

# Effects of Optical Illusion in the Works of Annie Ernaux

*Regina L. Peszat*

University of Kansas

**A**nnie Ernaux's works deal with a variety of intensely personal themes: coping with the devastating effects of fatal diseases, experiencing sexual desire, making sense of complex family relationships, and confronting the stigma of being a member of a lower social class. While some critics see these themes as a reason to classify Ernaux's work as "life writing" or "autofiction," Ernaux herself rejects this classification noting the incongruities of the usage of the term "autofiction," and its implied message that the presence of such themes in a work disqualifies it from being considered as serious literature:

Je n'ai jamais entendu le mot "autofiction" à propos de Philip Roth, Philippe Sollers, Jean Rouaud, Emmanuel Carrère, Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, etc. [...] Tout se passe très subtilement comme si l'autofiction était principalement un genre féminin, avec un côté sentimentalo-trash, narcissique, façon détournée, inconsciente, d'assigner aux femmes leur domaine, leurs limites en littérature. (Laurens et Ernaux interview)<sup>1</sup>

In dealing with such emotionally charged subjects, Ernaux claims to write "de la manière la plus neutre possible" (*Une femme* 62). She also avoids using a traditional literary style because it would be unnatural to her inherited idiom, the language used by her family and class: "Il me semble que je cherche toujours à écrire dans cette langue matérielle d'alors et non avec des mots et une syntaxe qui ne me sont pas venus, qui ne me seraient pas venus alors. Je ne connaîtrai jamais l'enchantement des métaphores, la jubilation du style" (*La Honte* 74). But in spite of its neutral tone and façade of

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<sup>1</sup> Ernaux's works have garnered much critical interest for their historical and sociological significance. Ernaux illustrates, within a narrative framework, many of the phenomena first articulated by the influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whom she acknowledges as a major influence on her work: See Cathy Jellenik's chapter on Ernaux in *Rewriting Rewriting* for an analysis of several of Ernaux's works through the prism of Bourdieu's theories.

simplicity, Ernaux's signature flat style exploits an economy of language which can be likened to the impression created by camouflage: purposely unremarkable, utilitarian, and therefore devoid of the type of refined embellishment one associates with a literary work of art.

To extend the analogy, the camouflage of Ernaux's prose conceals its treasures. Metaphorical riches can be discovered when the reader becomes sensitive to the effects of optical illusion that Ernaux has masterfully couched behind her deceptively plain prose. While Ernaux does write about explicit instances of optical illusion she has experienced in everyday life, she does not always alert the reader when she chooses to insert various types of effects of optical games elsewhere in her writing. Optical illusions, by definition, are conveyed through images, not words. For this reason some of these effects are not readily apparent to the reading eye. In some cases it is necessary to actively visualize Ernaux's word-images in order to "see" these effects. To capture the full meaning of Ernaux's works, the reader will need to ignore the writer's feints of artlessness, and adopt a more active role in reading. One's efforts will be rewarded; the discernment of such effects in Ernaux's works opens them up to new interpretations and broadens our understanding and appreciation of her œuvre.

Two critics have already suggested the analogy of optical illusion to describe Ernaux's prose. Carole Allamand proposes reading Ernaux's writing in the same manner that one uses in the decoding of a magic eye image: "Sa littéralité, nous allons le voir, ne cesse même de percer la toile métadiscursive. Notre lecture d'Ernaux prendra donc pour jalons ces saillies, des accrocs qui, reliés entre eux comme dans les "dessins cachés" pour enfants, feront peut-être apparaître un sens nouveau [...]" (204). In a similar manner Marie-France Savéan likens a passage in *Une femme* to another type of optical illusion, a gestalt image: "Mais l'apparente simplicité du récit se trouble. Comme dans ces dessins jouant sur les illusions d'optique dans lesquels on voit tantôt un visage de jeune femme tournée vers la gauche, tantôt un profil de femme âgée tournée vers la droite, une seconde et même une troisième image se superposent à la première, s'imposant et s'effaçant tour à tour [...]" (11-12). These two critics have intuitively sensed this recurring phenomenon in Ernaux's writing. More evidence of the extent to which Ernaux creates these effects can be seen in *Une femme* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*. Furthermore, games of visual perception show up in one of Ernaux's more recent works, *L'Usage de la photo* (2005). The types of effects that can be found are analogous to many different types of optical illusions such as gestalt images, anamorphoses, and sight gags.

