

Mocking Photographic Truth

The Case of HA!

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Résumé

Cet article part de l'idée que la lecture détaillée de la manière dont le texte littéraire rend compte de procédés photographiques, aide à repenser et à remodeler des concepts théoriques, le présent article se penche sur les jeux avec le médium photographique que l'on trouve dans un roman multimodal intrigant mais peu analysé de Gordon Sheppard, *HA!: A Self-Murder Mystery* (2003). La discussion part essentiellement de deux observations: d'abord la thèse généralement acceptée que la photographie se distingue d'autres médias visuels par son caractère indexical, ensuite le peu d'attention que l'on a pour l'usage de la photographie dans le récit. En se concentrant sur la représentation photographique du visage humain, généralement considéré comme porteur de véracité, document et vérité, l'article retrace les manières dont les usages effectifs de l'image photographique dans *HA!* forcent le lecteur à y voir un signe de duperie et de fausseté, non de vérité. Tout au long des analyses, l'article se veut attentif au tressage du récit verbal et des matériaux photographiques. Il met donc en avant l'interaction des mots et des images dans le méta-projet de l'auteur, qui cherche à reconfigurer les attentes du lecteur en matière de vérité et de mimésis dans le domaine de ce qui s'appelle traditionnellement le mode documentaire.

Abstract

Starting with the premise that careful examinations of the practices of photographic usage in literature help us re-think, revise, and reconfigure theoretical precepts, the article investigates the multiple games played with and by the photographic images in Gordon Sheppard's *HA!: A Self-Murder Mystery* (2003), a compelling yet surprisingly little researched multimodal novel. The discussion is framed by two general points: first, the prevailing agreement that what distinguishes the photographic image from other images is its indexical nature, and, second, the tendency to disregard the way the photograph is embedded in the narrative. Focusing on the photograph of the human figure, generally viewed as a particularly strong bearer of veracity, evidence, and truth, the article traces the various ways in which the actual use of the photographic image in *HA!* forces the reader/viewer to see deceit and fakery, not truth, as the proper domain of the photograph. Throughout, the article attends to the ways in which the verbal narrative and the photograph are braided together, that is, it emphasizes the mutuality of word and image in the meta-project of re-configuring the reader's expectations of truth and mimesis when dealing with what is conventionally viewed as documentary modes.

Keywords

photographic image, truth, *HA!*, Gordon Sheppard

“Photographs ... are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.”
Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (69)

Although, as many studies have shown, the impact of the photograph on literary narratives has a long history, the insertion of physical photographs (or, more correctly, of their reproductions) in fictional narratives is a relatively new phenomenon, even if one can find novels with photographs nested within them at the end of the nineteenth- and throughout the twentieth century.¹ Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*, and elegiac portrait of the Belgian city, first published in 1892, is often claimed to be the first work of fiction illustrated with photographs; *Nadja*, the semi-autobiographical novel by André Breton, and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, both published in 1928, featured photographic images; even Henry James, though persistently ambivalent about photographs, decided to have them as frontispieces in the collected edition of his fiction, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (1907-9), widely known as “The New York Edition.” Closer to our times we can find photographs reproduced in novels such as William Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968) or Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). However, it is since the late 1990s that we first can speak of “a virtual omnipresence of photographic images” (Horstkotte and Pedri 11) in fictional and semi-fictional narratives, W.G. Sebald customarily credited with initiating the sophisticated use of photographs (see for instance Patt and Dillbohner). Among contemporary writers who extensively use photographs in their narratives we find Carol Shields (*The Stone Diaries*, 2003), Mark Z. Danielewski (*House of Leaves*, 2000), and Jonathan Safran Foer (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2005). Perhaps less known are Steve Tomasula's *The Book of Portraiture* (2006), David Byrne's *The New Sins* (2006), Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008), Lauren Groff's *The Monsters of Templeton* (2008), and Leanne Shapton (*Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*, 2009). All of these writers braid the photographic image into the narrative in intriguing, sometimes even dazzling, ways.

Given this proliferation of photographic images in literary texts the emergence of a (relatively) new field of research, “photography and literature” is not surprising; a sub-field of “word-and-image” studies, it has its canonical figures in Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Susan Sontag. Nor is it surprising to see one of the most important scholarly journals in literary studies, *Poetics Today*, devote a special issue in 2008 to photography in literature.² What is surprising, though, is that while profuse critical attention is bestowed on the photographic image, the way it interacts with the verbal narrative is rather cursorily treated; all too often, it seems to me, discussions of actual uses of photographs in literature tend to be overshadowed by theoretical debates.³ This may, of course, be regarded as evidence that scholars

1. See for instance Armstrong, Shloss, and Williams.

2. *Poetics Today* is far from alone on bringing in photography in literature to the fore. Already in the Fall 1994 *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* published a whole issue on “Autobiography / Photography / Narrative.” If literary journals such as *Poetics Today* or *MFS* make room for photography, journals whose primary interest lies in photography increasingly focus on its presence in literature; see for instance the April 2011 issue of *Photographies*; <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpho20>.

