the young girl she once was. While Ernaux is preoccupied with memory, she is aware of the pain associated with recounting her own memories. As Michael Sheringham has pointed out: “One of Ernaux’s concerns is memory, and particularly the interconnections between individual memory and social or class memory, preserved in memory traces. Ernaux found that unearthing buried memories was harder than inventing fictional ones” (196).

Ernaux’s short story “L’Occupation” reveals certain themes that characterize her writing, and we will examine these themes by focusing on the importance of photographs and what they represent. “L’Occupation” recounts the jealousy of a woman which is the result of an announcement made by her former lover: that he is going to move in with another woman. The narrator tries to find out all of the details about this woman who has now become her competition even if she no longer desires a relationship with the lover in question.
Il me fallait à toute force connaître son nom et son prénom, son âge, sa profession, son adresse. Je découvrais que ces éléments retenus par la société pour définir l’identité d’un individu et qu’on prétend sans intérêt pour la connaissance des êtres, étaient, au contraire, essentiels. Eux seuls allaient me permettre d’extraire de la masse indifférenciée de toutes les femmes un type physique et social, de me représenter un corps, un mode de vie, d’élaborer l’image d’un personnage. (3-4)

Finding out this information about her competitor becomes a necessity for the narrator. Knowing the name, address, and profession of the other woman will allow the narrator to have a concrete image. Once this image is attained, she will have some clarity about the situation and will no longer be forced to look at every woman and wonder if it was “her.”15

These doubts, and the jealousy that follows, represent a specific summer in the narrator’s life. For her, world events transpiring around her are insignificant and she shows astonishment when she realizes that she only remembers those events which come from her personal history, and has difficulty remembering those events which constitute History: “J’ai beau chercher, en dehors du Concorde s’écrasant après son décollage sur un Hotelissimo de Gonesse, rien dans le monde de l’été dernier ne m’a laissé de souvenir” (3). This commentary on world events, and the narrator’s incapacity to see them as playing a role in her life, reminds us of a similar event narrated in La Honte. La Honte begins with a particular event that we will explore later, but our interest here lies in the narrator’s investigation into
this event, and its place in history. The narrator goes to the Archives de Rouen
to consult Paris-Normandie from 1952 to see if a personal event that has
marked her life is commented in the newspaper. When she makes her way to
the month of June, she reads of events that have no meaning, events of which
she has not heard. Furthermore, she is incapable of placing them in 1952:

Je connaissais la plupart des événements évoqués, la guerre
d’Indochine, de Corée, les émeutes d’Orléansville, le plan Pinay,
mais je ne les aurais pas situés spécialement en 52, les ayant sans
doute mémorisés dans une période ultérieure de ma vie… Que
Staline, Churchill, Eisenhower aient été aussi vivants pour moi
que le sont maintenant Elstine, Clinton ou Kohl m’a paru
étrange. Je ne reconnaissais rien. C’était comme si je n’avais pas
déjà vécu en ce temps-là. (LH 34)16

Since it is necessary to consider the evolution of the person who is writing,
the reality of autobiographical writing becomes the perception of the person
recounting his/her life. Thus, in an attempt to see how Ernaux evolved in the
course of her life (and her writing), we will analyze her perception of herself
and of her parents to see how her present reality changes along with her
social status and that of her parents and how these evolutions are explained
through photographs.

In La Place, Une Femme, and La Honte Ernaux writes about herself and
her parents, and as she explains : “Dans La Place, Une Femme, La Honte, les
photos sont une preuve de la réalité ; un document que je peux interroger,
décrypter, pour saisir quelque chose de passé. C’est aussi une image qui fait ressentir beaucoup de choses, des sortes d’énigmes qui me font désirer aller plus loin, des aiguillons d’écriture” (letter to the author November 11, 2002).

In La Honte, Ernaux begins with the description of a Sunday that will remain in her memory forever: the day her father wanted to kill her mother. This scene frames the rest of the story and what follows reinforces the sentiment of fear and shame that is incessant for the narrator. The narration begins with a specific scene, from a specific year, and little by little, other memories resurge.

These other memories are linked to two photographs and to the narrator’s perception of these photographs: “De cette année-là, il me reste deux photos. L’une me représente en communiante. C’est une ‘photographie d’art’, en noir et blanc, insérée et collée dans un livret en papier cartonné, incrusté de volutes, recouvertes d’une feuille à demi transparente” (LH 22-23). By qualifying this photograph as a work of art (in quotation marks) Ernaux questions the status of photography. This is precisely the type of situation to which Pierre Bourdieu refers in his study on photography as a marginal art form. Further in the narration, we see a distinct difference made between the young girl photographed and the woman she has become, as the narrator writes, “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” (23). In this passage, it is the use of the pronoun “elle” which is of interest since, even though we know that the photograph is of the narrator, she cannot refer to herself as “je.” A later passage helps to explain this distance: “Impression qu’il n’y a pas de corps sous cet habit de petite bonne soeur 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” (23-24). The young girl in the photo and the image this photograph captures is the representation of a moment in the life of the narrator, and the young girl “elle” is reduced to a former self.

The second photograph is of the narrator and her father in Biarritz and represents another use of photography by the middle class, for it is taken during a family vacation. We also know that the image is blurry, having been taken with a rudimentary device: “l’appareil cubique gagné par mes parents dans une kermesse avant la guerre” (25). It seems that two reasons can explain why Ernaux kept this photograph and why she needs to explain it. Firstly, Ernaux’s work does not contain many references to family vacations and, even in this passage, her mother is absent since she had to stay behind to tend to the family business. Secondly, being on vacation reveals a twofold sentiment for the narrator. She is happy to belong to a higher social class for a
short time, where she feels like a part of a more privileged group that is allowed vacations and leisure time. However, she feels at the same time a sense of alienation and shame associated with her own position in the social hierarchy because, with her father, they are not in their place: “J’ai sans doute gardé celle-ci parce qu’à la différence d’autres, nous y apparaissions comme ce que nous n’étions pas, des gens chics, des villégiaturistes. Sur aucune des deux photos je n’ouvre la bouche pour sourire, à cause de me dents mal plantées et abîmées” (25). Clearly, the poor condition of her teeth is another telling sign of her inferiority.

Thus, from a particular year (1952), Ernaux, adult narrator, examines two photographs that are supposed to serve as proof of her life, and her existence; but as we have seen, she has difficulty seeing herself in the young girl she once was: “(dire, ‘cet été-là’ ou ‘l’été de mes douze ans’ c’est rendre romanesque ce qui ne l’était pas plus que ne l’est pas pour moi l’actuel été 95, dont je n’imagine même pas qu’il pourra passer un jour dans la vision enchantée que suggère l’expression : ‘cet été-là’)” (27). This passage is the description of a photograph that represents a particular summer and a particular young girl who was once but is no longer. Thus, cet été là is over
and representative of the ça a été as explained by Barthes. For Barthes, photographs capture moments that can never be recreated in exactly the same way.

Like other contemporary writers known for their self expressive works, Ernaux also dedicates moments of reflection to her parents, past and present. Considered together, these three texts (La Place, Une Femme, and La Honte) show us that Ernaux feels increasingly exiled from her parents thanks to/because of the knowledge she has acquired in her private school. It is important to consider that Ernaux only began writing after passing the C.A.P.E.S., as if this accomplishment gave her the right to write, adding legitimacy to her expression.17 Therefore, since she is now writing from the point of view of a professeur titulaire, she has gained access to a social plane which eludes her parents who remain in an inferior social class.

In La Place, Ernaux recounts the life of her father after his death and presents him as a stationary member of his social class, static in his place in the world:

Alentour de la cinquantaine, encore la force de l’âge, la tête très droite, l’air soucieux, comme s’il craignait que la photo ne soit ratée, 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. (LP 55)18
This man, in his Sunday best, is ill at ease in a situation outside his norm.

This passage shows us, once again, that photographs do not always represent the truth, and it is the commentary surrounding it which makes the reader privy to its particular context. That is to say that the perception of the photograph can be neutral (seen by someone who does not have a relationship to the subject of the photograph) or the perception can be influenced by the past of the spectator.\(^{19}\)

To conclude our analysis of photographs in Ernaux’s oeuvre we will turn toward the mother and the *récit Une Femme*. The image of the mother figure often serves useful in defining her daughter since daughters are said to become their mothers one day, and Ernaux is no exception: “Je croyais qu’en grandissant je serais elle” (UF 46).\(^{20}\) Ernaux’s relationship with her mother is different from the one she has with her father, and the difference between these two relationships becomes evident in the narration. In this story, the presence of photographs is less abundant (although there is a photograph that bears witness to the marital union of Ernaux’s parents that is also found in *La Place*). Even though there are fewer photographs of the narrator’s mother, she is more visible to the powers in society by whom the narrator feels judged, thus the narrator’s mother takes on an important role in her life. It is a role based on the way she is perceived in society. Ernaux’s mother is more visible
than her father in the public eye for it is she who runs the family business and she whose image is discussed at Ernaux’s school: “Au pensionnat, quand on m’envoyait au tableau: ‘si votre maman vend dix paquets de café à tant’ et ainsi de suite (évidemment, jamais cet autre cas, aussi réel, ‘si votre maman sert trois apéritifs à tant’)” (54). This hyper-visibility of the mother sets up other contradictions since she is more educated, and more interested in school and literature than her husband. It is she who tells her daughter that she must not be “mal vue à l’école” (LH 114), and it is also the mother’s visibility that provokes the most shame for her daughter. Since the mother’s image is judged by others, their judgment influences her daughter’s perception of her.