In *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, a journal Ernaux maintained over a period of two and a half years recording periodic visits to her mother in a nursing home, and her mother's progressive decline from Alzheimer's, Ernaux records a personal experience she herself has of perceiving an optical illusion. While visiting in July of 1984, she is taken aback by a piece of junk mail her mother had received, a sweepstakes announcement informing her that she may "already be a winner." The letter is

accompanied by a “fun” optical illusion. This particular image is an example of anamorphosis: an image that can only be perceived by viewing it from a skewed angle or from a certain distance:

Au courrier, cette semaine, il y avait une lettre pour ma mère. *France Million*, les nouvelles de la Chance. À côté d’une photo d’Anne-Marie Peysson, tout sourire, était écrit : « Est-ce à Mme Blanche Duchesne [the name of the narrator’s mother] qu’Anne-Marie Peysson va remettre le chèque de 25 millions de centimes ? » Un fac-similé du chèque au nom de ma mère figurait en bas et aussi : « Unique au monde, le portrait électronique de Mme Blanche Duchesne », portrait qui « prend du relief lorsqu’on l’observe à un mètre de distance ». À un mètre, on distinguait les contours d’un visage jeune, à la bouche pulpeuse. Le nom de ma mère était répété une centaine de fois, pour l’assurer qu’elle était choisie, qu’elle allait gagner si elle répondait avant le 5 octobre. Cons. Attraper A.-M. Peysson par la peau du cou et la traîner au ‘long séjour’ de l’hôpital de Pontoise. (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 41-42)

Ernaux’s perception of the youthful woman, advertised as her mother’s portrait, angers her, but it is not initially apparent why it provokes such a strong emotional response. Ernaux typically writes in a manner that requires the reader to make sense of her seemingly offhand remarks. Not only is the image of the attractive young woman in the electronic portrait an inaccurate representation of her mother, it is the reverse image of her mother. The disease of Alzheimer’s had undoubtedly brought about acute physical changes to her mother’s body, and therefore the youthful face in the anamorphic image presented an opposite portrait of her actual physical state at that moment in her life. The sweepstakes letter’s insincere personal tone and its unwitting insensitivity to her mother’s actual state of health infuriate Ernaux.

At a later time in the journal, Ernaux expresses hostility towards another representation of women who do not resemble her mother. This time it is in a play by Roussin being shown on television: “En voyant *Les œufs de l’autruche* de Roussin, à la télé, je retrouvais toutes les femmes haïes, images inversées de ma mère, avec leur corps et air fragiles, leur soie et leurs perles, leur minauderie” (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 79-80). Like the woman in the sweepstakes letter, the women of Roussin’s play are reverse images of her mother. The elegant women in the play remind Ernaux of what her mother endeavored to become, but never entirely mastered, in spite of a lifelong effort to refine her looks, tastes, and manners. In *Une femme* Ernaux describes the conscious efforts her mother had to make, even in her later years, to give the appearance of being middle-class: “Il ne lui échappait plus aucun gros mot, elle s’efforçait de manipuler « doucement » les choses, bref, se « surveillant », rognant d’elle-même sa violence. Fière, même, de conquérir sur le tard ce savoir inculqué dès la jeunesse aux femmes

bourgeoises de sa génération, la tenue parfaite d'un « intérieur »" (*Une femme* 79-80). But passing for middle-class is always an affectation, and certain gestures and words occasionally betray class origins. In photographs of her mother, the detail that Ernaux notices is her mother's large hands. "Ce sont les mêmes mains larges et repliées que sur sa photo de jeune mariée" (*Une femme* 80). Portraits of her mother do not match the delicate-boned women portrayed in Roussin's play.

