



**Élise Hugueny-Léger, *Projections de soi. Identités et images en mouvement dans l'autofiction* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2022, ISBN: 9782729713799).**

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Playing on the double meaning of the word *projection*, this book explores the multiple relationships between the French literary genre of autofiction and the moving image. Élise Hugueny-Léger, a researcher of contemporary French literature and a specialist of the work of Annie Ernaux, departs from the idea that autofictional writing is a form of psychological projection, wherein a self-image is being cast onto the page. In a more literal sense, the word projection refers to the cinematic technique of showing moving images on a screen. Several francophone authors known for their autofiction have also been involved in audiovisual productions, but earlier criticism has largely limited itself to studying their literary output. By addressing this rich and complex subject matter, Hugueny-Léger makes a valuable and original contribution to the field of francophone life-writing studies.

The book opens with a discussion of the debates surrounding the concept of *autofiction*, a notion famously coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 and which, according to some, simply designates contemporary autobiographical fiction. Hugueny-Léger, however, subscribes to the idea that autofiction marks a move away from traditional autobiographical writing as it was defined by Philippe Lejeune in the 1970s. She states that autofiction has emerged as a distinct literary genre over the last few decades, as the artistic expression of a socio-cultural context marked by increasing individualism, the emancipation of women, the democratisation of writing, and the rise of visually oriented new media which allow for new forms of self-expression. Hugueny-Léger thus contends that autofiction is in essence an intermedial artistic

approach; its authors tend to construct their self-image or authorial posture not only through the literary text but also through all sorts of media outlets.

Through a number of interesting and well-written case studies, Hugueny-Léger intends to demonstrate the numerous types of connections that exist between autofictional writing and the moving image. Her aim is to understand the role of moving images in the self-conception of the modern subject, and the possibilities they may offer for narrating one's experience. In the first place, she notes how for many writers, the cinema has shown the way to the (re)invention of the self, or to the representation of a fractured identity through techniques of montage and assemblage. It seems that the essence of the autofictional genre lies in its conscious dealing with fundamental contemporary issues such as the digital revolution and the questioning of identities. The title of her book subtly indicates that not only images are moving, but so are the identities that are being expressed in the autofictional work. In the words of Hugueny-Léger, 'L'autofiction fait du rapport au réel, du règne des apparences, de l'éclatement du sujet, des projections de soi dans le virtuel ou l'imaginaire, le sujet même des textes' (26).

The writers studied in this book range from canonical figures from the recent past such as Marguerite Duras to lesser-known authors whose oeuvres are still work in progress. Hugueny-Léger has carefully selected both male and female authors, in a conscious attempt to counter the widespread idea that autofiction is an essentially feminine genre. The book starts with the influence of the cinema on the theoretical underpinnings of life-writing in the works of the *nouveaux romanciers* Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras. Although, technically speaking, their major work predates the 'invention' of autofiction, it is relevant in the context of this study because of their fundamental questioning of conventional literary representations of reality, and the importance of the cinema in their work. This chapter also contains an analysis of the posture of Marguerite Duras in her television appearances.

The book then goes on to explore the various forms of integration of audiovisual elements in literary texts, with case studies on authors such as Camille Laurens, Emmanuel Carrère and Georges Perec. The recurring motif of the quest in the work of the latter underlines a fundamental feature of the autofictional text: the staging of a search for an elusive (former) self. The interplay between the textual and the cinematographic in the works of Perec and of conceptual artist Sophie Calle is shown to be a powerful creative instrument which opens up reflections on the problematics of life-writing.

In one of the strongest chapters in this book, Hugueny-Léger looks at film adaptations. She shows a particular interest in films that take a metafictional stance,

since this is also typical of a great deal of autofictional writing, most notably that of Annie Ernaux. After discussing Ernaux's rejection of the label autofiction, Hugueny-Léger convincingly demonstrates the relevance of this notion to the study of *L'Occupation*, a story about jealousy and obsession that contains numerous instances of visual and cinematographic language. The protagonist is conscious of experiencing reality through the projection of images and film scripts onto her own story. She calls this interior movie an 'autofiction permanente' (Ernaux 21), the only occurrence of this word in Ernaux's literary work. It designates the way in which the mind uses images to represent the past and the future, in an attempt to take control of the situation. At the same time, the flux of images also creates a sense of chaos and alienation; more than writing, the moving image underlines the internal conflicts and the instability of the subject. In their film *L'Autre*, which is loosely based on *L'Occupation*, Patrick Mario Bernard and Pierre Trividic transpose the theme of obsession to the dominant visual leitmotifs of (computer and television) screens and mirrors as a way to signify the omnipresence of modern technologies and the fragmentation of the subject.

The final chapter of the book deals with the ways literary authors manifest themselves as public figures through the mass media. Hugueny-Léger draws a number of interesting parallels between literature and television, without going so far as to subscribe to the view that autofiction is the literary equivalent of reality TV. She shows that writers are very conscious of the challenges and opportunities presented by celebrity culture, and that the literary text is a space where these issues can be explored in a playful and/or critical manner. These reflections culminate in an in-depth analysis of Delphine de Vigan's novel *D'après une histoire vraie*. As the title indicates, this novel manipulates the reader's expectations with regard to the autobiographical nature of the story. It weaves a complex web of relations between fiction and reality, between the text and the world outside the text. Thus, De Vigan proves the creative potential of a critical engagement with the mechanisms of self-projection through the media.

By providing a thorough exploration of the various connections between autofictional writing and the moving image, *Projections de soi* underlines the rich creative potential and cultural relevance of a genre that is too often criticized for its alleged nombrilism or even narcissism. An extreme example of this hostile - and often misogynistic - attitude to autofiction was seen when the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* reported on the attribution of the highest literary honour to Annie Ernaux in November 2022 with the headline 'Annie Ernaux, Prix Nobel de littérature: Et si c'était nul?' ('What if it was rubbish?'). I believe that Elise Hugueny-Léger's book provides the perfect refutation of this contemptuous suggestion, as it convincingly

demonstrates the cultural relevance and artistic innovation the genre of autofiction brings to the current literary field in France and beyond.

### Works Cited

Ernaux, Annie, *L'Occupation*, Paris: Gallimard, 2002.