

Hervé Guibert: Writing the Spectral Image

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Hyperreality and the simulacrum

Reading novels of the 1980s and nineties, one may wonder how they differ from other previously written novels; one may also wonder what is their specificity, and whether they constitute a genre particular to the eighties and nineties. Since these novels make wide use of pastiche and mass culture objects (i.e. brand-name items known to everyone via media advertisements), a close reading of them in the light of postmodernism would seem to be a logical first step. However, the definition of postmodernism is still open to debate. From one point of view, postmodernism is seen as a problematizing of referentiality in a world increasingly suspicious of “grand totalizing narratives” (Hutcheon 17). In this sense, postmodernism is a creative practice that denaturalizes both literary codes (by means of parody and pastiche) and culturally based/biased presuppositions (by means of a “hybridizing mix” of fact and fiction).¹ From another point of view, postmodernism is a reactionary discourse that threatens to replace people with machines (via technological representation).² Indeed, it would seem that the particularity of postmodernism lies in its indefiniteness. Nonetheless, one constant seems to remain at the core of how to define the postmodern: the importance of the simulacrum.

In *La Transparence du Mal*, Jean Baudrillard defines the postmodern period not only as the stage of the simulacrum but as “l’après orgie” ‘the after-orgy’.³ “L’après orgie,” which he also calls the fractal age, establishes the absence of distinction between values, ideology and signs:

L’orgie, c’est tout le moment explosif de la modernité, celui de la libération dans tous les domaines. . . . Ce fut une orgie totale, de

r  el, de rationnel, de sexuel, de critique, et d'anti-critique, de croissance et de crise de croissance. Nous avons parcouru tous les chemins de la production et de la surproduction virtuelle d'objets, de signes, de messages, d'id  ologies, de plaisirs. Aujourd'hui, tout est lib  r  , les jeux sont faits, et nous nous retrouvons collectivement devant la question cruciale: QUE FAIRE APRES L'ORGIE ?

The orgy is the total explosive moment of modernity, that of liberation in all domains. . . . It was a comprehensive orgy, of the real, the rational, the sexual, the critical, the anti-critical, of growth and of the crisis of growth. We have travelled up and down all the roads of production and of the virtual surproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies, pleasures. Today, everything is liberated, the cards are dealt, and we find ourselves collectively facing the crucial question: WHAT TO DO AFTER THE ORGY? (11)

We are thus trapped in simulation; a state whereby we imitate movement in the same direction as before, only at an accelerated pace and in an orgiastic manner. However, according to Baudrillard, we are accelerating in a void (of a completed liberation), merely simulating scenarios that have already occurred—"r  ellement ou virtuellement" 'truly or virtually,' (12). It is at this stage—"l'utopie r  alis  e" 'utopia realized'—that Baudrillard introduces his notion of the hyperreal: "la reproduction ind  finie d'id  aux, de fantasmes, d'images, de r  ves qui sont d  sormais derri  re nous, et qu'il nous faut cependant reproduire dans une sorte d'indiff  rence fatale" 'the infinite reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images, dreams that are now behind us, but which we must, however, reproduce in a sort of fatal indifference' 12. This indifferent reproduction of images, as Baudrillard explains, leads to an implosion of the image and the real so that, ultimately, there is no longer any distinction between the two. In this sense, images have no finality, they are no more than object-fetishes that, far from representing any reality, reproduce only more images. Images, then, become more real than the real and operate within their own logic, thus leaving behind the world of signification and propelling bodies into a hyperspace where they lose all meaning.

Herv   Guibert, a journalist/novelist/photographer of the contemporary period, also characterizes the postmodern condition of the non-distinction between signs in an equally disturbing way by asking "O   commence l'obsc  nit  , en un temps troublant o   le r  el et la fiction

tendent à se fondre dans des reality-show, des guerres vécues en direct comme des jeux de vidéos, ou le journal autofilmé d'un agonisant du sida?" "Where does obscenity start, in a troubling time where reality and fiction tend to dissolve into reality-shows, where wars are lived directly like video games, and we are witness to the self-filmed journal of a dying person with AIDS?"⁴ Here Guibert articulates a major tension that qualifies not only postmodernism but his own work as well: the constant play between the notions of the "real" and the "fake," between "reality" and "fiction." Guibert's work is indeed grounded in the hyperreal. Yet (and this is what makes it all the more problematic), his work also introduces the reader to a crucial dilemma of postmodern society: AIDS.