Further irritation comes from the fact that Ernaux's upper-class mother-in-law, whom Ernaux often contrasts with her own mother, does resemble the women of Roussin's play: "La mère de mon mari, le même âge que la mienne, avait un corps resté mince, un visage lisse, des mains soignées. [...] (type de femmes que l'on voit dans les pièces de boulevard à la télévision, la cinquantaine, rang de perles sur une blouse de soie, « délicieusement naïves »)" (*Une femme* 70-71). Ernaux and her mother were both sensitive to the fact that the mother-in-law benefitted from a superior social status. Ernaux highlights this inequality through the words of her mother: "Jalousie toujours vivace vis-à-vis de ma belle-mère: 'Si ç'avait été la mère de Raymond (elle veut sans doute dire Philippe, mon mari) on lui aurait fait une petite place'" (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 31). Ernaux's mother senses that had the mother-in-law found herself in similar circumstances, she probably would have been invited to come live with Ernaux's family instead of being placed in a nursing home.

As hinted at by Carole Allamand, another type of optical illusion that Ernaux's flat style produces is analogous to that of a gestalt image such as the popular old woman-young woman picture in which the profile of a woman's face represents alternately an old woman's mouth and a young woman's neck depending on how the viewer conceptualizes the shared contours of the image. But unlike this well-known and easily recognized gestalt image, each of the two images of Ernaux's gestalt-like word images interacts with its complement in ways that enhance their separate and combined meanings—as the term *gestalt* implies. The fleeting, back-and-forth phenomena common to the perception of a gestalt image is present here in Ernaux's frank avowal of the ambivalent feelings she has about her mother's strictness as a parent:

En écrivant, je vois tantôt la « bonne » mère, tantôt la « mauvaise ». Pour échapper à ce balancement venu du plus loin de l'enfance, j'essaie de décrire et d'expliquer comme s'il s'agissait d'une autre mère et d'une fille qui ne serait pas moi. Ainsi, j'écris de la manière la plus neutre possible, mais certaines expressions (« s'il t'arrive un malheur ! ») ne parviennent pas à l'être pour moi, comme le seraient d'autres, abstraites, (« refus du corps et de la sexualité ») par exemple. Au moment où je me les rappelle, j'ai la même sensation de découragement qu'à seize ans, et, furtivement, je confonds la femme qui a le plus marqué ma vie avec ces mères africaines serrant les bras de leur petite fille derrière son dos, pendant que la matrone exciseuse coupe le clitoris. (*Une femme* 62)

Ernaux uses the words “balancement,” “fugitivement,” and “je confonds,” all of which are indicative of the sensations produced in the perception of a gestalt image. Pierre-Louis Fort has commented specifically on the “oscillation” and “balancement” present in this and other ambivalent remarks that Ernaux makes about her mother in his edition of *Une femme*: “Le balancement entre les deux adjectifs mis entre guillemets (pour pallier l’insuffisance de la qualification) montre l’oscillation de l’image de la mère dans le souvenir. L’écriture convoque des images fortes et l’image de la mère revient spontanément de façon dichotomique. Le livre pose ainsi la question de la remémoration” (121). But neither Savéan nor Fort connect Ernaux’s oscillating representations of her mother to other instances of the effect of optical games in her writing.

Complex feelings toward her mother are apparent in another significant incident in which Ernaux records a casual real-life experience of perceiving her as a gestalt-like image. She has this experience while visiting her in the nursing home: “Elle portait aujourd’hui une robe de chambre à fleurs, le tissu était plein de poils tirés par l’usure. Fugitivement, ma mère m’a paru couverte d’un pelage de bête” (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 88). For a moment, it appears to Ernaux that the floral nightgown has been replaced with animal fur. She is undoubtedly shocked to see what appears to be the surreal transmogrification of her mother’s body into that of an animal. This sudden impression is due in part to the fact that the frayed and protruding threads of her mother’s gown resemble the fur of an animal’s coat. But Ernaux also seems to be predisposed to perceive her in this way. Ernaux’s cognitive perspective has no doubt been altered by the trauma of dealing with her mother’s deteriorating physical and mental health. In *Une femme* she gives this telling description of her worsening condition: “Elle n’avait plus honte de rien, porter une couche pour l’urine, manger voracement avec ses doigts” (*Une femme* 98). Ernaux neither suppresses nor glosses over the realistic circumstances of her condition, as one might be tempted to do. As Pierre Louis-Fort points out, the oscillation of seemingly opposite representations of her mother articulates the difficulty of writing about her life. Ernaux struggles with the challenge of capturing and portraying a stable image. Which woman was she? The proud, energetic wife and mother who ran the family business, or the hospital patient who was no longer able to feed and care for herself, and whose manner had become animal-like? The analogy of a gestalt image captures the ambivalent feelings affecting Ernaux’s project of writing about her mother. By recreating the effects of gestalt images, Ernaux is able to bring together conflicting images of the most important woman in her life. The analogy of morphing images aptly represents her effort to connect, in one cohesive narrative, the seemingly disparate portraits of who her mother was as a person: “Pourtant, je sais que je ne peux pas vivre sans unir par l’écriture la femme démente qu’elle est devenue, à celle forte et lumineuse qu’elle avait été” (*Une femme* 89).

