

# Hervé Guibert: the Emergence of the “Self” through Icono-Textual Descriptions of a Body in Metamorphosis

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## Keywords

**representation;**  
**body; narration;**  
**image;**  
**metamorphosis;**  
**self.**

The body has been scrutinized in various researches as a representation device capable of revealing certain states of existence of the person in his different aspects of life. It has been the subject of sociological, philosophical, biological, anthropological or psychological studies. Certain subjects such as illness, passion, pleasure and suffering, metamorphoses, identity or social taboos have been studied in their relationship to the body and have allowed a deeper knowledge of the individual, the “self” and personal identity.

Hervé Guibert follows in his work a project of self-unveiling that is realized in a hybrid field of image and text; especially when he falls ill and tells the story of a suffering body. A recurring theme in his work is the body, through which he tries to show what constitutes his identity, the deconstruction and finally the reconstruction of this identity through the prism of illness. Guibert observes himself from the outside look through the mirror or through the camera. Therefore, through the image of the body, he constructs the distinct levels of his self-narrative. Furthermore, writing thus becomes a way of survival for the author, a way of reconstructing a new identity.

The cognition and presentation of the “self” are partially corporeal and it is through the body that the person attains self-perception, in other words “[l]e schéma corporel est l’image tridimensionnelle que chacun a de soi-même (Schilder, 1935: 159).

The alterations caused by a disease on the body, can modify this perception and disrupt the physical and psychic links of the individual; subsequently, the identity of the “self” may be changed. Danièle Brun, inspired by some of Freud’s theories, explains that body modifications have significant impacts on the psychic of the individual:

‘l’inquiétante étrangeté’ est une variété particulière de l’effrayant qui tient à la désorientation comme à la perte de repères au point qu’on ne sait plus à quoi s’en tenir, car le familier, le connu depuis toujours, n’est plus fiable [...] le sentiment d’inquiétante étrangeté peut faire irruption dans des situations anodines comme dans des situations plus spécifiques ou plus complexes, comme la maladie du corps son annonce, sa rechute, son aggravation et même sa guérison [...] y contribuent également tant elles marquent le vécu du corps d’une empreinte particulière. (2007: 116)

The brutal mutilation of the body also generates a psychic wound. The body and its image, formed since the birth of the individual (the consciousness that the individual takes of his body

is born from the stage of the mirror) are proofs of the existence of the person that ensure his self-body<sup>1</sup> which is one of the primordial elements in self-knowledge.

Body image is a remarkable concept that directly affects the identity of the “self” through physical and psychic means. According to Paul Schilder, it is “la représentation à la fois consciente et inconsciente du corps, désignant non seulement une connaissance physiologique mais renvoyant également à la notion de libido et à la signification sociale du corps” (1935: 159). Thus, “le corps n’est pas qu’un objet physique, c’est aussi et surtout la manifestation principale d’un “soi”, d’un être subjectif porteur d’états mentaux et animé de comportements” (Jeannerod, 2010: 185).

So, there is a direct relationship between self-presentation and the image that the person constructs of his body; when this image is modified because of an accident or illness, the process of self-presentation encounters certain disturbances.

It is in *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* that Hervé Guibert evokes for the first time his HIV status. As soon as this book is published, the image it reveals of itself is that of a sick body advancing towards death. We must not forget that AIDS was also for him “un paradigme dans [son] projet du dévoilement de soi et de l’énoncé de l’indicible” (Guibert, 1991: 247). It is Guibert’s sick body that modifies the representation of the autobiographical “self”.

It should be noted that with the *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*, Hervé Guibert played a pioneering role in the social and public presentation of AIDS<sup>2</sup>. He became the spokesman for the AIDS patients and represented the muffled cry of the patients who were also suffering from this disease.

Hervé Guibert presents his stories as the story of a body, a body that evolves and ages, a body that is on the one hand, the place of sexual impulses and on the other hand is the origin of suffering; Anca Porumb considers that Hervé Guibert “n’a que son propre corps sur lequel se pencher. C’est tout ce qui lui reste, et l’auteur en fait une véritable obsession. Plus qu’une obsession, le corps est la seule liaison avec la vie” (2021: 150).

Thus, the body that was already present in Hervé Guibert’s work, after the illness, becomes a considerable subject – at the heart of his writing and photographs – and shows the rapid mutation of his condition.

As a writer and photographer, Hervé Guibert wanted in his literary and photographic works to go to the end of the “du dévoilement de soi et de l’énoncé de l’indicible” (1990: 247). In this way, it is by putting his considerations on his own body, his suffering, his alterations related to the disease, and by telling it in different situations such as in the hospital or during a sexual intercourse, that he tells the story of the “self”.

