

Title:

Perspective and Sexual Politics in *Mémoire de fille*

Abstract:

It is striking how often the first-person memories in Annie Ernaux's 2016 work of life-writing are rendered from a third-person perspective. Visual depictions like this one of the author's younger self are shown to us as if from an outside observer, as if Ernaux-narrator were present in the scene separately from her younger self. It is a bystander's viewpoint of the events recounted. These events include sexual exploitation and public shaming for falling foul of the era's sexual double standards, and, in the aftermath of this, an identity crisis and an eating disorder. How does her complex interplay of empathy and distance with regard to her younger self affect the social and political themes in the work, and the ethical stance of the text towards them? And how is the reader implicated by the perspective through which Ernaux has us view her teenage self of 1958?

Key words:

Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, *A Girl's Story*, *La Honte*, perspective, shame, sexual politics

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Perspective and Sexual Politics in *Mémoire de fille*

This is an essay on perspective in its most literal sense: the spatial position in which you stand and from which you look out. It explores the use of visual perspective in *Mémoire de fille* (2016) and its relation to narrative perspective to uncover the role perspective plays in the representation of the protagonist and her social environment. In particular, we will see how point of view in the book illuminates the sexual politics of the community of young people working at the *colonie de vacances* in late 50s France, which forms the setting of the story. These sexual politics are characterized by the predatory male attention, objectification, sexual exploitation and assault that Ernaux depicts in the first part of the narrative, and subsequently by the sexist double standards examined in the later sections, as the teenage Ernaux is publicly shamed and ostracised by her fellow *moniteurs*, male and female alike, for the transgression of perceived promiscuity. I argue that Ernaux's focalization of the narrative and visual presentation creates a 'bystander perspective' with significant implications for how these sexual politics are represented by Ernaux and received by the reader.

Ernaux's 2016 work is focused on the summer of 1958, the summer of her 18th birthday, when she experiences a first taste of freedom from the family home working at a holiday camp in Normandy and has her first sexual experience with a slightly older co-worker, for which she is shamed by her peers. The book then continues to explore the aftermath of these events as Ernaux develops an eating disorder while studying away from home at a Rouen lycée, and spends the spring and summer of 1960 as an au-pair in north London. An unusual visual perspective makes itself apparent from the very start of the 1958 narrative:

Même sans photo, je la vois, Annie Duchesne, quand elle débarque à S du train de Rouen en début d'après-midi, le 14 août. Ses cheveux sont tirés en un chignon vertical à l'arrière de la tête. Elle porte ses lunettes de myope qui lui rapetissent les yeux mais sans lesquelles elle se meut dans le brouillard. Elle est vêtue d'un trois-quarts marine – son manteau en loden beige d'il y a deux ans coupé et teint – d'une jupe droite en tweed épais – retailée aussi dans une autre – d'un pull marin à rayures. À la main une valise grise – neuve il y a six ans pour un voyage à Lourdes avec son père et qui n'a jamais resservi depuis, et un sac en plastique bleu et blanc en forme de seau, acheté la semaine précédente sur le marché d'Yvetot. (Ernaux 2016: 24)

The perspective here is third-person. First of all, grammatically so. The first-person *je* is reserved for the narrating voice of the older Ernaux, and the younger Annie Duchesne referred to as *elle*. In terms of visual perspective, the situation is more complex. It is not a completely external perspective. We know what it's like to see through Annie Duchesne's eyes when she's not wearing her glasses and we are aware of the backstory of her clothes and suitcase. These latter details, though, exist in a vague in-between that is hard to attach definitively to the memory of the adult narrator or the interiority of the teenager. In the continuation of the passage we do learn at least one detail that the teenage protagonist is feeling in the moment:

Il y a du soleil. Elle a trop chaud dans son trois-quarts en loden, son épaisse jupe d'hiver. Je vois une provinciale de classe moyenne, grande et robuste, d'apparence

studieuse, habillée en « fait main » dans des tissus solides et cossus. (Ernaux 2016: 24-25)