These passages underscore the importance of evolving perception whether it be through the memories of the narrator in relation to photographs, or in relationship to the perception of others. We can, nevertheless see in both cases how it is impossible to define the (ça) real, especially when it is far removed from the moment when it was (a été).

Therefore, in analyzing the photographs which reveal the marginality of photography as an art form alongside the marginal social class of Ernaux’s family and the idea of the ça a été characteristic of photography, we can
observe that Ernaux, as an adult narrator, writes about herself and her parents as they are in the photographs, as though they are dead and removed from the consequences of a present judgment.

*Rapport sur moi*, a recent book published by Grégoire Bouillier, begins much like *La Honte* with an event that took place on a Sunday afternoon. This event is the narrator’s mother’s question: “Les enfants, est-ce que je vous aime?” (RSM 7). This question provokes the narrator to investigate his relationship to his mother, and the response to her question. The question also provokes an explanation of the narrator’s “roots,” and those of his brother. The “official” parents of these two male children were French, yet the situation becomes much more complicated as the narrative unfolds.

The narrator cites his mother as evoking, in public, his dark skin and the fact that he had none of the traits of a Bouillier: “En public, elle aimait évoquer ma peau mate et le fait que je n’aie rien d’un Bouillier” (9). While the narrator grew up with two French parents, the identity of his father was questionable. The narrator explains that his parents met when they were young (his father was eighteen, his mother sixteen), and that he was conceived in Algeria where his mother had gone to be with her new husband who was serving in the French army. During their time in Algeria, the couple engaged in many sexual adventures, clearly rejecting monogamy, and thus
the true father of the narrator is unknown, for as he explains, “[C’]est lors
d’une de leurs parties à trois que je fus conçu” (8). And, for the narrator’s
brother, a similar identity crisis would ensue since “c’est dans les bras de
deux hommes qu’elle devient mère pour la seconde fois” (9). The narrator
never reveals that not knowing who the father of her children is causes his
mother any distress. Instead, she seems proud to share an explanation with
him that is pleasing to her: “[E]lle conclut en disant qu’elle avait lu dans un
magazine que lorsque deux homes éjaculent dans le vagin de la femme, leurs
spermatozoïdes, au lieu de rivaliser, fusionnent pour féconder l’ovule et
donner naissance à un mutant” (9). Because of the mother’s promiscuity both
of her children are deprived of a certainty in regards to the identity of their
father, they would always carry around the idea of being different from their
parents, especially their father.

The narrator describes a photograph from his youth that is indicative of
the ambiguous nature of his origins, and of photography:

Il existe une photo qui nous représente, mon père, mon frère et
moi, marchant sur un chemin en forêt. Je dois avoir six ans.
C’est un petit cliché noir et blanc, aux bords crénelés. Il s’en
dégage une joie de novembre. Sans doute ma mère tient-elle
l’appareil car elle n’apparaît pas sur la photo. Je n’ai aucun
souvenir de cette promenade. C’est pourtant le plus beau
souvenir d’enfance que je me sois fabriqué. (40)
This photograph represents a happy childhood memory that the narrator had fabricated. Furthermore, since the photograph represents two generations of Bouillier men, it would seemingly prove a family tie; however, the family tie is not so solid.

Events from the narrator’s childhood would leave their mark for a number of reasons. The narrator felt alienated from his parents, and this alienation would be perpetuated in his attempt to create a family of his own. His own marriage would end in divorce, and another photograph of the narrator and his wife provokes a similar feeling of uncertain roots for his daughter:

Un jour, ma fille a regardé une photo de sa mère et moi lorsque nous étions ensemble et elle a eu ce regard muet, inconsolable, de ceux qui savent que leur bonheur, quoi qu’ils fassent, se dressera dorénavant sur un malheur qui ne leur appartient même pas et qui les a injustement frappés, par surprise. J’aurais tout donné pour ne jamais retrouver ce regard chez mon enfant (57).

Thus, the narrator is a victim of his inability to create a stable family unit and must suffer this lot in life. His brother also rejected a traditional family, and after a series of failed homosexual relationships, died of AIDS.

In the mere one-hundred twenty seven pages of his rapport, Bouillier alludes to many sociological issues that are common in contemporary society. It is in this way that he expresses personal aspects of a life (the narrator’s)
through the writing process while using techniques similar to those we have examined in this chapter, especially the mixing of factual and fictional elements. He addresses identity, social class, homosexuality, sexual freedom, and so on, and does so by creating a new literary genre. On the back cover of this book, it is described in the following manner: “Ni autobiographie, ni roman, ni autofiction, Rapport sur moi inaugure un genre nouveau dans le paysage littéraire contemporain.” Again, the need to categorize everything makes the idea of clear barriers seem almost ridiculous. In this work that, for critics, represents a new literary genre, there are aspects that have been used in self expression for decades. Specific categories designated for self-expressive works are just as arbitrary as the other dichotomies we have discussed throughout.

One factor that differentiates this book from others is that we are less aware of factual elements pertaining to the real life of the narrator. It should be noted that Bouillier’s companion, Lorette Nobécour, published her version of their communal life around the same time that Bouillier published Rapport, making memory and the presentation of shared events a game of he said/she said. These two versions of the same story highlight how different two versions of the same events can be. The writers we have examined in this chapter are all telling part of their life story, searching for a truth that will
lead them to their identity. However, as we have seen in the analyses of the various authors, fact and fiction, text and image, subjectivity and objectivity, and so on are constantly colliding, making it impossible to ascertain a unique truth from their expression.

Like Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras, the authors we have discussed in this chapter use verbal descriptions of photographs to narrate parts of their childhoods. By describing photographs, the author is able to distance him/herself from the memories they provoke. This distance is further underscored by the oscillation between first and third person pronouns used by these authors to talk about themselves. In this way, the author is able to discuss real events through the medium of a photograph that partially removes him or her from the reality that is represented. This process helps to “protect” the authors from painful truths by turning the “self” into a “other.”

Finding one’s “self,” or at least recognizing it, is often a complicated endeavor. We have seen how this characterizes self-expressive writing. However, such encounters with images of “self” and “other” in photographs can be found in many contemporary works of various genres. In Chapter Four we will look at several works in which the narrator searches for images that will identify him or her. On the surface, these works seem to be
completely different from the autofictional narratives we have discussed.

However, many of the questions posed by their narrative strategies parallel the ones we have been trying to answer in this study.

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1 Photo Speak is also the title of Gilles Mora’s guide to the ideas, movements, and techniques of photography.
2 Autobiography has long been considered a marginal art form because it is not fiction, and photography’s marginal status is examined in Pierre Bourdieu’s study Un art moyen.
3 The 1970s also bore witness to Philippe Lejeune’s seminal work on autobiography that we discussed in chapter two. Lejeune’s Pacte autobiographique and Barthes’s Roland Barthes were both published in 1975 and are viewed as a sort of turning point for the autobiographical genre. It should also be restated that the 1970s bore witness to a great number of works that contained, or made reference to, photographs. (See Chapter Two.)
4 These authors were chosen because they use similar narrative strategies, and verbal descriptions of photographs are abundant in their works. This is not to say, however, that Perec and Modiano are the only Jewish writers of the period or that they were the only writers affected profoundly by this period. Sarraute and Duras both lived traumatic experiences during (and/or because of) the German Occupation. See Huguette Bouchardeau’s chapter “Être juive en 1940” for more on Sarraute and Duras’s La douleur. These are, of course, only a few of infinite examples. It should be noted as well that each section of this chapter could be expanded to include other authors. The selection of authors was based on their particular fit for this project.
5 Ldf = Livret de famille
6 Her real life seems to have had an impact on her son and serves as a possible reason for his interest in film. Modiano is the author of the scenario for the film Lacombe Lucien, a collaborative effort with French filmmaker Louis Malle. Lacombe Lucien, interestingly, is also a project based on the German Occupation, and as Golsan points out: “In many ways, Lacombe Lucien is simply a transcription into the medium of film of a Modiano novel, and examining it in relation to the writer’s other fictional works helps to illuminate some of the film’s more understated themes” (108). The film takes place in the south of France in 1944, and focuses on the alienation and loss of identity that plagued Frenchmen following the German Occupation clearly repeating central themes found in Modiano’s oeuvre. The title character is a naïve boy who is influenced by members of the German police, with whom he later collaborates. The deconstruction of this myth also served as the foundation of La Place de l’étoile, a book in which Modiano uses irony to portray “a world in which moral values, tragedy and comedy, fact and myth are inverted or deformed in kaleidoscopic images, revealing the inner core of corruption in society” (Lazarus 94). Modiano wants to show the truth about injustice in society all the while coming to terms with his own identity, and his exclusion.
7 Sarraute lived a similar experience, for she went by the name of Nicole Sauvage during the Occupation.
8 This first part of this work is entitled “entre tiens” which goes beyond “entretien” although it is an interview. This play on words allows Cixous to deny any real beginning to her story. The title page reads as follows: “ON EST DÉJÀ DANS LA GEULE DU LIVRE ENTRE TIENS.”
9 See Nancy Wood’s work in which she speak of this “gift” of citizenship.
11 ARP = Au pays de mes racines
12 LMPD = Les Mots pour le dire
It is interesting to note that Cardinal narrates a similar moment when she finds a photograph of her father, a man she hardly knew, *par hasard*. “Je ne sais pas par quel hasard j’ai chez moi, dans un tiroir, son [son père] diplôme d’ingénieur et aussi son brevet de ‘vélocipédiste’, ainsi que son permis de conduire les véhicules à pétrole, et des certificats de ses patrons recommandant, au fil des années, l’apprenti, l’ouvrier, le contremaître, puis l’ingénieur. Une photo de l’époque : sur un court de tennis, en plein revers (66).

