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Non-pareille?
Issues in Modern French Photo-Essayism

> [L]'esthéthique sait depuis longtemps que l'image, contrairement à ce que croit et fait croire la machine d'information, montre toujours moins bien que les mots toute grandeur qui passe la mesure: horreur, gloire, sublimité, extase. (Comolli and Rancière 1997, 66)

It may seem odd, in a general analysis of the modern French essay accompanying photography, that there is no reproduction of photo-graphs. This is however a deliberate choice, and not one without precedent, as the collection of Michel Butor's photo-essays into one photo-less volume shows.[1] For it would seem in this age of the image – dubbed by essayists as diverse as Debray (1992), Flusser (2000 [1983]), Gervereau (2000), Glissant (1994) as the televisual era – the written word has tended to be downplayed. This is no more the case than in the photo-essay, a sub-genre largely overlooked and under-theorised, generally subsumed within photo-journalism, and in which photographic sequences are preferred to written text (see Mélon, in Baetens and Gonzalez 1996, 138–55).

Either it is narrative with photographs which has been investig-ated (see Baetens and Gonzalez 1996, and *History of Photography* 1995, for analyses of the *roman-photo*), with photo-essays quickly subsumed into narrative, as in Scott (1999) who deems John Berger and Jean Mohr's collaborative – and deeply essayistic – work 'post-

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1   Butor's essayistic collaborations with photographers Jean-Pierre Charb-onnier (in 'La Gare St Lazare') and Gilles Ehrmann (in 'La cathédrale de Laon l'automne'), and his essay 'La montagne rocheuse' on four photographs by Ansell Adams and Edward Weston, are collected in Butor 1964 (55–77; 91–105; 189–199), but without the images.

modern narrative'.[2] Or commentary on text accompanying the image has been restricted to painting and to the *ekphrastic*, and the dangers of the latter for the photo-essay are keenly underlined by Hubert Damisch (2001, 38).

This study will attempt to avoid both of these tendencies, in order to investigate what writers do with photographs outside of the story, and given the specificity of the photographic medium. In other words, is there a contamination of the photographic medium in the essay-writing on that medium? Or put another way: if, as Flusser suggests (2000, 27), the photographer is *both* a player (*Homo ludens*) *and* a functionary of the photographic apparatus (the camera), (how) does this apply, by extension or contiguity, to the photo-essayist, especially given – in Flusser's schema at least (8–13) – that text and image are dialectically linked but diametrically opposed?

The photographer, essayist and former poet Denis Roche has deployed an old word in French, 'nonpareille', which, in its adjectival sense, he applies to (the singularity of) a photograph, to any one photograph, in that it is 'inégalable' (*Cahiers de la photographie* 1989, 108). This expression is all the more striking when placed next to Damisch's characterisation (2001) of the meeting of photography and writing as *dénivelée*. How, then, do we analyse an interaction in which the parties are both unequal and unequalable?

The *nonpareille* also raises the problem of collaboration. If an essayist is to collaborate with a photographer, it is not unreasonable to expect that there be, in the commentary on the photographs, some notion of equality between the two media, even a slight deference, if not humility, on the part of the writer, otherwise the *dénivelée* will lead to a sign of writerly self-importance or even arrogance.[3] Michel

2   Baetens's analysis of Berger and Mohr (*History of Photography* 1995) also insists on narrative. See also Shloss 1997, which looks not at Barthes's own photo-essays, but applies Barthesian narrative analysis to the photo-essay work in Mary Ellen Mark's *Streetwise*. Hughes and Noble (2003) is however wide-ranging in its definition of 'narrative', including important elements of essay-ism.

3   Naturally, this constraint is not relevant to a photographer who writes his/her own photographs, and it is superceded by other constraints if the *dénivelée* is

Tournier (1979) – see, for example, Fui Lee Luk in this volume – *could* be accused of a certain writerly superiority to the images shown. Similarly, in his 'georgic' essaying of Daniel Boudinet's pastoral scenes of Alsace (Boudinet 1993, 65–77), does Roland Barthes avoid the 'arrogance' of the photo-essayist? Here then we are constrained by the specificity of the operation: photographers who 'essay' their own work, such as Jean-Loup Trassard, can remain deeply collaborative (if only with himself); the Boudinet/Barthes interface is, by contrast, out of kilter (temporally and subjectively, in that the work involves two people).[4] In other words, what Damisch calls the *dénivelée* is exactly what happens when a photograph (Photography?) meets written text, or, in Barthes's words, when a 'message sans code' meets a highly coded language in a caption, fragment, commentary or essay.[5]