3. I am not claiming that there is no interest in the word-image interactions; to the contrary, such interest is widespread, as evidenced by the existence of journals such as *Word and Image* or *Image & Narrative*, or the book series *Word and Image Interactions*, or the critical anthology *Literature and Photography* (edited by Jane M.

like Jeffrey T. Nealon are right in claiming that in post-postmodernism “the work of interpretation is no longer the primary research work of literature departments” (133), that the hermeneutics of suspicion has given way to anti-hermeneutics. I don’t think Nealon is wrong in pointing out that in recent years literary studies “has swerved away from interpreting texts ... to examining the historical, archival, scientific, biological, and political contexts of literary production” (147), but he is wrong, I hope, in suggesting that these interests have *supplanted* the question of meaning. I, for one, take joy in being “beholden to interpretation.” Embracing the embarrassment that a confession to a commitment to literary analysis seems to entail these days, I assert the self-evident truth that a careful examination of the practices of photographic usage in literature can (sometimes? often?) help us re-think, revise, and reconfigure theoretical precepts.

Indeed, such reconfigurations are often done for us by literary texts themselves if we pay attention to what the verbal narrative and the photograph “want” from each other. To this end I examine the use of photographs in Gordon Sheppard’s *HA!: A Self-Murder Mystery* (2003). Two general points frame my discussion, the first being the prevailing agreement that what distinguishes the photographic image from other images is its indexical nature. As Rosalind Krauss succinctly and representatively puts it, the photograph is “an imprint or transfer of the real”; it is “causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints” (26). Even in what William Mitchell has dubbed a “post-photographic” era, the era of wide-spread use of Photoshop, the photograph is persistently taken to be “a concrete impression of a particular object in the real world,” as Horstkotte and Pedri remind us (13), and continues to be viewed as a carrier of the authentic and the documentary, that is of truth.⁴ It is precisely this shared belief in both the truth-value and the objectivity of the photographic image and its mimetic impulse that *HA!: A Self-Murder Mystery* turns into the object of multiple games. As I will show, the deployment of photographs in *HA!* shifts the coordinates of the photograph: it insists that deceit and fakery, not truth, are its proper domain. The second framing issue concerns the nature of the photographic image’s embeddedness in a verbal narrative. To discuss a photograph *per se* is one thing; to analyze its interactions with the context in which it is placed is another. My ambition in what follows is to systematically attend to the mutuality of the photograph and the narrative in creating meaning.

HA!: A Self-Murder Mystery is one of those texts that “clearly delight in the newfound ... possibilities that the cross-pollination of words and pictures ultimately affords” (Baetens and Blatt 2-3). In fact, few (if any) narratives can match *HA!* as regards the staggering number and variety of images and graphic devices that are braided together with words. Maps, diagrams, music notations, EEG records, reproductions of postcards, photographs, film posters, film stills, handwritten letters and notes, classical paintings (by, for instance, Michelangelo and Goya), *I Ching* hexagrams, bills, etc. are embedded on virtually every single page of *HA!*. Even a cursory glance makes it is easy to understand why one reviewer called *HA!* “the wildest scrapbook” (see Homel). This orgy of the visual is compounded by

Rabb) and the volume *Phototextualities* (edited by Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble).

4. This is not to say that the mainstream belief that the photograph (most often assumed to be a snapshot) has an intrinsic connection with reality has not been contested. Indeed, a rejection of this premise is central to, for instance, for Baetens and Bleyen’s argument about the photonovel.