But aside from this one touch, which itself stems as much from the description of her clothing as from accessing her state of mind, we have a largely outside view of Ernaux's teenage self, and very literally so. We take the position of an imaginary observer standing on the platform, as if behind the camera that wasn't there to take the non-existent snapshot that Ernaux is describing to us. We also look with a bystander's judgment, sizing up Annie Duchesne's body and clothing to make a stranger's judgment on her class, wealth, origins, and personality. Her mother is similarly viewed:

À côté je vois la silhouette plus petite, carrée, d'une femme dans la cinquantaine, qui « présente bien », tailleur, cheveux permanentés roux, un port de tête autoritaire. Je vois ma mère (Ernaux 2016: 25).

Here again, the repeated 'je vois' places the narrator's viewpoint, and therefore our own, not in the head of her younger self standing next to her mother, but separate from both of them, standing before them to look the pair in the face.

Third-person perspectives (in the literary sense) are uncommon in life-writing, but by no means unheard-of. They can be used to suggest a dissociation between the narrating self in the present and the narrated former self. Salman Rushdie, for instance, uses the third person to narrate his post-*fatwa* life in hiding under an assumed name in *Joseph Anton* (2012). Dissociation is of particular relevance to memoirs of youth and childhood, where a long stretch of time and a gap of development and maturity lead to a sense on the part of

the writer that their younger protagonist is not, or not entirely, their own self. Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984) is perhaps the best-known example in French literature, sliding between first and third person in reference to its teenage protagonist as the narrator moves between identifying and distancing herself.¹ The critic Marianne Braux (2020: 261) describes the narrative perspective of *Mémoire de fille* in precisely these terms of dissociation, declaring that Ernaux's book employs 'un mode d'énonciation qui contrevient à la norme énonciative du récit autobiographique en dissociant la narratrice de son propre personnage à travers l'emploi quasi-systématique des pronoms je et elle'.

We have also seen perspectival distancing in Ernaux's work before now, including in *Les Années* (2008), where a first-person plural encompassing Ernaux and the various social groups she has belonged to alternates with passages in the third person which develop out of descriptions of photographic images of Ernaux through the decades. *La Honte* (1997) is perhaps the closest cousin to *Mémoire de fille* in Ernaux's earlier work. It too looks back over decades to a traumatic experience, in this case witnessing her father assault her mother in 1952. Like *Mémoire de fille*, the abiding concern is a sense of estrangement from the young person she was: 'La femme que je suis en quatre-vingt-quinze est incapable de se replacer dans la fille de cinquante-deux' (Ernaux 1997: 37), although in *La Honte*, the first person is used throughout, for both narrator and twelve-year-old protagonist. Nevertheless, we see a similar distancing: Ernaux hesitates to identify her present self with her past self in a photograph: 'Certitude que "c'est moi", impossibilité de me reconnaître, "ce n'est pas moi"' (Ernaux 1997: 26), and closes the final page by settling at last on the third person in a return to that same photograph: 'Je n'ai plus rien de commun avec la fille de la photo, sauf cette scène du dimanche de juin qu'elle porte dans la tête et qui m'a fait écrire ce livre' (Ernaux 1997: 141).