However – and this will be the spirit of this study – writing the photograph is, paradoxically, the best way to deal with this perceived 'unevenness': to essay the photographic image *is* an opportunity to reflect on the respective media and crucially on their interaction. It seems furthermore that, today, photographs and exhibitions can only be apprehended via language (essay, preface, commentary, caption, story, reportage etc.): it is as if the 'absurd' of the photograph needs its sharp corners rounding off.[6] The key problem then becomes for the essayist – and for the photographer, or essayist-photographer – how to

reversed and the photographer is invited by the writer to 'illustrate' the writing, *a posteriori* as it were.

4   It would be interesting to compare Barthes's writing of Boudinet's rural photographs with that by Trassard accompanying his Russian-countryside study (1990). Indeed, it may be that a comparative approach is the only way to analyse photo-essayism.

5   In 'Le Message photographique', Barthes (1993 [1961], 944–46) suggests – long before Damisch's theory of *la dénivelée* – that text and image are 'irreducible' to each other, though this does not stop degrees of 'amalgamation'.

6   A number of publishers in France now specialise in photo-essayism: Le temps qu'il fait, La Revue noire, Filigranes, Rémanences, Muntaner are the best known, not to mention the 'Photopensées' series of essays published by the Maison Européenne de la Photographie. And indeed the vogue today for writers being invited to 'essay' photographs makes our task of analysing photo-essayism that much more timely.

avoid *ekphrasis*.[7] This is not easy. For, even though the mass avail-ability of photographs (since Fox Talbot's invention of the negative) dispensed with the painterly need evident in the eighteenth century of describing a painting (to students, connoisseurs), surely any comment-ary on photographs is bound to fall into a lyrical or poetic description, a form of *ekphrasis* or even 'descriptivitis' (on which see Anne Freadman's chapter in this volume) – though it must be said that any attempt to 'criticise the real' in a photograph would perhaps struggle in a 'pictorialist' essay?

The photo-essay risks then being compromised in pure descrip-tion, dominated by the visual image, unable to achieve the discursive, errant and performative effects common to the essay. It is thus, within the enormous corpus that is modern photo-essayism, precisely the 'pictorialist' photo-essay ('that which reflects back on the medium'), a form of 'creative criticism', that I wish to highlight here, an essayistic practice which will be taken to its extreme in the early photo-essay work of Denis Roche.

In order to investigate not only how the philosophy of photo-graphy influences essay(-writing) but also how the philosophy of the essay inflects our understanding of the photograph, the first key question will be to establish what might be considered a 'pictorialist' photo-essay. We will then consider Roche's experiment, in which he inverts the two media. Finally, we will suggest the stakes of assessing the photo-essay's relation to the photographic image. This survey will consider photography only as analogue, since the digital image debate would require a separate chapter.

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7   Also spelt 'ecphrasis', the term literally means 'removing obstructions', but
     usually refers to the ancient rhetorical, and then fine-art, tradition of providing a
     lucid, self-contained explanation or description of a work of art (OED).

Photo-essay as *forme brève dénivelée*

There are a number of reasons why the photograph and the essay can be linked generically. Firstly, there is the question of subject-matter, within the categories of which photography and essay coincide surprisingly well. Indeed, Mitchell (1994) sees profound similarities between the informal and personal nature of essayism (including autobiography and memory) and the 'point of view' of photography, citing the 'partial' and incompleteness evident in both the genre and the medium; and thus, when combined into the photo-essay, as Mitchell underlines (289), the result contains 'a certain reserve or modesty': the essay can claim only to '"speak for" or interpret the images'.[8]

There are other obvious affinities between the *essai* and the photograph. The *essai*, as Alain Montandon (1992, 73) points out, has no pretensions to exhaustiveness nor totality; the photograph is both arbitrary and able to leave room for the viewer's subjectivity (see Barthes 1980). Yet, at the same time both *essai* and photograph gesture towards a certain scientificity (photograph as chemical, material reality handed down by the past, *essai* as searching for answers however provisional).