The spectral image

Hervé Guibert died from AIDS in December, 1991. Although AIDS is exposed in many of its dimensions throughout Guibert's work, most notably in the trilogy *A l'ami qui m'a pas sauvé la vie*, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, and *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*, it need not be considered the sole driving force behind Guibert's writing. Indeed, Guibert's success and talent as a writer could very well lie in his ability to turn AIDS into a process of creative generation rather than destruction, one that is intricately linked to the central current of the postmodern debate: the image. AIDS, as we shall see, becomes the medium by which Guibert's images fuse reality and fiction, thus generating a constellation of images that compose the hyperreal body. In Guibert's *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* and *Mon valet et moi*, the body-with-AIDS is a privileged site from which the text radiates, much like a virus.⁵ Significantly, this viral proliferation is at once a component of AIDS and a component of the image, as Jacques Henric has already implied:

L'animal humain est, lui aussi, malade de la peste. D'une étrange peste. A la différence de ce qui se passe pour les autres organismes vivants, il ne s'agit pas d'une épidémie passagère, d'une éruption violente, meurtrière mais néanmoins combattable, jugulable, circonscriptible. Si elle présente, elle aussi, ses moments nettement ravageurs, ses points d'intense fièvre dévastatrice, cette peste-là, dont je parle, a la particularité d'être invincible. Son feu ne cesse de couver sous la cendre. Il suffit d'un rien . . . —le déconnage de quelques cellules qui, ayant tâté de l'anarchie, se mettent à faire

sans frein des petits—pour que le mal recommence à souffler par rafales. . . . Cette peste très speciale, immémoriale, irréductible, porte un nom: l'*image*.

The human animal himself is also sick with the plague. With a strange plague. Contrary to what happens for other living organisms, it is not a question of a passing epidemic, of a violent eruption, deadly but nevertheless combattable, haltable, containable. If it also presents its distinctly ravaging moments, its periods of intense, devastating fever, this plague, of which I speak here, has the particularity of being invincible. Its fire unceasingly smolders under the ashes. Anything would suffice. . . .—the blundering of a few cells which, having attempted anarchy, begin to reproduce themselves madly—and the illness begins again to blow in gusts. . . . This very special plague, immemorial, irreducible, bears a name: the *image*. (184)

The similitude between the image (as plague) and AIDS is not surprising, considering that the postmodern era seems to be characterized by both “viruses.” In fact, both the image and AIDS function according to the same process. In much the same way that the HIV virus invades the cellular system, concurrently disturbing its replication and contaminating it, the image, in Baudrillard’s sense, reproduces the real in a viral manner:⁶

en tant que simulacre, l’image précède le réel dans la mesure où elle inverse la succession logique, causale, du réel et de sa reproduction. . . . L’image est intéressante quand elle commence à contaminer le réel et à le ‘modéliser,’ quand elle ne se conforme au réel que pour mieux le déformer, mieux: quand elle subtilise le réel à son profit, quand elle anticipe sur lui au point que le réel n’a plus le temps de se produire en tant que tel.

as a simulacrum, the image precedes the real insofar as it inverses the logical, causal succession of the real and its reproduction. . . . The image is interesting when it begins to contaminate the real and modulate it, when it conforms to the real only to more successfully deform it, or even better: when it subtilizes the real to its own advantage, when it anticipates the real to the point that the real no longer has the time to produce itself as such. (*Au delà* 157)

The work of Hervé Guibert serves as an interesting example of fiction “contaminated” by the “real.” The deformation of the real by images is a recurrent motif in his novels, and could even be considered an element central to his vision as a writer of the postmodern era. Indeed, his *L’Image fantôme* is a text entirely dedicated to the malign power of images. The narrator of *L’Image fantôme* emphasizes the negative influence images can have in our daily lives by introducing us to the problematic via so-called autobiographical elements, such as photographs and home movies. The narrator’s parents demonstrate that the act of watching a home movie is no longer a simple routine of the traditional family. The parents, as they watch a home movie, are transformed into opaque signs as they are confronted with the image of their younger bodies on film. The bodies, as a result of a violent love/hate relationship to the image, wish at once to fuse with the images and to destroy them. In this way, the reality of the moment spent watching the film is contaminated by the presence of what the narrator calls “ces vilains mirages, ces trop beaux mirages.” The Baudelairean pastiche here overcodes the act of writing as a process of assembling ghostly images:⁷

Nos corps nous sont maintenant insensibles, invisibles, et nous aimons secrètement et nous haïssons en même temps ces corps jeunes qui passent comme des fantômes dans le pinceau lumineux du projecteur. Nous les aimons au point de désirer, par une magie inverse, entrer dans l’image, et l’êtreindre, revenir avec elle dans le passé, nous les haïssons au point de vouloir les défigurer, les mutiler, les rayer à la pointe d’une aiguille à même le film, pour qu’ils ne nous narguent plus, ces vilains mirages, ces trop beaux mirages.