In his photographic works also, Hervé Guibert considers the same functioning that he practices in his writing, that is to say to go as far as the expression of the inexpressible. In the

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<sup>1</sup>The self-body (moi-corps) in Freudian thought is the level at which the person tends to insert the soma and the psyche into a unity, divided certainly within itself, but preserved according to the link that connects what is divided. The importance of knowledge of the body in self-knowledge and the construction of the “self” was also and extensively studied by Lacan as organic and symbolic. A brief comparison between the body in Freud and Lacan is made by Didier Castanet; see Didier Castanet (2004). The reality of the body: psychosomatic phenomenon and symptom (Clinical implications). *L’en-je lacanien*, 3, 107-123. Available online: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-en-je-lacanien-2004-2-page-107.htm> [Consulted on 15/03/2023]

<sup>2</sup>Even if there were not many stories about AIDS at that time, we could nevertheless mention *L’Accompagnement* (1994) by René Ceccaty, *Ève* (1987) by Guy Hocquenghem and *La Maison Niel* (1995) by Jean-Baptiste Niel.

case of an example, he tries to show the treatments that his body undergoes and that brings out suicide in his thoughts: “La première fibroscopie avait été un vrai cauchemar : l’abattage du cochon à la campagne [...] c’est atrocement douloureux, oui, c’est insupportable, c’est le cauchemar, la violence de cet examen fait immédiatement surgir la nécessité du suicide” (1991: 56).

So, physical descriptions are always related to pain, sometimes because of the disease sometimes because of the treatments: “[...] j’ai des spasmes, des contractions, des hoquets, je veux le rejeter, le cracher, le vomir, je bave et je gémis” (57).

### **The expression of bodily transformations in the Guibertian narrative**

The physical changes caused by AIDS and treatments are shown tirelessly through photography and text as well as in their cooperation. It can be traces of weight loss or pallor due to the disease: “J’ai commencé à maigrir l’été dernier, il y a à peu près un an. Je posais soixante-dix kilos, je pèse cinquante-deux aujourd’hui [...]” (27).

Guibert notes these somatic changes in the mirror at the beginning and during his illness and demonstrates how these sudden somatic alterations broke the identity of a “self” of past. He expresses his feelings in the morning when he observes himself in the mirror “[...] je ne peux pas dire que sa 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, ça dépend des jours, parfois j’ai l’impression qu’il va s’en sortir puisque des gens sont bien revenus d’Auschwitz, d’autres fois il est clair qu’il est condamné, en route vers la tombe, inéluctablement” (15).

Sometimes he interprets his image in the mirror that informs his self-perception after the illness: “Ce visage décharné que le miroir chaque fois me renvoie [...] ne m’appartient plus mais déjà à mon cadavre” (1990: 29).

The body, for the author, is a way of representing and proving the existence and allows him to assess and evaluate his situation in the face of the disease and the daily changes that continue to intensify. He establishes a link between the body, illness and the loss of personal identity. Comparing himself with healthy people, he describes the brutality of this physical change and the feeling of being pushed abruptly in time: “Le sida m’a fait accomplir un voyage dans le temps, comme dans les contes que je lisais quand j’étais enfant. Par l’état de mon corps décharné et affaibli comme celui d’un vieillard, je me suis projeté, sans que le monde bouge si vite autour de moi, en l’an 2050” (111).

By illustrating the state of his body, he implies the modification of all aspects of the life of AIDS patients who, on the one hand, are forced to bear the suffering that gives rise to “la nécessité du suicide” (1991: 56) and on the other hand, they must accept the positions of society, but also of politicians who, by collectively degrading the sick, contribute to aggravating their situation.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, AIDS “que tout le monde donnait encore pour incurable” (1990: 9) transforms the physical and psychological aspects of the sick person as well as his social identity because it encourages to place a distance between the sick and the rest of society and sometimes generates irrational theories, as Guibert notes: “Le sida, qui a transité par le sang des singes verts, est une maladie de sorciers, d’envoûteurs” (17).

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<sup>3</sup>See *Le Monde*. Available online: <http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/06/06/sida-trente-ans-de-lutte-contre-le-virus3425488.html> [Consulted on 10/10/2022]

### Writing project

Hervé Guibert's writing project with the aim of revealing everything, continues and amplifies in his stories of AIDS; in *Le Protocole compassionnel*, which was written after *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, he reveals in a meticulous way the stages of the disease and the description of its progression.

The story begins with the receipt of a new medicine, "DDI" (1991: 9) which was not easy to find; and continues with the description of the physical degradation that strikes the writer, a description that will continue throughout the story and delivers a large amount of information about a disease still little known at the time. This information is divided into two categories: information on the various treatments for the disease and information on the physical transformations it causes. In the first case, the writer describes the therapeutic protocol and its stages through gestures, words or information heard or recorded in a medical setting, such as, for example, when his doctor tells him: "Avec un taux aussi bas de leucocytes, vous pourriez mourir à cause d'une sardine pourrie, plus aucun barrage, plus aucune protection, et le poison s'est infiltré par tout dans votre corps" (22).

