

Article

Representation of the Self and Disease: Writing, Photography and Video in Hervé Guibert

Marta Sábado Novau

INCAL (Institut de Civilisations, Arts et Lettres), CRI (Centre de Recherche de l'imaginaire),
Faculté de Philosophie, Arts et Lettres, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium;
marta.sabado@uclouvain.be

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Abstract: Hervé Guibert (1955–1991), a French writer and photographer, began developing a double artistic practice in 1977. In 1988, he discovers he has HIV and his literary and photographic works begin to reflect each other in an attempt to tell the story of a disease whose progression proves uncontrollable and ultimately fatal. Hervé Guibert then undertakes an intensive self-examination of his body and of the changes imposed on it by the disease, using both writing and images (photography and video). At the same time, he carries out a theoretical reflection on the limits of the image and on the limits of writing, both complementing each other in an attempt to convey the experience of disease. His work thus offers a valuable ground for exploring the relationship between literature, photography and the story of disease and, most of all, the need to resort to these two modes of expression in order to communicate the intimate experience of illness. In Hervé Guibert, this experience can be understood through the tension between unveiling and exposing oneself. While the former is creative, the latter seems to be the result of the illness loss of control. This article aims to analyze this dialectical tension in light of three artistic mediums used by Guibert.

Keywords: Hervé Guibert; disease; autofiction; AIDS/HIV; creation process; photography and literature; self-representation; reality and fantasy

Among the numerous perspectives by which the work of Hervé Guibert can be approached, representation of the self is one of the most fruitful¹. From the beginning of his creative production with *La mort propagande* (Guibert 1977), the writer puts himself on stage and imagines his body in states pushed to the limits. Similarly, at the start of his activity as a photographer—which Guibert modestly calls an amateur one—the author reveals his fascination for the body, often convoluted from its ordinary uses and representations. His first texts and photos respond to and complement each other in a non-conflictual way, both in their themes and in their forms, which led Frédérique Poinat to evoke the “Siamese work” of Hervé Guibert (Poinat 2008). This metaphor invites us to conceive Guibert's literary and photographic creative experience as a unity: yet, each form of expression retains its own particularity.

This article will focus on the changes that came about in the representation of the self and of the body when Guibert learned of his seropositivity in 1988. It is not only a question of merely observing how autofiction and self-portraits are modified by the experience of disease and the changes it imposes on the body, but also of trying to understand how the reality imposed by AIDS profoundly troubled an

¹ The main secondary bibliography on Guibert examines his work through the problematic of identity (Boulé 2001) and the way its penetrated by the different media he uses (Genon 2007). The way AIDS influences Guibert's creation is mostly taken into account. Some studies, such as Frédérique Poinat (2008) chose to concentrate on Guibert's photographic work. The problem with the representation of the self is its connection to the issue of physical and corporal identity and the role of each medium to express it. For an overview on Guibert's critical bibliography, the reader can also go to www.herveguibert.net where Arnaud Genon summarises everything that has been written about the French author.

artistic project structured largely around the fantasies of performing oneself. My hypothesis is that the HIV/AIDS infected body is already in itself a borderline experience and that this reality principle collides with Guibert's original fantasies that have to do with body, eroticism and death. In an interview for a Belgian newspaper, shortly before he died, Guibert confessed: "Quelque part, j'avais écrit dans mon journal, avant de savoir que j'étais malade: "Mort du sida. Indication superbe d'une biographie"" ("Somewhere I had written in my diary, before knowing that I was ill, "Died of AIDS. Superb indication for a biography""") (Guibert 1990b). How does Guibert manage, while infected with HIV, to turn AIDS into a source of creation based on fantasies when it can no longer be a fantasy because it has become real? What aesthetic (textual and iconographic) changes allow Hervé Guibert to continue to fantasize about a borderline body even though AIDS had imposed a reality upon him that seemed to prevent any sort of fantasy?

A first step toward answering these questions can already be taken by considering the literary genre practiced by Guibert—autofiction—through which it will be necessary to read the subsequent analyses. This genre is characterized by the voluntary confusion between reality and fiction in favor of another category, that which is "true," and I might add, that which is "true for" someone². Autofiction therefore presents itself as an integrating discourse allowing for dimensions of self that appear at first to be conflicting (such as the opposition between reality and fantasy) to be reunited. The transparent recourse to this narrative device (or genre) in Guibert's work seems, for this reason, to lend itself particularly well to the telling of the experience of disease, which is fundamentally an experience of diffraction of the self. Indeed, for the philosopher Claire Marin, "unique to disease, is the act of making a first fictional experience, our belief in a form of continuity, a kind of duration that provides the bedrock of our identity, disappear" (Marin 2014, p. 9)³. Disease damages the link that a subject establishes with his or herself. This identitarian link has a "fictional" nature, that is to say, it is partly based on fantasy. Or, to put it another way, disease disrupts the existential and identitarian sense of continuity based, in part, on the bodily experience that each one has of his or herself; disease brings out its contingent nature. The work of Guibert, developing in a space mandated by the rules of autofiction, occupies a space where identity is, from the onset, perceived as a construction that combines fantasy and reality and that seems capable of reestablishing the link broken by disease. But what is made possible through creation? And what issues are raised?

Let us focus, first of all, on the "original" fantasies of the Guibertian works that serve to demarcate the writer's imaginary realm and that are necessarily transformed in order to face the reality of disease.

