

STARS OF CCTV: TECHNOLOGY, VISIBILITY AND IDENTITY IN THE WORK OF SOPHIE CALLE AND ANNIE ERNAUX

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As part of *M'as-tu vue?*, her retrospective exhibition held at the Centre Pompidou in 2003, Sophie Calle presented *Unfinished*. Rooted in a series of still images from CCTV recordings of people withdrawing money from a cash machine in America, it was a project on which she had begun to work in the late 1980s and which, as its title suggests, she had struggled to bring to a satisfactory end. At first sight, and in the context of the exhibition, the significance of *Unfinished* appeared to lie mainly in its status as a meta-project, one which allowed Calle to reflect on her working methods. Its interest from this perspective – and therefore, ironically, its success – lay precisely in its failure as a project, and in particular in Calle's inability to find a text with which to accompany the images, and so to make them 'speak'. After all, the conjunction of text and image is, as she puts it, her 'marque de fabrique';¹ but if she persists with the project in the first place, it is because of her continued fascination with the images themselves: 'il fallait trouver une idée pour accompagner ces visages que je n'avais pas oubliés'.² She is bewitched and haunted by the stream of individuals who materialise before the camera to withdraw their money, or indeed retreat empty handed: 'elles racontaient quelque chose, mais quoi? Ça parlait de surveillance, d'argent, de solitude?'³ Her fascination was made manifest when the project materialised in book form two years later, under the title *En finir*. The monochrome cover features the ghostly image of a bare-chested man emerging out of the shadows, fine vertical striations signifying its origins in CCTV footage.⁴ If the first half of the book recaps Calle's efforts to turn the images into a meaningful project, and find a narrative into which they can be woven, the second half confronts us with stills and sequences from the original CCTV material. We see a series of unknown people living through miniscule dramas of uncertainty and anxiety as they undertake their transactions, and the camera captures a range of emotions from consternation to joy. The encounter with the cash machine seems to leave no-one impassive. At the same time, being privy to such dramas is in itself disconcerting; it feels like an invasion of the private sphere at its most intimate and vulnerable.

1. Sophie Calle, *M'as-tu vue?* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou-Éditions Xavier Barral, 2003), p. 418.
2. Calle, *M'as-tu vue?*, p. 418.
3. Calle, *M'as-tu vue?*, p. 418.
4. Sophie Calle and Fabio Balducci, *En finir* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005).

Significantly, Calle is not alone in her fascination for cash machines. Early on in *Journal du dehors*, her portrait of life in the modern urban spaces of the Parisian *banlieue* first published in 1992, Annie Ernaux describes a scene familiar to many, when she queues up to withdraw cash in her local shopping centre:

Nous sommes devant le distributeur de billets du centre commercial, les uns derrière les autres. Un confessionnal sans rideaux. Un guichet s'ouvre, les mêmes gestes pour tous, attendre, la tête légèrement penchée, appuyer sur les touches, attendre, prendre l'argent, le ranger, s'en aller en évitant de regarder les gens autour de soi. (JDD 28)

Her sketch focuses our attention on the peculiarity of an operation which requires an intimate moment to be played out in public. As we might risk having a confession overheard in a church, so to we expose our potential financial weaknesses to the opprobrium of society. The sense of tension, anxiety and vulnerability which seems to inhabit each customer as they present themselves in turn to the machine is captured here in the repetition of the verb 'attendre'. Moreover, it is a tension which Ernaux herself feels acutely when her turn comes, and her card is rejected:

Sur l'écran s'affiche: 'Votre carte est illisible.' Je reste interdite, sans comprendre, comme accusée d'un acte répréhensible que je ne connais pas. Je ne sais pas pourquoi ma carte de crédit, justement la mienne, est illisible. Je refais les opérations indiquées par l'ordinateur. À nouveau: 'Votre carte est illisible.' Horreur du mot 'illisible'. C'est moi qui suis illisible, fautive. Je reprends ma carte et m'en vais sans argent. Je comprends qu'on brise un distributeur de billets, en l'injuriant. (JDD 28)