In *Mémoire de fille* Ernaux explicitly raises the question of narrative perspective as she discusses the genesis of the project. Akane Kawakami suggests that the book is 'self-consciously [...] about the act of remembering as much as about the events remembered' (2019: 253), perhaps more so than any of Ernaux's previous work. Ernaux mentions an earlier, failed attempt a decade earlier to write the events of that summer, abandoned after fifty pages as 'je voyais bien que ces pages d'inventaire devraient passer dans un autre état, mais je ne savais pas lequel' (2016: 18). A quoted line shows that the abandoned version of the story was written in the first person. Looking at an ID photo of herself from that time, Ernaux now asks: 'Est-ce qu'elle est moi, cette fille? Suis-je elle?' (2016: 20). To be her, Ernaux writes, she would need to be able to solve physics problems, be in favour of French Algeria, be called Annie Duchesne, and other characteristics she has long since ceased to share. Conclusion: 'La fille de la photo n'est pas moi mais elle n'est pas une fiction' (2016: 21). As she chooses 'elle' over 'je' she declares the choice not more right but more adventurous. Dissociating her present self from her past self 'pour aller le plus loin possible dans l'exposition des faits et des actes. Et le plus cruellement possible – à la manière de ceux qu'on entend derrière une porte parler de soi en disant « elle » ou « il » et à ce moment-là on a l'impression de mourir' (2016: 23). The imagery captures the complexity and ambivalence of the narrative choice. Ernaux is going to write about her younger self *as if* this were a person with whom she had no connection. But who is experiencing the cruelty? It must at least partly be the older narrator, since the girl in the past hears nothing behind the door and feels no cruelty towards herself. And this connection is acknowledged on the same page, where Ernaux writes that her 18-year-old self remains 'une présence cachée, irréductible en moi' (2016: 23).

The narrative itself follows the train-station arrival scene with a consistent external viewpoint in its visual presentation throughout the first half of the book, the half set in the *colonie de vacances* where Ernaux has her first sexual experiences.

‘Je la vois comme je l’ai vue ensuite des dizaines de fois, descendant avec sa coturne les volées de marches, en jean, un pull marin sans manches, des sandales blanches à lanières. Elle a enlevé ses lunettes et défait son chignon, ses cheveux longs flottent dans son dos’ (2016: 44)

As in the arrival scene, the recurring phrase ‘je la vois’ separates narrator from protagonist, as if the ghost of the twenty-first century Ernaux were present at the scene in 1958, observing her younger self from the sidelines. As with the opening scene, it is not an absolute estrangement. Ernaux will occasionally slip into a first person that elides their differences, such as when she comments in her original self-presentation that it is ‘impossible de dire si j’avais encore les intonations traînantes des Normands’ (2016: 25) in her teenage speaking patterns. And within third-person structures too, the emphasis is sometimes on connection rather than dissociation, as when she writes of a first moment of rejection:

En ce dimanche gris de novembre 2014, je regarde donc la fille qui a été moi regardant lui tourner le dos, devant tous, l’homme avec qui elle a été nue pour la première fois, qui a joui d’elle toute la nuit. Il n’y a pas de pensée en elle. Elle n’est que mémoire de leurs deux corps, de leurs gestes, de ce qui a été accompli – qu’elle

l'ait voulu ou non. Elle est dans l'affolement de la perte, dans l'injustifiable de l'abandon.' (2016: 55).

Like Duras in *L'Amant*, Ernaux slips between moments where she is able to access or reconstruct the interiority of her former self, as in the above quotation, and others where the teenager's inner life is closed to her, and Annie Duchesne appears as if a different person from the narrator, as in this moment of intense humiliation where she is openly laughed at for vainly awaiting her lover's return:

À partir d'ici je ne pénètre plus la pensée de la fille de S, je ne peux que décrire ses gestes, ses actes, consigner les paroles, celles des autres et plus rarement les siennes (2016: 53).

In comparing the representation of the *colonie de vacances* in *Mémoire de fille* with the passage in *Les Années* (2012: 72-73) which deals with the same experience, Lyn Thomas notes a shared recourse to the third person, but a different quality of dissociation. Where the *on* of *Les Années* aims at a 'decentring of the self' (Thomas 2021: 172) in the interest of writing collective history rather than individual experience, the *elle* of *Mémoire de fille* is set against the prominent *je* of the writing self, which is absent from *Les Années*. Rather than absenting the self, Thomas argues, *Mémoire de fille* stages the tension between the *je* of the present and the *elle* of the past: 'The initial drama is that of the writer herself, who finds she can no longer avoid confrontation with this till now unavowed, and psychically threatening Past' (2021: 172).