1. First Fantasies: Unveiling and Fragmentation

At first, in Guibert's imaginary realm, there is a desire for unveiling that goes through writing and the body (its performance), as well as the imbrication of each and the other in what Ralph Sarkonak called Hervé Guibert's "textual body" ("corps textuel") (Sarkonak 1997). But this staging of oneself is above all a writing performance, and in the act of unveiling, there is always at the same time a veiling, in which autofiction participates. As if in anticipation, *La mort propagande* contains the seed for the theme of unveiling, in its ambiguous and provocative nature, that would never cease to be exploited in his work. Thereby, for example, in his first story, the young writer exposes his fantasized desire to unveil his body to others: "Mon corps est un laboratoire que j'offre en exhibition" ("My body

² This definition of autofiction is inspired by the work of Guibert, particularly in its relation to fantasy deployed in his texts (for an overview of the role of fantasy in the writer's literary work and creative process, see the study of Cavallo 2016), though we must remember that autofiction was born with the novel *Fils* (Dobrovsky 1977) by Serge Dobrovsky, published the same year as *La mort propagande*. Dobrovsky defines autofiction as "fiction, of events and of strictly real facts" (Dobrovsky 1977, p. 9, my translation). The book of Samé (2013) inscribes Guibert's works in this literary tradition. For an overview of the different meanings and uses of this term, see Colonna (2004) and the numerous works of Gasparini (2004, 2008, 2016).

³ My translation.

is a laboratory that I offer on display”) (Guibert 1977, p. 171)⁴. This display is played out in an intermediary space, neither real nor fictive, incarnated by writing. Words, in crudely naming the body, display it. Detailed by words, rendered present by descriptions, a textual body exposes itself: this is the performative power of language. However, according to his own declarations, Guibert was actually very coy: “je suis quelqu’un qui, depuis que je suis enfant, se cache, qui cache son corps, [...] je cache, je ne me déshabille pas” (“I am someone who, since I was a child, has hidden, hidden his body, [...] I hide, I don’t undress”) (Guibert 1992b, p. 146). Conversely, in the text, an unveiling is desired and realized, which confirms the hypothesis that fantasies can be sublimated through writing. Autofiction, while it undertakes veiling, it is also a genre where personal fantasies come to unveil themselves through writing and allow for the subject to construct itself. Indeed, in putting his body “at stake in narrations, situations, relationships”, Hervé Guibert becomes “his own character” (Guibert, *ibid.*, p. 145). A narrative voice is born; it comes into being in the performance of the self; it becomes both the subject and object of its discourse. In *La Mort propagande*, both an erotic and thanatological desire pervades this fantasy of a body exposed, a body viewed. A few lines further on, the text seeks to show death in the body: “Me donner la mort sur scène, devant des caméras. Donner ce spectacle extrême, excessif de mon corps dans ma mort. En choisir les termes, le déroulement, les accessoires” (“Taking my own life on stage, in front of cameras. Giving this extreme and excessive viewing of my body at my death. Chose the terms, the proceedings, the accessories”) (Guibert 1977, p. 184)⁵. In the early fantasies of his youth, death and eroticism combine into a certain fantasy of exhibitionism.

Naming the body in this anatomic precision seems, in a way, to parcel it, to fragment it in a process that is not without resonance with a certain fetishism in which a part is detached from a whole. All the while being intimately and indissociably linked to the ego (it is at every moment part of “my body” [mon corps]), the narrator experiences a fascination for all that can be *detached* from his body: fluids, noises, or body parts that appear fetishized. Given the extreme attention that the young writer gives to his body, the subject seems to divide in a dissociation evocative of the division of “self” inflicted upon the diseased subject. This fragmentation of the body into parts would later be reinvested as one of the aesthetic means for telling the diseased body, as we will see.

Shortly after this first publication, Guibert takes on a photographic project behind the scenes of three museums in which the human body is exposed: le Musée Grévin, le Musée de l’Histoire de l’Homme à Paris, and la Specola in Florence. The project results in a series of black and white photographs in which parts of the human body (hands, legs, heads, busts) appear detached, inanimate, creating an effect of unsettling strangeness (see Figure 1). The eye of the young photographer lingers not only on detached members of wax figures, but also on the models that expose the insides of the body: veins, tendons, muscles. This is similar to *La Mort propagande* whereby the photographic work explores a body exposed, in pieces, at the border between living and dead.

⁴ This and all future translations of Guibert are my own.

⁵ These lines are troubling when we think of the scene played out by Guibert in the documentary *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* (Guibert 1992c) in which he pretends to take his own life on camera, playing out a youth fantasy, even though in reality, the writer’s death is imminent. This correspondence, like many others, links the beginning of his work to the end, and confirms that fantasies have a chronological continuity and coherence in Guibert’s work, despite the different experiences the artist endures. I will come back to this documentary at the end of this article.



Figure 1. Untitled (La Specola, Florence), 1978.

2. The Body Exposed by Force: From Unveiling to Exposure

When, about ten years later, the writer learned of his seropositivity, these fantasies of unveiling would be confronted with reality. With AIDS, the exposure of the body is *forced*: during medical exams, operations and blood tests. The dynamic of self-exposure goes from *fantasy*, in which the exposure is active on the part of the subject, to the *real*, in which the subject is passive. The *real* here expresses itself firstly through a change in the lived: the dream of unveiling becomes the nightmare of nudity⁶.