Ernaux's consternation and anger at being rejected by the cash machine contend with feelings of guilt and shame. Her inability to carry out the transaction is almost a moral failure, one subject to censure which is both immediate (she must retreat empty handed) and public (her retreat takes place under the gaze of those waiting in line behind her);⁵ but what also counts here is the existential nature of her failure. In rejecting her card as 'unreadable', the cash machine is also casting doubt on her presence in the world. For if her card is unreadable, then she too becomes invisible ('Horreur du mot "illisible". C'est moi qui suis illisible, fautive'). The rejection of her card is also a denial of her identity, as defined by bank cards and personal identification numbers (PINs) at least. However, the narrator's brief moment of crisis, as she slopes away without any money, crystallises precisely the fact that bank cards and code numbers seem to be playing an ever greater role in defining identity in the present day.

In reflecting on our encounter with the cash machine, then – an encounter so embedded in the routines of daily existence that we barely notice it – Calle and Ernaux may in fact be getting to grips with what it means to exist in the modern

5. On the important theme of shame in Annie Ernaux, see Loraine Day, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

world. Indeed, the lesson we can learn from both is that paying attention to the apparently unremarkable or insignificant aspects of daily activity, what cultural geographers Nigel Thrift and Shaun French have termed the 'taken-for-granted background' of our lives,⁶ can enable us to grasp something significant about the nature of human existence. This shared concern for everyday life and its practices, described by Shirley Jordan in relation to Calle as an 'ethnographic sensibility',⁷ is one reason why bringing their work together is productive. More specifically, we can see both Calle and Ernaux as engaging in a broader interrogation of the nature of human identity in a world which is increasingly defined and driven by technology, and exploring the ways in which identity is being forged and shaped in that world.

Of course, the theme of identity has long been recognised as central to the work of both Calle and Ernaux. It is foregrounded in the playful title of Calle's retrospective exhibition. Did you see me? asks Calle. Did you *really* see me, despite how much I paraded myself before you? Do you really know who I am? Calle's work lends itself to an archetypally postmodern understanding of identity as shifting, malleable and endlessly performed; as constructed and reconstructed by self and others as part of the 'jeux de société' in which we are forced to engage when we enter the social realm.⁸ Likewise, during the 1990s, Ernaux became increasingly preoccupied with the notion of the 'je transpersonnel', and the way in which subjectivity, identity and memory are bound up in, and the product of, social contexts and environments much more than at first we might recognise. What have come to be known as her *journaux extimes* of the 1990s (*Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*, published in 1993 and 2000 respectively), can be read as explorations of the observation by Rousseau which serves as the epigraph to *Journal du dehors*: 'notre vrai moi n'est pas tout entier en nous'.⁹ The texts reflect the narrator's realisation that her past is in some sense dispersed across the social body, lodged in faces, bodies or behaviours which serve as triggers for memory. Her sense of self is in part contingent upon her chance encounters with

6. Nigel Thrift and Shaun French, 'The automatic production of space', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, new series, 27 (2002), 309-35 (p. 309).
7. Shirley Jordan, 'Exhibiting Pain: Sophie Calle's *Douleur exquise*', *French Studies*, 61.2 (2007), 196-208 (p. 199).
8. For example, see Johnnie Gratton, 'Experiment and experience in the phototextual projects of Sophie Calle', in Gill Rye and Michael Worton (eds), *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 157-66, and Kate Ince, 'Games with the Gaze: Sophie Calle's Postmodern Phototextuality', in Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham (eds), *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 111-22.
9. See Nancy K. Miller, 'Autobiographical Others: Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*', *Sites*, 2.1 (1998), 127-39 and Rosemary Lancaster, 'Writing the City Inside Out or Outside In? Objectivity and Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 37.3 (2000), 397-409.

anonymous fellow commuters and shoppers as she goes about her daily life in the modernised Parisian suburbs of the late twentieth century.