### Transfiguration of Excrement

In another instance it is clear that Ernaux's frame of mind predisposes her to misinterpret certain visual clues. Her mistake in visual perception resonates with personal and literary significance. The experience of perceiving this gestalt-like image took place, again, while visiting her mother in the nursing home. Checking to make sure her mother still had something in her bedside table to snack on, Ernaux opened the drawer expecting to see cookies, but found something else instead: "Le pire, imprévisible. J'ai ouvert le tiroir de sa table de nuit pour vérifier s'il lui restait des biscuits. J'ai cru voir un gâteau: je l'ai pris. C'était un étron. [...] Un épisode de mon enfance m'est revenu, j'avais caché un excrément dans le buffet de la chambre par paresse de descendre aux cabinets de la cour" (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 42-43). It is natural that what she is expecting to find (cookies) momentarily causes her to see a small cake instead of feces (Ernaux actually uses the colloquial, and more humorous term "étron"). There are, unfortunately, certain similarities of color and texture between feces and cake that may cause the confusion of one for the other. These shared characteristics are similar to the shared contours of a gestalt image. Ernaux is of course shocked to discover that what she has picked up is not a small cake. However, just as with the Proustian experience of the *petite madeleine*, a scene from her childhood suddenly returns to her consciousness. It is certain that the irony of the event is not lost on Ernaux, the well-read *agrégée de lettres*: for her, long-forgotten childhood memories are recaptured not from a fragrant tea-soaked cake, but its digested opposite, its inversed image. Furthermore, this experience of encountering excrement in her mother's night table is yet another reminder to Ernaux of the omnipresence of urine and feces in the nursing home – a detail that she often mentions in the journal. The feces in the drawer of her mother's night table is a *visceral* reminder, in its most literal sense, of her family's place in society. Ernaux points out this unglamorous fact in *Les Années*: "On vivait dans la proximité de la merde. Elle faisait rire" (39).

While the incident of mistaking feces for cake has its tragicomic side, the proximity of Ernaux's family and her social class to excrement was not always a laughing matter. This is apparent in Ernaux's description of their home located in the sector called "La Vallée" that was built around the textile factory where her parents managed their first small grocery store. Ernaux notes the system of open sewage common to all of the homes in the neighborhood: "[...] une minuscule courette avec un cabinet qui se déversait directement dans la rivière" (*La Place* 40). But after heavy rains, the effluent from the community's outdoor plumbing didn't always stay in the river: "Aux fortes pluies, la rivière inondait la maison" (*La Place* 44). The family later left La Vallée because Ernaux, who was five years old at the time, had developed a chronic cough. Having lost their first daughter to diphtheria before Ernaux was born, her parents did not want to lose their second daughter, and only child, to the disease. Ernaux describes La Vallée in these words: "Encore aujourd'hui, dire la Vallée d'avant-guerre, c'est tout dire, la plus forte concentration d'alcooliques et de filles mères,

l'humidité ruisselant des murs et les nourrissons morts de diarrhée verte en deux heures" (*Une femme* 39-40). Indeed, living in such conditions had mortal consequences for children born during the difficult years leading up to and during the Second World War, many of whom did not survive childhood due to the unsanitary conditions of La Vallée, and other similarly impoverished communities throughout Europe.