This striking use of perspective in the *colonie de vacances* narrative shifts in the second half of the book back towards Ernaux's more typical narrative mode. The change is signalled at the mid-point with the announcement that Ernaux's writerly re-immersion in the summer of her youth has successfully reconnected her with the person she was: 'je peux dire: elle est moi, je suis elle' (2016: 86). From this point on, in the *lycée* and London-set second half of the book, the perspectival method is flipped. The bystander's visual perspective does not disappear completely, as this example shows:

Je la vois allongée sur le lit de ses parents, près de la cheminée inutilisée avec un grand cadre de sainte Thérèse au-dessus (2016: 97)

But it is now very much the exception, and even the more general use of third-person pronouns is gradually supplanted by Ernaux's more familiar use of first-person for both narrator and protagonist. Notably, when the *lycée* narrative recounts Ernaux's eating disorder with its compulsive eating and starving, first- and third-person perspectives jostle against each other in a deliberate intermingling of identification and distance:

Je n'avais pas terrassé la faim. Je l'exténuais seulement en travaillant. Je ne pense qu'à la nourriture. [...] Je ne sais pas à quoi pense la fille qui perd d'un seul coup tout contrôle sur son désir, se jette – j'imagine – sur le fromage à la coupe, les madeleines au détail, les caramels (2016: 110-11).²

By the time we reach London in the final section of the novel, narrating Ernaux's experiences working as an au-pair in Finchley, the first person has won out and the bystander has vanished almost entirely:

Un dimanche après-midi de la fin d'août ou de début septembre 1960, je suis assise, seule, sur un banc dans un jardin public du côté de la station Woodside Park (2016: 157).

The shift towards first-person perspective is partly explained by the fact that the protagonist has changed. She is now 'celle qui n'est plus la fille de S mais celle d'Ernemont' (2016: 107). Her experiences at the *colonie de vacances* have made her more mature, less naïve, wiser to the world, in short a person who has more in common with Ernaux-narrator, and with whom the latter more easily identifies. Braux explores this aspect of the text in her article on *Mémoire de fille*, in which she sees the entire narrative of the novel as a 'processus de subjectivation' (2020: 261), culminating in a 'moment de bascule' (2020: 264) in the final pages. Here, Braux claims, the first person is definitively established at a point of self-identification as the young Ernaux embarks on her trajectory to become an author. But this is clearly not the whole story. If we look closely at the 'je la vois' descriptions from the *colonie de vacances* narrative, we can see that the use of the third person has an effect beyond the narrator's dissociation from her past self. The subject matter is the objectification of the young Ernaux, her being-for-others. We see her as an object of predatory sexual desire, naively inviting male attention and cosplaying sexual maturity and worldly sophistication. We saw it in the passage quoted earlier describing her descending the stairs towards the party, her appearance transformed from that of the frumpy teenager

who arrived on the station platform into a would-be desirable young woman with flowing hair, stylish clothes and an absence of spectacles (2016: 44). Here is the phrase again at another party, as she and her coworkers conspire to humiliate one of the young men among them: 'Il faut d'abord le faire boire, elle s'en charge. Je la vois, dansant avec lui et lui passant la bouteille de blanc' (2016: 73). And here it is again as we see the young Ernaux in thrall to her sexual desire and in the act of sex itself: 'Je la vois, Annie D, dans son désir au sommet de sa force' (2016: 58); 'je la vois nue sur le lit, les jambes écartées, se retenant de crier sous la poussée' (2016: 78). The real presence of such predatory perspectives is confirmed in the scene of the 'sur-pat' in which H, the *moniteur-chef* who will shortly take her to bed, makes his desire known through his gaze: 'Il ne cesse de la fixer intensément tout en la faisant tourner. Elle n'a jamais été regardée avec des yeux aussi lourds' (2016: 45). And again, a few lines further on, his stare is again emphasized: 'En dansant, il recule vers le mur en continuant de la fixer' (2016: 45). The bystander perspective thus puts us uncomfortably alongside such gazes: we are standing with the *moniteurs* of the camp, sharing their point of view, seeing Annie Duchesne from the same perspective as those who are looking at her in this way.