At the beginning of his first novel on AIDS, the issue of nudity appears as a symbol of the writer's new identity as a sick person: "j'ai senti mon sang, tout à coup, découvert, mis à nu [...]. Il me fallait vivre, désormais, avec ce sang dénudé et exposé, comme le corps dévêtu qui doit traverser un cauchemar" ("I felt my blood, all the sudden, discovered, stripped naked [...]. I had to live, from then on, with this naked exposed blood, like the undressed body that has to go through a nightmare") (Guibert 1990a, p. 14). Guibert himself establishes the link between the unprotection that HIV inflicts on the blood and on the whole body of the individual, which leaves him/her exposed. AIDS unprotects the body, which is stripped naked by force. Nakedness as a motif, and the inhibiting negative charge it deploys, is opposed to that of the unveiling which has, in Guibert's writing, a creative, positive connotation. While nudity is imposed, unveiling is voluntary. While nudity is a state, unveiling is an action. While nudity is still, unveiling is in movement. The dynamic of unveiling arouses desire. Nudity kills all potential for imagination.

À *l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990a) and *Le protocole compassionnel* (1991), the first two novels of his autofictional trilogy on AIDS (*L'Homme au chapeau rouge* would follow posthumously in (Guibert 1992a)) can be considered as attempts to recover a desire for unveiling despite the fact that nudity has been imposed. In these books, the gesture of unveiling acquires an intimate, personal dimension, but also a collective, even political dimension. At the beginning of the 1990s in France, Guibert's literary imagination, by choosing the gesture of unveiling in order to face the AIDS experience, also involves an act that can be considered as a "coming out" of the disease. One can thus conceive that the unveiling

⁶ The bibliography on Guibert and AIDS is abundant. There are two main perspectives through which it is explored: literary, and psychoanalytically. For a literary perspective, the reader can see the articles of Brad Epps and Derek Duncam, both published in Sarkonak's book (Sarkonak 1997) mentioned at the beginning. For a psychoanalytical approach, see Gardey (2001) and Grimaldi (2001).

of oneself, which, in previous works, was of the order of a personal universe, will be accompanied, from this moment, by a greater social and collective dimension given by AIDS. Hence, the intimate is tied to the common.

Thus, the act of taking control by unveiling begins by allowing us to see the functioning of the infected blood. The author would long linger on his texts about the routine blood tests he had to endure and would have the reader follow the fluctuations in his T4 levels, his gamma globulin, his P24 antigens and his white blood cells. In the attention paid to the changes of the components of his blood and to “this fight inside [him]” («cette lutte à l’intérieur [de lui]») (Guibert 1990a, p. 48), the writer shows how disease is a phenomenon that the subject has no hold over. Yet, Guibert will try to transform this experience into an active—and therefore creative—one. The reality is the same, but it is the creative discourse that imaginatively accompanies blood tests that successfully reverses the experience of nudity and loss of self-control towards a chosen act of unveiling. Even if the disease continues its misdeeds, it is through writing that Guibert regains power over this experience. Writing about blood, unveiling its components in a poetic way, is therefore also a way of unveiling the inside of oneself and of turning the *passivity* imposed by illness into *activity*. For him, “la prise de sang c’est l’intérieur du corps qui sort et qui est visible, [...] c’est vraiment de l’ordre de l’intimité...” (“the blood test is the inside of the body coming out, made visible, [...] it’s really about intimacy...”) (Guibert 1992b, p. 140). The fantasy of an unveiled body and the idea of an organic laboratory offered up to the eyes of others is depicted in the exposure of this sick blood. It seems that in this unprotected blood that he has not chosen, Guibert chooses to reinvest his early fantasies of a body that is offered on display.

In addition to this exhibition, the fantasy of fragmentation continues and finds a form of continuity. The experience of disease literally fragments the body and imposes a new topography that the writer would attempt to re-appropriate by integrating a sort of medical lexicon. The inspection that the doctor performs on the patient breaks his body into multiple zones, some of which had been unknown or overlooked by the subject, and which seem to acquire an existence of their own beyond the body that serves as their base: “arches of feet,” “notches of skin between the toes,” “ureter,” “groin,” “abdomen,” “underarms,” “uvula,” etc. (Guibert 1990a, p. 19). The experience of disease as well as the medical examinations performed do indeed provoke a dissociating effect between the subject and his or her body: “j’avais lancé mon corps dans quelque chose qui le dépossédait apparemment d’une volonté autonome” (“I had thrown my body into something that apparently dispossessed it of free will”) (Guibert 1990a, p. 221). The body is depersonalized, and its will, which belongs to the soul, appears to be disempowered. In this experience, a clear echo can be heard with the fantasy of a body broken apart. However, while in *La mort propagande*, the attention given to the detached parts was of an erotic nature, or even in the order of a certain lure toward fetishism, with AIDS this fragmentation becomes exclusively a sign of death. In *Le protocole compassionnel*, the narrator perceives his own body through the gaze of the other as “remains” [“dépouille”] that it is no longer possible to apprehend in their entirety, but merely as “parcels” [“par parcelle[s]”] (Guibert 1991, p. 184). The part detached from the whole is no longer a source of erotic pleasure.

This parceling of the body would then be transposed into the body of the text, as a means for Guibert to take back control through writing this experience of self-disintegration. The use of medical vocabulary contaminates and, in a way, breaks the literary text, but in doing so, also reestablishes an equilibrium between the body and the disease that has infiltrated it. Writing the experience of disease and the mastery of its lexicon therefore take on an integrating and reuniting function. In the text and in its language, the overtaking of the act of scission and of depersonalization is played out. In *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*, the author himself establishes this parallel between the sick body and a textual corpus, notably through the contamination of the virus “T.B.” in reference to the writer Thomas Bernhard whom he read assiduously during the writing of the book and whose style influenced him greatly. Guibert turns it into a metaphor for communicating the collision between two linguistic bodies: “Un diable s’est glissé dans les soutes: T.B. Je me suis arrêté de le lire pour stopper l’empoisonnement. On dit que chaque réinjection du virus du sida par fluides, le sang, le sperme ou les larmes, réattaque

le malade déjà contaminé” (“A devil has slipped into the holds: T.B. I stopped reading him to stop the poisoning. They say that each reinjection of the AIDS virus in fluids, blood, sperm or tears, re-attacks the already contaminated ill”) (Guibert 1990a, p. 12). The medical vocabulary clothes the literary text, renders its unexpected poetic force, all the while expressing a feeling of strangeness specific to illness.