This story was later published by Gallimard.

This jealous crisis is reminiscent of *Passion simple*.

*C.A.P.E.S.* stands for *certificate d’aptitude professionnelle à l’enseignement secondaire*. Since Ernaux now hold this degree, she is speaking from an authoritarian point of view.

These ideas are examined by Barthes: *operator* = the photographer, *spectator* = the person looking at the photograph, and *spectrum* = the person who is photographed. (CC 22).

The terms “self” and “other” here are based on Mitchell’s definition mentioned earlier.
CHAPTER 4

MAN AGAINST THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MACHINE: ENCOUNTERS WITH MODERNITY

The previous chapters attest to the ubiquity of descriptions of encounters with photographs in the French novel, especially since the late 1960s. Verbal descriptions of photographs are used to substantiate facts about one’s life in autobiographical writings because they are associated with representations of the real. However, this reality is actually a hyperreality. Narrating ekphrastic encounters can serve many different functions for the novelist. Photographs, as we have seen, often act as fetishes inciting narration of past events in the life of the protagonist—which is often some representation of the novelist. Furthermore, they seem to help the novelist (via his or her protagonist [or alter ego]) demonstrate a distrust of modernity and its innovation. The analyses in this chapter will consider several examples of struggles between Man and the modern machine. These struggles stem from disenchantment with those machines which produce photographs, such as cameras and Photomats, due to a malfunction of the equipment or an inability to understand or recognize the images they
produce. This, in turn, generates uneasiness toward the power that machines now possess. As we will see this power leads to a problematization of “real” images. The authors we have chosen create verbal representations of photographs that, for one reason or another, do not or cannot correspond with the narrator’s idea of what the image should portray.

In this chapter we will examine several different encounters with images, and/or the machines that produce them, to see how they cause distress for the protagonist. Narrating Man’s struggles with the modern machine allows for a problematization of the photographic image (and other forms of images) by questioning its ability to produce an exact duplicate of a real (or first) image. This type of questioning is not exclusive to the images that are produced, represented, and duplicated verbally in the texts themselves; it also allows writers to go further by challenging current perceptions and imposed ideologies about images. We will be discussing passages from Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Djinn, Michel Tournier’s La goutte d’or, Dominique Noguez’s Les trente-six photos que je croyais avoir prises à Séville, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s L’appareil photo. In each of these works, images are a vital part of the narration, and help to demonstrate modern day power struggles with machines.
Machines and new technologies allow hyperreality to develop through the simulation and mass production of aspects of reality that are created mechanically, portraying a reality that is free of all equipment.¹ As Walter Benjamin explains in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”:

…for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the through going permeation of the reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (Quoted in Fuery 120)

Jean Baudrillard’s theories stem from a similar lineage, and have gone on to include other new media. Equally, they have contributed to our understanding of how visual cultures are formed through his ideas pertaining to the simulacra. He rejects the possibility of an original “arguing instead that we exist in a world of simulation and simulacra” (Fuery 118). He investigates the relationship between the real and the copy and the degree of authenticity associated with the image from a cultural perspective. His notions about hyperreality and simulation will prove particularly useful in this section to show the twofold aspect of images as copies of what they represent and/or
culturally constructed representations. The real no longer exists as an isolated form, it has been freed from the envelope of the imaginary and rationality to become hyperreal:

Il ne s’agit plus d’imitation, ni de redoublement, ni même de parodie. Il s’agit d’une substitution au réel des signes du réel, c’est-à-dire d’une opération de dissuasion de tout processus réel par son double opératoire, machine signalétique métastable, programmatique, impeccable, qui offre tous les signes du réel et en courte-circuit toutes les péripéties. (Baudrillard 11)

Through what Baudrillard calls hyperreality and simulation, there is an appropriate context for the formation of a hyper-image. A hyper-image “do[es] not simply present a more extreme version of the thing being represented, these hyper-images actually shift the significance of the thing within its social order” (121). Fuery and Fuery use this to explain how images become excessive and come to represent the entire realm that encompasses them; for example, *Mona Lisa* is a hyper-image of Art, Elle McPherson of the Body, and terrorism of violence. In a similar way, the writers discussed in this chapter use excessive images to create hyper-images which, in turn, render the actual object they represent invisible. It is a technique that lends credibility to Fuery’s assertion that “cultures do not only make some things more visible, but they necessarily make others invisible” (123). Through the hyper-image, we see what an object represents but “[w]hat we do not
see...are the people themselves” (121). Here the unseen “persons” are Djinn, an American woman in France, a mannequin, or a man named Simon Lecoeur; Idriss a young Berber boy who, despite his efforts, never attains an accurate representation of his image; Jo, Mica, and all those they encounter on vacation; and the narrator of *L’Appareil photo*.

**Man, Myth, and Mannequins**

In Robbe-Grillet’s novel, *Djinn*, many of the practices that characterized his earlier works return and provide a foundation for commentaries on the visual. In this novel—which was presumably a continuation into Robbe-Grillet’s project to write texts that could be used by students learning the French language—fact and fiction intermingle to create several versions of a story. The premise of the story is that a man, Boris, has come to a meeting in response to an ad for a job. This act allows Robbe-Grillet to present the events that follow, but Boris is not immediately made aware of his new employer’s expectations: “‘Notre action est secrète, par nécessité. Elle comporte pour nous des risques importants. Tu vas nous aider. Nous allons te donner des instructions précises. Mais nous préférons (du moins au début) ne te révéler ni le sens particulier de ta mission ni le but général de notre entreprise’” (D
The ambiguity that pervades the circumstances of the job begins with the very person who has placed the ad. When Boris arrives, he engages in a conversation with his new boss, a young man dressed in a rain coat and wearing glasses. Because of the glasses, Boris has the thought that the man might be blind, foreshadowing events that will follow. The young man to whom Boris is speaking corrects his pronunciation of her name: “Ne prononcez pas Jean, mais Djinn. Je suis américaine” (12). After a few moments of discussion with Djinn, Boris realizes that he is not speaking to a real person, but a mannequin: “Les sons ne sortent pas du mannequin, lui-même, c’est probable, mais d’un haut-parleur dissimulé juste à côté” (15). The knowledge that an invisible eye is watching his every move makes Boris uncomfortable: “Ainsi, je suis surveillé par quelqu’un d’invisible. C’est très désagréable. J’ai la sensation d’être maladroit, menacé, fautif. La fille qui me parle est, aussi bien, assise à plusieurs kilomètres ; et elle me regarde, comme un insecte dans un piège, sur son écran de télévision. Je suis sûr qu’elle se moque de moi” (15). This type of surveillance will continue as Boris’s dedication to his new job is tested.

Boris is told to be at the gare du Nord at 7:15. He stops along the way to have a coffee, an Italian espresso, like all self-respecting Frenchmen: “Paradoxe: pour ne pas être remarqué, en France, on demande un expresso
italien” (22-23). Despite his “appropriate” behavior, Boris realizes that someone is watching him. This young woman, acting as a student reading in the café, reminds Boris that he has a meeting and should leave now to avoid being late: “Ainsi, cette jeune fille est une espionne, placée par Djinn sur ma route pour surveiller mon sérieux professionnel” (24). Oddly, no one was privy to the information that Boris was going to stop in that particular café, yet he seems to accept the young woman’s presence there without a great deal of questioning. He continues his route to the train station and along the way he is presented with many disruptions that actually become part of the game in which he is engaging. After taking a street that was suggested as a short cut, he discovers a young boy who has tripped on the uneven pavement and is lying motionless. He tries to help the boy, and carries him back into the house from which he had come running. Inside the house Boris meets a young girl, Marie, who is the young boy’s sister. She explains that his name is Jean and that he is dead, but dies often and should come back to life shortly.

The meeting with these two children becomes integral to Boris’s mission, and after taking them to get something to eat, they give him a disguise: a rain coat and glasses that blind him. Simon’s new situation as a blind man reveals an interesting paradox: “Je découvrais là une conséquence paradoxale de la cécité: un aveugle ne peut plus rien faire en cachette! Les
Thus, he must trust Jean to lead him to the next part of his mission. After being drugged and driven to an undisclosed location, Boris finds himself in a room where he hears Djinn’s voice as she describes the mission of the organization of which Boris is now seemingly a member. Boris is distracted at first, and concentrates on the beauty of Djinn’s voice. It should be added that Boris has become strangely attracted to Djinn, and is engaging in his mission without too many questions in the hope of impressing her (For Boris love really is blind!). The only thing he really takes from her speech are blurbs about fighting against machines which take Boris back to the announcement, and the message he had not really understood: “‘pour une vie plus libre et débarassée de l’impérialisme des machines’” (77). Djinn’s lovely voice continues to diffuse explanations about the mission of the organization, “‘La machine vous surveille; ne la craignez plus! La machine vous donne des ordres; ne lui obéissez plus! La machine réclame tout votre temps; ne le lui donnez plus! La machine se croit supérieure aux hommes; ne la préférez plus!’” (80). Again, Boris fades away and is more curious about his surroundings than what Djinn is explaining. He manages to partially remove his glasses and sees that he is in a room with many men dressed exactly like...
him. That is the last thing he would remember for someone hit him on the head and he would wake some time later disoriented with vague recollections of the events surrounding Djinn and his new job.