In the depiction of the sexual encounter itself the implication of the bystander perspective is even more starkly apparent: 'La suite se déroule comme un film X où la partenaire de l'homme est à contretemps, ne sait pas quoi faire parce qu'elle ne connaît pas la suite' (2016: 47). The young Ernaux and her partner are likened to performers in a pornographic film. By implication, the perspective we have on them as readers must be that of the viewer of a porn movie.³ When Ernaux as narrator offers her retrospective analysis, she confirms the predatory social norms we have witnessed. The teenage Ernaux is 'un objet de convoitise' (2016: 64) and proud of being so. Her sexual encounter is figured as

conforming to a patriarchal idea of female obedience to male sexual appetites: ‘Ce n’est pas à lui qu’elle se soumet, c’est à une loi indiscutable, universelle, celle d’une sauvagerie masculine qu’un jour ou l’autre il lui aurait bien fallu subir’ (2016: 48). And while Ernaux writes of ‘Mon impossibilité encore aujourd’hui d’utiliser le mot viol au sujet de H’ (2016: 120), post-publication, she will reconsider the appropriateness of the term. In an interview four years later – four years which have notably featured the transformative #MeToo campaign against sexual abuse, harassment and rape culture – Ernaux agrees with the interviewer’s suggestion that *rape* may have been the right word after all: ‘vous avez raison, et maintenant *j’ai raison* de dire viol’ (Grand d’Esnon 2022: 18).⁴

The political implications of the bystander perspective become even more pertinent as the teenage Ernaux is scapegoated by her peers, who view her judgmentally as someone to be shamed for promiscuity. The sexist double standards involved here – male promiscuity attracts no such opprobrium – continues a theme which has been present throughout Ernaux’s œuvre, in *L’Événement* (2000) and *La Femme gelée* (1981) for instance, and in the early fictionalized account that most closely resembles *Mémoire de fille* with its themes of teenage life and early sexual encounters, *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (1977). As she returns to the topic in *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux debates whether she should be writing from a 2014 perspective (the time of writing) in which ‘hormis l’inceste et le viol, rien de sexuel n’est condamnable’ (2016: 62), or adopt ‘le point de vue de la société française de 1958 qui faisait tenir toute la valeur d’une fille dans sa « conduite », et dire que cette fille a été pitoyable d’inconscience et de candeur, de naïveté, lui faire porter la responsabilité de tout’ (2016: 62). In practice, the point of view of judgmental 1958 society is not the only one in the book, but it is strongly present, and once again reinforced by the bystander perspective, as we stand with the camp *moniteurs* clustered around the noticeboard on which Ernaux’s letter

about her sexual experiences has been fished from the wastepaper-basket, pieced back together and pinned up for all to see: 'Ils l'entourent, s'esclaffent, citent les mots de la lettre, alors, comme ça, ça te rend folle quand H te pose la main sur l'épaule en passant?' (2016: 69). We see the same judgmental shaming when she is rejected by her coworker Monique C: 'On n'est pas copines, alors?' 'Ah! Non! On n'a pas gardé les cochons ensemble!' (2016: 53). The narration of this episode puts particular emphasis on the protagonist as object of the contemptuous gaze of her accusers: 'Annie D, la petite fille gâtée de ses parents, l'élève brillante est, à ce moment précis, un objet de mépris et de dérision dans le regard de Monique C et de Claude L, de tous ceux qu'elle aurait voulu ses pairs' (2016: 54). And once again the emphatic externality of 'je la vois' recurs as she is drenched by a bucket of water tipped over her as a prank:

Je la vois dans le couloir des chambres, protestant parce qu'elle est aveuglée par ses cheveux trempés d'eau, celle d'un seau balancé sans doute au cri devenu ensuite rituel de Taïaut O Taïaut. (2016: 54)