For the attentive reader, certain details from the passage just quoted will resonate when Ernaux describes the only dream she can clearly recall during the ten months she takes to write *Une femme*. Considered side by side, these two passages bear a curious resemblance to one another. The result is what one might liken to the old woman / young woman gestalt image that changes when the shared contours are conceptualized differently. One part of this word-image is contained in the description of La Vallée: "[...] filles mères, l'humidité ruisselant des murs et les nourrissons morts de diarrhée verte en deux heures" (*Une femme* 40). The second word-image is contained in the description of the dream:

Pendant les dix mois où j'ai écrit, je rêvais d'elle presque toutes les nuits. Une fois, j'étais couchée au milieu d'une rivière, entre deux eaux. De mon ventre, de mon sexe à nouveau lisse comme celui d'une petite fille partaient des plantes en filaments, qui flottaient, molles. Ce n'était pas seulement mon sexe, c'était aussi celui de ma mère. (*Une femme* 104)

Several pictorial aspects of the description of the dream resemble the narrator's earlier account of the family's situation in La Vallée. One of the characteristics common to these two passages is the presence of water: "l'humidité ruisselant des murs," and "au milieu d'une rivière, entre deux eaux." Another perhaps more striking similarity is the flowing of green substances from the body. In the description of La Vallée the diarrhea is green, in the dream the plants are green. Ernaux does not describe the latter as green, but one can assume that, being plants, they are indeed green. A third similarity is the word *fille mère*, which refers to the young unwed mothers in the description of La Vallée. The compound noun *fille mère* also evokes the image in the dream of the mother and daughter who are one person – a sort of mother-daughter body. These three visually similar elements link the two descriptions.

The shared contours (streaming water, the color green, and the child-mother) of these two different word-images, when considered side-by-side, are like a gestalt image. Furthermore, these two descriptions illustrate the qualitative change in Ernaux's and her mother's socio-economic reality. The dream image portrays a rejuvenated mother and daughter who simultaneously occupy the body of a healthy prepubescent girl who has made it through the vulnerable period of childhood, who has not succumbed to any of the potentially fatal diseases or statistical probabilities associated with having to live in

the impoverished conditions of the working-class sector of La Vallée. Although Ernaux's sister died of diphtheria,<sup>2</sup> the parents were able to save their second daughter, Ernaux herself, from a similar fate by moving to a different city. The morbid image of the infant with green diarrhea in La Vallée morphs into the more optimistic and healthy image in the dream at the end of the work of a prepubescent girl with plants growing from her viscera. In real life Ernaux's mother transformed the family's social reality through years of hard work and by imitating the manners and tastes of the middle class: "[Mon père] l'a suivie, elle était la volonté sociale du couple" (*Une femme* 39). Ernaux however does not tell her mother's life story by imitating bourgeois modes of literary discourse, which is usually marked by the use of metaphor and other poetic rhetorical figures. Nor does she shun the unglamorous details of her family's social reality to avoid offending bourgeois codes of what subjects are, and are not, appropriate for *literature*. Instead she artfully represents her mother's lifework by employing a novel form of transfiguration that is very metaphorical, but that circumvents traditional literary style.

### A Portrait of the Artists

Similar effects of optical illusion are to be found in *L'Usage de la photo*, which was written nearly two decades after *Une femme* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*. Like most of Ernaux's works, *L'Usage de la photo* defies genre classification. As Akane Kawakami aptly points out, Ernaux's and Marc Marie's book can be read in many ways: "as an experimental work featuring multiple media and authors; as an autobiographical, or perhaps autoethnological chronicle; as a meditation on the relationship between photography and writing; or as a cancer narrative, specifically focused on breast cancer from a feminist perspective" (451). To this I would add that it can also be read as a reflection on pleasure. Ernaux and her lover at that time, Marc Marie, undertook their writing project as a way of holding on to, and thereby extending, their moments of shared intimacy: "comme si ce que nous avons pensé jusque-là être suffisant pour garder la trace de nos moments amoureux, les photos, ne l'était pas, qu'il faille encore quelque chose de plus, de l'écriture" (12). But erotic pleasure is not the only form of pleasure that the work explores.