Similar events are recounted in chapters six and seven, but this time they have no relation to Djinn and the job announcement, except, of course, the café, the meeting with Marie and Jean, and Boris buying glasses and pretending to be blind. One other factor that disturbs Boris is that Djinn knows his “real” name, and wrote it on the letter she addressed to him and left in the house where he first met the children: “L’enveloppe porte le nom complet du destinataire: ‘Monsieur Simon Lecoeur, dit Boris’” (39).

Furthermore, a similar story is recounted yet again in chapter eight. This time our narrator is someone who knows Simon: “Quand je suis arrivée en France, l’année dernière, j’ai fait la connaissance, par hasard, d’un garçon de mon âge nommé Simon Lecoeur, qui se faisait appeler Boris, je n’ai jamais su pourquoi” (121). This passage reveals that the narrator is a woman, and we might assume that she is Djinn, an American who recently arrived in France, but limiting our conclusion to one hypothesis is too reductive for we do not know the real identity of any of the characters. The text itself adds no clarity to the story of Boris and Djinn. However, “factual” information about Simon (dit Boris) is revealed in the prologue and epilogue.
In the prologue, we are told that the text that follows was found after the disappearance of Simon Lecoeur. We are also told that his identity is problematic since “[p]ersonne ne lui connaissait aucun parent, éloigné ou proche” (8). His passport is found along with the text in his office at the Franco-American school. This French passport belongs to a man named Boris Koershimen who was born in Kiev. While the police affirm that this passport is a fake, the photograph on the front page represents the man they all know as Simon, a respected professor. Simon’s disappearance coincides with the police finding a dead female body near the gare du Nord, and thus due to its similar subject matter, the text becomes evidence in the investigation. The police believe that the text was written by a unique person, Simon Lecoeur, and that chapter eight, while written from a female point of view, is still the work of Simon based on stylistics. This also helps to strengthen the hypothesis that Simon was possibly both a man and a woman:

Un autre point intrigue la police: la ressemblance plus que curieuse (allure generale, mensurations, traits du visage, couleur des yeux et des cheveux, etc.) qui existe entre la morte et Simon Lecoeur lui-meme. La chose est a ce point troublante qu’on a pu penser un moment qu’il s’agissait d’un seul et meme personnage : le charmant professeur de l’Ecole franco-americaine aurait ete une femme travestie. (143-44)

This hypothesis is interesting for it provides solid links between Simon and Djinn, however, it would be dismissed for a more medically sound one. A
certain Dr. Morgan had recently examined Simon for problems with his vision, verified that he was, indeed, a man, and suffered from a banal Oedipus complex.

Boris’s passport photograph adds to the ambiguity of his identity which is certainly intentional, and is not the only photograph that provokes questions about our narrator. When Boris first visits the house where Marie and Jean live, he sees a photograph of their father who was a marine and died at sea. After being knocked out (the first time), Simon (as Boris is now known) stops in the same café he had visited the previous day. There, he sees a photograph which reminds him of the one he had seen in the house. He examines the photograph and concludes that it is a photograph of the man who had served him the day before. The woman working in the café explains that it is a photograph of her father who was a marine and had died at sea. The photograph bears the same inscription as the one in the house: “Pour Marie et Jean, leur papa chéri” (93). The third time this photograph turns up is the most disturbing for Simon. The second time he encounters a motionless body of a young boy and takes him into a house, he meets another (or the same) young girl. He sees a photograph, the same one he had already seen in a similar house, and in the café. However, this time it was he who was the marine who had died at sea: “Il l’aurait presque parié: c’était là sa propre
photographie. Il n’y avait pas à s’y méprendre. La figure était parfaitement reconnaisable, bien que peut-être vieillie de deux ou trois ans, ou à peine plus, ce qui lui conférait un air de sérieux et de maturité” (117). Djinn (as the young girl is called this time) explains that these impossible facts come from the abnormal memory of Jean, and that Simon will become the father of the two children giving legitimacy to the dedication accompanying the photograph. When he refuses to believe her seemingly outrageous claims, Marie explains that Simon is not open to non-traditional explanations because he is French:

Vous raisonnez vraiment comme un Français: positiviste et cartésien...De toute façon, j’ai dit que vous viendriez ici dans quelques jours ‘pour la première fois’. Mais vous y reviendrez souvent par la suite. Vous habitez mème probablement cette maison avec votre femme et vos enfants. Pourquoi, sans cela, votre photo ornerait-elle ce mur ? (118-19)

In this way, the photograph seems to explain and prove events that have no traditional explanation.

*Djinn* is a complex novel that plays with notions about language and the visual. Again, Robbe-Grillet has produced (intentionally) a “story” that is difficult to interpret. The very title of the novel implies a mystical power. Djinn, as her name might suggest, is a genie who allows Boris to float through time. The different representations of her vary from Simon’s boss, to young
Marie (who is noted for her old-fashioned dress: “La petite Marie, toujours en robe de 1880…” (146), to Simon’s female side. The French language is a mechanism that allows this floating through time to be narrated. By employing non-traditional techniques, Robbe-Grillet once again produces an experiment in literature. In Djinn, Man is a mechanical production of language and human thought surveilled by machines. For Roch C. Smith, this representation of Man is reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier novels: “Robbe-Grillet’s emphasis on the mechanical aspects of the characters in Djinn is in part a tongue-in-cheek reference to the early and persistant criticism that his novels are inhuman and mechanical” (Smith 126). Smith does not, however, reduce this novel to a mechanical representation of characters. He explains that through ambiguity and complex narrative techniques, Robbe-Grillet creates art: “What remains is neither simple artifice nor nature but rather art, that is, an invented form that has the opening, the freedom, and the fire of life” (126). Thus, as young Marie (or Djinn) would say, the reader can discover art if he or she is willing to break away from Cartesian reasoning.

Robbe-Grillet’s work exhibits an acute penchant toward the visual that is not exclusive to the novel. He has engaged in many projects related to photography and film but this does not prevent him from problematizing the
visual. None of Robbe-Grillet’s works are set up to be interpreted in a single way. *Djinn* is a site for many duplications such as the mannequins and the multiple versions of the same story. There are also many intertextual references that can be revealed such as the protagonist Boris, whose name is used in Robbe-Grillet’s film *L’homme qui ment*; and other characters in the same film such as Jean. The myths he evokes share intertextual links as well.

We know that Simon Lecoeur was diagnosed with a banal Oedipus complex which is reminiscent of Wallas, the Oedipal figure in *Les Gommes*. Robbe-Grillet works from generators, which are starting points for the linkage of all his works as well as the linkage of art, language, and society. As Marjorie H. Hellerstein maintains in her study *Inventing the Real World*: “The myths he [Robbe-Grillet] uses as generators come from classical literature and from popular literature; the fictional situations are stereotypical situations in literature; the artworks are real works by real artists; the places are real places” (27). She goes on to explain that he acknowledges the links his generators have to reality but that “he considers that all of these established forms are elements of an outmoded ideology, an unquestioned ideology, and that he, as an artist, must challenge outmoded ideologies” (27). Instead of providing answers, his interest in visual generators provokes questions.
Similarly, Michel Tournier who is considered “France’s greatest amateur photographer” and whose works reflect his interest in photography, explores its power in his fictional works (quoted in Vogl 15). Like Robbe-Grillet, he uses myths and stereotypes to question outmoded ideologies. Mary Vogl say that Tournier is often praised for his effort to condemn racism and economic exploitation in contemporary France, citing such critics as Petit, Jay, and Worton. She believes, however, that “Tournier tends to subordinate his analysis of postcolonial power struggles to his efforts to popularize philosophical concepts relating to issues of representational practices in the visual media and the relations between words and images in contemporary ‘Western’ society” (16). Vogl’s claim becomes quite evident in one of Tournier’s well known novels La goutte d’or, narrated through the eyes of a young boy from the Orient. In this work, the protagonist is a young Berber named Idriss who embarks on a voyage on which his objective is “rejoindre sa photo” (GO 99). Images and photographs maintain an important role in the narration. This becomes obvious when a couple of French tourists visiting Tabelbala takes a picture of Idriss: “‘Hé petit! Ne bouge pas trop, je vais te photographier” (13). This moment shows a clear objectification of Idriss and the Orient. The woman who takes his picture is French (from Paris), blonde, wearing shorts, and emerges from a Land Rover:
La voiture stoppa. La femme retira ses lunettes et sauta à terre. Ses cheveux flottaient en nappe décolorée sur ses épaules. Elle portait une chemisette kaki très échancrée et un short outrageusement court. Idriss remarqua aussi ses ballerines dorées et pensa qu’elle n’irait pas loin avec ça dans la pierraille environnante. Elle brandissait un appareil de photo. (13)

All of these factors make her the opposite of everything that Idriss knows, for they bear witness to the Western world. The passage that describes the taking of the photograph not only shows Idriss as a demarcated object, it almost “kills” him. The woman was “brandishing” the camera, and she had to rearm several times to get a good shot: “Elle avait plusieurs fois réarmé, et visait à nouveau Idriss et ses moutons. Elle regardait maintenant en souriant, et, débarassée de l’appareil de photo, elle paraissait enfin le voir normalement” (14). The obvious allusions to shooting a gun are abundant, making this act a dangerous one. After the photo is taken, Idriss asks to have the picture, not understanding that the camera was not a Polaroid and the photos would have to be developed. However, the woman takes Idriss’s address and promises to send him the picture from Paris. When the Land Rover pulls away, Idriss’s picture goes with it, bringing new meaning to “taking” his picture.

