

Traces of the Ordinary: Observational Memory in

Annie Ernaux's *Exteriors*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the observational narrative technique used by Annie Ernaux in *Exteriors* to represent everyday life in suburban Paris. Unlike her earlier works, which focus on personal memory and inner emotions, this text emphasizes external observation and present-time reality. Ernaux adopts the role of a detached observer and documents routine activities occurring in public spaces such as trains, supermarkets, and streets. Through these observations, the work highlights the social dimensions of ordinary life and reflects the influence of culture, class, and temporality on modern existence. The study argues that Ernaux's observational approach transforms individual perspective into collective social representation and provides insight into the contemporary urban experience.

Keywords: Observational narrative, Memory, Everyday life, Public spaces, Reality.

Annie Ernaux occupies a distinctive position in contemporary French literature through her ability to transform ordinary experiences into meaningful literary narratives. Her artworks often deal with the interdependent themes of memory, identity, class and social reality, while also incorporating personal and cultural impressions. The traditional approach to the autobiographical perspective focuses mainly on personal feelings and experiences, whereas Ernaux's writings often go beyond the self to explore the societal contexts that influence the ways in which humans live. *Exteriors* (2021) is an important step in her writing journey, moving her focus from personal introspection to the study of all that happens in public life. In this writing, Ernaux captures fleeting moments that show us the complexities of contemporary urban society and its subtlety influencing forces on human behaviour.

Exteriors is a collection of observations that have been observed for several years somewhere outside the city in the suburbs of Paris, in the train, in the supermarket, in the streets, in public places and anywhere. The focus is on the people and everyday life, rather than on a linear plot or on a single protagonist; Ernaux takes the viewpoint of an observant witness who records the lives of ordinary individuals. The people who are often overlooked in the society like commuters, shoppers, workers, old citizens and strangers appear in the foreground of the writing. A series of separate snapshots come together to form a picture of suburban life: social differences, cultural practices, class distinctions all informed by ordinary interactions. In her work Ernaux conveys an objective and restrained narrative style which changes ordinary experiences into powerful insights into modern life.

In *Exteriors*, the present study explores the interpretative role of the act of observing as a means to trace mundane life's memory. It explores the part of the observer-narrator, the representation of the characters of everyday life, and the way in which ordinary experiences become hordes of collective memory. The study suggests that *Exteriors* embodies the sociological facticity of a historical and cultural moment by observing the documentation that covers the everyday contacts that occur in the city. The work shows how seemingly insignificant events can have a value in writing for readers, who can learn something about memory and time from it, and, crucially, about relationships to social existence. *Exteriors* therefore is a social and cultural document that calls upon and records the experience of contemporary suburban life.

The interaction between the characters is the only way to analyse the nature and movement of *Exteriors*. It is essential to review *Exteriors* and how Ernaux reworks herself into a somehow special kind of character/author, the author-protagonist. In a traditional autobiography, the core of the story is the internal world of the main character—that is, his thoughts, feelings and psychological development. The interior is never a fait accompli, leaving one to abandon it for an eye of the camera, as does Ernaux. It is no coincidence that this is a change in style and that it is a psychological defence mechanism. She has her eyes out on the world, as she refuses to look into the world to find her own problems, her burden, her sufferings and her shadows. In the narrative “I,” the expression “I” is no longer an emotional confessor, but an expression of the “recording lens. In this neutral manner the author/ protagonist is able to, at the same time, be in a position of therapeutic detachment allowing this mode of intense observation to be a life-saving technique from personal trauma.

This objective lens is never passive; however, it is a very selective and intentional witnessing. Although Ernaux renders her writing in a flat style (*écriture plate*), avoiding poetic metaphors or invidious judgements, what she chooses to exhibit signals her subliminal focus. She records moments of speech,

gestures, treating moments that seem to have disappeared, such as everyday snapshots, a few moments in history. The author-protagonist is physically unable to communicate with those in her presence; however, there is tremendous instant communication through a silent channel. In refusing to share their biographical information with the reader, Ernaux uses her self-reflection to become communalized. Welch, E. (2007) demonstrates that “when the voice of the crowded mind is eliminated, the person telling you the story can serve as a clear mirror”. Annie shows that when the voice of the collective random world around you is projected into the mirror, instead of the voice of the individual, the story-teller can come into existence as much.

This clinical method would directly alter the way that characters lived in the text, from fully developed characters into short little social portraits. The surrounding world seen through this detached, seemingly impersonal narrative lens means that the people she meets lack names, history and traditional storylines. But rather, they seem to be fleeting figures in a play, emerging only from within their one-off acts and social interactions. It establishes “an important development in the research arrangement, changing the emphasis from the mechanics of camera lens from the subjects framed within the lens itself” (Marrella). The meaning behind these fleeting snapshots must be grasped within broader contexts in which these anonymous subjects are engaged and assembled: In short, the highly-constructed public spaces of modern commerce and consumerism.

The author-protagonist, whose eye functions as a camera, investigates how this "socioeconomic stratification" exists in society through its different public spaces in the commercialized setting of Cergy-Pontoise. In *Exteriors*, the local supermarket (the sprawling Auchan) and the open streets at which everyone one passed do not simply serve as neutral environments connoting democracy, they enable the transformation of the individual into a collective character. As long-time observer of shoppers and

pedestrians, Ernaux records the work of invisibles: class, gender and age. She does not resort to interior monologues to show how the characters think, but instead makes use of purely physical elements to show character motivations, without taking a second look at a price tag, ordering a cut of meat, or acting with a cashier. These are seemingly mundane behaviours that illustrate the macroforms of capitalism – how capitalism forms the human subject and governs public conduct.