Another form comes in part from the manner in which Ernaux and Marie agreed to structure the work. Together they decided that they would write about a selection of snapshots as they collected them over the period of their relationship with the understanding that they not show the other what they had written until they had reached the end of the project. Each of the fourteen pictures depicts the couple's clothing left scattered pell-mell in one room or another of Ernaux's home – remnants, proof as it were, of having lived a moment of passion, in short, of having lived. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Ernaux explains the circumstances of her sister's death in *Une femme*: "En 1938, elle est morte de la diphtérie trois jours avant Pâques. Ils ne voulaient qu'un seul enfant pour qu'il soit plus heureux" (42).

text that accompanies each photograph Ernaux and Marie almost never evoke specific details of their sexual relations; instead each photograph serves as a new starting point for procreation. In this manner their cooperative project represents another type of intercourse that is its own form of gratification. Furthermore, Ernaux uses an effect of optical illusion to superimpose one form of pleasure over the other.

Ernaux creates this effect at the very beginning of the work in the introductory remarks that she alone writes. In this preface Ernaux describes a photograph that is *not* part of the collection of fourteen pictures that the couple had chosen for their joint writing project. She explains that this photograph in particular represents a sort of substitute for pleasure because the couple did not have time to make love that morning: “J’ai pris cette photo le 11 février, après un déjeuner rapide. [...] Je devais prendre le RER pour aller à Paris, nous n’avions pas eu le temps de faire l’amour. La photo c’était quelque chose à la place” (15). She describes it in words only because, one might assume, of its frank and graphic nature – it is a picture of her lover’s erection: “Je peux la décrire, je ne pourrais pas l’exposer aux regards” (15). But Ernaux’s description conceals nothing – on the contrary it is unflinchingly graphic:

Sur la photo, on ne voit de M., debout, que la partie du corps comprise entre le bas de son pull gris, à larges côtes torsadées, tombant au ras de la toison rousse, et le milieu des cuisses sur lesquelles est baissé son slip, un boxer noir avec la marque Dim en grosses lettres blanches. Le sexe de profil est en érection. La lumière du flash éclaire les veines et fait briller une goutte de sperme au bout du gland, comme une perle. L’ombre du sexe dressé se projette sur les livres de la bibliothèque qui occupe toute la partie droite de la photo. On peut lire les noms d’auteurs et les titres écrits en gros caractères : Lévi-Strauss, Martin Walser, *Cassandre, L’âge des extrêmes*. Un trou est repérable au bas du pull. (15)

She goes on to compare her photograph to Gustave Courbet’s painting, *The Origin of the World* (1866): “Je m’aperçois qu’elle est, d’une certaine façon, le pendant du tableau de Courbet, *L’origine du monde*, dont je n’ai longtemps connu que la photographie dans une revue” (15-16). Ernaux likens Courbet’s work of art to this photograph, calling the latter its “pendant,” or counterpart, to Courbet’s image. The similarities between the two are obvious. Courbet’s painting depicts in frank detail a nude woman whose genitals are the focus of the picture, but whose head, arms, and legs are obscured by the artist’s choice of perspective. Courbet’s and Ernaux’s portraits are linked not only by their shared subject matter, but also by similar modes of representation. The raw realism of Courbet’s painting is analogous to the clinical description Ernaux gives of her model’s body, and to her prose style in general.

But it is not solely for these reasons that Ernaux likens her photograph to Courbet’s painting. Within this word-photograph Ernaux has created effects of optical

illusion similar to those found in *Une femme* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*. At this juncture it is pertinent to note that Courbet's *L'origine du monde* was also associated with a sort of optical illusion that concealed the actual theme of the painting from view. In 1955 Lacan, the owner of *L'origine du monde* at that time, commissioned André Masson to paint a cover for the painting that would cleverly hide its subject matter. When viewed separately for the first time, Masson's cover appears to be a sort of abstract landscape. But when one sees Masson's painting placed on top of Courbet's, it becomes obvious that the bushes and gently sloping hills share the contours of the model's anatomy below. Not only does Masson's abstract landscape camouflage the nude, it is a gestalt image of Courbet's painting. Given the previous discussion of the effects of optical illusion in *Une femme* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, Ernaux's assertion that her photograph and Courbet's painting are a pair suggests that Ernaux's photograph might also have its own clever cover that recreates an effect of optical illusion. Like Masson with his landscape, Ernaux has veiled our viewing of the photograph with her own art; a camouflage of words both conceals and exposes the word-picture. Behind the graphic description of her model's body Ernaux inserts effects of optical illusion.