Idriss, in all his naiveté, believes that the woman will send him the picture she has taken: “…sa photo, on allait la lui envoyer. Elle arriverait avec
le rare courrier de l’oasis et les commandes de ravitaillement, d’outils et de vêtements livrées chaque semaine par le camionneur Salah Brahim qui assurait la liaison avec la grande oasis voisine Béni Abbès” (22). For Idriss, the photograph is as important as these other vital objects. Others are suspicious and refuse to believe that Idriss will ever receive his photo. His mother affirms that a part of him has been taken away: “C’est un peu de toi qui est parti, renchérit la mère. Si après ça tu es malade, comment te soigner?”, and the mother’s friend predicts that the photograph will cause Idriss to leave the oasis: “Ça risque de le faire partir aussi…Trois jeunes du village émigrés vers le nord en six mois !” (22). For persons from this village where modern images are still scarce, photographs are regarded with suspicion:

‘Tu peux la regarder, tiens, cette photo! C’est sans doute la seule photo existant à Tabelbala. Il y avait bien celle de Mustapha qui était allé en voyage de noces à Alger. Il s’était fait photographier avec sa femme. Mais je crois bien que la photo a disparu. C’est peut-être la belle-mère qui l’a brûlée. Les vieux n’aiment pas trop les photos ici. Ils croient qu’une photo, ça porte Malheur.’ (54)

Indeed, the photo will become a source of distress for Idriss. In Tabelbala, it is viewed as vulgar to “offer” oneself to the camera’s eye: “Toute image avantageuse est grosse de menace. Que dire alors de l’oeil photographique et de l’imprudence de celui qui s’offre complaisamment à lui!” (24). Equally,
the photograph becomes a menace to Idriss as he is the victim of a cruel practical joke on the part of Salah Brahim, who delivers the mail. The entire village is now aware of Idriss’s situation. He regularly awaits the deliveries to see if there is a letter addressed to him that contains his photo. One day, to Idriss’s joy, he receives a letter, but when he opens it he discovers a post card with the image of a donkey. Idriss becomes the victim of mockery as all who have gathered to receive the day’s mail laugh as Salah Brahim asks if the picture is of his fiancée or himself (52).

Idriss tires of waiting for his photo, and decides to go to Paris to find it. Along the way, he will continue to be exposed to different images and representations of himself and his culture. He coerces different people to give him rides to Béchar where he plans to take a bus to Oran. Upon his arrival in Béchar, he realizes that he has missed the bus that day and that he will have to wait until the following morning to leave. He goes to a market to kill some time, and stumbles upon a studio Mustapha artiste photographe, and enters. Mustapha assumes that he has come for a portrait, yet Idriss has come with more questions than desires. Mustapha claims to be the photographer who can capture one’s dreams. Among his many sets are images of the Sahara which represent all its colors. However, he only does black and white photos since, as a professional, he leaves “la couleur aux amateurs de chromos” (85).
While Idriss is still in the studio, a couple comes in to have their portrait made. They are tourists doing a circuit that permits them to visit several areas of the Sahara. Mustapha proposes different scenes for their portrait, and after deciding on one and finishing the pose, an interesting exchange ensues. The couple asks Mustapha why his sets are painted in color if he only does black and white portraits. He explains that the sets are: “[I]’inspiration de [son] appareil photo [qui] participe à la création aussi” (86). This is, of course, for lack of a better response, for the question had taken him by surprise.

Light and color become important traits of images, and as Idriss explains that he is on his way to Paris to find his photograph, Mustapha ensures him that he will certainly find what he is looking for in Paris, the city of lights: “’Oh pour ça, tu vas en trouver à Paris des femmes et des photos! Ah, si j’avais ton âge! Paris, la ville-lumière! La ville-image! Des femmes et des images par millions!” (86-87). In order to give Idriss a hint of what he was to encounter in Paris, Mustapha places Idriss in front of a set painted to resemble Paris. Idriss sees this image in a mirror, but is not photographed since he does not have the fifteen dinars that the photo would cost. Mustapha remarks that it is a shame because had Idriss the money to pay for the photo, he could have his photo taken in Paris and would have no need to make the
long journey across the Mediterranean: “Si tu avais quinze dinars, ironisa
Mustapha, je te ferais ta photo. Alors tu pourrais rentrer chez toi. Ton
voyage serait terminé. Ce serait quand même moins fatigant que de passer la
Méditerranée. Mais ce n’est pas la peine de te donner un conseil aussi
raisonnable” (87).

Idriss would, of course, not take his advice, and his voyage would
continue. Another perplexing encounter with images would come when
Idriss realizes that he needs photographs of himself for his passport. Idriss
makes his way to the photomat where, for one dinar, he can attain the
necessary photographs:

Il chercha longtemps dans les rues inconnues l’objet tout aussi
inconnu…La cabine, fort délabrée, était occupée par deux
gamins qui s’y bousculaient en faisant des grimaces devant la
caméra. Ils partirent enfin, et Idriss prit leur place derrière le
rideau. Il y eut des éclairs de flash. Il ressortit, et examina le
tiroir où tombent les épreuves. (94)

Upon examination, the slot for the finished photos contained those of the kids
who had been playing in the cabin when Idriss had arrived. And, finally, two
more photographs appear which represent a man with a beard. Idriss
examines the photos and his own reflection in the mirror as if trying to
comprehend the discrepancy between the photos and his own image. His
conclusion is that “[l]es barbus ont aussi droit à un passeport,” and so he
takes the photos and returns to pick up his passport (95). To Idriss’s surprise, no one seems to notice that the photograph does not accurately represent and identify him: “Le préposé ne remarqua même pas l’étrange dissemblance d’Idriss et du barbu dont le portrait était fixé par deux oeillets sur son passeport” (97); and further, “son cas parut d’une extrême simplicité aux contrôleurs, et, malgré la photo de son passeport, il se retrouva l’un des premiers sur le quai de la gare maritime” (106).

To the present, each image of Idriss is distorted in some way, making it impossible for him to see himself in it: “Il ne se trouvait pas dans cette image de rêve. Mais s’était-il retrouvé dans la photo de l’âne de Salah Brahim, et même n’était-ce pas un inconnu qui s’était glissé jusque dans son passeport ?” (107). All of these “false” images cause Idriss to doubt the photograph taken by the blonde woman, and he begins to fear its representation: “[D]epuis que j’ai quitté mon pays, j’ai de plus en plus peur que ça ne soit pas une bonne photo. Enfin pas exactement la photo que j’attendais” (115). Of course, Idriss would never find the blonde woman or the photograph she took. He would, instead, discover many other images that provoke questions about his identity and his culture. As he explains, during his voyage he finds traces of himself captured in images. Unfortunately, the images he has collected do not resemble him, and he
begins to question photographic authority: “Et puis tout de même, ce n’est pas à moi à ressembler à ma photo. C’est ma photo qui doit me ressembler, non?” (100).

In Paris, the wave of images overwhelms Idriss. He encounters images of his country that he does not recognize as it is rendered exotic in photographs. In addition, he experiences different aspects of television and cinema that render everything exotic, demystifying the unknown by adding outputs for information. Idriss meets another man from Tabelbala who explains that cinema is like school, especially for those who come from regions where images are scarce: “Le cinéma, c’est notre maître d’école. Quand tu arrives du bled, comment on marche sur un trottoir, comment on s’assoit dans un restaurant, comment on prend une femme dans ses bras, c’est le cinéma qui te l’apprend” (146). For this man, knowledge, and the dream of something better, come from the images produced in the cinematic world: “Le cinéma, il fait de toi un homme riche, raffiné, qui roule dans les belles voitures décapotables, qui habite dans des salles de bains nickelées, qui embrasse sur la bouche des femmes parfumées, pleines de bijoux” (146). Cinema also brings the Western world into the Orient, although women must be punished for the knowledge they acquire in the theatre: “Et leur père ou leur frère aîné, ils tapent sur elles à coups de poing ou à coups de bâton pour
leur faire sortir de la peau les sales choses qu’elles ont prises au cinéma” (146). Despite these new outlets for information, no “new” knowledge is produced. Rather, these repeated images are symbolic of the perpetuated stereotypes and ideologies that are constantly duplicated. Idriss is shamed for his complacence in regard to his participation in the production and perpetuation of such images: “Et toi, te voilà, et tu vas pas au cinéma, mais le cinéma, c’est toi que le fais ! On te photographie, on te filme, et demain ça recommence !” to which Idriss replies innocently : “C’est pas ma faute” (146).

In fact, it is not his fault; he is constantly being objectified, which complicates his own conception of his identity. At one point, he is asked to be the model for mannequins that will be used in the windows of Tati stores. The duplication of his image again causes Idriss distress, especially when he realizes its consequences: “Quant aux mannequins, étant eux-mêmes déjà des images, leur photo est une image d’image, ce qui a pour effet de doubler leur pouvoir dissolvant. Il en résulte une impression de rêve éveillé, d’hallucination vraie. C’est absolument la réalité sapée à sa base par l’image” (181). For Idriss, a true representation is unimaginable, and instead of finding his photograph in Paris, he finds duplications of false images and perpetuated stereotypes. As Mary Vogl puts it, Idriss never finds his true
image, rather he “gradually learns that he is always expected to conform to
dfixed images that the French have of North Africans and that, even if he does
not conform, they will not notice the “real” Idriss anyway” (27). Although he
never rejoins his photograph, Idriss gets a pretty good idea of what the
French couple must have seen that day in the oasis.