generic diversity. Classified by the publisher as a novel and called a *documentary* novel by Sheppard himself, that *HA!* draws on the genre of detective fiction is signaled already by the subtitle (“A Self-Murder Mystery”). Its affinity with biography, suggested by the acronym HA (Hubert Aquin), is far less obvious to begin with, not least because none of the four definitions of the combinations of the letters “h” and “a” (Ha; Ha!; Ha! ha!; HA) refers to Aquin. Apart from biography and detective fiction, the book makes use of the conventions of psychological study, historiography, political pamphlet, metafiction, literary criticism, and hypertext, to name just a handful of the motley of genre affiliations with which *HA!* plays. Throughout, the documentary and factual are extensively interwoven with the fictional and fantastical, a strategy established right from the beginning, on a “dedication” page (a paratextually placed page that follows the title page and the page with definitions of “ha”) explaining that *HA!* is dedicated to all who have committed suicide, and offering a list of almost two hundred names, making Hedda Gabler, Anna Karenina, and Othello rub shoulders with Yukio Mishima, Socrates, and Virginia Woolf in Dante’s second ring of the seventh circle of Hell. Gargantuan in size with its close to 900 pages, encyclopedic in scope, *HA!* then puts daunting demands on the reader’s literary and visual literacy. Considering the enthusiasm with which the publication was greeted, the critical neglect of Sheppard’s novel is quite surprising.⁵ My own engagement is thus partly motivated by a desire to redress this situation and draw attention to the novel’s compelling weaving of the visual with the verbal. More importantly, the photographic images, profusely employed in *HA!*, constitute interpretive challenges that I want to map. While ostensibly telling the story of Gordon Sheppard’s quest to discover the truth behind the 1977 suicide of Hubert Aquin (1929—1977), the text’s meta-project is to re-configure the reader’s expectations of truth and mimes as regards documentary genres.⁶ Playing a prominent role in this meta-project, I argue, the photograph is the object of my focus here.

In line with its biographical thrust, *HA!* contains several photographs of Aquin.⁷ At first sight, the photographs seem to do what they are expected to: to furnish evidence, to secure veracity, to authenticate. In other words, they appear to be employed in the service of what Roland Barthes has famously called “ça a été” (“that-has-been”) in his seminal *Camera Lucida*, this *memento mori* function of the photograph being particularly congruent with a number of aspects of *HA!* as a narrative triggered by Aquin’s death, focused on his life-long obsession with suicide, and written in the shadow of Sheppard’s own approaching end, as the reader eventually learns.⁸ But while all non-staged photographs are taken

5. Compared to *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Citizen Kane*, *HA!* was pronounced a literary masterpiece and a work of genius, reviewers competing with each other in their use of superlatives such as amazing, extraordinary, monumental, magnificent, magisterial, brilliant, staggering, mesmerizing, riveting, and profound. The McGill-Queen’s University Press webpage offers a representative sample of the reviews of *HA!*; see <http://mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=1674>. Many of the unsolicited comments can be found at <http://www.gordonsheppard.com/bottom/bHA.html>. The only mention of *HA!* in a critical article that I have found thus far is in “Photographs on the Walls of the House of Fiction” by Adams.

6. Aquin was a Québécois separatist intellectual, novelist, and film-maker in the late 1960s and the 1970s, best known as the author of *Prochain épisode* (*Next Episode*, published in 1963).

7. The text teems also with other photographs: apart from one image of his son Emmanuel and one of his widow, Andrée Yanacopoulo, we find photographs of writers such as James Joyce or Yukio Mishima, of actors like Brigitte Bardot or Geneviève Bujold, of the scientists Francis Crick and James D. Watson, or a nameless Inuit woman or a group of Mohawk Indians.

8. In the section called “Authorized comments” at the end of the book Sheppard mentions his hormone-therapy treatment for stage 3 of prostate cancer. He died three years after the publication of *HA!*.

to have such a documentary purport, photographs featuring people have a pronounced particularizing and individualizing function: they are seen as capturing the subjecthood of the human figure. Ultimately, however, it is exactly this type of a photograph's documentary function that is contested, cast into doubt, and mocked, the eye of the reader/viewer re-configured to doubt what it sees.

That the use of photographs of Aquin in *HA!* is anything but straightforward is signaled by the sheer fact that it is impossible to answer rigorously the seemingly simple question about the number of photo images of the writer of *Prochain épisode* that can be found in the book. Five images have captions that identify Aquin as their subject. In order of appearance these are: "Hubert Aquin playing tennis, Montréal 1969" (78); "Negative image of Hubert Aquin on the back cover of *Neige noir*" (99); "Hubert Aquin at Radio-Canada in the 1950s" (238); "*Hubert Aquin* 1975 (photo hanging over Rivard's desk)" (547), and "Hubert Aquin 1929-1977" (851). To this category one could also add a reproduction of a page from *Journal de Montréal* with a photograph of a smiling Aquin with the caption "Thursday March 1977 p. 3" (428) and a photo of Aquin in a graduation gown but without an identifying caption (610). A photograph of a sculpture with the caption "Bronze head of Hubert Aquin 1977" (82) hovers between the category of photographic reproduction and artistic image. And then we have three images of different body parts that may be attributed to Aquin. But while the image of a hand is explicitly identified as "Aquin's hand" (390), it is only the surrounding text that allows the reader to think of the image of a mouth (383) and an eye (432) as "belonging" to Aquin. Finally, and most unsettlingly, there are two film stills from classic movies that reveal, on a closer inspection, that Aquin's face has been inserted into them to replace the original. The captions read: "Re-enactment of scene in *Casablanca* when Rick asks Sam to play 'As Time Goes By'" (560) and "Re-enactment of death scene in *Elvira Madigan*, 1967" (742).⁹ While an all-inclusive count would result in thirteen photographic images of Aquin, a stricter one leaves us with only five photos of Aquin represented in a fashion that would allow the reader/viewer to identify him, the others being either so blurry that they become generic or so contrived that they cast doubt on the identity of the represented subject.