It is striking here that the protagonist effectively has no perspective, visually speaking, as she is blinded by the wet hair over her eyes (although, as the passage goes on to recount, she is still able to make out the presence of H, leading to further humiliation as he publicly rejects her attempt to embrace him). What Ernaux as narrator 'sees' in this extract is not just a perspectival shift in a memory-image but a wholesale reconstruction of the scene from the point of view of her tormentors, howling at her as if they were a hunting party and she were their prey.⁵

More than any other part of the book, perhaps more than any text by Ernaux since the passages of *L'Événement* dealing with the judgment of peers and medical professionals of her pregnancy and abortion, this is a study of being-for-others. Ernaux's engagement with the philosophical concept of the other, and with existentialism-related thought more broadly, comes principally through Simone de Beauvoir rather than Jean-Paul Sartre. Her first encounters with Beauvoir's work are recounted in *Mémoire de fille* (2016: 120), and it is Beauvoir's discussion of first sexual experiences that leads to Ernaux's reflections, quoted above, about the use of the word *viol*. However, it's Sartre's original conception of being-for-others, the image of our own being constructed in the consciousness of the other, and our apprehension of how we appear in that image, which seems particularly relevant here. Ernaux's representation of her experience reflects the highly negative characterization of shame, judgment and the disempowerment that comes with being the object of the other's gaze, which was present right at Sartre's first illustration of the concept in *L'Être et le Néant* (1943) with the image of the voyeur surprised with his eye to the keyhole:

Imaginons que j'en sois venu, par jalousie, par intérêt, à coller mon oreille contre une porte, à regarder par le trou d'une serrure. Je suis seul [...]. Cela signifie d'abord qu'il n'y a pas de moi pour habiter ma conscience. Dès lors « je fais ce que j'ai à faire » [...] ma conscience colle à mes actes, elle est mes actes [...]. Or voici que j'ai entendu des pas dans le corridor: on me regarde. Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? C'est que je suis soudain atteint dans mon être et que des modifications essentielles apparaissent dans mes structures [...]. Voici que j'existe en tant que moi pour ma conscience irréfléchie. [...] je me vois parce qu'on me voit (Sartre 1943: 268).

Sartre's contention that 'je me vois parce qu'on me voit' chimes closely with the 'je me vois' of Ernaux's remembered rejections and humiliations by her peer group. Just as the external perspectives before her first sexual encounter come to signify the objectifying gaze of predatory older men, so the outside viewpoints in the later parts of the *colonie de vacances* section come to stand for that essential element of shame which is the awareness of another's gaze, and another's judgment, upon us. Obliquely, Ernaux links the two kinds of gaze together at the end of the sequence, where she writes of two lists. First of all she discusses a list she once wrote of the names of the men with whom she had sex at the *colonie*, and then follows this with mention of another list, this one imaginary:

Pour rendre sensible aujourd'hui l'opprobre jeté sur la fille de S, il me faut mettre en face une autre liste, celle des railleries grasses, des quolibets, des insultes déguisées en mots d'esprit, par lesquels le groupe des moniteurs l'a constituée en objet de mépris et de dérision (2016: 67).

At this point in the narrative the text is concerned less with how Ernaux's early sexual experiences felt to her, but how they seemed to the onlookers around her: 'Elle ne peut pas lutter contre l'image qu'ils ont d'elle' (2016: 70). And it's this constructed, distorted figure, the shamed and shameful 'putain sur les bords' (2016: 108), who is the one seen through these outside eyes. 'Ai-je soupçonné à ce moment-là qu'elles me tenaient pour une petite pute sans cervelle?' Ernaux asks (2016: 92) as her letters to her former co-workers at the colony go unanswered. The focus on the point of view of the others in the *colonie* narrative also explains the move towards first-person perspective in the second half, which turns its

attention to the psychological consequences for the young Ernaux as she processes what happened alone in the aftermath of the events of that summer:

C'est la honte de la fierté d'avoir été un objet de désir. [...] Honte des rires et du mépris des autres. C'est une honte de fille.