Through Idriss’s duplication as a model for mannequins, Tournier is
able to show how fixed images and stereotypes are perpetuated. He also
explores the intersection of traditional and modern interpretations of myths
and legends. The blonde woman who took Idriss’s photograph possessed a
great deal of power over him, and her importance in the narration is
strengthened by a story that interrupts Idriss’s tale. Before the concluding
pages of La goutte d’or, there is a legend that interrupts the narration. This
legend is about the overwhelming beauty of a blonde queen whose image
provoked jealousy for each man who saw it. Her story reminds us of many
well-known stories such as Romeo and Juliet, for it recounts forbidden love
shared by children of feuding families. After the queen’s lost love and her
death, her portrait becomes an envied object that transmits her story.
However, her true story can only come to life through words. A young boy
Riad, who discovers that his father is in possession of the queen’s portrait
learns calligraphy and is able to tell her story through writing, thus pointing out the importance of language to describe an image and tell its story: “Pour le lettré, l’image n’est pas muette” (208-09).

In these two works Robbe-Grillet and Tournier use similar techniques to problematize the image. The result, however, is quite different. Both writers use repeated images in the form of photographs, stereotypical images, and mannequins that simulate photography’s reproductive power. They also evoke mythical figures that have well-known “identities” in order to further complicate the deciphering between fact and fiction. For Robbe-Grillet, these techniques require the reader (or the “spectator”) to engage in the text and find meaning. Tournier, on the contrary, seems to be sending a message to refuse prefabricated ideas about the Orient in an effort to render the problematic status of North African immigrants visible. In both cases, words and images are of vital importance to the transmission of messages, and the creation of new myths, which require the reader to go beyond outdated notions about art, literature, and society to find new meaning. In this way they seem to embrace Roland Barthes’s conception of myth as a form. They dispel the idea that myth is a factual system and ask their readers to see it as a semiological one (Barthes 1957: 109, 131).
Dominique Noguez and Jean-Philippe Toussaint have both published works in which images are the driving force of the narration. Noguez, like Robbe-Grillet, has written theoretical works on the image, and studies on specific authors, most notably author/filmmaker Marguerite Duras. Toussaint, while not a theorist per se, problematizes the image’s role in modern culture via his fictional works. Here, we will be looking at Noguez’s Les trente-six photos que je croyais avoir prises à Séville and Toussaint’s Appareil photo to show how both authors narrate stressful encounters with photographs and the devices that create them, using these encounters to create their own literary devices.

As the title suggests, Noguez’s récit is about thirty six pictures that the narrator (who we would later learn is named Joseph, Jo, for short) believed he had taken. The fact that the pictures do not exist provokes distress for Jo. We might delineate two reasons for this distress. Firstly, we will find out later that the photographs cannot be reproduced and become tangible, visible objects because of Man’s unsuccessful encounter with a machine: “Le plus bouffon, cela a tout de même été ma tête quand le type de la boutique de photo, à Paris, m’a dit que le rouleau avait été mal enclenché et que la
pellicule était restée vierge. Pas une des trente-six photos n’avait été prise !” (Noguez 13). Secondly, Jo (who cannot manage to pay his rent) has spent his last bit of money on a new camera specifically for his upcoming vacation to Seville : “Mes derniers sous étaient passés dans l’achat du Pentax PC 35 AF qui devait immortaliser le voyage” (11). Not being able to pay his rent is not Jo’s only problem. The day he is supposed to leave for Seville he realizes that he has misplaced the plane tickets. When his girlfriend Mica arrives, they eventually find the tickets, but this will not lead to tranquility. In the plane, the couple begins to disagree about how they will spend their time in Seville. Jo plans to visit the World Exposition while Mica has envisioned a sightseeing escapade filled with museums and cathedrals. The final piece of information given in the introduction gives the reader a glimpse into the future and how the trip will end, as well as an explanation of the unique narrative technique that will be employed. Upon the narrator’s return (alone) to Paris, he realizes that his bag did not arrive. However, to his joy, he has “guarded” his Pentax PC 35 AF with him: “Au moins j’avais réussi à sauver l’appareil: grâce à lui, qui portait dans son ventre les précieuses traces de ces journées décisives, je pourrais revivre et comprendre ce qui m’était arrivé” (13).
Instead of letting tragedy prevail, Jo creates thirty-six photographs by providing detailed descriptions of them because, as he explains: “J’ai une très bonne mémoire, je peux à peu près tout reconstituer” (12). Even though the photos do not really exist, our narrator brings them to life through verbal descriptions. Several factors give the reader an impression of authorial (and photographic) authority. Each description is accompanied by a blank image that represents the absent photograph that would take this place if it were developed. And, there are, of course, exactly thirty-six of them like the roll of film. Furthermore, the descriptions themselves show an obvious effort on the part of the narrator to “accurately” explain his photos. The first picture represents a “gros plan du visage de Mica en train de déchiffrer l’avis placardé sur la porte d’entrée de l’Alcazar, une heure à peine après notre arrivée à Séville” (15). The notice is reprinted in the text exactly as it was written at the entrance to Alcazar : “On y lisait très exactement” (15). Not only does the narrator make us believe the descriptions are faithful to the missing photos, he sometimes mentions his photographic technique. The second photograph was taken “au flash” in front of a stand with an exhibit about the Big Bang Theory at the World Expo. Most of the photographs are described one by one highlighting the fragmented events and representations that the narrator is recounting. However, with photos eight, nine, and ten,
the narrative becomes more fluid because there are three photographs that come together to represent on spot, the *Pavillon de France*. The unity of the story told by these photographs will not dictate the following descriptions, and each photograph is isolated as they were at the beginning. Other information is provided about the photographs that makes the reader believe in the authenticity of the narrator’s tales. This information is about the varying quality of the photographs from photo twenty of which Jo “[est] assez fier” (57) to photo twenty-two which is blurry: “…elle est floue, je l’ai prise trop vite et de trop loin-, ce cliché n’a strictement aucun intérêt” (61) to photo twenty-five about which Jo admits: “Je ne me souviens plus de ce qu’il y avait sur cette photo” (67) to photo twenty-eight about which he writes: “Cette photo n’est vraiment pas convenable. Je préfère n’en rien dire” (69).

These seemingly valid judgments about the photographs make the reader believe what Jo is recounting.

In addition to these judgments about the photos themselves, some of the descriptions reveal interesting commentaries about photography. Photo twenty-six is an image within an image:

Quelques heures plus tard: ma tête, dans la glace de la chambre, quand j’ai trouvé le mot de Mica disant ‘je te quitte’ et où figuraient entre autres et successivement les expressions ‘marre de tes farces merdiques’, ‘dans le baba’, et ‘tu finiras en taule’ (allusion à la trai té impayée que, sans elle, je n’avais effectivement plus beaucoup d’espoir de pouvoir honorer. (69)
This photograph, in its duplication of the narrator’s own image, serves as visual proof and a realization about himself and why Mica had left him bringing new meaning to the expression “to get a good look in the mirror.”

Duplicate images and commentary on the facility with which images are reproduced is addressed in the description of photo twenty-one:

Ici, j’ai photographié Mica en train de photographier, avec son propre appareil, un touriste occupé lui-même à photographier sa nana figée dans une pose immobile aux côtés des deux faux ouvriers (de cire ou de je ne sais quelle matière imitant la peau) qui ‘peignent’ le flanc du pavillon américain. Mixte de tableau vivant et de nature morte, image d’image d’image, lueur de leurre de leurre, abyme, abyme, abyme : Dieu que nous sommes intelligents ! (59)

Capturing fixed images of fixed images not only reinforces the idea of photography as a means to still images, it reiterates photography’s reproductive power. There is also a possible allusion to the consumerism related to images, especially in American culture. Images dictate much of what we think because they have influential power. At the end of the description of photo thirty, Jo comments on the power audiovisuels have at the exhibit, and how this makes him uncomfortable: “C’est avec les ‘agents de sécurité’ et les ‘audiovisuels’ (ces téléviseurs, dans tous les pavillons, diffusant les mêmes images stéréotypées que personne ne regarde), le principal fléau de cette manifestation” (78).
Because photography is accessible to everyone and it is so easy to duplicate images, Jo begins to see photographs as having little value, finding them laughable:

En vérité, depuis que tout le monde est photographe (et partout, maintenant — même dans les églises, même dans les restaurants, même au pieu je suis sûr), à quelques rares exceptions près dont la no 20 ci-dessus, j’ai contracté une sainte horreur de la photo. Ces trente-six dernières photos prises — ou plutôt déprises — à Séville étaient en fait trente-six ricanements. (59)

Despite their importance at the beginning of the story, these photographs become useless.