Arguably, however, the question of why it is that the theme of identity should be a particular concern of both Calle and Ernaux at this particular moment in time needs still more careful thought than it has received up to now. If, for example, as Robin Tierney rightly observes, Ernaux is keen to reassert or focus attention on 'lived experience at the level of the body' in the 1990s,¹⁰ why should she do so especially in texts which explore and respond to life in the new urban environments of the Parisian suburbs? Similarly, it is not enough simply to locate Sophie Calle within the context of 'postmodern' artistic and cultural practice, as Johnnie Gratton is tempted to do, and define that context in purely art historical or literary historical terms.¹¹ Rather, I would suggest that their common preoccupation with the cash machine, or Ernaux's reflection on the modernised urban world around Paris, signal an engagement with a specific socio-historical moment. Both Calle and Ernaux can be seen to explore and articulate the nature of life in what David Lyon has termed a 'technosocial' world;¹² that is to say, a world in which the social fabric, social relations and therefore personal identity are increasingly, and yet often imperceptibly, permeated and shaped by technology.

More precisely, they can be seen to tell the story of our emergence into that world, by paying attention to what it means to be confronted on an increasingly frequent basis by technology, machines and what Thrift and French call their 'generative alterity'.¹³ Calle and Ernaux show themselves to be sensitive to the ways in which the body is reconfigured by new technologies, and configures itself in response to them; and they tease out the ways in which we are constantly required to respond to the changes in the social, physical and technological environments in which we are embedded. One of the recurring leitmotifs of *Les Années*, Ernaux's most recent text, is the way in which the passage of time is felt in, and lived through, our relationship to things, and our ability, reluctance or inability to adapt and respond to new things.¹⁴ My aim in the remainder of this article, then, is to explore the light shed by Calle and Ernaux on life in a technosocial world; the questions they raise about nature of human identity in such a world; and their own response to the situations in which they seem increasingly to find themselves. In doing so, I aim also to contribute to the broader debates

10. Robin Tierney, "'Lived experience at the level of the body": Annie Ernaux's *Journaux intimes*', *SubStance*, 35.3 (2006), 113-30.

11. Gratton, 'Experiment and experience', p. 157.

12. David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: monitoring everyday life* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), p. 23.

13. Thrift and French, 'The automatic production of space', p. 311.

14. See pp. 220-21, for example.

which are on-going around the relationship between machines, technology and humans; in other words, to the body of work concerned with developing what has come to be known as 'thing theory'.¹⁵

CCTV, surveillance and control

Perhaps the most striking thing about the cash machine transactions in *Unfinished* and *En finir* is the fact that they are filmed. The stills collected by Calle are instantly recognisable as CCTV footage. Extracted from the countless hours of videotape footage kept by the American bank, they represent a tiny proportion of the vast amount of visual surveillance data which is being incessantly recorded and stored around the world. Over the period of the past twenty years or so, CCTV images have become emblematic of our existence in what have variously been called 'software societies', 'societies of control', or 'surveillance societies'.¹⁶ Such terms represent different ways of describing the trend across a number of countries towards the deployment of, and reliance on, a range of information technologies, networks and systems in order to monitor, regulate and control activities within societies, and the functioning of societies as a whole. David Lyon argues that what we recognise today as 'surveillance society' is a distinct mode of social organisation resulting from the rapid technological and social change of the past 200 years, change which has most visibly affected the 'advanced' countries of the liberal West, but whose ramifications affect virtually all parts of the globe. For Lyon, the trend towards a surveillance society is a consequence in particular of the fact that social relations have become increasingly disembodied. Communication and exchange are no longer predicated on embodied co-presence: the evolution and spread of information technology especially has enabled individuals to engage in remote forms of communication, and to become increasingly mobile within the social framework.¹⁷ But if disembodied social relations are at once the result of,