With regard to the photo-essay, is it a question of dividing the essayistic, what Montandon (1992) calls *les formes brèves* (poem, aphorism, fragment, citation, graffiti), from the 'essai'? If so, where do we put the *commentaire*, the *préface*, all those forms so close to, if not forms of, the *essai* that so often accompany the photograph? Or is the essay which accompanies photography 'contaminated' by the photographic image to the extent that it becomes a(n important) part of the essayistic? Paul Valéry considered his *cahiers* to be a 'contre-œuvre', because *œuvres* themselves are: 'des falsifications, puisqu'elles éliminent le provisoire et le non réitérable, l'instantané et le

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8   The photographic essay, says Mitchell (1994), links the essay to photography 'in the way that history painting was linked to the epic or landscape painting to the lyric poem'. The categories of 'reality' (as opposed to realism), non-fictionality and 'even "scientificity"' are 'general connotations' that link the two, he suggests.

mélange pur et impur, désordre et ordre' (cited in Montandon 1992, 10). So does the 'instantané' of the photograph manage, or at least seek, to repair this? Or is there something in the *noeme* of photography which defies writing accompanying it becoming like a photograph?

Though Damisch's *dénivelée* metaphor refers to a *chronological* mismatching, rather than value-laden discrepancies (as in 'high' and 'low' art-forms) – in which one or the other of image and text precedes temporally the other – the sensitivity to the 'unevenness' of the phenomenon is instructive. If work on the photo-essay can only advance (initially) by comparison, then the *dénivelée* can be of use in measuring 'pictorialist' approaches in photo-essayism. Thus we could confront two texts that accompany photographs (coincidentally, by two Caribbean writers): Patrick Chamoiseau's work with Rodolphe Hammadi on the *bagne* in La Guyane (1994), and David Damoison's photostudy of the Galion fields in Martinique accompanied by Raphaël Confiant's commentary (2000). Using Mitchell's theory of the 'resistance' between the two media, we can begin to establish what is photo-essayistic – by this I mean 'pictorialist' – and what is not.

It is not simply a question of the emphasis on the photographs – Maspero (1990) is not a photo-essay, whereas Maspero and Frantz (1992) clearly is – but also of the emphasis on Photography as itself a form of 'writing'. Confiant's commentary on Damoison's intricate images of workers in the Martiniquan cane-fields then is purely *ekphrastic*, describing the travails of working on the sugarcane, but never stopping to reflect on Damoison's photographic work, on the medium of representation itself. In his commentary by contrast, Chamoiseau uses various techniques to unsettle the cosy relationship between text and photographic image: by not only writing poetically – in almost Hugolian terms – but reflecting on memory, on presence and absence, through *and* in Hammadi's poetic images of empty cells bulging with strangling undergrowth, occasionally lending from his essay a caption to accompany certain of the images of the prison. These two examples indeed confirm Mitchell's point that the distance between text and photographs can be crucial: Confiant's text moves – but only typographically – with and alongside Damoison's images; Chamoiseau's precedes, but also inflects, Hammadi's.

One might also compare Gérard Macé (2000) with Lorand Gaspar (1997), to see 'pictorialist' and non-pictorialist essay alike. In the latter, the photography (by Gaspar himself) merely indirectly illustrates the prose: the incidental nature of the photographer's participation in the essay, though producing some startling images, stands in stark contrast to Macé's essay, in which photography, the photographer (also himself) and the photograph (but not directly essay-writing) are the object and subject of the writing. Whereas Gaspar's text remembers, via image and text, a trip to Jerusalem, Macé's laconic and terse prose engages us directly in the Photographic Image, and in those images produced by him. For example, Macé tells (9–10) how, long before using a camera, he used to frame reality with his mind as if using a camera: 'ce que j'appelle la photographie sans appareil est bien […] cette curieuse façon, maniaque mais esthétique, de découper le réel sans laisser des traces'. By contrast, 'photographier', he later declares aphoristically, 'c'est s'entraîner à l'absence, mais en laissant des traces' (48). Clearly, the *noeme* of photography is the object of Macé's essay.

Similarly, after his peregrination through the empty buildings of the 'bagne' in French Guyana, through what he calls the 'trace-mémoires' of all those who lived and suffered there, Chamoiseau is forced to admit: 'Et je perçois que je ne saurais jamais écrire, ni approcher par une phrase quelconque, ce que sont ces Traces-mémoires' (1994, 44). Instead, he concedes – and here is the importance of Hammadi's photographic study – 'il faudrait […] des photographes' to 'faire vivre ces Traces-Mémoires après avoir immobilisé les procès de leur usure'. In other words, some texts accompanying photographs may buck what Flusser calls the 'post-industrial' trend of an image illustrating a text. Paradoxically, Flusser's view that this post-industrial trend of image subservient to text, 'of ritual magic' in which the 'suspension of critical faculties' in the 'process of functionality' 'renders any historical action impossible' (2000, 60–63), seems to open up a space for the photo-essay in which to counter the current pervasiveness and ubiquity of the photograph. Indeed, against a teleological and instrumentalist approach, which merely valorises the image over text, modern photo-essays seem to thrive on the notion of the erratic, of *errance*, of an errand: see Raymond Depardon's

photo-essay *Errance* (2000), and also the preference in Chamoiseau's photo-essay (1994, 43) for '*errance*' over 'visite', '*divagation*' over 'flânerie', both categories of the Montaignean essay *par excellence*.