While each of the above-listed photographic images of Aquin does perform the conventional illustrative role in the verbal narrative, each turns out also to enter into a more complex relation with the text than could initially be expected. The degree of complexity varies. For instance, the snapshot of Aquin playing tennis seems to function merely as a straightforward visualization of the verbal, since it is placed in the context of the discussion of Aquin as a dynamic tennis player. There is, however, an interesting disjunction here between text and photographic caption. While in the interview Jean Éthier-Blias speaks of seeing Aquin play tennis in Paris around 1950, the caption situates the tennis playing in Montreal in 1969. This type of disjunction, a temporal and spatial slippage, is at work in much of *HA!*, gradually building up into the themes of dysfunctional memory, confusion, dislocation, and lying. Another example concerns the image of the photographic negative of Aquin's portrait. This photograph is brought up in Sheppard's interview with Patricia Smart, a professor of French literature and one of Aquin's lovers, as she says: "You know that photo of him on the back cover of *Neige noir*? It's a negative image which gives him the look of a vampire" (98). The caption under the reproduced image

9. It is impossible to know if such small errors as articles missing or a lack of italicization are simply a matter of a poor editorial job or if they are planted as meaningful mistakes.

reads: “Negative image of Hubert Aquin on the back cover of *Neige noir*” (99). While illustrating / documenting narrative information, the image can be read as a pictorial literalization of what emerges from a number of interviews: a predominantly negative image of Aquin as a person who financially, intellectually, and emotionally feeds on other people, a vampire of a magnitude that confounded all who knew him. Moreover, the photograph functions as a phantom-double of the themes of spectrality and haunting, an issue to which I will return later.

But it is two bewildering “re-enactment” images and the final portrait that I want to discuss in some detail now, since they best embody the interlacing of certain themes and motifs that organize the narrative as well as mockingly play with the indexical nature of the photographic image.

Both re-enactment images are film stills that have been manipulated. The first still comes from *Casablanca*, the 1942 movie directed by Michael Curtiz. As is generally known, it tells the melodramatic story of a complicated love affair between a seemingly cynical American Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa Lund, a Norwegian woman (played by Ingrid Bergman). In one of the central scenes of the movie, after an unexpected meeting with Ilsa and her husband in his bar, Rick is shown sitting at a table with a glass and a bottle, desperately hoping that his lover return to the bar, while Sam (Arthur “Dooley” Wilson), the black piano player and singer, is playing the theme tune that triggers off Rick’s recollection of the happy time with Ilsa in Paris. It is one of the stills from this movie sequence that is reproduced in *HA!*, with Aquin’s face rather eerily replacing that of Rick Blaine/ Humphrey Bogart. (Figure 1)

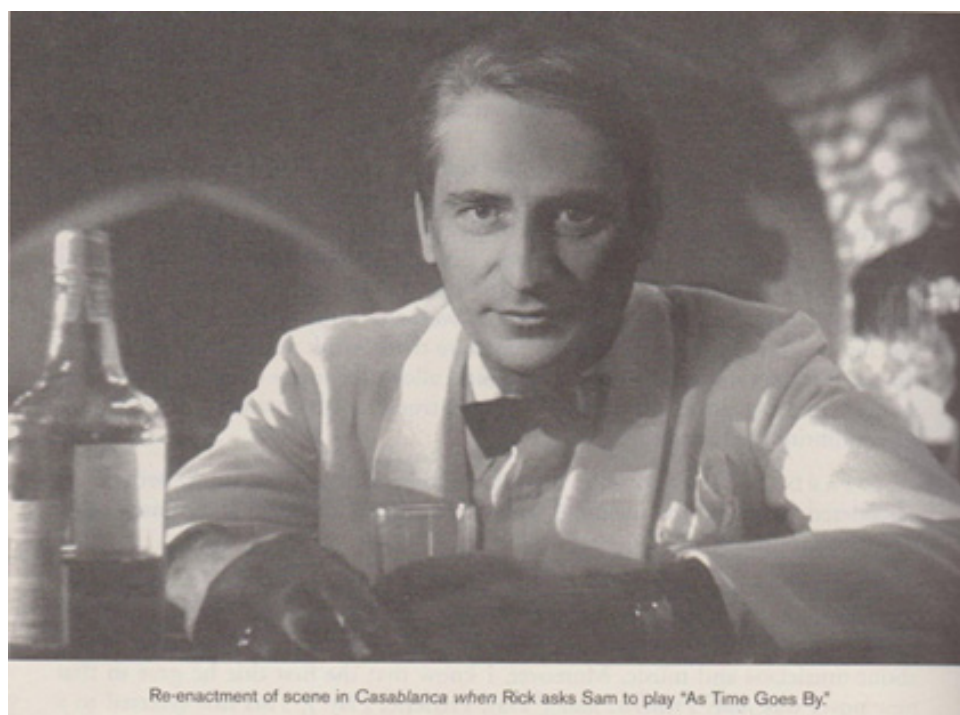


Fig. 1: “Re-enactment of scene in Casablanca when Rick asks Sam to play ‘As Time Goes By’”