An isomorphic relationship between the body of the writer and the body of the text can also be detected, as the book, divided into 100 chapters, accounts for the feeling of the body’s dissolution engendered by the disease. *À l’ami* corresponds, from a formal perspective, to an image from *La mort propagande* in which the young Guibert imagines his “corps en décomposition, jour après jour, éclaté sous le feu, étalé, cloué, exposé, mimant le supplice des *cent morceaux* dans un jeu de masques chinois” (“body in decomposition, day after day, shattered under fire, spread out, nailed down, exposed, mimicking the agony of the *thousand cuts* in a game of Chinese masks”) (Guibert 1977, p. 182). Once the disease has ravaged the body, the fantasy is transformed and affects not only the imagined body, but also the textual body that becomes its incarnation.

Altogether, we can say that the representation of self in writing manages to affront the challenges of illness. It easily inserts itself onto the imaginary sphere of Hervé Guibert and onto his original fantasies. The fragmentation of the body imposed by disease, and the physical tests that it implies, find continuity and manage to reinvest themselves in the fantasy of unveiling the self and the body. Writing the disease allows desire to be revived, and to position itself, despite everything, on the side of the living. This is perhaps due to the nature of language, since for Guibert, “les mots sont beaux, les mots sont justes, les mots sont victorieux” (“words are beautiful, words are just, words are victorious”) (Guibert 1992b, p. 142). Or to put it another way, it is in words that each individual carries the responsibility of his or her imagination; words are what sustain and ensure the success of each individual’s fantasies. In the following sections, we will see that this is not the case for images.

3. Self-Portrait I: From Self-Identification to Self-Scission

Parallel to his writing, at the beginning of the 1980s, Guibert also did a series of self-portraits that resonate as the iconographic equivalent of autofiction. In both cases, art is a means by which the subject can invent himself by projecting and anchoring an image of self. This is especially true for Guibert, who confesses that it is difficult for him to imagine “d’autres personnages que [lui]” (“other characters than [himself]”) (Guibert 1985, p. 47). Just as I did for his writing, I would now like to observe in what way the writer portrays himself in his early photographs and how this relationship to self, based on personal fantasies, is modified aesthetically (or not) as the disease sets in. If in the first part of this article I asserted that disease forces fantasies to collide with the reality principle, this is even more true when considering a medium in which the body is not written but photographed and in which words yield their primacy to images. As we will see, for Guibert, images are more violent, less flexible than writing, and illness would modify his relationship to the photographic practice. We can thereby reflect not only upon the experience of disease, but also on the characteristics of images and of writing as means of expression.

Let us note, first of all, as Boulé and Genon (Boulé and Genon 2015, pp. 217–18) already have in commenting the Guibertian self-portrait, that this form of self-representation is historically marked by an imaginary of death. Guibert voluntarily inscribes himself in this tradition (as we observed in his first texts as well as in his first reflections on photography, the representation of the self *by the self* is marked by the fantasy of death). In the chapter “Photomaton” [Photobooth] in *L’Image fantôme* (Guibert 1981), the writer explains how he orders a “funereal medallion” with his photo ID (Guibert 1981, p. 61). In the chapter “Autoportraits” [Self-portraits], he long lingers on the master of this genre, Rembrandt, and describes his fascination for a painting in which the painter appears as a “vieillard qui se fond dans une ombre de cercueil en s’accrochant à l’outil de sa création” (“an old man who melts into a coffin-like shadow clinging onto the tool used for his creation”) (Guibert 1981, p. 65) Guibert concludes: “Je m’y identifiais. Mes propres autoportraits, je les aurais voulus ainsi” (“I identified with it. I would have wanted my own self-portraits to be like that”) (Guibert, *ibid.*). This was in 1981: the

death drive is attractive because it is in the fantasy territory, as is shown by the conditional tense used to express a desire, a projection. But how can he continue to make the death drive a source of creative inspiration, when death is no longer a horizon but a fatality? His later self-portraits will explore this tension: Guibert's "narcissism", profoundly linked to death, will have to be rearranged.

In the first shots dating back to the beginning of the 1980s, Guibert often sat in front of a mirror (see Figure 2). His image is delimited by the mirror's frame, like a stage onto which his image is projected. The mirror, in sending back his reflection, makes him both the subject and the object of the gaze. Although the mirror can be seen as at the origin of a doubling of the self, in these first self-portraits, the mirror seems to showcase a non-conflictual doubling. Indeed, in these shots, the mirror sends the subject's own image back to him in an identical correspondence between the subject seen and the subject who sees. However, the trial of illness transforms the mirror from an integrating device into a divisive one. Numerous pages of *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and *Le protocole compassionnel* make reference to it, but let us cite a passage that describes the subject in front of a bathroom mirror, a scene that emerges on several occasions in Guibert's work (the 1981 self-portrait and in the book, as well as in the documentary *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*). For the ill subject, this moment of recognition and of positive self-construction is transformed into the expression of a scission: "Un immense miroir [...] tapissait tout le mur au-dessus du lavabo [...]. Cette confrontation tous les matins avec ma nudité dans la glace était une expérience fondamentale, chaque jour renouvelée, je ne peux pas dire que cette perspective m'aidait à m'extraire de mon lit. Je ne peux pas dire non plus que j'avais de la pitié pour ce type" ("an enormous mirror [...] covered the entire wall above the sink [...]. This confrontation every morning with my nakedness in the mirror was a fundamental experience, each day renewed, I can't say that this prospect helped drag myself out of bed. But I can't say that I felt pity for the guy either" (Guibert 1990a, p. 18). Illness turns the mirror into a motor for dissociation. The process is clearly marked by the passage from the first person to the third person singular. The mirror is no longer the place where the subject recognizes him or herself and constructs his or her identity, but a space in which it is shattered. The mirror is no longer a space of projection, where the subject *chooses* to unveil his or herself. The image of the naked body seems to disarm it, preventing any attempt at self-construction. Guibert has to put up with an "old man's body" («corps de vieillard») (Guibert 1991, p. 12), but this body is no longer a source of fantasies as it was when he identified with the death drive of Rembrandt self-portrait.