Our bodies are now to us unfeeling, invisible, and we secretly love and hate at the same time these young bodies that pass like phantoms in the pencil of light of the projector. We love them to the point of desiring, by an inverse magic, to enter into the image and to embrace it, go back with it in the past; we hate them to the point of wanting to defigure them, mutilate them, scratch them with the point of a needle on the film itself, so that they no longer scoff at us, these evil mirages, these too beautiful mirages. (*L’Image fantôme* 52)

L'Image fantôme reveals some central components of Guibert's conceptualization of images, especially in their relationship to the homoerotic body: the images bear elements of masochism and they fuse death with life. Here we encounter the spectral image, an image born of the intersections and interchangeability of life (reality), death (images), and writing. In other words, the spectral image replicates a clone. It is the dying (homoerotic) body-of-writing (a body composed of writing):

Le texte n'aurait pas été si l'image avait été prise. L'image serait là devant moi, probablement encadrée, parfaite et fausse, irréaliste, plus encore qu'une photo de jeunesse: la preuve, le délit d'une pratique presque diabolique. Plus qu'un tour de passe-passe ou de prestidigitation: une machine à arrêter le temps. Car ce texte est le désespoir de l'image, et pire qu'une image floue ou voilée: une image fantôme.

The text would not have existed if the image had been taken. The image would be there in front of me, probably framed, perfect and fake, unreal, even more so than a photo from youth: the proof, the crime of a nearly diabolic practice. More than a sleight of hand or a magic trick: a machine to stop time. Because this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or veiled image: a spectral image. (*L'Image* 18)

It is important to note that throughout Guibert's work, the spectral image is nothing but a pure simulacrum. Even though it appropriates some elements of reality such as family photo albums or the narrator's own photograph, it displays an infinite interplay between the real and the fake and their relation to the simulacrum. In *L'Image fantôme*, the narrator as subject is effaced in a text that supposedly draws from real life. His own photo is censored, thus making it impossible to tell whether it is he or not:

Et soudain ce fut comme un choc, je ne pouvais pas me tromper: malignement, le garçon venait d'extraire du sac en plastique noir une photographie encore molle et l'avait aussitôt plaquée sur le verre, et sur cette photo c'était moi. Je reconnaissais mes cheveux bouclés, ma chemise blanche, ma bouche, et en même temps j'avais toute une partie du visage barrée par un appareil de rhinoscopie, ou un écouteur de radio posé à l'envers. Je n'étais

jamais allé dans cette soirée, je n'avais jamais vu ce garçon. Je savais très bien que ce visage ne pouvait être que le mien (ou celui d'un sosie?), et qu'en même temps ce ne pouvait être moi.

And suddenly it was like a shock, I couldn't be wrong: maliciously, the boy had just taken out of the black plastic bag a still sticky photograph, and then had pasted it on the windowpane, and I was in this photo. I recognized my curly hair, my white shirt, my mouth, and at the same time I had a whole part of my face blocked out by a rhinoscopic instrument, or by radio headphones put on upside down. I had never been to that soirée, I had never seen that boy. I knew very well that that face could only be mine (or that of a look-alike?), and at the same time it could not be me. (*L'Image* 59)

The spectral image bears no relation to any *concrete* reality, as the narrator's "fictionalized" photo demonstrates. It is a body/text created in response to the "désespoir de l'image" 'the despair of the image.' Yet, because we are introduced to the text by the image, we enter from the very beginning into the domain of the hyperreal and the simulacrum. Here it is necessary to explain the role that AIDS plays in this process of simulacrum in Guibert's writing. Rather than being explored as a real phenomenon with real effects, AIDS is used more as a medium of representation. The narrator, using the destroyed body-with-AIDS, employs the elements of pain and decomposition to accentuate the (unreal) proportions of the body (he emphasizes certain body parts—like an infected lymph node in his neck or his swollen feet—as if they were being seen in a close-up by a zoom lens). This in turn allows him to re-envision and re-compose the body in hyperreal dimensions. The hyperreal body, as we shall see, is constructed by/from the text through an image that acts as a body double; thus it has no relation to any real person with AIDS. Such is the case with *Mon valet et moi* and *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*, in which we are introduced to the body-with-AIDS by means of an image. In *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*, the video image of the narrator's dying body on the operating table serves as one of the pre-texts for the narrative itself. In *Mon valet et moi*, we are presented with an eighty-year-old narrator dying of a terminal illness through the intermediary of the valet, to whom he is introduced by a photo: "A Christine, qui m'a découpé dans un magazine la photo de mon personnage, dans l'avion entre Anchorage et Tokyo, et à qui je crains que cette histoire ne dise rien du tout" 'To Christine, who cut out the

photo of my character for me from a magazine in the airplane between Anchorage and Tokyo, and about whom I fear this story says nothing at all' (7). The problematic position of the narrator in both texts further complicates the issue, since he would seem to be telling a "true" story about his life. The narrator of *Mon valet et moi* is a person infected with a fatal disease (possibly an element of autofiction). Yet the disease, albeit described in a very realistic manner, is never named and is easily attributed to old age—the narrator is supposedly eighty years old:

J'étais un homme sur le déclin. J'avais besoin d'un vrai garde du corps, quelqu'un qui me ramasse quand je tombe, m'habille, pince mes jambes quand elles s'engourdissent au point que je ne les sens plus. (12) Mon valet se lève . . . pour me regarder dormir, et voir si tout va bien, vérifier que ma respiration est régulière. . . . Il n'en parle jamais, mais j'ai compris qu'il a terriblement peur que je ne meure pendant la nuit au cours de mon sommeil, c'est pourtant ce qui pourrait m'arriver de mieux. . . . Il faut bien qu'un homme de quatre-vingts ans parte un jour.