The second doctored still comes from *Elvira Madigan*, a 1967 movie by the Swedish director Bo Widerberg, starring Pia Degermark and Tommy Berggren. Its story is based on the lives of late-nineteenth century Danish tight-rope dancer Hedvig Jensen (whose stage name was Elvira Madigan) and the Swedish army lieutenant Sixten Sparre, who left his comfortable middle-class life, his wife, and his military service for Elvira. Their passionate romance ostracized by society, the couple decide to commit a double suicide. In a scene in which the main character is about to shoot Elvira while embracing her, Aquin's face is put in place of Sixten Sparre's/Tommy Berggren's.¹⁰ (Figure 2)

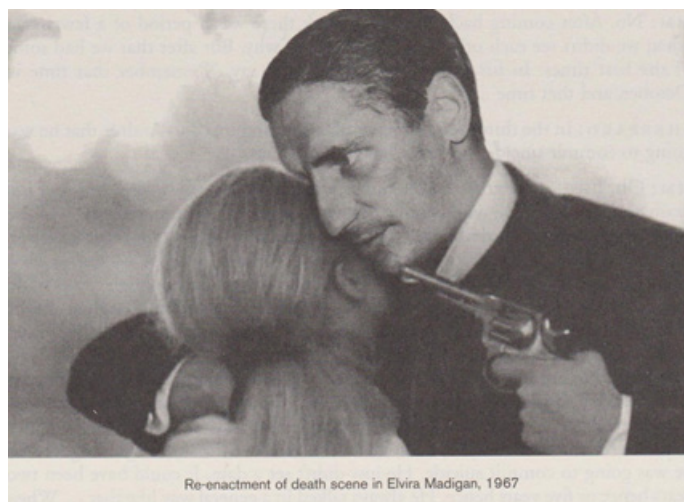


Fig. 2: “Re-enactment of death scene in *Elvira Madigan*, 1967”

Aquin's face, then, functions as an equation mark of sorts, linking two radically different characters, Rick Blaine and Sixten Sparre: the first gallantly gives up his beloved to ensure her future happiness, while the latter kills his much younger mistress and then himself. Both Rick and Sixten are well-known through movies, although the first is a fictional character and the other is based on a real-life person. Aquin impersonates both the fictional character Rick, and the historical figure Sixten Sparre. So whose face does Aquin's replace: that of the fictional characters or of the real-life actors performing Rick and Sparre respectively? Or perhaps both? The photographic stills draw the reader's attention to Aquin as a performer of multiple roles, someone who was an actor throughout his life. Indeed, as we learn from the interviews, Aquin mimicked a wide range of fictional and real-life characters; he saw himself as, for instance, Tristan, Hamlet, or the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig. The two film stills not merely resonate with this textual information, but offer a parodic meta-commentary on the very motivation of a quest to recuperate Aquin's “true” self through an accumulation of facts—and, in fact, of photographic images.

The photographic stills signal the contradictory but closely interwoven pulls in Aquin's life: a series of intense love relationships and an equally intense series of incidents revealing his drive toward self-destruction. Both *Casablanca* and *Elvira Madigan* are melodramatic stories of the pull and push of Eros

10. In a third re-enactment image it is not Aquin's face but the face of one of his lovers, Dominique Blondeau, that replaces the face of Björn Andrésen playing Tadzio in *Death in Venice*. The caption reads: “*Death in Venice* 1971. Re-enactment of a scene between Tadzio and Gustav” (174).

and Thanatos. Each of Aquin's erotic relationships, we gather from the interviews, was intensely linked to his morbid obsession with death; again and again Aquin enticed his lovers and friends into discussions about "self-murder." The doctored photographs trigger the question of whether the self-murdering act was not in fact performed by Aquin over and over again in his every act of impersonation. On the one hand, he was symbolically "killing" his own self; on the other, his acts of impersonation entailed "murdering" the other's self, be it a fictional character or a real-life person, by usurping the other's body. It could be also argued that the stills are in line with the theme of Aquin as a vampire; after all, he fed off others both in his life and his art. Be that as it may, his face in the two stills simultaneously performs two functions: it multiplies his selves at the same time as it flattens / dismantles differences, the differences between self and other, fact and fiction, then and now, here and there.