Figure 2. Self-portrait, 1981.

Faced with such a task while his own body transformed, shattering any possibility of fantasy or of identification, the performing of self through photography would also be progressively transformed in the artist's work. In all the late self-portraits, the mirror is no longer apparent. The scission of self is expressed through a certain aesthetic and comes to inhabit the face itself. For this reason, the writer makes use of a series of effects (backlight, shadow/light, blurring) that serve to represent this tension, this battle taking place in him. The self-portrait in which the camera is reflected on the writer's face, cutting it in two like a weapon that he holds to his own head, has been commented on at length by critics, and accounts for the splitting of identity brought about by disease and for the aesthetic solutions that Guibert finds to respond to this (see Figure 3). All the while, it reveals a series of long-running fantasies: the mirror, which here becomes a source not of recognition but of foreignness, and the infamous fantasy of his own death on display.



Figure 3. Self-portrait, 1988.

As Boulé and Genon accurately point out, the photographs taken between 1987 and 1988 “tend to the staging, fiction of self and symbolism,” while in “the subsequent ones, dated 1989, Guibert returns to the practice of close-up shots of his face framed without effects.” (Boulé and Genon 2015, p. 241, our translation) Indeed, the last self-portraits the subject unveils himself and reveals a state of distress that corresponds to the state of the sick body. By apparently depicting all staging and by approaching a natural spontaneity, Guibert reveals his distress (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Self-portrait, 1989.

It seems, in any case, that Guibert's self-portraits from the period during which he was sick seek to represent an intermediary state: between the desire for unveiling and a situation of imposed nudity inflicted by the disease in which the subject is deprived of any potential conception of the self as another, between self-mastery and absolute distress.

4. Self-Portrait II: Death Will Come with My Eyes

This series of shots in which Guibert takes close up photos of himself is reminiscent of what Roland Barthes says in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1981) about a photograph of a young man sentenced to death: "La photo est belle, le garçon aussi. [...] Je lis en même temps: *cela sera et cela a été*; j'observe avec horreur un futur antérieur dont la mort est l'enjeu" ("The photograph is handsome, as is the boy [...] I read at the same time: *This will be and this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake") (Barthes 1981, p. 96). The young man's gaze, like that of Hervé Guibert in his late self-portraits, is the gaze of someone who knows his death is near, someone who is waiting for it and whom the photograph immortalizes—that is what we say—this instant before death. To accompany the photograph, Barthes writes: "*He is dead and he is going to die*" («*Il est mort et il va mourir*»). (Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 95) What is specific to photography is precisely the fact of making present a reality that is no longer but that the image brings to life: "For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive [...] but by shifting this reality to the past ("*this-has-been*") («*ça-a-été*»), the photograph suggests that it is already dead" (Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 79).

If these reflections are quite suitable for grasping the force and the fragility of Hervé Guibert's self-portraits, there is however one essential difference: Guibert is the one taking the photo of himself. It is therefore no longer the photo that testifies to an anterior future, between a reality that was and a living being that resurfaces before us like a specter already dead. Rather, it is the object and the subject of the photo that, through the act itself of taking a photo of oneself, inlays the photo with a doubled awareness. The man in these shots—Guibert—seems to want to say in anticipation: "I am dead, but I live." These photos therefore constitute a kind of *transfer* of a fantasy of life, of immortality, that the writer invites his spectator to take on in his or her own imagination. In doing so, Guibert seems to fulfill his desire to deliver in his self-portraits a "posthumous image" («*image posthume*») (Guibert 1981, p. 65).

The endeavor of self-representation via photography, although it evolves, remains possible for a certain period of time. However, we must note that contrarily to Guibert's writing whose subject was the body, in the photos that Guibert takes of himself, the body remains invisible; it can only be imagined. Self-portraiture, in its strict definition, consists solely of the representation of the face. However, the face is not a part of the body like any other, it is the entrance to the subject's identity; it is the place where identity ties itself to the body, in a uniqueness specific to each individual. Self-portraiture then says less of the sick body than of the sick subject, the photographed face is more an attempt to represent the *identity* of the diseased than it is to represent the body. But at some point, the experience of illness would make photography impossible. "When I was sick," explains Guibert to Christophe Donner, "I couldn't stand to see myself anymore" ("Quand j'étais malade, je n'ai plus supporté de me voir") (Guibert 1992b, p. 144). Guibert would express this impossibility mainly in the unwillingness to photograph his body.