Une honte historique, d'avant le slogan « mon corps est à moi » dix ans plus tard. (2016: 108)

The structure of the narrative is thus not so much, as Braux contends, a slow, gradual climb towards a final moment of subjectivity at the point of becoming a writer in the last pages of the book. Rather it is a story split into two halves. The first, with predominantly external perspective, sees the young Ernaux objectified by the desiring or contemptuous gaze of her peers. The second, predominantly internal, shows the effects of her sexual exploitation and shaming on her emotions, behaviour and mental health in the ensuing period of her life. Elegantly, the pivot between the two at the dead centre of the book is that six-word chiasmus of third-person and first-person pronouns: 'elle est moi, je suis elle' (2016: 86).

I hope this discussion has convincingly demonstrated the political element to Ernaux's use of visual and narrative perspective in *Mémoire de fille*. Having made the argument, I ought to briefly concede that politics are not the whole story, of course. Conceptual thought is founded to a large extent on basic and concrete metaphors of position and movement in physical space. With narratological use of terms like perspective and viewpoint we have barely moved beyond the literal sense of a person standing in a space looking or being looked at.⁶ So a choice to narrate an autobiographical narrative in the

third person can smuggle in, intentionally or not, the notion of standing beside oneself. The narrator dissociates from the position and body of the protagonist to become an observing witness sharing the scene. And in Ernaux, as we've seen, the use of third-person narration develops from the specific trope in earlier texts of describing photographs, a situation that places the narrating self literally face to face with the image of the former self.⁷ It's only a small step further for the narrating self to 'enter' the photograph and observe her former self from within the remembered scene as a bystander to the experience. We're familiar, too, with the common trope in film and television of memory represented on-screen as a scene in third-person perspective rather than from the viewpoint of the remembering character. This device even has a parallel in *Mémoire de fille* as Ernaux's memory of sex with H blurs into her viewing of a scene from Louis Malle's *Les Amants* that she is watching in the cinema: 'ce n'est pas Jeanne Moreau, c'est elle, dans le lit, avec H' (2016: 95).⁸ But what I aimed to demonstrate here is that perspective in *Mémoire de fille* is about more than dissociation, grammatical choices, or contamination from other storytelling techniques. Ernaux has not just taken the narrative viewpoint out of the head of the teenage girl whom she no longer feels is her. She has placed that viewpoint elsewhere in the scene, in a position which shares the standpoint of the young men who sense her vulnerable naivety, and the young women who can affirm their own social respectability by publicly destroying hers.

Narrative perspective is not only the viewpoint that the storyteller takes on the events of the story being told. It is also the viewpoint of the reader, who has no other place to stand than the one afforded to them by the narrator. Ernaux's bystander perspective, in the most literal sense at least, aligns us with her abusers, those who scope her out as a potential sexual conquest, and those who vilify her as promiscuous and immoral. It's an

uncomfortable position to be put in, never more so than when our view of her first sexual experience is likened to that of a viewer of a porn film. As she places us alongside these young people from the 1950s, even as she shows us the harm and the injustice caused by their sexual politics of the time, Ernaux challenges us to measure ourselves against them, and in our own outrage or unease to feel how far we have travelled, or failed to travel, in the intervening years.

Endnotes

¹ *L'Amant* has other notable parallels with *Mémoire de fille*, to the extent that it might seem a deliberate intertext. In both texts a writer in their seventies looks back to their first sexual experience during their teenage years, which for both is with an older, more experienced man and for both is marked by naivety, exploitation, trauma and shame. Both texts open with a meditation on the autobiographical project, followed by an imaginary 'photograph' of the protagonist, Duras on a ferry, Ernaux on a train, bringing them to their sexual encounter. Ernaux's text does not cite *L'Amant* as an influence, but it does mention Duras in a reference to the impact of the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) on her younger self (Ernaux 2016: 130). A more detailed comparative analysis of photographic references in *Mémoire de fille* and Duras's *L'Amant* can be found in Arribert-Narce (2017: 10-11).