This way of social inequality is observed in the daily life interaction and is the central point of Ernaux's sociology of the everyday. No, the strangeness and violence of the class system isn't exhibited as dramatic conflict, but rather as the little moments of friction between strangers who share their space in such commercial spaces. This is, of course, a reality that Ernaux reports in his writing:

I believe that desire, frustration and social and cultural inequality are reflected in the way we examine the contents of our shopping trolley or in the words we use to order a cut of beef or to pay tribute to a painting; that the violence and shame inherent in society can be found in the contempt a customer shows for a cashier or in the vagrant begging for money who is shunned by his peers—in anything that appears to be unimportant and meaningless simply because it is familiar or ordinary. (*Exteriors* 56)

The anonymous store clerk becomes a significant historical figure as he treats what is essentially the same scenario – these exchanges are commonplace – as a subject of serious investigation. Street corners, checkout counters transform into locations where frustrations of the collective character are expressed. This is a close look at consumer spaces which reveals that modern alienation is a strong connection with our physical space. When the collective character transforms from stationary retail locations to locations while en route, it highlights the social divisions even more, moving the setting study

away from proprietary retail spaces and back into a commonplace context as a shared experience of the regular commute.

The commuter trains, in particular the RER line that links Cergy-Pontoise, in the suburbs, with the centre of Paris, are a lifeline and a place where the collective is condensed into a small shared space. In the train carriages someone of each class, race and age are put into close proximity with each other, living in a strange silent intimacy. The author is also a protagonist of the story, telling the story from this point of view and showing the same routine actions of the work, witnessing the "weariness" of the "quiet anxiety" of the workforce, and in rare moments, emotional connection between them. Over 7 years, the text captures the micro-history of the transportation experiences of passengers establishing a common history of urban transport. The train car is no longer just a vehicle, but a travelling stage, hence the public appearance of the modern human condition, is continually enacted here.

In this densely populated environment, the line between the observer and the stranger starts to fade, and we begin to gain insight into ourselves that is intimately tied with our surroundings. Watching the passengers does not bring them into Ernaux's writing, but their presence provokes profound emotional and historical insights to an observer. This is an interaction between the self and the collective, as she says:

It is other people—anonymous figures, glimpsed in the Metro or in waiting rooms, who survive in our mind and change our perception of reality—who revive our memory and reveal our true selves through the interest, the anger or the shame that they send rippling through us. I have put a lot of myself into these texts, far more than originally planned, realizing that our true self is not entirely within us. (*Exteriors* 96)

This self-discovery reveals that the commuters are not the only ones subjected to micro-sociological investigation; that they themselves are active subjects who mirror the author-protagonist in understanding her subjectivity. These ever-so-casual looks, ties that bind two strangers together – that's the essence of the shared memory produced within the confines of the RER train. The text captures these fleeting instances and documents a fragile history of life away from its formative days (Sweeney-Byrne). The myriads of information emphasizes the kind of literary voice necessary to portray such moments—literary habits that aim directly toward the poetics of witnessing to these mundane experiences in a way that doesn't beguile them into fiction.

In order to render the sum of suburbs as a whole, but not caricature them, Ernaux uses a particular literary style, which translates mundane, everyday facts into works of art. This method is very much approach-based in the infra-ordinary—a term coined by sociologists that refers to the mundane, routine, background information of human life that is typically neglected in literary work. The story never really develops a plot or any form of psychological conflict—it is all about very short moments that would vanish in no second. These tiny bits of reality are captured in the neutral prose style that Ernaux calls “écriture plate”, which tries to eliminate all romantic, metaphorical, emotional and even poetic adornments.

This asexual style of writing works well for capturing social reality and transforming fleeting moments into written history. The author is not going to take anything lightly even seemingly insignificant details like a graffiti-covered wall—from a minor issue to a political matter a dropped coin or a brief glance between two individuals. When she refuses to make judgment on the people, she sees or to romanticize her people, the mundane world speaks for itself. The ordinary elements of her everyday seem to hold deep cultural significance, collecting the silent, collective memory of a whole generation. This literature has a distinct genre and purpose as she explains in below:

My aim is to capture reality by means of a prose style which is as transparent and neutral as possible, a style which aims at a total absence of literature, in order to avoid distorting the facts. For me, writing about things seen or heard in public spaces is a way of rescuing them from oblivion, of giving a permanent form to the transient, fragile moments of our collective existence. (*Exteriors* 112)

The ephemeral places of the suburban world are given such attention that the quotidian space and time becomes a rich repository of human history. Indeed, the narrative voice is flat, with no drop in affectivity for the text, but “what is made even more direct and immediate are the social truths of class and alienation” (Ahonen). This compilation of everyday information is the culmination of her narrative journey, from an experimental approach to vision to a comprehensive sheet of society. Therefore, Annie Ernaux's *Exteriors* transforms ordinary observations into a powerful narrative of collective memory and social documentation. Through her role as an observer rather than a central autobiographical subject, Ernaux records the everyday experiences of individuals encountered in public spaces, revealing the cultural, social, and class dynamics that shape suburban Parisian life.

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