So far we have used the influence of photographic history – and the crucial moment of 'pictorialism' – to shape our view of the photo-essay. We have also taken on board Mitchell's sensitivity to 'tension' – typography, distance between photographic image(s) and text – what he calls the 'resistance' by the (photo-)essay to photography. One other dimension we must consider is that of any *forme brève* which may sit outside of a strict definition of the essay.[9]

One *forme brève* that Montandon does not include in his excellent index is the 'légende', brilliantly deployed by Bernard Noël (1998) in his work on photography of the Commune. The closest in Montandon is the epigramme, proverb, or sentence. But there is a specificity of the 'légende' (and 'caption' in English betrays intriguing etymological origins), which we will see in Roche's work. I do not at all necessarily share Hunter's view (1987, 6) that captions 'are a lowly genre written art' (though he acknowledges that they 'are not for that reason negligible'). Indeed, Claire de Obaldia (1995) makes a strong case for considering the essay as part of a wider set of writerly practices, what she calls the 'essayistic'.

These practices could include poem, fragment, commentary, even the novel. Indeed, in his final lectures at the Collège de France in 1979 and 1980 (2003), Barthes linked the haiku and the *forme brève* to essayism, and especially to photo-essayism (117);[10] the haiku, with its

9   Good (1988, xi–xii) tentatively defines the essay, in terms of length, as some-where between the phrase and the book-length work, and bound up with four major categories: travel, moralism, criticism and autobiography, or any combin-ation of these.

10   The publication of Barthes's *cours* at the Collège de France and *séminaires* at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, in the 'Traces écrites' series published by Seuil, marks perhaps an important development in the modern French *essai*. It seems more than likely that the 'livre-cours' that Barthes envisaged as early as 1968 will quickly become part of the *essai* genre. These are distinct from, say, Foucault's essay drawn from his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, *L'Ordre du discours*, which (as Robert Crawshaw shows elsewhere in this volume) is 'adapted' from the oral 'performance'. None of the 'lecture notes' for Barthes's classes appearing in the 'Traces écrites' series by contrast was

strong deployment of the 'instantané' and its metaphor of light makes it formally appropriate to the photograph, and, of course, Barthes was making these comments just as he was about to publish his seminal photo-essay, *La Chambre claire* (1980). This allows us to consider Philippe Tagli's (1998) agit-prop deployment of short poems alongside his photographs of the Parisian *banlieue* and its inhabitants as part of a contemporary phenomenon of photo-essayism.

The question then becomes: how do we square these examples of *forme brève* attached to photography, with the 'pictorialist' approach mentioned earlier? It also raises the question of the photo-narrative. The 'trouvaille', the anecdote, or 'biographème' – for example, Barthes's pithy comments on Proust's photographs of Parisian individuals (2003) – risk, as Montandon reminds us, becoming a form of 'essai journalistique'. Does not the photo-anecdote (and even then the photo-story as found in photo-journalism) have necessarily something of the narrative, or *roman-photo*? Indeed, it could be argued that the photo-portrait *is* itself a biographical *forme brève*, or 'biographème' (again, see Barthes's 'captions' for Proust's photo-archive, 2003). More generally, the photo-essay may be defined negatively in relation, say, to the photo-novel, which is anything but a direct engagement of text and image, as the narrative necessarily intervenes (though, naturally, there can be narratives in collections of photos; these however come from the photographs themselves).[11]

Clearly, photo-essayism involves problematic divisions, especially when we consider the deeply 'collaborative' essence of the essay in relation to literature that the Lukácsian model of the essay puts forward.[12] In other words, our discussion here has suggested that

simply 'adapted' for publication: the lecture/seminar notes have a life of their own as 'livre-cours'.

11   Eugene Smith has argued moreover that photojournalism is more akin to narratives, producing 'picture stories': 'that's a form of its own, not an essay' (quoted in Mitchell 1994, 292 n10).