5. The Phantom Body or How to Fight against Exposure

Guibert's refusal to see himself would be accentuated as the disease progressed. The theme would become more and more present in *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and would reach a considerable degree of intensity in *Le protocole compassionnel*. Guibert, however, never ceased to fantasize about representing himself and his body in photography, but at this point, the images became *phantom images*. A phantom image, for Guibert, is an untakeable image or an image that, by a technical accident, has

not been taken. These invisible images, however, can be imagined, described, written. In *L'image fantôme* (Guibert 1981), where he first theorizes this concept, he explains how text takes over the visual impossibility: "Et le texte n'aurait pas été si l'image avait été prise [...] 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 picture had been taken [...] For this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a flurred or fogged image: a phantom image") (Guibert 1981, p. 18). Instead of photographing his body, Guibert would then consciously turn his body into a "phantom body": a body marked by the impossibility to be visually captured, but that can be infinitely written as a phantom image. In that sense, all the body descriptions in his final books constitute a range of virtual photographs. The phantom image, not having been taken, remains subject to desire, whereas "la photographie échoue à conserver intact le désir" ("photography fails to keep the desire undamaged") (Del Amo 2011, p. 15). By defining this textual images as phantom images, Guibert plays with the similarity between "fantôme" (phantom) and "fantasme" (fantasy), which is ruled by desire. It seems to me that terminal illness, as experienced by Guibert, turns the body into a phantom body for two reasons: by way of the impossibility of the image and of its impending disappearance. Therefore, the "phantom body" and the tension between the written and visual representation that it reveals, allows one to question the different values that literature and photography bring to representation of self and of the sick body.

Well before the onset of AIDS, Guibert had tried to theorize the role that text and photography might play in the expression of self and of the world. A sentence in the writer's archives sheds light on this partition: "~~Je rêve (que le texte dise les limites de la photo, et que la photo repousse les limites du texte)~~ que la photographie semble un même travail manuel que la calligraphie" ("I dream ~~(that text says the limits of photography, that photography pushes back the text limits)~~ that photography resembles the same kind of manual work as calligraphy") (Poinat 2003, p. 36). The text exceeds the image whereas the image feeds and extends the text⁷. As we have seen, where text allows for the continuity of desire and the fulfilling of a fantasy, photographs abolish the permanence of desire. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes provides a definition of photography that complements that of Guibert: "The photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion, it fills the sight by force, and because in it, nothing can be refused or transformed" (Barthes 1981, p. 91). This is, yet again, another way of saying that photographs may kill desire and any potential fantasy; they oblige us to see, as they impose themselves and by the same token eliminate imagination.

For Guibert, the sick body then becomes a battlefield and a place divided by image and text. It would become the place where potential conflicts are actualized between these two mediums. An episode narrated in *Le protocole compassionnel* is particularly representative of this conflict surrounding the image of the sick Hervé Guibert, and how the phantom image takes over the impossible representation. Jules, a friend, offers to "photograph" the narrator's "skeleton" ("photographier son squelette"), but the narrator is confused by this proposal and can't seem to understand "the meaning" ("le sens") of it. Is not the skeleton what's on the inside of the body? Would this not then be the act of unveiling? Indeed, the narrator comments: "[cette proposition] j'aurais pu la lui faire moi-même quelques semaines plus tôt: photographier mon corps décharné" ("I could have made it [this offer] myself a few weeks earlier: to photograph my emaciated body") (Guibert 1991, p. 30). He goes on to say: "J'avais même pensé le proposer au peintre Barceló, que je venais de rencontrer et auquel je rendais parfois visite à son atelier, et j'avais eu l'idée de lui proposer comme titre pour la série: 'Nu malade du sida'" ("I even thought about offering it up to Barceló the painter whom I had just met and whom I often visited at his studio, and I had the idea to suggest to him the title for the series: 'Nude infected with AIDS'") (Guibert, *ibid.*, p. 30).

⁷ This idea, put forth during his writing period seems to still be in the conception stage, as the sentence crossed out and in parentheses suggests. Only through the experience of such limits would the scope of this affirmation and its implications become clear.

The image is only bearable if it is in the order of desire or of fantasy. As soon as actually taking the photo becomes likely, its impossibility returns. In this respect, when Guibert imagines the photo that Barceló might take of him, words replace the image: “nude infected with AIDS.” Guibert *sees the words* but *silences the image*. Words indeed also generate images, but here, they are phantom images. The narration of this episode, the narrator’s desire for images, replaces the actual taking of the photo. If there are no images of the narrator’s skeleton, we do however have its phantom image, which, precisely for this reason, remains subject to the unceasing desire of its author and of his readers.

The offer his friend made and Guibert’s refusal lead the narrator to understand that the “relationship” to his “body must have changed” since the onset of the illness. However, he explains, “j’avais retrouvé des textes, écrits quand j’avais vingt ans, qui décrivaient déjà ce spectacle, cette maladie et cette nudité” (“I had found texts, written when I was twenty, that already described this spectacle, this illness and this nudity”) (Guibert, *ibid.*, p. 31). But today, the reality directed by the suffering body renders the realization of this fantasy impossible: “maintenant il n’y avait plus que de la pitié, une très grande compassion pour ce corps ruiné, qu’il fallait préserver des regards” (“now there was only pity, a great compassion for this ruined body that was to be shield from prying eyes”) (Guibert, *ibid.*, p. 31). As if being preserved from sight would be the condition to continue to exist as a subject. Contrarily to words, images, by their coercive nature, render impossible the expression of the complexity of the sick subject as well as of its construction. Through its violent nature, the image kills any possibility of fiction or of self-construction. Writing takes over.

Illness underscores an essential difference between writing and photography: while writing is unveiling, photography is exposure. As for the phantom image, the written image, it allows for infinite unveiling.