I was a man on the decline. I needed a real body guard, someone to pick me up when I fall, dress me, pinch my legs when they go numb to the point that I no longer feel them. My valet gets up . . . to watch me sleep, and to see if everything is all right, to verify that my breathing is regular. . . . He never talks about it, but I have understood that he is terribly afraid I might die during the night in my sleep; this, however, is the best thing that could happen to me. . . . A man of eighty years old has to leave some day. (37)

The narrator's age, however, is consistently put into question throughout the novel: "Monsieur, c'est vrai que pour votre âge, si vous avez vraiment celui que vous prétendez, vous faites hyperjeune" 'Sir, its true that for your age, if you are really as old as you claim, you look really young' (19). Thus the veracity of the narrator's discourse is immediately subverted and cannot be considered reliable/realistic information, especially since we are in the year 2036 at the end of the novel.

The spectral image and *Mon valet et moi*

In *Mon valet et moi*, the spectral image is created from the fusion of the image (a fake body double) with the body-with-AIDS. The valet functions as the body double and is nothing more than an image who

appears throughout various modes of representation (e.g. cinema, literature, photography). First, in the dedication, as we have seen, he appears in a photo. Then, in an allusion to Russian paraliterature, he appears as a fictional character:

Les narrateurs des romans russes ont des valets qui dorment comme des chiens dans des vestibules traversés de courants d'air, aiguisent le fleuret de leurs duels et portent leurs vieux pardessus. Ce sont des ratés, souvent des doubles de leurs maîtres, qui auraient pu l'être à leur place.

The narrators of Russian novels have valets that sleep like dogs in vestibules traversed by currents of air, sharpen their dueling swords, and wear their old overcoats. They are losers, often the doubles of their masters, who could have been in their place. (*Mon valet* 12)

Finally, as an actor, he is said to have come to the narrator via the intermediary of cinema:

J'aurais dû avoir l'idée le premier: aller recruter mon valet à Mettray, et l'embaucher directement sans l'intermédiaire du cinéma, qui l'a sali, dit-il, et lui a appris à mentir.

I should have been the first to have the idea: to go recruit my valet in Mettray, and hire him directly without the intermediary of the cinema, which dirtied him, he says, and taught him to lie. (*Mon valet* 43)

The narrator decides to hire the valet because, as we saw above, he needs a "vrai garde du corps" 'a real body guard.' Significantly, throughout the novel, the valet begins to function as a double of the narrator. The narrator, disabled as a result of his disease, can no longer accomplish most everyday tasks and needs the valet to help him regain the bodily integrity he loses in the wake of his illness. Therefore, he constructs the image of the ideal valet or the body double. This representation of the double is further complicated by the Rabelaisian manner in which the narrator introduces him:

Au départ j'avais pensé embaucher, puisque ni mon secrétaire ni mon majordome ne pouvaient endosser *ce rôle*, et parce que je

pétais de plus en plus fort dans ces soirées mondaines où je n'allais presque plus, un jeune homme élégant *qui me suivrait pas à pas en public, mais ferait semblant de ne pas me connaître, comme un comparse de prestidigitateur*, et s'exercerait à rougir, à tousoter et à s'excuser discrètement *à ma place* chaque fois que je lâcherais un de ces vents pétaradants. *J'imaginai*, quand j'emmènerais ce jeune homme au restaurant pour me tenir compagnie après son travail, que *par un accord tacite nous serions convenus qu'il répondrait systématiquement* au maître d'hôtel qu'il n'avait aucunement faim, et que moi je brouillerais du bout des lèvres, comme pour ne pas m'y brûler, le nappage d'un plat très copieux, que je pousserais alors sur la table en direction de mon employé, qui le dévorerait goulûment. Malheureusement, rien ne s'est passé comme prévu.

In the beginning I had thought about hiring, since neither my secretary nor my majordomo could take on *this role*, and because I was farting more and more loudly at those social gatherings which I hardly went to anymore, a young elegant man *who would follow me step by step* in public, but *who would pretend not to know me, like a magician's assistant*, and who would practice blushing, coughing, and excusing himself discreetly *in my place* each time I released one of those spluttering winds. *I imagined*, when I would take this young man to a restaurant to keep me company after his work, that *by a tacit accord we would have agreed that he would respond systematically* to the headwaiter that he was not at all hungry, and that I would nibble with the edge of my lips, as if to not burn myself, the glazing of a very copious dish, which I would then push down the table in the direction of my employee, who would devour it gluttonously. Unfortunately, nothing happened as planned. (*Mon valet* 10; my emphasis)