Throughout the descriptions of the thirty-six photographs, we see the power of the camera to provide multiple images, images within images, etc. We also see commentaries about the power of images and the way in which they symbolize consumerism. One other popular image is evoked at the very end of Jo’s vacation photos. Jo, having been left by Mica, meets another woman whose name is representative of a popular mythical figure: “Je lui ai demandé son nom. Elle m’a dit ‘Carmen’. J’ai compris que ça n’allait pas être du gâteau” (89). This allows the reader to focus on the mythical aspects of the narration. The entire story is nothing but a created myth, a story told through absent photographs seen through the narrator’s mind’s eye.
Like Jo in *Les trente-six photos que je croyais avoir prises à Séville*, the narrator of *L’Appareil photo* tells a story that seems to come from images of daily life in Postmodern Europe. As Maryse Fauvel remarks:

> Tout se passe comme si le narrateur racontait une histoire à partir de photos du quotidien, dans une réalité reconnaissable, celle d’une Europe postmoderne. La multitude d’anecdotes rapportées comme des légendes de photos-souvenirs donnent l’impression d’un voyage, qui pourtant ne se réduit qu’à des déplacements anodins… (Fauvel 1994: 40)

The narrator’s daily life in this novel is, indeed, seemingly insignificant. He takes a few overnight trips, spends time in Paris and, among other banal activities, he tries to complete his application for driving lessons. Completing this application becomes a complicated experience for the narrator because he keeps forgetting to bring four identity photos. One day he walks into the driving school, but does not yet have the needed documents: “…et la jeune femme, me voyant entrer, crut qu’en réalité je revenais déjà pour l’inscription. Je dus la détromper, mais lui laissai entendre que les choses avançaient, j’avais déjà la photocopie de mon passeport et envisageais dans les heures à venir de voir ce qu’il y avait lieu de faire pour l’état civil” (AP 9).8 The young woman is perplexed by his behavior but simply reminds him that he will also need four photos to which he responds: “oui, oui…quatre photos” (9).

Acquiring these photographs will not happen as quickly as one might think,
and the narrator exhibits a great deal of hesitation and anxiety about having the pictures made in a photomat (despite the facility associated with this act). The very same day he returns to the school to tell the young woman that he has obtained his fiche d’état civil (and even made a photocopy), and she informs him that all he needs now is a self addressed stamped envelope and the four photos. The narrator then reveals to her that he found some photographs of himself when he was young earlier in the day and proceeds to show them to her one by one complete with an explanation for each of them. Nevertheless, he realizes that these photos will not help him to complete his application and before leaving states: “…je pense que vous conviendrez que cela ne nous est pas d’une grande utilité (pour le dossier…)” (11). For the narrator, photographs are useless and acquiring his identity photos for his application will continually be put off. Maryse Fauvel points out how many of Toussaint’s works reject photographs because they “kill” the individual and they make Man the object of surveillance (38).9

In the interim, the narrator engages in other banal activities such as a pedicure, looking for a lost sock, buying a bottle of gas, and going on dates with Pascale (the young woman from the driving school). This list of events finally comes to include taking the needed photos. And, interestingly, the narrator finds the perfect moment to take these photographs, not in Paris but
during a short trip to Newhaven: “J’étais assis dans la pénombre de la cabine depuis un moment déjà, le tabouret réglé à la bonne hauteur, et je ne me pressais pas d’introduire les pièces dans la machine. Toutes les conditions étaient réunies maintenant, me semblait-il, –pour penser” (93). And, this is exactly what he does. He thinks about the rain and its similarities with thoughts since they: “fixe un instant dans la lumière et disparaissent en même temps pour se succéder à elle-même” (93). The successive movement implicit in this description is not only applicable to rain, water, and thoughts; but to the reproduction of photographic images.10 After a moment of reflection in this closed space where he is protected from the outside world and the elements, the narrator concludes his philosophical banter with the following comment: “…seul dans un endroit clos, seul en suivant le cours de ses pensées dans le soulagement naissant, on passe progressivement de la difficulté de vivre au désespoir d’être” (94). This commentary coincides with the taking of his photos; and in performing this act, the narrator has come to exist. A few pages later, the narrator removes the photos from his coat pocket and finds: “…quatre photos en noir et blanc, mon visage était de face…Je n’avais aucune expression particulière sur ces photos, si ce n’est une sorte de lassitude dans la manière d’être là…” (97). These photos, like the ones from his childhood, have no real meaning and only represent banalities. Two facts
are important concerning these identity photos. Firstly, the narrator finally acquires them from a photomat on the other side of the English Channel, during an overnight trip. Thus, he had to “travel” to get them serving as a metaphor for a more philosophical journey. Secondly, the photos are associated with movement and repetition from the falling rain to the sea that he has crossed.

The narrator’s second encounter with photography comes toward the end of the novel when he finds, and ultimately steals, a camera: “Je n’avais pas eu l’intention de le [l’appareil] voler, non. Lorsque je l’avais ramassé, j’avais simplement eu dans l’idée d’aller le rapporter au caissier, mais au moment de le lui remettre, comme il était occupé à rendre la monnaie, j’avais fait demi-tour et j’avais quitté la salle” (102-03). This act of thievery causes the narrator to feel guilty, and he admits his “crime” to Pascale upon return to Paris: “Cette nuit, j’ai volé un appareil-photo” (111). In this way Pascale becomes an integral part of the narrator’s being. It is she who needed the identity photos that would prove the narrator’s existence, and she is the person to whom he “confesses.” 11

Before leaving Great Britain to return to Paris, the narrator throws the stolen camera into the water. Then, while on the plane, he contemplates the type of photograph he would take if he were still in possession of the camera:
“...si j’avais gardé l’appareil-photo, j’aurais pu prendre quelques photos du ciel à présent, cadrer de longs rectangles uniformément bleus, translucides et presque transparents...” (112). These photos of the sky would represent the translucence he had thought about photographing several years ago:

“...j’avais voulu essayer de faire une photo, une seule photo, quelque chose comme un portrait, un autoportrait peut-être, mais sans moi et sans personne, seulement une présence, entière et nue, douloureuse et simple, sans arrière-plan et presque sans lumière” (112). He then realizes that he took just this photo on the boat that evening: “…c’est sur le bateau que j’avais fait cette photo...C’était comme la photo de l’élan furieux que je portais en moi...Car on me voyait fuir sur la photo...la photo serait floue mais immobile...il y aurait là toute l’étendue de l’immobilité qui précède la vie et toute celle qui la suit, à peine plus lointaine que le ciel que j’avais sous les yeux (113). With the mention of the sky, invisibility, and the stages of life, the narrator seems to be alluding to death, and as he remarks before throwing the camera into the water: “Parfois, oui, la mort me manquait” (106).

Even though the narrator takes several pictures, the end result will be much like Jo’s in *Les trente-six photos que je croyais avoir prises à Séville*: “Dans les jours qui suivirent, j’allai retirer chez le photographe les épreuves des photos que j’avais prises cette nuit là dans les escaliers du bateau. Il y avait,
Dans la petite pochette bleu clair qui me fut remise, onze clichés en couleurs…” (115). The fact that there are only eleven photographs draws our attention to the absence that has come to qualify the photos that our narrator took. The photos he has picked up are of persons he does not know, and consequently of little interest to him. Furthermore, the narrator’s own invisibility is highlighted by the missing photos: “…je me rendis compte qu’à partir de la douzième photo, la pellicule était uniformément sous-exposé, avec ça et là quelques ombres informes comme d’imperceptibles traces de mon absence” (116).

The narrator’s absence in the photos is further underscored by Pascale’s unexplained presence. As the narrator re-examines the photographs from the stolen camera, he discovers an odd presence: “La photo avait été prise dans le grand hall de la gare maritime de Newhaven et je me rendis soudain compte que, derrière la jeune femme qui se tenait au premier plan, on devinait les contours du présentoir des douanes, où apparaissait très nettement la silhouette endormie de Pascale” (120). A similar image of Pascale is described toward the end of the novel when the narrator calls her from a phone booth. The phone booth, like the photomat, is a site of reflection and protection. However, light is able to permeate the transparent barrier between the narrator and the outside world, making the spot less
private than the Photomat. When Pascale does not call him back as she has promised, he deduces that she might have fallen back asleep: “…à mesure que le temps passait et que Pascale ne me rappelait pas, j’en vins à me demander si elle ne s’était pas rendormie” (124). As the narrator awaits her call, he sits in the phone booth as night becomes day, and with the new day that is approaching, the narrator is able to think of seizing the present and living life: “…je regardais le jour se lever et songeais simplement au present, à l’instant present, tâchant de fixer encore une fois sa fugitive grace—comme on immobiliserait l’extrémité d’une aiguille dans le corps d’un papillon vivant” (127). The passage from night to day is symbolic of the new light that shines alleviating the obscurity and invisibility with which we associate the narrator.

In all of the texts we have discussed in this chapter, there is a clear questioning of the real. The real identity of all of the “characters” in Djinn and the protagonist in La goutte d’or are reduced to duplicated images of the real. In Les trente-six photos que je croyais avoir prises à Séville as well as L’Appareil photo, photography’s ability to create exact representations of a real (or first) image is questioned. Fauvel comments on Toussaint’s works saying that: “En effet, le réel traduit dans les textes de Toussaint est un réel de surface, un réel d’images, un simulacre du réel” (40). This comment applies,
as well, to the other texts we have discussed. Each of their authors focuses on
the reproductive power of images to show different forms of reality, creating
hyper-images. These hyper-images become meaningful through the reader’s
(or the spectator’s) eyes as he or she interprets them and gives them
significance. Through duplication and simulation the image gains power, and
is able to manipulate our perception of what is real. The reality of images,
however, is not evident in what they represent. As Susan Sontag explains: “It
is not the reality that photographs make immediately accessible, but
images…One can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by)
images” (Quoted in Fauvel 1994: 40). As we have shown, images can possess
us through their repetition and simulation, highlighting their seductive
power. It is because of this seductive power that images now possess that we
must learn to read them and remain literate in an ever-evolving visual
culture.