6. Vivid Imagery or the Significance of Gesture

After the success of *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* and Hervé Guibert’s appearance on the literary program « Apostrophes », television producer Pascale Breugnot offered to give the writer a camera in order for him to film the day-to-day of his illness. Video, in the initiative taken by the producer, was intended to allow for *another type of writing*, after Guibert’s decision to no longer write books. Guibert was hesitant at first, despite the fact that making a film was “a childhood dream” («un rêve d’enfant») for him (Guibert 1991, p. 199) and that he had already co-written a screenplay (*L’Homme blessé*, in 1983, with Patrice Chéreau). Then, while he was beginning a second auto-fictional novel on AIDS, after receiving the camera, Guibert also begins to think about a filmic narrative. He recounts his hesitations in real time in *Le Protocole compassionnel*: “Hier j’avais envie de nouveau livre, et j’avais même envie du film” (“Yesterday I felt like a new book, and I even felt like a movie”) (Guibert 1991, p. 55). But movies imply images and this media was problematic. The desire to film was there, but the violence inherent in images discouraged him: “Hier je voulais profiter de la fibro de jeudi matin pour la filmer [...]. Aujourd’hui cette idée m’écœure” (“Yesterday I wanted to take advantage of the Thursday morning fibro to film it [...]. Today this idea disgusts me”) (Guibert 1991, p. 62). And again: “Je me suis dit qu’on ne pourrait pas filmer ces cadavres ambulants comme j’y avais pensé un moment à cause de la proposition de la productrice télé” (“I told myself that it was not possible to film these walking dead as I had thought of doing at one point because of the proposal from the TV producer”) (Guibert 1991, p. 55) As is often the case, at the root of any creative gesture, we first find desire, a fantasy; but in this case, and as in the case of photography, the fantasy *crashes into* the principle of the *real* personified by the diseased body and proves to be too brutal. However, little by little, Guibert would appropriate this new means of expression at his disposal. And, unexpectedly, it would turn out to be a “completely appropriate tool” (Guibert 1992b, p. 154). The result is a filmic

experiment that lasted 7 months (from July 1990 to February 1991)⁸ and that would blur the genres of documentary and cinematographic autofiction.

What does video allow that neither image nor writing did? In what way is it useful for the telling of Guibert's illness? Its linearity and rhythmicity bring video closer to writing, while the visual support comes from photography. Video therefore allows for a return to image, but instead of the fixed nature of photography and the break in time that it implies, film imbues the image with movement. If the photographic instant is on the side of death, the passage of time in film seems to be on the side of life. It is precisely the temporal dimension of the filmic image that would allow for Guibert's reconciliation with visual self-representation, specifically, the representation of the body. With Derek Duncan, we can say that video, by its nature, fulfills an almost therapeutical function: "la projection sur l'écran, [...] transforme Guibert en son propre spectateur et met en marche un processus d'identification entre lui et le corps dont il s'était détaché [...]. A mesure qu'il tourne le film, Guibert se retrouve." ("The projection on the screen [...] transforms Guibert into his own spectator and starts a process of identification between himself and the body from which he had detached himself [...]. As he turns de film Guibert finds himself again") (Duncan 1995, p. 111). If video constitutes an "intermediary zone" between writing and photography (Guibert 1991, p. 199), it also allows the divided self to reunite, to abolish the psychological and aesthetic polarity that illness had imposed.

This reunification is made possible by a new feeling of time characterized by continuity, which actually has the power to transmit an impression of unity. In *Le protocole compassionnel*, Guibert indeed explains that "every day, a gestural capacity, a movement sequence" disappears ("chaque jour une possibilité de geste, une séquence de mouvement") (Guibert 1991, p. 142). The elderly body that inhabits him is not a mere status but a gestural potentiality gradually disappearing. Video allows for the filming of Guibert alive, Guibert moving, taking action and in this way retaining gestures in the web of time. In short, video makes it possible to account for these everyday movements, which photography and writing cannot do in the same way. The gesture is indeed the ephemeral movement of the body that photography cannot capture. Writing, though, due to its calligraphic nature, is inherently gestural. Video, thus, through the recording of gestures, offers itself up as a means to introduce a calligraphic dimension into images, and in this way, of fulfilling Guibert's desire for "photography to become a manual task as much as calligraphy" ("que la photographie semble un même travail manuel que la calligraphie") (Poinat 2003, p. 36).

In *Le protocole compassionnel*, the writer describes the physical activities that he does at home to stay in shape: "j'entreprends ma gymnastique, comme par petites séquences: tendre les jambes debout sur la poitrine, mains derrière la tête, une flexion, une autre, un bras levé sur le côté, en l'air. Boxer. [...] Boxer à poil dans le vide, dans l'infini, dans l'éternité" ("I go about my gymnastics, as if doing little sequences: stretch the legs out straight up to the chest, hands behind the head, a flexion, another, one arm extended to the side, up in the air. Boxing. [...] Boxing naked with thin air, with infinity, with eternity") (Guibert 1991, p. 169). Guibert reflects on his physical activity in cinematic terms (the exercises are movement "sequences"). But what's more, they are movements that allow him to inscribe himself in "infinity," in "eternity." This affirmation is even more relevant as this same "phantom scene," which contrary to the phantom images, was filmed by the writer himself. In *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, we can indeed contemplate a scene in which Guibert is doing exercises and boxing in thin air (see Figure 5). The writer's voice-over clarifies the meaning of the sequence: "Le sida m'a fait accomplir un voyage dans le temps. Un corps de vieillard affaibli a pris possession de mon corps d'homme de 35 ans. [...] Chaque jour je perds un geste, que j'étais encore capable de produire la veille. Je lutte contre la montre" ("AIDS has taken me on a time travel. An old man's body has taken possession of my body, that of a man of 35. [...] Every day I lose a movement, that I was still capable of producing the day

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the creation of this documentary see Artières and Cugnon (2003). According to these two researchers, the video was actually recorded from July to February and not from June to March as stated in the film's credits.

before. I am racing against the clock.”) (Guibert 1992c) Because video renders movement, it inscribes the subject in time (infinity, eternity) and in life.