15. For an introduction to 'thing theory', see Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1-22, and Jane Bennett, 'The Force Of Things: steps towards an ecology of matter', *Political Theory*, 32.3 (2004), 347-72. Thing theory is informed in particular by the work of Bruno Latour, and his investigation of the frontier between subject and object, human and non-human. See Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, coll. "Poche", 1997), for example.
16. On the rise of CCTV surveillance in contemporary society, see Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong, *The Maximum Surveillance Society: the rise of CCTV* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), and Clive Norris, Mike McCahill and David Wood, 'The Growth of CCTV: a global perspective on the international diffusion of video surveillance in publicly accessible space', *Surveillance and Society*, 2.2/3 (2004), 110-35. While CCTV cameras were first used by the police in the mid-1950s, it was only in the 1980s and 90s that they became widely deployed by both public authorities and the private sector. Norris, McCahill and Wood suggest that it was with the murder of toddler James Bulger in 1993 that CCTV footage properly entered public consciousness in the UK for the first time ('The Growth of CCTV', p. 111).
17. Lyon, *Surveillance Society*, pp. 15-17.

and facilitated by, changes in information technology, they also require new technologies of information in order to be managed, organised and regulated effectively. If the embodied person disappears from sight, then other ways are needed to keep track of them or recognise them. Thus, institutions such as banks come increasingly to accept the signature (initially) or the personal identification number (latterly) as a token of identity and trust in relation to an agreement or transaction.¹⁸ As Lyon concludes, 'the problem of disappearing bodies is thus crucial to understanding surveillance societies. It shows how surveillance systems have arisen in an attempt to compensate for the disembodiment of many social relationships'.¹⁹

Moreover, surveillance itself can be seen as part of the much broader processes of control and regulation which appear to be central to contemporary society. Gilles Deleuze has argued that the disciplinary society identified by Michel Foucault as characteristic of Enlightenment modernity has been displaced by what he terms the 'society of control'.²⁰ Characteristic of such societies is the need to manage increasingly mobile individuals who can be subjected much less easily to the panoptic gaze or 'embodied surveillance', as Lyon puts it, emblematic of Foucault's disciplinary institutions.²¹ The more our relationships become disembodied, and the greater our mobility within social and physical space, the more we require passwords, codes and numbers to make ourselves visible within the social order, and legible to the various systems of information and communication which guide and structure our existence. Codes and passwords become increasingly significant as the co-ordinates and parameters of identity in a technosocial world. Indeed, and as Ernaux's experience at the cash machine would suggest, we have perhaps reached a point where our identity is mediated by codes, passwords and other traces to such a degree that our physical presence or embodiment in the world is no longer a sufficient guarantee of our identity or existence. Without the correct code or password, we cease to exist: we become invisible or, in the strictest sense, invalid.

Alternatively, and to draw on a metaphor deployed by the sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, it is becoming increasingly necessary for us to be correctly 'formatted' for life in the modern world.²² Latour's use of a metaphor from the domain of computing is undoubtedly deliberate, drawing attention as it does to the way in which we are made compatible with the systems and networks supporting an identity which is defined primarily in terms of codes, numbers and

18. *Surveillance Society*, p. 16.

19. *Surveillance Society*, p. 26.

20. Gilles Deleuze, 'Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle', in *Pourparlers, 1972-1990* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990), pp. 240-6.

21. Lyon, *Surveillance Society*, p. 15.

22. Bruno Latour and Émilie Hermant, *Paris: ville invisible* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte, 1998), p. 101.

other forms of data. In *Paris: ville invisible*, he explores the ways in which individuals in contemporary society are both sustained by, and imbricated within, a complex web of structures and systems. We can see his book as an attempt to map Deleuze's 'society of control'. He shows how we are constituted, shaped and inflected by a range of structures put in place by different institutions and social organisations, from the teaching timetable and the weather map to the street furniture designed to regulate our movements through urban space. Daily life in the modern world consists of being relayed from one network or system of organisation to another, and of drawing on different identities and practices as we do so:

D'une seconde à l'autre, des régimes d'action différents se relaient pour me faire passer d'une compétence à une autre compétence. Je ne suis ni aux commandes, ni sans commandes: je suis formaté. On m'offre des possibilités d'existence qui reposent dans des dispositifs épars, fourmillant à travers la ville.²³

From the perspective opened up by Latour, daily existence at its most mundane level – despite what we might think – requires an identity which is both shifting and multiple; and this in turn is a requirement of, and shaped by, the technosocial environment we inhabit.