12   Indeed it would be possible to use Lukács's 'mystical' and collaborative definition of the essay to suggest an 'ontology' of the photo-essay; such an ontology would involve an 'entelechy', an '*in potentia*' (to quote de Obaldia), in which Time – crucial for Lukács in the essay, and in Photography for Barthes – becomes a crucial component.

the *ekphrastic* in the photo-essay is a much more complex issue than 'mere description' can convey. The use of *ekphrasis* in relation to photography is not a new phenomenon; it dates from the time when Photography was viewed through painterly eyes in the mid-nineteenth century. Considering the nineteenth-century writing of photographs, Hermange (2000) sets out two different kinds of *ekphrasis*, a standard description as opposed to an encomium. Commentaries by writers for the photography journal *La Lumière* (especially those by François Wey and Ernest Lacan), Hermange suggests, were more a literary description, an *encomium* which 'essentially aims to encourage the reader to admire the work, making an emblem of its description' (2000, 16). We will return to the 'encomium' in the conclusion.

One final way of approaching the modern photo-essay is by way of Roche's avant-garde experiment. If the photo-essay has been shown to be inflected by its attachment to the photograph, could we then consider the photograph itself as a 'fragment', or even as 'essai'? In other words, can we speak of contamination in the other direction?

Roche and the *dénivelée*

> Aucun esprit humain ne peut garder en mémoire ce qu'embrasse le regard pendant une des ces incessantes fractions de seconde que le temps fait se succéder à une vitesse tellement vertigineuse que lorsque je trace la dernière lettre d'un mot le geste de ma main dessinant la précédente appartient au passé.
> (Claude Simon, cited in *Magazine littéraire*, December 2002, 4)

The novelist Claude Simon has suggested that photography has 'un assez étrange pouvoir […] celui de fixer, de mémoriser ce que notre mémoire elle-même est incapable de retenir, c'est-à-dire l'image de quelque chose qui n'a eu lieu, n'a existé, que dans une fraction infime du temps […]. Je me demande si, en définitive et au-delà de toute autre considération, ce n'est pas l'attrait de ce pouvoir quelque peu magique qui m'a poussé à m'y essayer'. Though Simon is referring to

his own photographic practice, the 'm'y essayer' could be applied to Roche's 'experiment' of 1978.

Originally a radical poet in the 1960s, writing in the vein of *Telquelian* avant-gardism, Roche abandons poetry after May 1968. Instead, he takes up Photography, becoming one of France's foremost experimental photographers of today. Roche is particularly well-known for his *Fiction & Co* series with the publisher Seuil, in which there predominates work bringing together text and image. His transition from poet to photographer can be seen in his important treatment of the text/image interface in his 1978 photo-essay *Notre antéfixe*.

In as much as Roche's aim in *Notre antéfixe* is to question and exemplify the relationship between text and photographic image, the result is an *essai* in all senses of the word. Rather than considering whether Photography is an art (or not), or asking 'what question does a photo pose?', or 'what can a philosopher make of a photo?', Roche wants to recast the debate: 'avec quoi une photographie peut-elle avoir quelque chose à faire, dès lors qu'on la prend?' (16).

Narrating a lunchtime discussion about how painting has been so widely and repeatedly written on, but not photography, he wonders: 'd'où vient que l'écrivain soit si préfacier de peinture et jamais de photographie (affaire de classe?)?' (19). Indeed, Roche contends, there is a tendency to look at photography *as if it is* a painting.[13] He is then at pains to stress that photography is not the 'décalque ou le substitut de rien' but its 'propre sujet', with its own definition and '*visée*' (20). Therefore, he concludes, we need a new discourse, 'une terminologie fraîche […] sans précédent, sans jurisprudence':

> Ainsi un aller et retour, un va-et-vient parlant et cliquetant, s'installerait entre la littérature (non, l'écriture) et la photographie (non pas l'épreuve, mais le fait instantané). (20)

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13   In his preface to John Heartfield's antinazi photomontage, Roche asks: 'Il faudrait pouvoir savoir ce qui se passerait si c'était aujourd'hui que la peinture était inventée […] *qu'est-ce que les peintres choisiraient de représenter?*' (Roche 1978b, 8; emphasis in the original).

If, says Roche, photographers are like 'Indians' in relation to painters and writers – playing 'avec précipitation', 'cavalant comme il n'est pas permis au-devant de n'importe quoi', '*sans lourdeur*', 'captant ainsi la moindre image' (21) – then we need an 'écriture "indienne"' to accompany photography. So, he concludes, when it comes to writing fairly about photographs: 'Je vous dis moi que les philosophes sont *out*' (22).