1 The term hyperreality is understood in terms of Baudrillard’s theories as quite simply what is
more real than real.
2 In this work grammatical tenses are used in a way that is conducive to the study of the French
language from the way in which the events are narrated to an explanation of the significance of
the simple past. In addition, many stereotypes about the French and Americans are explored
such as Frenchmen being short, the different terminology used for floors of a building, the
differences in the coffee consumed in both cultures, the use of “tu” and “vous,” and the words
now used in the French language that come from English.
3 D = Djinn
4 GO = La Goutte d’Or
5 It should be noted that there is an objectification of the woman as well: from the way in which
her revealing dress is described to the discourse employed by her companion who reminds her
that Idriss is admiring the Land Rover, not her. Furthermore, in a later passage where Idriss
shares his story about being photographed with his mother, he modifies it saying that two men had been in the Land Rover, nullifying the woman’s role.

6 The fact that he is going to be a model for Tati perpetuates stereotypes of the Orient since these stores are often frequented by North Africans living in Paris. This, like the title of the book itself, reinforces stereotypes about Maghrebian immigrants.

7 Idriss is distressed by this duplication of his image in a more literal way because he nearly suffocates when they are creating the mold.

8 AP = L’Appareil photo

9 Image-makers do seem to dominate many of Toussaint’s narrators. In his 1997 novel La Télévision, the narrator attempts to take back some of the power that audiovisuals have over him by making a resolution to stop watching TV: “J’ai arrêté de regarder la télévision. J’ai arrêté d’un coup, définitivement, plus une émission, pas même le sport” (7).

10 The camera also becomes linked with the phallus. As Fauvel remarks, there is a constant movement associated with the narration and the camera which reinforces the sexual image: “…et le rythme d’apparence de ces objectifs qui apparaissent et disparaissent, vont et viennent dans la narration, renforce une image sexuelle évident. Dans L’Appareil-photo, l’appareil “faisait une petite bosse contre ma cuisse…” (39).

11 This is somewhat reminiscent of Jean-Baptise Clamence’s confession in Albert Camus’s La chute.

12 Both the photomat and the phone booth are enclosed spaces that make us think of the confessionals in the Catholic Church. And, Pascale is the “reason” for both moments when the narrator “confesses.”
CONCLUSION

THE DIALECTICS OF PICTURES

In this study, we have discussed images, objects, and pictures. It is important to consider all three of these entities; for, as we have shown, they are in no way mutually exclusive. Images and objects come to be seen through some medium and form pictures (Mitchell 2005: xiii). As W.J.T. Mitchell asserts, “It should be clear that if there are no images without objects (as material support or referential target), there are no objects without images” (Mitchell 2005: 108). For the authors we have selected, objects are the generators for vision and the creation of pictures. The New Novelists used everyday objects in their narratives to produce images. Moreover, in their use of textual representations of photographs, they “objectify” the subject of the photograph. Robbe-Grillet does not believe that a unique interpretation of an image (textual or physical) can exist. Sarraute would argue that a single interpretation would result in a banality. Therefore, we might say that Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute take agency in the textual representations they are creating. However, they invite their reader to actively participate and interpret these images in his or her own way. From this point of view, the
literary endeavors of the New Novelists varied in subject matter, but they were similar in the manner in which they included the reader. It is in this way that Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute problematize the boundaries separating a text and an image. This practice of questioning the text/image dichotomy is repeated by the other authors who we have studied as well. Furthermore, we have shown how the very classification of the works in question is a complicated matter. Are we dealing with an autobiography, an autofictional narrative, a fictional narrative, or non-fiction? In order to answer this question, we had to first consider the fundamental relationship between a text and an image. With a few exceptions, all of the photographs that have been produced within the text are verbal creations, so they must be read and interpreted.

This point highlights the dialectical relationship between these images and the texts that create or justify them. The textual photograph provides a site for reflection on a fixed image of a supposed truth. As we have noted, the veracity associated with photographs makes them an effective reference for this type of meditation. In this way, authors can raise questions and make claims about a represented image. In addition, by textualizing an image the narrator has agency in its representation. In this case, the reader has no concrete, visual image to which he or she can compare the textual image. The
reader must, therefore, decide what sort of relationship to have with the text. Furthermore, presenting textual photographs allows the author (via his or her narrator) creative agency. Thus, the interplay of text and image is crucial for the creation of a story, and the interpretation of that story by a reader.

The story that is created by the image and the text comes to life through the author’s caméra stylo. Ben Stoltzfus is just one of the many literary critics to note the similar inspirations for writing and for cinema:

As his [Stoltzfus] essay [“Shooting With the Pen”] makes clear, he feels the writing activity is bound to reflect and even to adopt certain techniques first used in the cinema. For Stoltzfus, as for the French critic Alexandre Astruc [who coined the phrase caméra stylo to liken cinematic techniques to the writing process. In addition, this term came to be associated with the major tenets of New Wave cinema that was born around 1960.], the camera can be likened to a pen, just as the pen can adapt for its own use the visual propensities associated with the camera (Cohen, K. 245).

From this standpoint, the modern novel has much in common with cinema.

“According to this analogy [of the writing process and cinematic techniques], modern films and novels not only resemble one another but are perfectly situated to influence one another as well” (245). Several of the authors we have discussed engaged in projects directly related to the silver screen, but the influence of cinema is obvious in the modern novel as a whole. Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras later wrote screenplays that were
adapted to the big screen, and produced their own films. Patrick Modiano has, as well, written screenplays and had his works adapted as films. Marie Cardinal has held acting roles (she played a role in Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* and addresses cinema in *Cet été là*). She refers to Jean-Luc Godard, a prominent figure of the New Wave, for example.), and some of her works have been made into movies. Photographs are the primary elements that come together to make a film, just as they make us see a text.

For this reason photographs remain a source of interest in the context of visual culture. Technological developments have prompted an evolution in the way we receive and interpret the stillness of a photograph, but for the moment still photographs continue to have a function in larger texts and films. The different function of the still photograph in texts and in films is somewhat analogous to the relation of dialectical to vulgar thinking. As Leon Trotsky explains:

Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines a series of them according to the laws of motion. Dialectics does not deny the syllogism, but teaches us to combine syllogisms in such a way as to bring our understanding closer to the eternally changing reality. (Trotsky 2)

The changing reality to which Trotsky refers is analogous to the photographs (whether actual photographs or verbal descriptions of them) that we have
discussed and the captions which accompany them. Robbe-Grillet’s visual
generators, Sarraute’s tropisms, the verbally inscribed photographic
representations of the narrator in autobiographical narratives, and the
commentary surrounding hyper-real images that we have discussed here all
point out the importance of this eternally changing reality. These authors are
all referring to moments that were, but are no longer. Interpretations of
images and photographs evolve because they are always viewed from a
current perspective which changes as time elapses.

This notion points out a “misunderstanding” of what would seem to be
basic logic. For Trotsky, there is a fundamental problem with the premise of
Aristotelian logic because ‘A’ is not, and cannot be, equal to ‘A’. Because time
is a fundamental element of existence, ‘A’ can only be equal to ‘A’ if ‘A’ never
changes. Trotsky asserts that this is only possible if ‘A’ does not exist.
Existence assumes evolution throughout time. For the New Novelists, their
novels were not ‘B’ in regards to ‘A.’ Instead they were literary manifestations
that bore witness to the time that had elapsed between the traditional
novelistic form (‘A’) and their new novels (a representation of ‘A’ that was
influenced by the passage of time). In a very similar way, the photographs of
narrators and their parents have never deviated from what they were ‘A,’ rather they were a new version of ‘A’ that was the product of the new perception of the spectator based on lived experiences.

These comments shed light on the problem of all images captured in photographs, and help to reinforce the arguments we have made in this study. The image that is captured represents a present truth, but when this image is later interpreted the image does not have the same meaning. This is because the moment and sensations it provoked that were captured in the photograph have evolved as time has elapsed. The difference between the current and past image is a result of time and mediation. Or, in Hegelian terms, the image that was at first immediate “now appears as mediated, related to an other, or that the universal appears as a particular” (Hegel 648). In this way the image becomes the representation of an other, “but not the other of something to which it is indifferent—rather it is the other in its own self, the other of an other; therefore it includes its own other within it and is consequently as contradiction, the posited dialectic of itself” (648). Images are never exact duplications that should not be questioned. We cannot forget to go beyond our own desires and consider the desires of pictures. As W.J.T. Mitchell has argued, pictures want to be asked what they want. While we cannot say what it is pictures want, we can assume that if they were to
articulate their desires, they would want more than to be dismissed as superficial. They would (most likely) want to be interpreted, and provide meaning. The ways in which they are interpreted are, of course, influenced by time, knowledge, culture, and lived experience.

The interpretation of an image, like anything else, evolves. While their particular representation of a person or an event has not changed, time has necessarily changed the way a spectator views this image. The current perception of the viewer is dependant on his or her (visual) culture. The more we understand about images and their place in visual culture, the more enlightened we are as members of a visual world. Let us face it, images dominate our thoughts. In a world where MTV, Reality TV, commercials, internet pop-up advertisements, and junk email messages stand as forerunners in the media’s domination of our thinking, it is difficult (and naïve) to accept an image simply for what it seems to be. We must go beyond the image that is presented to us, interpret it, and decide how it provides meaning and contributes to our understanding of the world. In doing so, we are accepting our role as spectators in a visual world and working toward visual literacy.
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