In their analysis of contemporary 'software societies', Thrift and French explore further the nature of our relationship with this environment, drawing attention to what they term the 'generative alterity' of software and the technologies and objects it drives or grounds.²⁴ They argue that we need a better understanding not only of the relationship between human beings and machines, but also of the peculiar qualities possessed by machines themselves, and call on us to appreciate the 'complex ethologies of software and other entities which, too often in the past, have been studied as if human agency is clearly the directive force'.²⁵ In other words, they encourage us to acknowledge that agency – the ability and power to make things happen – is a quality possessed by non-human as well as human entities. Indeed, the very term 'generative alterity' implies this. It invites us to see the encounter with technology as productive of human identity and self-understanding by opening up new possibilities for existence in the modern world, or what Thrift and French go so far as to call a 'theatre of promise'.²⁶

Visibility, identity and resistance

By contrast, Ernaux's texts give us a clear sense that the narrator's encounter with the systems, technologies and machines of software society is lived as something more troubling. It is perceived as a negation of, or threat to identity; as an ethical

23. Latour, *Paris: ville invisible*, p. 101.

24. Thrift and French, 'The automatic production of space', p. 311.

25. 'The automatic production of space', p. 309.

26. 'The automatic production of space', p. 312.

and existential challenge: the agency acquired by software and technology seems to be so at the expense of human agency. David Lyon suggests that one of the most significant consequences of a society of surveillance or control has been to bring about a profound shift in the nature of identity by destabilising the boundary between public and private spheres.²⁷ Those activities or aspects of our lives which we feel should remain beyond the public domain, and which do most to define our singularity, are increasingly being played out in or exposed to the public view. The destabilisation of the boundary between public and private is brought to light most obviously when Ernaux confronts the cash machine, and the way in which it requires us to play out our relationship to money – vital as it is to defining our place in society and our ability to function within it – before others. But there are various other instances where the recognised and accepted boundary between public and private is transgressed. *Journal du dehors* in particular is marked by the narrator's constant awareness of, and reference to, the homeless and destitute people who populate the tunnels and trains of the public transport system. Both their presence and their actions (such as the public display of genitalia) disrupt dominant norms and social conventions, and disturb the behaviour of passers-by (JDD 35-36, for example). A sense of the blurring of this boundary is also reflected more broadly in Ernaux's exploration of identity in the text, and the way in which self-understanding seems to take shape through and because of her immersion in the modernised urban spaces of contemporary Paris.

The drive to modernise space in post-war France, characterised by the New Towns, motorways and regional express rail networks which define Ernaux's daily life, can itself be seen as symptomatic of contemporary trends in social organisation, in terms of the role it was intended to play in the regulation, management and distribution of large populations and population flows. At the same time, the systems and networks in which Ernaux circulates present us with a number of paradoxes. We have seen that, as Lyon argues, the emergence of a surveillance society is predicated on the disappearance of bodies, which has as its corollary increasingly disembodied social relations. However, Ernaux's observations of life in the modern urban world invite us to nuance this perspective. After all, bodies clearly have not disappeared from Ernaux's world. Far from it, in fact: the reader is struck by the proximity and impingement on others required by the confined spaces of mass public transport. Ernaux depicts a society in which we are ever more on show to each other and, as she observes, in which we feel the need to perform our identity to our fellow passengers.²⁸ Yet immersion in the crowd seems to bring with it a heightened sense of disconnection from those around her. The mode of voyeurism which public transport encourages can only, she admits, give her the *illusion* of proximity to these people: 'noter les gestes, les

27. Lyon, *Surveillance Society*, pp. 20-23.

28. For example, see JDD 49, 71 and 81 and LVE 103.

attitudes, les paroles de gens que je rencontre me donne l'illusion d'être proche d'eux. Je ne leur parle pas, je les regarde et les écoute seulement' (JDD 36).