Contrary to Liliane Louvel's persuasive argument that the photographic image in general oscillates "between two times and places" (34), the two manipulated images of Aquin set in motion an oscillation between *multiple* temporalities and locations. The photographs evoke layered pasts: the moments in which the film images were taken, the times they refer to, the moment of their manipulation, the moment of viewing/reading them. In a similar vein, the stills also bring forth multiple locations: the places where they were taken, the places they represent, the places in which they are situated by the narrative. For instance, the *Casablanca* still is given in the context of Sheppard's interview with Andrée Yanacopula who refers to her conversation with Aquin in May 1976 in Nice, in the bar at the Hôtel Méridien. This real-life bar, Rick's bar in the *Casablanca* film, and the Hollywood studio in which the *Casablanca* bar was staged commingle and interact with the time in which the story is set (early December 1941), the time of shooting of the film (1942), the time of Aquin's and his wife's conversation about the film (1976), as well as the times of viewing / reading / remembering the various bar scenes.¹¹ What I would like to propose is that one of the structuring principles at work in *HA!* is a simultaneous and paradoxical merging and multiplication of temporalities and spaces, a gathering of layers of time and diversity of locations into one thick time-space. But while Aquin's face is the site of absorption of times and spaces, it also stands for the dispersion and dissemination of what would be his "self." I will return to this point shortly.

The use of the word "re-enactment" in the captions directs the reader's /viewer's attention to the doctoring of the film stills, to the "nesting" of Aquin's photograph within another artifact and another medium, and to the transgression of narrative levels. Had it not been for the captions, a cursory look at the photographs might very well lead one to assume that they are indeed stills from the respective movies. As it is, the word-image interaction draws the reader's/viewer's attention to the mischievous subversion of the presupposition of that photo-image's indexical function, to its role as a carrier of truth. By extension, also the documentary value of *HA!* is put under stress: manipulation and fakery are part and parcel of both the photograph and the narrative. It is in fact the very agent who sets out to find out the truth about Aquin and his suicide, Gordon Sheppard, who seems to have tampered with the photographs. In the "Credits" section, Sheppard acknowledges permissions to reprint the photographs

11. The *Elvira Madigan* still is inserted in Sheppard's interview with MM (Aquin's lover) who speaks of Aquin's proposition of a double suicide presented in May 1976. Separated by close to 200 pages of text, the two stills are brought together not only by Aquin's presence in them but also by the time in his life.

inserted in *HA!* (alongside other sources he uses: texts and lyrics, painting, prints, drawings, etc.). The two film stills fall into the category of images identified as taken by Gordon Sheppard or as being “part of his private collection” (868). It is thus Sheppard himself, it seems, who must have manipulated the stills. It is *his* version of Aquin that *HA!* ultimately offers, the biographer competing for prominence with the subject of his biography. Sheppard, in other words, *creates* Aquin’s life as much as he *documents* it; he is a collector as much as a producer of information. But while of course *all* biographers are also in a sense producers of their subjects, to doctor the truth-value of photographs remains a rare and hence a very powerful act of transgression. The rigged stills forcefully bring out what Sontag has called photography’s “shady commerce between art and truth” (6). “Once changed,” Louvel notes, “an image, a photo, is no longer ‘ça a été,’ a trustworthy ‘photographic document’”(42); instead, it enters the realm of the fictional.

The two explicitly manipulated images cast a shadow on the documentary charge of all the other photographs of Aquin. This is particularly true of the final photographic portrait of Hubert Aquin, which paradoxically both consolidates and undermines his subjectivity. The portrait is final in a double sense: it ends the sequence of photographic images of Aquin in *HA!* and, as the note on the copyright page informs us, it was the last portrait for which Hubert Aquin posed. Its placement at the end of the narrative gestures toward the tradition of paratextual appearance of such photographs in autobiographies, although



Fig. 3: “Hubert Aquin 1929 – 1977”

several sections of the book appear after the portrait: a coda, a list of characters, “authorized comments,” contents, credits, and a painting by Rembrandt. In this full-page frontal photograph, Aquin is smiling slightly, his eyes meeting those of the reader/viewer.¹² (Figure 3)

As in none of the others, in this image Aquin appears to be fully alive, unabashedly available to the reader’s/viewer’s gaze. Yet at the same time, as no other photograph of the author of *Prochain épisode*, it becomes “the inventory of mortality” (Sontag 70), the sense of aliveness in tension with the multiple signatures of endings and deaths that accompany it. Given at the end of the narrative (if not quite at the end of the book), with dates of Aquin’s birth and death provided below the photograph, the picture has an aura of temporal and thematic closure and finality.¹³ Closure, in fact, is inscribed in the very rhetoric of Aquin’s portrait. As Susan Sontag reminds us, “In the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, and disclosure of the subject’s essence” (37-8). The picture seems to clinch the success of the verbal narrative’s quest to “piece Aquin together,” as it were, to offer us a full account of his life, both outer and inner.