The valet is an image meant to respond to and simulate the narrator's fictive reality. However, things don't work out exactly as planned because when the valet takes on his role of double, he surpasses the state of imitation and obedience originally imagined by the narrator. Much like the image in Baudrillard's sense (which only conforms to the real in order to better deform it), the valet begins to contaminate and modulate the narrator's life. First, the valet assumes all the tasks of daily life once carried out by the narrator: "Maintenant c'est mon valet qui gère l'ensemble de mes affaires" 'Now my valet

manages all my business matters' (28). Then, little by little, the valet takes control of the situation: "Mon valet . . . a dissimulé ou jeté presque tous mes livres préférés, que j'aimais tant relire, parce qu'il prétend qu'ils me donnent le cafard" 'My valet . . . has hidden or thrown away nearly all my favorite books, which I loved to reread so much, because he claims they depress me' (40). Finally, the valet deviates from his initial function so completely that he begins to abuse the narrator physically: "Il ne me parle plus, et ne répond plus à mes questions, sauf par des coups de pied" 'He no longer speaks to me, and no longer answers my questions, except by kicking me' (83). At the end of the novel, the valet has returned to his obedient function, yet the narrator pushes him to begin the series of mutations again by pretending not to know him and by giving him a new identity:

Je maugrée, pour le contrarier: 'Non, aucun souvenir. Qui es-tu? Je ne t'ai jamais vu par ici. Tu appartiens au corps des sapeurs-pompiers, c'est ça? Vous faites de la réanimation? Mais qui t'a ouvert la porte?—C'est moi, Monsieur, c'est Jim, votre valet.—Kim? C'est toi que j'ai trouvé en Thaïlande?' Je fais exprès de ne pas le reconnaître pour le pousser à bout. Quand il est à bout, il devient enfin intéressant. Il perd son exaspérante banalité.

I grumble, to annoy him: 'No, no memory. Who are you? I have never seen you around here. You belong to the fire brigade, is that it? Do you do resuscitation? But who opened the door for you?—Its me, Sir, its Jim, your valet.—Kim? Are you the one I found in Thailand?' I purposely do not recognize him to push him to the limit. When he is at the limit, he finally becomes interesting. He loses his exasperating banality. (*Mon valet* 90)

What we are witnessing here is a constant interplay of images in a mirror or, in other words, a viral proliferation of images.⁸ The valet himself is an image created from an image (the photo through which he is presented in the dedication). This proliferation of images, however, leads to an erasure of the writing subject. From one point of view, the image of the valet's body recomposes the body of the narrator—and decomposes it—by means of mass culture clothing (Nikes, Ray-Bans, baseball cap, and tight jeans). This costume is homogenous since it borrows from normative cultural stereotypes. It is also hyperreal since it mixes the real and the fake. The narrator's body, hidden behind a panoply of advertised clothing accessories, is no longer visible.⁹

Because it is no more than a mixture of styles and clichés, the body facilitates the shedding of the narrator's subjectivity, even while, paradoxically, it enables the subject's very existence (as a spectral image).¹⁰ The more the body-with-AIDS deteriorates from its illness, the more it depends on the proliferation of images that serve as body doubles. In other words, the spectral image cannot exist without the mediation of fake body doubles. These images allow the writing subject to subvert his fate (or death) while simulating his existence as a series of images. The status of the narrator is always problematic, since it depends on fake images (the simulacrum) to produce the text. Eventually, the narrator splits into two fictional characters: his valet and himself.

The disappearing portrait of the man in the red hat

In *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*, the treatment of autofiction adds a new dimension to the problematizing of the real and the fake. Although the reader could think that Guibert's text is more or less autobiographical, since he writes about his own illness and his own death, the descriptions of his body as well as those of objects (especially paintings) are always positioned outside reality. In the case of the child's portrait, the windowpane is a central element that serves as a screen between the original model (the child) and the represented object. It is a "portrait terreux—illisible" 'a muddy portrait—illegible' that bears the mark of a dead body:

Le tout petit portrait d'enfant posé par terre et entraperçu derrière la vitre, brumeux, terreux, presque illisible, m'a arrêté. La plupart des tableaux que j'ai finalement achetés et dont la possession n'a plus cessé de me donner du plaisir, je les ai découverts de très loin, derrière des jeux de vitre, et dans un mouvement qui m'empêchait d'arrêter mon regard sur eux pour bien les comprendre, j'étais assis dans l'autobus, je regardais la rue par la vitre, et soudain j'apercevais dans l'arrière fond obscur d'une librairie inconnue de la rue des Martyrs ce tableau du jeune Tartitius qui est devenu mon colocataire, mon room mate depuis 1987. Le tableau conquerrait de plein fouet mon désir. Je le reconnaissais comme un objet familier, une possession de toujours.