In other words, Ernaux's desire for some form of connection with others, a desire which she formulates in terms such as the 'je transpersonnel', can be understood as a response to an emerging sociological situation, one brought about by the changing technosocial environments of the contemporary era. The texts focusing on life in the modern urban world – which has itself been shaped by technosocial forces – display an increasing sensitivity to the need for a productive encounter with the other at a time when self-other relations are becoming increasingly tenuous, and when individual human agency might appear to be on the wane. Hence her attempts to rescue some sense of proximity, community or agency in her representation of urban life, either through the notion of the 'je transpersonnel', which asserts the commonality of experience and locates traces of memory in figures in the crowd; or, as Tierney suggests, by focusing on bodily experience; or finally, and most disconcertingly, through the metaphor of prostitution (JDD 69) – a trope whose vehicle works to confirm the debased and transactional nature of her relationship with others in the very act of trying to articulate it *as* a relationship.

A key to understanding Ernaux's response to the technosocial environment in which she finds herself can arguably be found in what we might term a dialectic of visibility and identity, in which identity takes shape through seeing and being seen. It is thanks to the people Ernaux sees around her that her memories are triggered and her sense of identity sustained. As she puts it in *Journal du dehors*, 'peut-être que je cherche quelque chose sur moi à travers eux, leurs façons de se tenir, leur conversations' (JDD 37); and she imagines herself playing the same role of 'porteuse de la vie des autres' (JDD 107). Crucially, though, she proves herself to be increasingly sensitive to the importance of visibility, of seeing and being seen by the other, at the very moment when its generative and ethical potential appears to be eroded. Or more precisely, as visibility in contemporary society becomes increasingly important and necessary, so too it becomes increasingly problematic. Ernaux's experience at the cash machine makes clear that visibility is an essential criterion for playing a full part in contemporary society. We need to be seen by the machines which drive society if we are to exist fully within it. Our identity is in part constituted or granted by those machines and the systems and networks they form. However, what seems to be at stake in our encounter with machinic otherness is not the ethical imperative, but social control. We perceive that otherness not as productive or generative, but as negative. The threat we feel is articulated in Ernaux's sense of horror at finding herself to be invisible to the system, to be unreadable; that is to say, at finding herself (at least momentarily) external to the socio-economic system, and among the ranks of the excluded whom she is at pains normally to avoid.

The dialectic of visibility and identity is also latent within the title of Calle's

retrospective exhibition, but in a way which is characteristically ambivalent, and displays the combination of irony and post-ironic serious which Gratton argues is fundamental to her work.²⁹ On the one hand, the title *M'as-tu vue?* serves as a neat précis or caricature of her work and its dominant themes, and in particular, as Jordan notes, the tension within it 'between self-revelation and self-concealment',³⁰ between exhibitionism and elusiveness. At the same time, the title stands as a straight question: did you set eyes on me? In the context of *M'as-tu vue?* the question can be seen as a reference to Calle's alleged presence in the exhibition itself, circulating anonymously in order to study its visitors and their reactions (and doing so in memory of a sometime employee of the Centre Pompidou, Bénédicte Vincens, whose disappearance in 2000 fascinated Calle, and to whose case I return below).³¹