Importantly, the final photograph provides the reader with a view of the part of Aquin’s body that was completely shattered in his suicide act. The shot through the mouth made Aquin’s head, we learn at the beginning of *HA!*, fly “everywhere” (13). This absence of a face on Aquin’s corpse is something of a leitmotif throughout the narrative. This is how one of the first eyewitnesses, Sherry Monahan, describes the scene: “There was brain tissue on the trunk of the car, and his head was so . . . *deformed*. I have no picture of his face at all. I think it must have been so *grossly* . . . It’s certainly his head that sticks out in my mind as far as the mess of it all” (10; italics in the original). Half of Aquin’s face “completely gone,” the coroner, Dr. Louis-Georges Huard, finds it difficult to identify the corpse, and has to rely on such evidence as a tuft of grey hair on a bone fragment from Aquin’s cranium (684). When the widowed Andrée sees the corpse in the morgue, she cannot act on her desire to kiss Aquin one last time because “his face was gone—there wasn’t anything to kiss” (689). But while most of the head was missing, the rest of the body appeared to the eyewitnesses “immaculate” (13). The photographic portrait restores, as it were, an immaculate face to the immaculate body (invisible in the photograph) and thereby provides the reader with the uniqueness of the self associated with the face.¹⁴ However, this restoration is also an act of violation, since it goes against Aquin’s unwillingness to be photographed. As we learn earlier in *HA!*, his face was the one feature of his body with which Aquin was particularly dissatisfied. He was

12. The semantic value of the size and placement of images in verbal narratives is an important issue that I cannot develop here. Let me just mention that while the re-enactment photos take less than half a page and are embedded in the text, the final portrait fills the whole page with only the bottom margin left for the caption. Only two other images in *HA!* are of the same size: an opening reproduction of close-up of a detail from Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of *St. John the Baptist* and a reproduction of a fragment of *The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo on page 752.

13. The reiteration of temporal closure is counteracted by two seemingly minor details: there is no information when the photograph was taken and the pages on which the time endings are so conspicuous are unnumbered. These details, I would like to suggest, hint at the timeless existence of Aquin, not unlike that of the figures in paintings, in particular the image of St. John the Baptist in Leonardo da Vinci’s painting that is reproduced on the verso of the title page.

14. Several of Sheppard’s interviewees link Aquin’s face to his uniqueness. For example, Patrick Jacquemet wonders: “Why did he destroy his face, his features? Even if the features are a mask that last only a little while after death, there still [would have] remained something for people to see of Hubert’s character” (347).

“fed up” with his face, we learn; he “didn’t want that nose, certainly not those eyes either, and he didn’t like his chin.” When asked how he would like to be seen in a photo, Aquin answered: “Transparent, with my head at the bottom” (152).

Anything but transparent, Aquin’s face in the portrait speaks of spectrality, the ghost of death inscribed in it more powerfully than in any other photograph, since it re-presents exactly that which has been destroyed beyond recognition by the suicidal gunshot. Reassuring the reader of Aquin’s uniqueness, the photograph is simultaneously the advent of the self as other (Barthes 12). It is in the connection between the photograph and what it represents that the spectral resides, as this is the site of both history and magic. Stanley Cavell puts it as follows:

We might say that we don’t know how to think of the *connection* between a photograph and what it is a photograph of. The image is not a likeness; it is not exactly a replica, or a relic, or a shadow, or an apparition either, though all of these natural candidates share a striking feature with photographs—an aura or history of magic surrounding them. (17-18)

What is perhaps most striking in the final portrait is Aquin’s enigmatic smile. It echoes that of St. John the Baptist in the Leonardo da Vinci painting that is reproduced on the verso of the title page. This inter- and intra-visual resonance works clearly against the seeming “disclosure of the subject’s essence.” Moreover, the face that we see in the final photographs is conspicuously like the one that is attached to the body of Rick/Humphrey Bogart in the *Casablanca* still. Indeed, rather than offer an “essence” of Hubert Aquin, his photographic portrait dissolves it, as the connection between the real and the imagined, the historical (Barthes’s “ça a été”) and the fictional are shifted, turned, and twisted. Or, to use a more appropriate image, in a Moebius-strip-like way, the real is always already connected to the imagined, the true to the false, the authentic to the fake, the past to the present, the “there” to the “here.”