One of the factors that might initially interfere with a reader's ability to perceive these effects is its shocking subject matter. Ernaux is quite conscious of this for she tells us that the image is analogous to a scene she witnessed in Rome the summer she was twenty-three. While sitting in her train compartment in the Termini train station she was suddenly exposed to a startling sight: "Juste en face de moi, dans le train arrêté de l'autre côté du quai, un sexe érigé sorti du pantalon était violemment branlé par la main d'un homme dissimulé jusqu'à la taille par le store, qu'il avait à moitié baissé, d'un compartiment de première" (16). In addition to the obvious visual similarities another link between the two images might be similar motives. One's natural reflex is to look away when confronted with an exhibitionist. Just as the flasher seeks to aggressively shock and awe his unsuspecting victim, so too does Ernaux with her written description of the photograph.

But if one dares to "stare," it becomes apparent that the word-photograph describing her lover's pose, and the details in the room surrounding it, can be interpreted as a sort of burlesque sight gag in which the humor is communicated visually, not verbally. As such, in order to perceive the effects of visual games in this photograph, the reader must develop it in the darkroom of the mind's eye. The word-photograph might be likened to a portrait of the artist; Marc Marie is one of the authors of *L'Usage de la photo*, but instead of the author's face, we "see" a synecdochic stand-in calling to mind the type of photograph one often sees of a writer posing in front of an edifice of books which mutely assures the viewer of the writer's erudition and credentials. Ernaux's word-picture seems to be poking fun, not at Marc Marie, but at this sort of photograph, and at the same time the dominant phallogocentric – phallus in the center – perspective. Elizabeth Richardson Viti has also noted the use of synecdoche with regard to Ernaux's depiction of Marc Marie: "[...] the reduction of

Marc Marie in the text to a simple M. necessarily brings to mind the abbreviation for Monsieur, subtly supporting the notion that all men are the same and that a man, any man, will do” (85).

This word-portrait produces multiple effects of visual playfulness. If the reader “looks past” the eye-catcher in the foreground, and considers the significance of the books in the background, a second image comes forth – another form of pleasure, that of reading and writing represented by the presence of books. Further underscoring this interpretation is the shadow of her lover’s erection that falls on the books, metaphorically associating the two forms of pleasure. The visible letters “Dim” on Marc Marie’s underwear echo the other words that can be made out on the spines of books. Moreover, the heteroclit collection of authors and titles metonymically hints at the portrait of another artist, Ernaux herself. The genres of sociology, history, biography, and political analysis on her bookshelves metatextually allude to Ernaux’s approach to writing in general, which is itself a combination of textual modes. She describes writing *Une femme* in this manner: “Ce que j’espère écrire de plus juste se situe sans doute à la jointure du familial et du social, du mythe et de l’histoire. [...] Mais je souhaite rester, d’une certaine façon, au-dessous de la littérature” (*Une femme* 23).

The inaugural word-photograph in *L’Usage de la photo* hints at a subversive background that has the potential to disrupt and redirect the focal point of the artist’s portrait. The mock traditional literary figure at center stage is upstaged by Ernaux’s own brand of literature. Although her graphic description of the word-photograph does not conceal the nude from the reader’s ability to “see” it, as does Masson’s cover for Courbet’s painting, it is a sort of camouflage and it does contain effects of optical games that mask a major theme of the work – writing, and retaliating through writing, are their own forms of pleasure.