As for the bodily modifications due to AIDS, the writer whose body has become that of "d'un vieillard" (10), never ceases to talk about them and to highlight them:

Il n'y avait pas de jour où je ne découvrais une nouvelle ligne inquiétante, une nouvelle absence de chair sur la charpente, cela avait commencé par une ligne transversale sur les joues, selon certains reflets qui l'accusaient, et maintenant l'os semblait sortir hors de la peau, à fleur de peau comme de petites îles plates sur la mer. La peau refluit en arrière de l'os, il la poussait. Cette confrontation tous les matins avec ma nudité dans la glace était une expérience fondamentale, chaque jour renouvelée [...]. (15)

Metamorphoses obviously have consequences on his daily and professional life, and these are developed with meticulousness during the narration, as for example when the narrator describes the scene where he falls into a bar and no longer has the strength to get up: "Ce moment très brusque dura bien sûr une éternité: tout le monde était stupéfait de voir cet homme jeune terrassé, à genoux, pas blessé en apparence, mais mystérieusement paralysé" (12). In fact, the narrator feels "décharné" (15) and "affaibli" (111), and sees death approaching him; the terms he uses show that the perception of his age has been affected when he says "j'ai quatre-vingt-quinze ans" (10) or when he compares his body with a "squelette" (13). The only thing he can foresee is his early death: "Je fais un looping en chute libre sur la main du destin" (28).

In the two types of information that Guibert makes coexist in his story, by the presence of details, as well as by the refusal of decency or shame, his only goal is to advance in his project of saying everything and "balance[r] par écrit" (20). But although Hervé Guibert tries to push back the barriers and go beyond the limits to be able to evoke everything, despite all his attempts, he sometimes fails to describe the raw truth of AIDS, which sometimes reaches a form of unspeakable suffering.

When he experiences pain, a certain silence may first settle in his writing; in this case, his pain is sometimes palpable in the absence of words to describe it. When, for example, after having undergone the brutal and humiliating experience of a ruthless endoscopy, he remains almost silent: "Chez moi j'ouvris mon journal, et j'y écrivis : « Fibroscopie ». Rien d'autre, rien

de plus, aucune explication, aucune description de l'examen et aucun commentaire sur ma souffrance, impossible d'aligner deux mots, le sifflet coupé, bouche bée. J'étais incapable de raconter mon expérience" (71).

### **The image and the confrontation with the transformed body**

The body, partially or wholly challenged by AIDS, has become the alarm signal of the advance of the disease, and its physical transformations prefigure the approach of death; the Guibertian image and text testify to this. The presentation of these bodily evolutions remains important because it directly influences the perception of his own image and personal identity; indeed, the person only knows the image of his body through devices (mirror, camera), as Roland Barthes confirms "Où est votre corps de vérité ? Vous êtes le seul à ne vous voir qu'en image, vous ne voyez jamais vos yeux, sinon abêtis par le regard qu'ils posent sur le miroir ou sur l'objectif [...] même et surtout pour votre corps, vous êtes condamné à l'imaginaire" (1975: 40).

Hence the importance of the role of the mirror and photography in this (re)acquaintance. So, the image that the individual has of himself is a construction that he elaborates in thought; according to Paul Schilder, the human body is an image that "nous formons dans notre esprit, autrement dit la façon dont notre corps nous apparaît à nous-même" (1935: 159).

This citation from Schilder reveals the importance of the photographic device that shows the image of a person to himself<sup>4</sup>; the construction of self-image is constantly evolving (because of time and different events and experiences) and can be perceived in photographs when an author seeks to recognize himself in his old photos.

It is to this extent that the photographic presentation of the body is extremely important. Indeed, the daily physical changes, which constantly occur in the body, are often not noticeable in the mirror. Photography, on the other hand, records the features of the past, fixes them, talks about them more and shows more. As a result, sudden transformations, such as those that appear due to a serious illness or accident, become remarkable in the comparisons that the individual makes between his current state (in the photographic image or in the mirror) and his state as previously recorded in the old photographs; as when Hervé Guibert finds himself facing two photographs of himself with a few years of time lag: "[...] je me retrouvai avec ces deux photos côte à côte, ces deux visages qui n'avaient rien à voir, qui étaient de deux personnes différentes" (1981: 55).

The photographic image, as a driving reference, figures and impacts the body and three-dimensional schema that the author has of himself; so, the very encounter of the individual with his old photograph can be a shock since it is in fact an encounter with his "visage antérieur" (56).