Thus the final photograph simultaneously amplifies and reconciles, in a fashion, the two contradictory aesthetic impulses of *HA!*: scattering, fragmentation, and dispersal on the one hand, and gathering, recuperation, and piecing together on the other. The accumulation of facts, of information, of images amounts to a total picture whose wholeness we cannot trust. These contradictory drives of randomness and detail on the one hand and the careful orchestration of the narrative on the other, of a pull toward documentation and a push toward fictionalization, of beginnings and ends are forcefully played out between the recto page of the portrait and the verso page with the two words: “end” and “home.” (Figure 4)

The word “end” is printed in block letters in what approximates Times New Roman bold font 54. It is crossed over by an almost diagonal line. Above it, almost parallel to the diagonal line, the word “home” is put in a distinctly hand-written style. These two words create a dramatic visual image that dominates the page at the bottom of which we find the line “*Montréal-Hollywood-Toronto-Montréal 1977-2003*” (italics in the original). Altogether, the words and their arrangement on the page multiply the closure and finality evoked by the portrait while at the same time indicating circularity and beginnings. For instance, the date of Aquin’s death, 1977, coincides with the date of the beginning of Sheppard’s work on the book. Thus endings, literal as well as metaphoric deaths, seem to lose their sense of finality

and closure.

But it is of course the sign of erasure that sets in motion a number of questions, making it hard to overlook the metaphoric density of the two words. Is death the proper home for Aquin, who, as we have learned, felt out of place in life as a French Canadian and an intellectual? Or is his rightful place—his home—literature, Sheppard’s book? What is the relation of (book) endings to homes (as places of

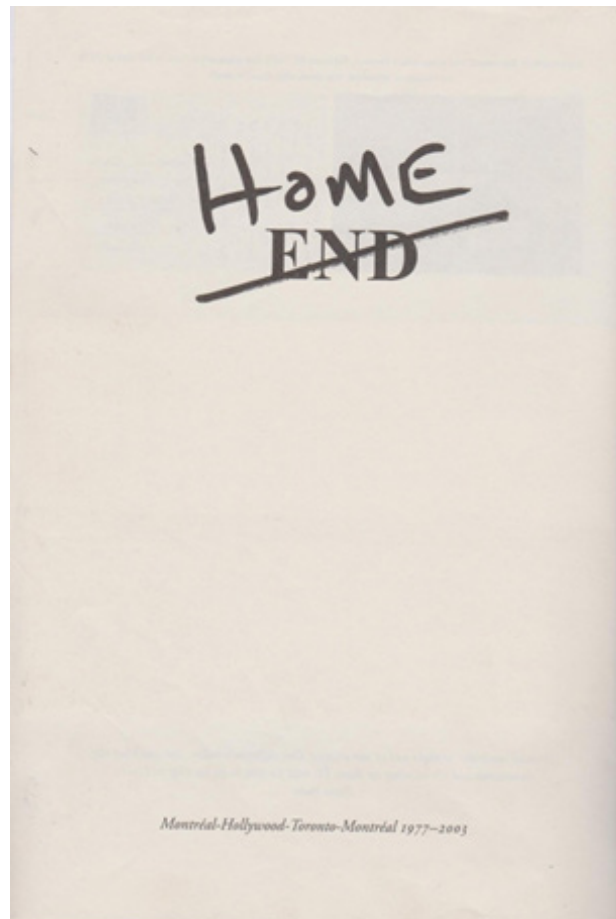


Fig. 4: Figure 4: “Montreal – Hollywood – Toronto – Montréal 1977 – 2003”

arrival, rest, and safety)? Can the book/narrative be seen as a home in which the subject continues to live well after his physical death? Are the two words Sheppard’s comment on Aquin’s fate or on the process of writing the book? And what are we to make of the relation between Aquin’s smile and the two words? Is Aquin’s smile to be read as an ironic response to the reader’s belief that he/she has been offered a truthful picture of him? Or is his smile beatific, signaling content and confidence, a smile of relief and at-homeness? Is it canny or uncanny—or both at the same time?

Having labored through the close to nine-hundred pages of *HA!* including the numerous inserted images, the reader arrives at an end but hardly a closure. Engaged in a range of sighting activities: looking, staring, gazing, glancing, scanning, as well as looking again, the reader is “programmed” to

flip the pages back and forth and to check images and texts anew, to choose what to read and what not to read, what to look at first, second, third on each page, and what links to make between images and words. In this process, the photographic truth in which *HA!* ostensibly traffics becomes the subject of re-examination. Sometimes vociferously, sometimes slyly, the photographic image's artificiality and deceitfulness are exposed, challenging the reader / viewer to reconfigure his / her eye and to see the multiple disjunctions and slippage between the photo and the narrative, and between the photo and the reality it presumably captures.

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