The tiny portrait of the child posed on the ground and glimpsed behind the windowpane, hazy, muddy, nearly illegible, stopped

me. Most of the paintings that I ended up buying, and whose possession never ceased to give me pleasure, I discovered from far away, behind windowpane effects, and in a movement that prohibited me from arresting my gaze on them in order to understand them well. I was sitting on the bus, looking at the street from the window, and suddenly I noticed in the shadowy back shop of an unknown bookstore on Martyrs street this painting of young Tartitius, who has become since 1987 my co-renter, my roommate. The painting conquered my desire like a whiplash. I recognized it as a familiar object, a possession of forever. (*L'Homme au chapeau rouge* 25)

As the dead body or the body-with-AIDS expresses itself by a pulsion of desire, desire is directed toward a painting which, in turn, becomes a fake body double (a roommate) of the lost or dead body. However, it is precisely this meeting with a (false) image designating death that causes the narrator to re-live. Much like Barthes's lover from the *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Guibert privileges the body as a "lieu d'apprentissage" 'a place of apprenticeship.'¹¹ Looking at the paintings, it is as if he were saying "ce qui rententit en moi, c'est ce que j'apprends avec mon corps. . . . le mot, l'image, la pensée agissent à la façon d'un coup de fouet. Mon corps intérieur se met à vibrer, comme secoué de trompettes qui se répondent et se recouvrent" 'What echoes in me is what I learn with my body. . . . the word, the image, the thought function like a whiplash. My inward body begins vibrating as though shaken by trumpets answering each other, drowning each other out' (*Fragments* 237, trans. Richard Howard). Here, the body becomes language and then text. As Raymond Bellour has pointed out, the image in Guibert "est devenue le lieu élu d'une vacillation qui se concentre autour du corps, de la figure: elle est avant tout figuration-défiguration des corps. . . . diluée, comme fragmentée, mais très vive et souvent d'une extrême violence, (l'image est) attachée au corps, à la pulsion, à la fois ce qui se dérobe et frappe au plus vif" 'has become the elected place of vacillation which concentrates itself around the body, the face: it is before anything figuration-defiguration of the body. . . . dilated, as if fragmented, yet very vivid and often of an extreme violence, (the image is) attached to the body, to a drive, at once that which conceals and strikes with force,' "Vérités et mensonges" (69).

The body-with-AIDS in itself is already a destroyed body. However, paradoxically, it is by means of the constant encounters with pain

and destruction that the body-with-AIDS can recognize itself, and then re-compose itself. Yet, although it can re-compose itself, it is always in proportions that surpass the real:

Ce n'était pas par masochisme, mais cette douleur me donnait une force extraordinaire, elle faisait de moi un colosse, un géant, non pas dans mon endurance à la supporter, mais parce qu'elle était devenue un instrument de connaissance de moi-même qui me grandissait dans chacune de mes pensées.'

It wasn't out of masochism, but this pain gave me an extraordinary strength; it made me a colossus, a giant, not in my endurance to tolerate it, but because it had become an instrument of knowledge about myself that expanded me in each one of my thoughts.' (*Chapeau rouge* 41)

Guibert's newly re-constructed body takes on gigantic dimensions reminiscent of Artaud's theatrical figures, which themselves are at the origin of a new principle of writing.¹² Indeed, Guibert's descriptions of the bodies (destroyed bodies, dying bodies, shadowy bodies glimpsed through windowpanes, fragmented bodies) seen in paintings are related to writing. Writing, like the body, is constantly associated with the fake. On two occasions, the narrator tells us that his manuscript has disappeared "Le peintre partit en emportant mon texte, dont je n'avais pas le double" 'The painter left, taking my text, of which I didn't have a double' (43); "Ces cinquante pages égarées, qui sont maintenant Dieu sait où, j'ai beau les connaître par coeur, je suis incapable de les refaire" 'Those fifty lost pages, which are now God knows where, try as I might to know them by heart, I am incapable of redoing them' 154).¹³ As readers, we begin to wonder where the original text is and if in fact it does exist. Moreover, the so-called real events that compose the narrative of *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* itself are another example of how writing is associated with the fake. This narrative is constantly deviating into the realm of the fake via the lie. First, the narrator lies to the two principal characters, Yannis and Lena, by not telling them that they are in fact "les modèles" 'the models' of his book. Then he lies to art brokers when he passes himself off as an American named Keith. He also lies to his best friend Jules in order to "screw" (*baiser*) him. In effect, the narrative as well as the characters are ravaged by a horror of the fake:

En buvant du café à la cuisine, car il n'y avait rien d'autre à faire qu'à allumer le feu et regarder la télévision, nous bavardâmes un peu avec Babette. Elle m'avoua que Yannis était parti dans un état d'agitation indescriptible, ravagé, c'est le mot qu'elle employa, par cette histoire de faux. 'Pourquoi ravagé?' demandai-je 'Parce qu'il semblerait, chuchota-t-elle, que ces trente faux qu'on a retrouvés, contrairement à ce que dit Yannis en les traitant d'horreurs absolues, sont en fait de purs chefs-d'oeuvres.