Figure 5. La Pudeur ou l'impudeur, 1992.

As in the boxing scene, *Le protocole confessionnel* often describes scenes that would later be filmed in the documentary or that have been already filmed and that Guibert writes down. For example, the first scene recorded by Guibert for the film is also written in the book whose drafting was completed at the same time as the recording. In his autofictional novel, Guibert writes: “Dimanche 22 juillet, dix heures trente, avec le masseur j’ai commencé à expérimenter la vidéo. [...] J’ai cherché un bon angle en posant le caméscope sur son pied, j’ai appuyé sur le bouton rouge, vérifié qu’il y avait bien ‘Record’ dans le viseur, et suis allé m’étendre à plat ventre sur la table de massage, la tête tournée vers la bibliothèque, donc cachée à l’objectif” (“Sunday 22 July, ten thirty, with the masseur I started to experiment with video. [...] I sought out a good angle by placing the video camera on his foot, I pushed the red button, checked that it said ‘Record’ in the viewfinder, and went to lie down flat on my stomach on the massage table, my head turned toward to bookshelf, therefore hidden from the camera”) (Guibert 1991, p. 115).

The first sequence recorded consists precisely of the emaciated body’s entrance on stage, which photography was incapable of capturing (see Figure 6). Guibert therefore fulfills the fantasy of representing himself as a “nude infected with AIDS” that had haunted him and had remained, until then, in the order of a phantom image. But when the body makes its appearance, the face disappears: as if the identity of the ill person were still divided, as if the face’s identity could not correspond entirely to the sick body.



Figure 6. La Pudeur ou l'impudeur, 1992.

Unlike photography, video is able to sustain the sight of the sick body's nakedness: "Ma nudité dans la vidéo est d'un ordre pictural et documentaire, pas exhibitionniste" ("My nudity in the video is of a pictorial and documentary kind, not exhibitionist.") (Guibert 2001, p. 253) Why? Because video is perceived as neutral. Its automatic aspect seems to strip away all intentionality, all desire, neutralizing it. This becomes visible in the way in which the writer describes the recording process: "Là, je suis nu entre les mains du masseur, et ça filme" ("There, I am naked in the hands of the masseur, and it's recording") (Guibert 1991, p. 115). The "it" here refers to an object bereft of all intentionality. Thanks to this medium, that writes and records *without* the writer, nudity is no longer obscene, it "[c'est] devenu autre chose, elle est asexuelle" ("[it] has become something else, it is asexual") (Guibert 1991, p. 115). The sober, naked aspect of the film, which seeks to provide an x-ray of reality and to raise it to the ranks of a document—in this case, a document of the havoc wreaked on the body by AIDS—allows for the representation of the whole body.

Finally, let us note the framing that Guibert chooses for many of his sequences: the body appears systematically decentered; we perceive only certain parts of it (see Figure 7). The decentering of the frame then proves to be a variation on the fantasy of fragmentation perceived in his early texts and photography (as shown in the first part of this article). But it is also a way of escaping exposure as well as of arousing the desire to see, as Guibert only unveils part of his body.



Figure 7. La Pudeur ou l'impudeur, 1992.

Video becomes an effective means of relating the last months of his life; it reintegrates images and revitalizes writing, allowing for spontaneity and a burning urgency. Guibert, near the end, comes to think of the act of writing in filmic terms. His writing starts to seek the temporal efficiency of video: “pour moi la fin de ces livres n’est pas comme un soufflé qui retombe, c’est plutôt une cassure de ruban, c’est des ciseaux qui coupent la pellicule, qui coupent le flux, parce que ce sont des livres qui sont tellement liées à mon existence, dans la durée réelle des événements” (“for me, the end of these books is not like a *soufflé* that would go flat, it’s more like cutting the ribbon, it’s scissors cutting the film, cutting the flow, because these are books that are so linked to my existence, in the actual duration of events.”) (Guibert 1992b, p. 140) This convergence of media then leads to a multiplication of the recording of the real: the same scene would be written, filmed, and in the video, the writer’s voice would accompany the images. It is a way of letting nothing escape, of documenting as closely as possible the reality of illness by multiplying points of view (objective, subjective). The artistic practice seems as well to try to saturate the time left. Through the diversity of the creative apparatuses, Guibert manages to take on an active role in the experience of disease and therefore, to conquer the feeling of self-representation as exposure imposed by AIDS.

Does the use of video and moving images mean that words (and photography) can fail to express the experience of illness, as Kathlyn Conway argues in *Beyond words* (Conway 2007)? It seems to me that in the case of Guibert, this does not apply. It is precisely the words that make it possible to go beyond the image, that is to say, to escape the picture where the patient would be reified. Finally, what Guibert exhibits is as much the body as a laboratory, that is, a multi medium laboratory that becomes one with the sick body. It is therefore less a question of the limits between text and image in terms of their possibilities of *expression*, than the temporal question (and therefore of death), which becomes decisive in the experience of disease in Guibert, for the hybridity of the media used in his latest work.

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