But the question Calle poses can also be interpreted more broadly as a reference to the issue of surveillance, which is, of course, another long-running theme of her work. Indeed, she rose to prominence in the 1980s thanks to *Suite vénétienne*, in which she pursued a man and his wife to Venice and tailed them round the city; and around the same time, she asked her mother to hire a private detective to follow her around Paris for the day, an event which gave rise to *La Filature*. Calle's fascination with observation and surveillance is arguably crystallised by the CCTV images she collects. What seems to count here is not just the encounter with the cash machine, but the fact that the encounter is filmed. The images represent one way in which we are made visible within the social order. Emerging out of the darkness, or an out-of-focus background, is a visual metaphor for coming into the purview of contemporary society. It is one of the points at which we connect with a society of surveillance and control, are made visible to it, and acquire an identity within it. At the same time though, Calle's preoccupation with surveillance also invites us to think about the limits of surveillance, and the extent to which surveillance brings (or does not bring) knowledge. For, as Petra Gördüren observes in relation to *La Filature*, the private detective ends up none the wiser about Calle's life and the meaning of her encounters, despite Calle's best efforts to piece together a meaningful day; that is to say, a day which illustrated significant aspects of her life.³² Likewise, once

29. Johnnie Gratton, 'Sophie Calle's *Des histoires vraies*: Irony and Beyond', in Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble (eds), *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), pp. 182-97.

30. Jordan, 'Exhibiting pain', p. 196.

31. Calle, *M'as-tu vue?*, p. 136.

32. Petra Gördüren, 'Sophie Calle: The (Shadow) Detective', in Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel (eds), *CTRL [SPACE]* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 410-15 (p. 415).

dislocated from their spatial and temporal contexts of production, the CCTV images of *En finir* seem to fall mute. They do not bring knowledge so much as confirm the opacity of life. We see anonymous individuals about whom we know nothing. Only their correspondence with a PIN can make them meaningful. Calle's exploration of the limits of surveillance, and the possibility of dropping beyond the purview of society, is equally reflected in her preoccupation with the case of Bénédicte Vincens.

Vincens was an employee of the Centre Pompidou and admirer of Sophie Calle's work, who disappeared following a fire in her Paris apartment in the year 2000. Her story was a *fait divers* which caused widespread interest in the media at the time, principally because she seemed to have achieved what was clearly felt to be impossible. As the author of an article in *Les Inrockuptibles* put it somewhat incredulously at the time, 'comment disparaît-on pieds nus, au centre de Paris, entouré par la police et les pompiers?'³³ How can one slip through the net of surveillance constituted not just by the elements of social organisation most obviously responsible for such things (namely the police), but – as Latour's analysis of Paris reminds us – by a whole series of networks and structures whose purpose is precisely to make visible, and give purchase on, the different elements, forces and flows which make up the social body? If Calle is drawn to Bénédicte and her story, it is perhaps because her act of disappearance represents the logical conclusion of Calle's own exploration, as it raises the question not only of the way in which identity takes shape through social processes, but also of the possibility of evading those traces or marks of identity, of slipping through the networks of identity which constitute us. It reflects Calle's own playful testing of the limits of those mechanisms and networks. The story of Bénédicte's disappearance suggests that evasion and invisibility are possible; but it also raises the troubling question of whether such a thing is desirable. In the case of Bénédicte, invisibility is not so much a moral problem as an ontological one. Her disappearance from sight, and therefore from the sites of social meaning and identity production, perhaps offers a thrilling yet simultaneously chilling brush with the (Lacanian) Real. It confirms Ernaux's intuition that to become invisible to society is to cease to exist.

Calle's exploration of the limits of surveillance and visibility is where her work can be seen to diverge from that of Ernaux. Her fascination with the blindspots of a contemporary surveillance society is in contrast to Ernaux's alarm at her sudden invisibility. Both *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* articulate Ernaux's sense of the irreducibly social nature of identity, and the importance of seeing and being seen as constituent of identity and memory. Nevertheless, Ernaux's more recent work suggests a modulation in her position. This is especially true of *L'Usage de la photo*, co-written with Marc Marie during 2003 and 2004. The book explores their love affair through the device of photos taken by the couple of