Hervé Guibert's work, after AIDS, becomes the manifestation of his sick body whether it is a story, a photograph or a film; in his latest exhibition, the author shows a photo of himself naked on a stone table, which metaphorically represents the anticipation of his death. Hervé Guibert tries to reveal the body in different systems of representation; thus, in his film project *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, he shows his diminished body and reveals the reality of treatments that

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<sup>4</sup> See Mirror stage and its importance in Lacan's self-knowledge, "Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je : telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique", in *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 1949, p. 449-455.

were quite unknown at the time; he evokes his wish, already present in *La Mort propagande*, his desire to show “[s]a mort sur scène, devant les caméras” (Guibert, 2009: 10).

This documentary film exposes the sick body and the scenes sometimes become painful, even unbearable, until the author shows his fake suicide attempt by poisoning. He described the attempt in his diary: “Avant-hier (le temps de s’en remettre), j’ai mimé mon suicide devant la caméra. Voilà une prise que je ne saurais pas refaire, sauf pour de vrai [...]. Je filmais le simulacre de mon suicide, inventant sur-le-champ, dans le champ, le coup de la roulette russe truquée avec les verres [...]. J’ai inventé la suite, par mon jeu” (Guibert, 2001: 414).

This scene, even fictitious, represents for the author the absolute truth of the disease and the bodily suffering; it is by going through this “simulacrum” that he realizes in advance his own death and suicide. In this way, he not only indicates the state of his sick body, but he also escapes the thought and anguish of death by mastering his representation before it arrives for good.

So, the importance of image and photography in the representation of the body is particularly perceptible in the link that Hervé Guibert establishes between the body and photography: “La photo marque la vie à la naissance, puis au mariage, ce sont les deux points forts. Entre-temps, comme la craie sur la toise, comme ces petites ciselures de croissance qu’on peut remarquer sur un os, à chaque anniversaire elle suit la poussée du corps, puis elle l’oublie, elle le dénie. Le corps adulte, le corps qui n’est plus vierge, le corps vieillissant tombe dans une trappe noire, il n’est plus photogénique” (1981: 30).

Through this passage, the author demonstrates how body modifications can appear in photography during life until death; it also points out that “la dégradation des corps” (51) manifests itself in the photo, which becomes for him an important medium to represent the sick body.

Thus, the writer photographer uses the open space through the intersection of multiple written and visual media, which creates an escape from the feeling of loss. He often examines the metamorphoses of his body as he explains in *The Ghost Image*: “j’étais attentif aux transformations de mon visage comme aux transformations d’un personnage de roman qui s’achemine lentement vers la mort” (67). Indeed, for him “la découverte de son propre corps représente l’effort de se construire une nouvelle identité” (Porumb, 2012: 148).

Roberta Agnese, in her article “Seuils de visibilité. La photographie et la représentation de la souffrance”, considers that

[s]’interroger sur la représentation de la souffrance dans les pratiques photographiques contemporaines signifie alors s’interroger sur les problématiques qui intéressent la photographie aujourd’hui, autant que techniques voire art et en même temps pratique sociale ; cela signifie viser au cœur d’une problématique qui est loin d’être d’ordre exclusivement esthétique mais qui, au contraire, a d’importantes conséquences sur un plan éthique et politique. Encadrer est un choix qui sélectionne ce qu’il faudra publiquement montrer et montrer la souffrance est une manière d’en porter témoignage. (2018: 359)

In this sense, photography allows the author to go beyond an aesthetic interpretation and, in addition, beyond the narcissistic dimension, and to observe and further analyze the social aspects of suffering that appear through the images he produces: diseases such as AIDS and

the social attacks it causes are for example addressed and depicted thanks to the presence and description of photos.

Therefore, Hervé Guibert, disturbed by a serious illness and its physical and psychological modifications, evokes his self-image through somatic descriptions and tries to give meaning to his life. As Rosenfield describes the importance of the body image:

[The] body image becomes conscious by reference to itself; it is its own frame of reference.... Through this ever-changing dynamic image, the brain creates a conscious world of extraordinary variety, organizing stimuli dynamically in its terms. It is to this dynamic image that stimuli are referred (self-reference) and in terms of which they 'make sense'. The qualitative richness of each person's perceptual world is created by the dynamic qualities of his or her body image; without it there would be no world that anyone could know. (1992: 49)

### **Conclusion**

Consequently, the expression of physical alterations in photographs evokes loss of "self"; the body reflects pain and frustration and thus shows that the continuity of existence, guaranteed by health, risks being broken at any moment; the photographs therefore require a reflection on the fragility of the sense of identity and reveals the person's confrontation with daily, imperceptible, but also sudden changes.

As Hervé Guibert explains, "photography speaks, or more exactly expresses something that writing is intended to complete" (*apud* Pujade, 2008: 7). As a result, constantly creating a relationship between writing and photography in his works, he demonstrates his sick body which reveals, on one side, his psychic state, his life, his friendships and social relations and, on the other side, reveals the conditions of the daily life of other patients of his time when AIDS was considered a taboo.

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