Reacting then against a purely theoretical reflection on photography, Roche's point is that it is only by writing the photograph that any meaningful understanding of the medium can be reached. His 'antefixes' here then become just one chapter in his lifelong project of founding a new *écriture*, a 'partage poésie-prose' which is not 'usé'; he has called these experiments 'des Dépôts de savoir & de techniques', and which began as early as 1963 with his first poems (in *Idées centésimales de Miss Elanize*).[14]

Already when he was writing poetry, Roche remembers, he had been dreaming of 'ce que pourrait être une écriture (*mon* écriture) à maniabilité souveraine et instantanée':

> [J]'imaginai de piquer, par milliers de piqures successives, par dizaines de milliers de piqures rapides et de durées semblables, la réalité des choses et des gens, mais toujours par écritures interposées, ces écritures étant des sortes de perspectives infinies mais retournées sans arrêt sur les choses ou les gens chez qui elles se trouvaient entreposées, retournées sur eux et sur elles et les commentant à n'en plus finir. (23)

This new form of writing would be to literature what photography was to painting. But also, this writing would, unexpectedly, take on an artistic status of (on?) its own, hence the title of his book, 'antéfixe':[15]

> Ornement de sculpture, ordinairement en terre cuite, qui décorait le bord des toits. Sans doute d'invention étrusque, les antéfixes masquaient l'ouverture des

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14   See also Roche 1976, an early example of the 'antefixe' technique, whose significance is clearer once the idea of the 'antefixe' is defined here.

15   Elsewhere Roche describes autoportraits as a 'littérature-arrêtée' (as opposed to the 'littérature arrêtée' of the 'journal'): 'l'arrêt est littéraire […] mais il est montré du doigt alors qu'il est, sous nos yeux, en train d'avoir lieu' (1981, 7).

> tuiles rondes, mais devinrent rapidement de véritables statues à l'image et à la
> taille des hommes et des femmes du temps. (24)

Here Roche seems to be suggesting that a major shift in the history of photography and of writing has taken place. In a preface to a study of John Heartfield's Dadaist photomontage (1978b), Roche hinted at the importance of text meeting photography. 'Toute l'histoire du photo-montage' he suggested, was that of '*tromper le sens* de chaque constituant: faire tenir un discours d'ensemble, un seul discours d'ensemble à des morceaux qui avaient choisi de dire différement des choses différentes' (1978b, 11–12). This equivalent of *trompe-l'œil* in painting – 'trompe l'oeil de la photo, de la même façon qu'on disait que la politique est la trompe-l'oeil de l'Histoire' – was now a model of text/image interface to follow in his 'antéfixe'.[16]

These new 'antefixes', in which writing and photographs collaborate, would require a simple method of writing which paralleled the acts of recording of those photographs alongside which the writing would be appended. The writing would mirror the photographic act, and vice versa:

> [R]épéter à l'infini, en étant libre de m'arrêter à n'importe quel moment, une
> même longueur de texte – non pas un *même texte*, mais un même nombre de
> signes, une même longueur d'écriture déjà faite. (1978a, 25)

So, of a same length, the writing would be an equal complement to the photograph. This would require:

> un geste ou un objet donnés […] à exister à nouveau, et, ce faisant, de dire sans
> quelque chose de nettement différent ce qu'ils disaient avant l'irruption *d'en
> face* de l'appareil capteur. (24–25)

Thus, Roche's aim is (quite literally) to write as if taking a photograph, and to photograph as if writing. Following this introductory essay, Roche then gets down to business.

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16   Hunter (1987, 170) locates the radical use of photo-montage to Caspar Neher's
      1932 set design for Brecht's play *Die Mutter*, in which photographs of pre-1914
      political leaders were placed next to socialist quotations, thereby creating telling
      juxtapositions.

Roche includes, *in tandem* with the photographic images (which have been taken with a delay-action on the automatic picture-taker), written lines which are all quotations and all of the same length, found in a wide range of places: manuscripts, letters, prescriptions, captions on photographs, conversations on television. Similarly, Roche is considering a photograph as a 'quotation' from our lives. These 'échantillons d'écriture' represent a 'formidable traversée du miroir que chacun s'empresse de nous opposer'. So all the quotes come from people's private life. But, when they are placed in parallel to his own photographs, there is a new '*entrechoc*': all of this 'du déjà vu/lu/dit', becomes a new 'cadré', involving what Roche calls 'des *flashes signifères limités*, tous finalement intempestifs et furieux de cet ordre dispersif et de ce moule à rafales que je leur impose' (26–27). Thus, these '"jumeaux braqueurs"' – the autoportrait on timer, and the written 'antéfixe' – both need loading (in a camera and a typewriter); and these strange metallic objects, both operated by arms and hands, allow no stopping in their movement, no 'ralenti' of the twin process (31–32).