33. Sophie Calle, *M'as-tu vue?*, pp. 127-128.

clothes abandoned before sex; but it does so against the backdrop of, and in response to, Ernaux's treatment for breast cancer. For Shirley Jordan, Ernaux's frank exposition of both these narratives is consonant with her on-going experiment with self-exposure, and what Jordan terms her 'high-risk exploration of the private/public boundary'.³⁴ Jordan points to the 'intrusive quality' of the photos they take:³⁵ laying bear the material traces of sexual desire and adumbrating the acts to follow, they overtly position the text's readers as 'consumers of intimacy'.³⁶ She aligns Ernaux's act of self-exposure with the invasiveness of her medical treatment:

L'Usage de la photo derives its meaning from the multiple incursions it involves through the boundary of the author's most intimate spaces. The home, the private space of single-authored writing and the skin of Ernaux's body are all broken (therapeutically but dangerously) as others are invited into positions of unusually direct intimacy with her.³⁷

However, I would suggest that the point at which Ernaux's body is being exposed to medico-scientific technologies of vision, and transformed into an object of surgical intervention (mapped out and marked up by means of X-ray and MRI scans), is also the point at which she turns to photography precisely as both a mode of resistance to that process, and a way of reasserting her own agency. The photos she takes of clothes abandoned before sex can be seen as a reaction to the transformation of her body into an object of medical discourse and knowledge through their reassertion of the private and subjective realm of lived experience. Firstly, the images which are scattered through the book can be properly meaningful only within the private sphere of her relationship with Marc Marie, as records of moments of desire. Indeed, Ernaux can predict a point in the future when they will be meaningless even to them: 'dans quelques années, ces photos ne diront peut-être plus rien à l'un et à l'autre, juste des témoignages sur la mode des chaussures au début des années 2000' (UP 151). The subjective meaning of the images as traces of desire will have evaporated, to leave only the objective evidence of trends in fashion.

Secondly, and more significantly, they also stand in tension with the medical images whose existence is acknowledged only in a footnote at the very end of the text (UP 149), yet which lurk like a ghostly presence whenever Ernaux discusses her treatment. With its proliferating list of techniques of vision (mammography,

34. Shirley Jordan, 'Improper Exposure: *L'Usage de la photo* by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7.2 (2007), 123-41 (p. 123). On *L'Usage de la photo*, alongside Alison Fell's contribution to this special issue, see also Nora Cottille-Foley, 'L'Usage de la photographie chez Annie Ernaux', *French Studies*, 62.4 (2008), 442-54.

35. Jordan, 'Improper exposure', p. 135.

36. 'Improper exposure', p. 127.

37. 'Improper exposure', p. 135.

radiography, MRI scan, tomography), the footnote captures the sheer variety of ways in which her body had been envisioned during treatment; but it also serves to corral those modes of seeing while the photos recording nascent desire are given free rein in the text. Moreover, the relegation of the footnote to the end of the text, as well as the dismissive and impatient tone with which it concludes (*'J'en oublie sûrement'*), can themselves be read as gestures of defiance on Ernaux's part. Both the footnote and its placement in the text are part of a battle between the subjectivity of sexual desire and the technologies which make Ernaux an object of medical science. If, as its title suggests, the text is about the uses of photography, then it would seem that she finds in the photos they take a way of confirming the boundary between the public and private spheres, and of counteracting the scopic tendencies of contemporary societies. The images enable her, perhaps, to assert the opacity of life in the face of our efforts to make it increasingly visible.

In bringing together the work of Ernaux and Calle, then, we have seen how both writer and photographer articulate and respond to the question of being in contemporary society, and crystallise the way in which modes of being and subjectivity have been reconfigured as we live in a world increasingly defined and shaped by technologies of regulation, vision and control. They do so in particular by tracking how such technologies impinge on and remodel the practices of everyday life, and require us consequently to recalibrate and rethink our understanding of human agency. The technosocial world they depict is not quite the 'theatre of promise' proposed by Thrift and French; but it is a stage on which we are all, however reluctantly, bound to appear, and whose demands, limits and blind spots their work helps us to grasp.³⁸

38. I would like to thank Andrea Noble and Alison Fell for their comments on an earlier version of this article.