² The eating disorder is one that Ernaux and critics following her have labelled bulimia, although Ruth Cruickshank points out that the symptoms described are not a good fit for the diagnostic criteria for bulimia. Bulimia normally refers to a disorder of bingeing and purging. Ernaux's behaviour of bingeing followed by food restriction, might, according to Cruickshank (2020: 274), more properly be labelled 'as OSFED ('other specified feeding or eating disorder') (APA 2013); ['troubles des conduites alimentaires, non spécifiés' (HAS 2015)]; EDNOS ('eating disorder not otherwise

specified') (APA 1994); or 'Eating disorder, unspecified' (ICD-10) ['trouble de l'alimentation non organique, sans précision' (CIM-10)].'

³Thomas (2021: 173) compares the scene to the opening of *Passion simple* (1992), in which Ernaux watches a pornographic film on a subscription channel *sans décodeur*, its images fuzzy and indecipherable. Thomas notes the association between memory and film in both cases, and suggests that in *Mémoire de fille*, 'it is the younger self who cannot decode what is happening to her'.

⁴The interview was with Clémence Allezard and Mathilde Forget as part of the documentary 'Violé·es: une histoire de dominations', directed by Clémence Allezard et Séverine Cassar, as part of *La Série Documentaire*, France Culture, 7-10 décembre 2021. Anne Grand d'Esnon quotes extensively from the interview in her article, including the illuminating exchange between Ernaux and Forget that leads to her reconsideration of the term:

FORGET: Quelque chose qui m'a beaucoup marquée, c'est qu'il y a les cris de douleur.

ERNAUX: Ah oui.

FORGET: C'est quand même pas... C'est pas rien.

ERNAUX: Oui, oui.

FORGET: Il force et vous criez de douleur.

ERNAUX: Je crie.

FORGET: Et tout le monde sait très bien ce que c'est qu'un cri de douleur...

ERNAUX: Absolument.

FORGET: ... ce que ça veut dire, ça veut dire que ça fait mal: c'est ça quand même qui fait partie d'un dialogue, enfin en tout cas, vous...

ERNAUX: Je crie, et il dit 'j'aimerais mieux que tu jouisses plutôt que tu gueules'. Ça, c'est une phrase d'une violence inouïe. [pause] Dans votre... dans votre bouche, dans votre... quand vous prononcez ces mots, c'est maintenant... j'en vois l'ampleur, l'ampleur de la violence, l'inadmissible évidemment aussi, l'inadmissible... et que vous avez raison, et maintenant *j'ai raison* de dire viol. Voilà.

⁵ Ernaux's 'blinding' here is one of several references to impaired vision initiated by the mention of her extreme short-sightedness in the description which opens the narrative. When she discards her glasses as part of her reinvented appearance at the *colonie de vacances*, we infer that 'elle se meut dans le brouillard' (24) for much of her time at S, and the bystander perspective turns our gaze on a protagonist who is unable to return that gaze with clarity. Elizabeth Richardson Viti (2007: 78) suggests that the myopia of the fictionalized 'Anne' in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* under similar circumstances also holds a symbolic element to 'underscore how blind Anne is to the rules of the game between the sexes'.

⁶ The importance of spatial metaphors to abstract conceptual thought is examined in e.g., Boroditsky (2000) or Pinker (2007: 266-78). I explored the relevance of this to literary critical terminology in an earlier article, (Kemp 2012) .

⁷ Ernaux's wider use of photographs is explored in Montémont 2011.

⁸ Élise Hugueny-Léger (2022: 95) notes that the 'royaume des illusions' that is the darkened cinema fosters a 'sentiment d'immersion et d'abolition spatiotemporelle' that builds further connections between film and memory.

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