We find then, in the second half of *Notre antéfixe*, following Roche's essay on the problematic of text/image, 243 written quotes of equal length, followed by forty-two photographs.[17] The quotes do not apply directly to the images, though each has an endnote announcing the origin/context of the line (a kind of caption, no doubt). Similarly, all the photographs have a date/place caption.

It is difficult to come to any definite conclusion as to the efficacy of Roche's experiment. Clearly, there is little physical proximity between text and image (a creative tension that Mitchell would appreciate), and only a very indirect link between the written antefixes and the photographic ones, which hinges on the temporal notions of chronology and simultaneity. It could be said that, rather than overcoming Damisch's *dénivelée*, Roche merely side-steps the question of how

17   In a 1989 interview Roche describes these photographs as 'technically and stylistically poor' (*Cahiers* 1989, 100). But perhaps this was on purpose to avoid the photographs becoming more important than the written text; it may explain also why *Notre antéfixe* is singularly overlooked by critics of Roche's work.

photography and writing 'miss' each other, although, for Mireille Calle-Gruber (*Cahiers* 1989, 30), the conjunction/ disjunction of photograph and text in *Notre antéfixe* encourages us (Mitchell-style) to 'rearm the eye', thereby reminding us that the work of fiction tries to convince us that our view of reality represented is only a desire for reality.

One thing is for sure though. Rather than a remobilisation of 'resistance' as Mitchell has done, Roche treats the problem of the text/photograph interface in the very act of combining photograph and written text. True to his belief that philosophical (or theoretical) discourse on the text/image symbiosis leads nowhere, he approaches the question practically, not only as photographer but as (photo-) essayist, literally 'essaying' (trying out) his 'essay' of quotations in parallel to his photography (as quotation). In this way, it could be argued, Roche is much closer to the later Barthes, not so much of *La Chambre claire*, but of the 1977 essayistic and fragmentary commentary on (and alongside) Boudinet's untitled photo-study of Alsace (1993, 64–77). Roche is thus the first to experiment in this fashion and has since inspired many others to think and write in such a vein – for example, Debray (1994), or Alain Coulange (1998), whose title quotes and slightly modifies Roche's question in *Notre antéfixe*, and for whom writing on photography operates 'à armes inégales'(14).

For Roche, it is the very *dénivelée* that he wishes, if only provisionally, to overcome. Indeed, it could be that, in trying to defeat this inequality, Roche's essayistic 'art', the 'poetics' of his *antefix*, is to have 'failed', but thereby to have illustrated the problem in practice. It is perhaps surprising then that Gilles Mora describes *Notre antéfixe* as Roche's 'conceptual period' (*Cahiers* 1989: 5), given that its aim is to 'write' the photograph. Described by Claude Nori (1981) as the most important text/image work (alongside Guibert's 1979 photo-novel *Suzanne et Louise*), *Notre antéfixe* is clearly a pivotal work. Roche has since moved onto other forms of photo-essayism: the conversational 'murmurs' between photographs of the same place taken at different times, or 'photolalies' (1988), a parody of the '100 best' photographs (1999) and further considerations on the link between photography, essayism and time (1991). Therefore, if Roche does not openly reject the *ekphrastic*, he certainly opens up the ques-

tioning of its pertinence to the photo-essay. In other words, the specificity of the photographic medium must in some way affect the writing and how we see this writing.

Photo-essay as encomium or creative criticism?

We have tried various ways of describing, defining, delimiting the photo-essay. The photo-essay is not simply that which draws attention to the medium, for could not a novel do this too? Similarly, we have placed in the sub-genre of the essay the poem, the fragment, the caption, as they seem to be part of the *forme brève*, of which the essayistic is both the form and spirit *par excellence*. Thus we are back to the generic instability of the *essai*. Nor is the photo-essay simply interchangeable or subsumable within its component parts (text and image). Maybe the 'wit' of the photo-essay is to draw attention to the medium without destroying it as 'illusion': that is, recognising but still playing out the contradictory nature of photography, both language and *analogon*, false and real. Maybe the photograph is itself a *forme brève*.