Ernaux eschews a traditional literary style as a means of striking back at the dominant class -- the gatekeepers of cultural capital. She does this because she herself has felt the violence of prejudice and marginalization exerted by its control. In a telling footnote in *Une femme*, Ernaux cites an authority’s “evidence” of her social class’s intellectual inferiority in an article from the most respected national newspaper in France, *Le Monde*. The quote suggests that any attempts to educate the young from her (and her mother’s) region and class are futile:

Dans *Le Monde* du 17 juin 1986, on lit à propos de la région de ma mère, la Haute-Normandie : « un retard de la scolarisation qui n’a jamais été comblé, malgré des améliorations, continue de produire ses effets (...). Chaque année, 7 000 jeunes sortent du système scolaire sans formation. Issus des “classes de relégation”, ils ne peuvent accéder à des stages de qualification. La moitié d’entre eux, selon un pédagogue, ne “savent pas lire deux pages conçues pour eux”. » (30)

One might hypothesize that Ernaux's irritated reactions to the above quoted newspaper report, Roussin's representation of the simpering women in his play ("images inversées de ma mère"), the "electronic portrait" of her mother in the sweepstakes letter, phallogocentric attitudes towards women's writing, in short a lifetime of similar small humiliations (if there is such a thing as a *small* humiliation) inspire Ernaux to produce her own texts whose deeper meanings potentially elude the "cultivated" reader. The journal entry recording Ernaux's anger in reaction to the clever image that accompanies the sweepstakes letter might be a metatextual comment obliquely alerting us to its significance.<sup>3</sup> It is a signpost to similar techniques of the artful placement of hidden word-images that Ernaux herself will exploit in her texts as a means of turning the tables on those who are usually in the position of tut-tutting over the ignorance of the uncultivated lower classes, or making dismissive assessments of women's writing on the basis that such intimate, "feminine" themes are not literary. Ernaux's "écriture plate" is a technique of rejecting complicity with the cultivated reader<sup>4</sup> of the dominant class. As Cathy Jellenik explains: "In order to validate her work in the eyes of the working-class readers who might disdain it, Ernaux writes and rewrites texts that put into play an increasingly austere, anti-mannerist aesthetic, thereby rejecting a more traditionally literary, 'bourgeois,' style" (74). Ernaux's effects of optical illusion are not only a means of siding with her own class origins, but also a covert attack on, and challenge to, the representatives of pedagogical and literary authority (teacher, journalist, national newspaper, literary critic) she has quoted to make the point that many members of the matriculated elite might themselves have difficulty decoding stylistically simple texts that have been "conçus pour eux". For readers who are able to appreciate Ernaux's effects of optical illusion, a "magic eye image" of complex and artfully produced writing will emerge from the nondescript surface of her flat prose.

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<sup>3</sup> The argument that I make in this section is similar to Warren Motte's argument about Ernaux's use of understatement not only as characteristic of her flat style, but also as a way of including metatextual commentary. Referring to a passage in *La place* in which Ernaux describes the events after her father's death, Motte says: "Within that description she carefully emblazons the very rhetorical technique that she will rely on throughout the text: 'There was an air of simplicity about the whole scene, no crying or shouting, just my mother's red eyes and the frozen rictus on her face. Our movements were calm and orderly, accompanied by simple words' (14/4). In addition to the role in the narrative economy of her father's story, the passage demands to be read as a commentary on the manner in which that story is *told*: Ernaux's narration too will unfold very simply, with simple words" (*Small Worlds* 56).

<sup>4</sup> Ernaux makes reference to "the cultivated reader" in *L'écriture comme un couteau*: "La seule écriture que je sentais « juste » était celle d'une distance objectivante, sans affects exprimés, sans aucune complicité avec le lecteur cultivé (complicité qui n'est pas tout à fait absente de mes premiers textes)" (*L'écriture comme un couteau* 34). Ernaux also makes a hostile reference to "cultivated readers" in *Se perdre* while attending a conference in Sweden: "Hier pour la première fois, envie d'insulter les gens venus là, au Centre culturel, pour m'écouter. Leur dire: « Qu'est-ce que vous attendez ? Que venez-vous faire ici ? la messe culturelle ? Bande de cons, y a rien à voir et je n'écris pas pour vous, vieilles mémés cultivées de Suède. »" (122-23).

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