While drinking coffee in the kitchen, because there was nothing else to do except light the fire and watch television, we were talking a bit with Babette. She confessed to me that Yannis had left in a state of indescribable agitation, ravaged, that's the word she used, by this story of the fakes. 'Why ravaged?' I asked. 'Because it would seem, she whispered, that those 30 fakes they found, contrary to what Yannis says by treating them like absolute horrors, are in fact pure masterpieces. (*Chapeau rouge* 72)

Furthermore, the painter Yannis, suspected of having denounced his early (poorer quality) work in order to maintain his reputation and fame, becomes a double character: "Je pensai alors qu'un faux Yannis et son homme d'affaires mafioso, qui avaient peut-être mis sa ligne sur écoute et suivaient notre conversation, seraient là de toute façon . . . pour m'enlever et rançonner le vrai" 'I thought then that a fake Yannis and his mafia businessman, who had perhaps put a tap on his phoneline and were following our conversations, would be there at any rate . . . to kidnap me and ransom the real one' (62). In this game of fake-real (which is also the game of writing), the reader learns quickly that she or he cannot trust anything. Hervé Guibert, as Bellour notes, "trompe enfin ses lecteurs en ne leur avouant jamais comment et jusqu'à quel degré ils sont manipulés, dans ce balancement poreux entre vie et fiction, qui confère à l'invention les apparences de la vérité autobiographique et documentaire" 'deceives his readers by never confessing to them how and to what extent they are manipulated, in this porous balancing between life and fiction, which confers to invention the appearances of autobiographical and documentary truth, "Vérités et mensonges" (69).

In effect, it is by means of the documentary and/or quasi-photographic gaze that Guibert's writing functions (in the sense of interchangeability) as an image. The image precedes the real by reversing its logical succession, that is from the real to its reproduction. Guibert's

fiction, like an image, precedes the event it describes. According to Bellour, the real “serait presque avant que l’événement ne se produise, son double, son halo, sa prémonition: la phrase déjà prête à s’en emparer et à la métamorphoser” ‘would be, almost before the event could produce itself, its double, its halo, its premonition: the sentence already ready to seize it and metamorphosize it’ (“Trompe-la-mort” 54). The video Guibert takes of his own operation and its transformation into fiction is a good example of the real and its double, the hyperreal. The body-image here becomes more real than the real. Moreover, it is only by means of this fake-real that the text advances and exists:

Après avoir raccroché, je m’obstinaï à vouloir obtenir l’image. D’un seul coup elle était là sur l’écran, bleue, métallique, à la fois chaude et glacée, irréelle, insensément belle . . . Mais l’image s’était censurée d’elle-même à cause de la violente douche de lumière sur le champ opératoire, qui transformait la zone saignante et la boucherie en une zone abstraite, incandescente, comme un torrent de lumière qui jetait des rayons au niveau du cou. Avec tout un système de caches improvisé par les blouses des infirmiers qui s’interposaient entre l’angle voyeur et ce qu’on avait envie de regarder ou de ne pas voir une fois pour toutes, l’opération dissimulée de surcroît par le chirurgien et son assistante qui ressemblaient maintenant à des Martiens cannibales penchés sur leur festin, l’image était devenue d’elle-même hitchcockienne, à mort . . . Quand j’arrêtai la bande, ma douleur avait redoublé, et je me mis à écrire quelque chose de tout à fait inattendu.

After hanging up, I stubbornly insisted on wanting to obtain the image. Suddenly it was there on the screen, blue, metallic, at once hot and icy, unreal, insanely beautiful. . . . But the image in itself was censored because of the violent shower of light on the operating table, which transformed the bloody zone and the butchering into an abstract zone, incandescent, like a torrent of light that was throwing rays at neck level. With an entire system of screens improvised by the nurses coats, which posed themselves between the viewing angle and what one wanted to see or to not see once and for all, the operation further dissimulated by the surgeon and his assistant who now resembled cannibalistic Martians bending over their feast, the image had become in itself ultra-Hitchcockian. When I stopped the film, my pain had redoubled,

and I began to write something completely unexpected. (*Chapeau rouge* 42-43)

Alongside numerous references to the image, Guibert's writing functions much like a camera: the spectral image, floating between two extremities, is momentarily frozen in what Guibert calls "des postures de récit" 'postures of narrative' (62). In this way, it exemplifies Barthes's description of photography, insofar as photography constructs and deconstructs a body according to its own "caprice": "Photography represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter" (14).

It comes as no surprise when, at the end of the novel, we realize there is no subject behind "l'homme au chapeau rouge" 'the man in the red hat': the narrator—alternately depicted as "le grand homme trop maigre au chapeau rouge" 'the tall and overly thin man in the red hat,' (30); "le squelette avec son chapeau rouge" 'the skeleton with his red hat' (120); "une silhouette noire surmontée d'une tache rouge" 'a black silhouette topped by a red spot' (150)—is ultimately nothing more than a fractal image, a self-effacing spectral image of death.

Photographic writing and the body-with-AIDS permit Hervé Guibert to suspend time—immobilize it—so as to modulate it, in order to control the fear of death. However, the figure of death—the spectral image—is always present; it is the leitmotif that haunts the text. What is remarkable about Guibert is that the production of texts ends up replacing the dead body according to a principle of fractal representation. This new body-of-writing, composed of objects, fetishes, images, paintings, photos and videos, becomes more real than the real; it is the primitive theater of death.¹⁴

Notes

1. For Linda Hutcheon, a "hybridizing mix" of fact and fiction is "more than a blurring of boundaries between the two; rather the borders are kept clear, even if they are frequently crossed" (37).