It has been suggested that the essay is a glory-hole, playing an ambivalent role in relation to literature. And if then, as Philippe Hamon claims, photography has always played for *les belles-lettres* 'le rôle ambivalent de modèle et de repoussoir' (cited in Ortel 2002, 177), what about the photo-essay? Do two 'negatives' – essay as glory-hole and photography as ambivalent form – make a positive? Is the modern photo-essay a new *archi-genre*, in which text and image vie for prominence? This series of questions suggests that there is more work to be done. Even the 'pictorialist' distinction we have used here is less than impermeable, when we consider for example Anne-Marie Garat's skilful 'description' of the photograph of the centenarian woman (1994), which is as much 'ecphrastic' as it is essayistic.

Like Perec's inciting us to look at a street anew (see Shering-ham's chapter in this volume), photography, when accompanied,

doubled by the essay, refreshes, unearths, re-orders our relation to the real; it renegotiates the nature/culture relationship. Yet, how does the photo-essay allay Flusser's suspicion that we have lost the power to understand a photograph's origins and meaning?

Flusser's critique of the (ubiquitous) photographic image is a general attack on the dominance of image in what he calls 'post-industrial' society (and parallel to which Claude Coste dubs in this volume 'une *noise*'). He regrets that not only are we not critical of the camera (the 'apparatus' of photography), but also that we do not know, or we rarely stop to ask ourselves, what an image actually is. For Flusser, the battle to 'break' the magic circle which photography forms around us is one of recognising the automaticity in the photograph (2000, 73), of recognising that we can only think currently in 'photographic categories', in short by 'playing against the camera', not allowing the apparatus, the camera to enslave us to the perceived magic of the photographic image (79–80). He argues that it is the photographer who is charged with 'uncovering the terrible fact of this unintentional, rigid and uncontrollable functionality of apparatuses in order to get a hold over them', an act in all its paradoxical status.

If this 'freedom' from automation has been illustrated, I would argue, by Roche's experiment, then it may be that we find its general expression in modern photo-essayism. Thus, if 'freedom' for Flusser is 'playing against the camera', it may also be evident in, even promoted by, that essayistic writing which acts with and against the photograph. For example, is Gérard Macé's fascinating and deeply essayistic framing of visual reality – what Macé calls 'photographie sans appareil' (1990) – a further shoring up of this failure to interrogate the image? Or is the photo-essay – at least the 'pictorialist' one – precisely the manner in which photographic images are subjected to rigorous but playful humanistic doubt? Modern photo-essayism then is not an encomium, like its nineteenth-century counterpart, but a 'creative criticism', both provisional in its deployment (photographs are infinitely recombinable and reinterpretable) but also provisionally definable (the creative criticism 'genre' is as unstable as the essay *tout court*, if not more so); and creative criticism, an *essai* form *par excellence*, is concerned with the medium of the object that it is criti-

cising as much with the 'content' of its own take on the same object.[18]
The key question then becomes, what are the links between creative
criticism and pictorialism within the photo-essay?

Thus, the decision not to include photographs in this survey of
the modern photo-essay in French is not so much redolent of Guibert's
'image fantôme', or even of Barthes's non-existent photograph of his
mother in the 'Jardin d'hiver', but due to a recognition of the con-
temporary domination, not to say ubiquity, of the photographic image.
Photo-essayism can then be revalorised, and hopefully redress the
imbalance between text and image. Naturally, the certificate of ex-
istence that is the photograph may unravel in the digital age, or rather
in the digital image (but then is it simply a question of deciding/
knowing whether the support is analogue or digital?). If this is the case
where does this leave the photo-essay? Will it, as digital inevitably
begins to dominate, have to return to the *ekphrastic* to which painterly
composition has given rise (in that the digital image is a composition
and not an *analogon*), at best becoming an encomium? Or will the
photo-essay be able to assert its independence and resistance to
visualisation and define its form for and in itself? The history and
study of essay-writing in relation to the image may not yet have
achieved this; but Debray's view (1992, 72) that 'le visible n'est pas le
lisible' may suggest otherwise. One thing, however, remains constant.
The Photo-essay is certainly a *forensic* form (in the true sense of the
word): an oratorical skill – in the hands of Barthes, Chamoiseau,
Garat, Roche, Tagli – which continues the essay's specific efforts to
link science with literature.

18   I have tried to show how 'creative criticism' is strongly linked to essayism (see
      Stafford 2002) with respect to Barthes's *S/Z*, in which furthermore text/image
      interaction is a central component.