2. See Baudrillard's "The Year 2000 Has Already Happened" in *Body Invaders*, Cecile Lindsay's "Lyotard and the Postmodern Body" in *L'Esprit Createur*, and Martine Antle's "Le surréalisme des années vingt devant la critique postmoderne" in *Oeuvres et Critiques*.

3. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

4. *Nouvel Observateur*. February 20-26, 1992. 85.

5. As of now, there is no term in English for the “corps sidaïque.” People with AIDS are generally referred to as PWA’s. See “Portraits of People with AIDS” in *Discourses of Sexuality*.

6. Susan Sontag tells us that in accounts of AIDS, infection is described like high-tech warfare. She cites the following account from *Time* magazine: “‘On the surface of that cell, it finds a receptor into which one of its envelope proteins fits perfectly, like a key into a lock. Docking with the cell, the virus penetrates the cell membrane and is stripped of its protective shell in the process. . . .’ Next the invader takes up permanent residence, by a form of alien takeover familiar in science-fiction narratives. The body’s own cells *become* the invader. With the help of an enzyme the virus carries with it ‘the naked AIDS virus converts its RNA into . . . DNA, the master molecule of life. The molecule then penetrates the cell nucleus, inserts itself into a chromosome and takes over part of the cellular machinery, directing it to produce more AIDS viruses. Eventually, overcome by its alien product, the cell swells and dies, releasing a flood of new viruses to attack other cells. . . .’” (*AIDS and Its Metaphors* 18).

7. See Baudelaire’s cult of images in *Mon coeur mis à nu*.

8. This becomes even more striking when the narrator says: “Quand nous sortons ensemble dans les rues de Bangkok, mon valet et moi, une fois que le déluge a cessé, j’ai l’illusion de nous voir en permanence dans un grand miroir qu’un esclave porterait sur son dos en sautillant devant nous. Je nous distingue lui et moi, avec nos habillements semblables, et parfois, je n’arrive plus à savoir si c’est lui à gauche, ou moi à droite, comme si nous étions une seule personne dédoublée. Parfois aussi je nous surprends dans le miroir transformés en femmes . . . je porte des lunettes noires panoramiques entièrement opaques, je sais que j’ai quatre-vingts ans, mais de loin j’ai l’air d’en avoir dix-huit, cette vision n’a pas fini de m’enchanter” “When my valet and I go out together in the streets of Bangkok, once the deluge has stopped, I have the illusion of seeing us permanently in a large mirror which a slave would carry on his back while hopping around in front of us. I perceive us with our similar outfits, and often I can no longer tell if it is him to the left, or myself to the right, as if we were one person doubled. Also, I often surprise us in the mirror transformed into women. . . . I am wearing black panoramic glasses, entirely opaque, I know I am 80 years old, but from afar, I look like an 18-year-old; this vision has not stopped enchanting me” (60).

9. The narrator, in reference to his valet and his clothing, says “J’ai toujours été habile à tromper mon monde. Mon valet et moi, nous passons quasi inaperçus. Nous avons l’air de deux jeunes comme les autres, de deux frères.

J'ai quatre-vingts ans mais en voyage je porte des chaussures de tennis Nike rembourrées, des jeans serrés, des blousons de cuir, mes Ray Ban cachent mes pattes-d'oie et ma casquette les raccords de bistouri des liftings. . . . J'ai l'impression de vivre une nouvelle jeunesse" "I have always been skilful in deceiving my crowd. My valet and I pass almost unnoticed. We look just like any of the other young people, like two brothers. I am 80 years old, but when I travel, I wear well-padded Nike tennis shoes, tight jeans, leather jackets; my Ray Bans hide my crow's-feet and my cap the touch-ups of the surgeon's knife from facelifts. . . . I have the impression of living a new youth' (15).

10. It is in this context that the narrator's different ages can be understood.

11. Barthes tells us that the lover is not to be reduced to a "symptomal subject," but rather that we understand him/her as "the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose . . . what in the straining body can be immobilized" (4).

12. For a discussion of Artaud's theatrical figures and writing, see Dominique Fisher's "L'Abstrait et le concret d'Artaud."

13. This also occurs in *Mon valet et moi*. For example, "Je dicte mon livre à mon valet, il prend en note docilement tout ce que je lui ordonne d'écrire, et ne fait aucun commentaire, ensuite je relis pour vérifier s'il n'a rien censuré" 'I dictate my book to my valet, he docilely takes down in notes everything I order him to write, and makes no commentary, then I reread to verify that he has censored nothing' (86).

14. I am referring to Barthes's *Tableau Vivant*: "However 'lifelike' we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (*Camera Lucida* 31-32). The same could be said of Guibert's writing.

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