

RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

photography and autobiography in postmodern texts¹

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ABSTRACT

I argue that the use of photography in postmodern and postcolonial fiction functions firstly, by providing a powerful strategy for drawing attention to the creative and subjective ways in which both verbal and visual images are produced and presented and, secondly, by validating a verbal narrative's exploration of events as well as supplying a special access to events and experiences that may have been forgotten or unknown. Photography emerges as a unique vehicle for moving between past and present and for thinking photographically as the image of a fleeting moment in time and space is allowed to dissolve into a multitude of possible takes, conflating various viewpoints and space-times of the past, present and future.

KEYWORDS

Narrative, photography, autobiography, memory,
post-modern and post-colonial fiction

Photography features frequently in autobiographical fiction. It has proved to be a useful tool for writers to explore the relationship between the seeming and the seen in various dualistic concepts such as “reality” and “appearance”, “authenticity” and “manipulation” or “original” and “copy”. The current trend of fictional autobiographies, in particular, has put the focus on photography's inherent semiotic capacity to challenge these concepts by thematizing the referential dilemma faced by both autobiography and photography. This becomes especially visible in photography, which, traditionally, has been considered the perfect medium for a faithful representation of the world, by virtue of the photochemical process that produces it. In C.S. Peirce's phrase, photographs are “produced under such circumstances that they [are] physically forced to correspond point by point to nature”² and are, therefore, principally indexical. This property is what makes a photograph a trace of its referent and gives it its documentary value. But photographs are also iconic, since they are “in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent”³

¹ First published in MAEDER, Beverly; SCHWYTER, Jürg; SIGRIST, Ilona; VEJDOVSKY, Boris (Org.). *The Seeming and the Seen*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006, p. 343-365.

² PEIRCE. *Collected Papers*, p. 2246.

³ PEIRCE. *Collected Papers*, p. 2246

– which is what tells us what is represented in a particular photograph. This iconic-indexical duality accounts for photography’s peculiar semiotic potential of being both a mirror and a trace of its object.⁴

Inserted into a fictional text, photographs introduce new and challenging ways to play with both the indexical and iconic functions of photography. The introduction of a different semiotic system equips writers with effective means to thematize the role of the visual not only in triggering memories⁵ but also in providing a virtual link to the past – whether through discursive descriptions of photographs or through the reproduction of actual photographs. Photography emerges as a unique vehicle for moving between the past and the present; it also provides a powerful strategy for drawing attention to the creative and subjective ways in which both verbal and visual images are produced and presented and, hence, to the volatility and evanescence inherent in the process of making sense and meaning of one’s private or public history. In particular, the use in narrative of photographs portraying moments of ritual experiences such as births, marriages, deaths, or ritually staged settings such as family portraits or certain memorable public events plays with the documentary claim associated with this type of image. In so doing, photography not only seems to authenticate the verbal narrative’s exploration of those rites of passage that traditionally mark life narratives, but it also provides a special access to experiences that may have been forgotten or unknown. Photography thus acquires a structuring function in the narrative, which draws the reader’s attention to hidden narrative patterns and features that might otherwise be overlooked but which nevertheless contribute to drive the narrative forward.

That is the case with the three novels that I will discuss here. In *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Kate Atkinson makes use of the photographic medium’s ability to frame and present what Susan Sontag calls “miniatures of reality”,⁶ in order to show how complicated our beliefs in and relationship to reality are. An epic tale about a Yorkshire family charted through four generations from 1888 to 1992, the story uses the photograph as a narrative engine that drives the plot to its unexpected closure. Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* has the interaction between words and images enact the problematic process of reconstructing personal and public histories, thus performing the search for an evanescent past that is fundamental to all mnemonic rituals. And, finally, in *The Stone Diaries*, a gripping fictional autobiography of a woman’s life in the twentieth century, Carol Shields pushes the alleged indexical relationship between image and referent to its limits by exposing discrepancies and gaps in the text-image relationship. Not only does the contrast between her haphazard collection of snapshots and her chronologically ordered narrative ironically foreground the problem of writing autobiography; the photographs of her “ritual of remembrance” also point to other, hidden patterns of “dark voids” and “unbridgeable gaps”⁷ that only imagination can transform into a narrative of shape and meaning.

⁴ Cf. SONTAG. *On Photography*, p. 154.

⁵ Photographs can also provide access to experiences that have remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten – an aspect that has been recently explored by Ulrich Baer in his investigation of the parallels between photography’s representational techniques and the enigmatic phenomenon of trauma.

⁶ SONTAG. *On Photography*, p. 4.

⁷ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 76.

1. THE PHOTOGRAPH AS NARRATIVE PROP

In Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, it is the unexpected discovery of a photograph that sets the plot in motion. Roaming through an old cardboard box left by her uncle, Ruby, the novel's narrator, finds a photographic portrait of a strikingly beautiful woman at the end of the nineteenth century and is told that the woman is her great-grandmother. This is, however, not the "ugly and fat"⁸ great-grandmother that she has been shown earlier, in other photographs, but a different, very beautiful woman whose inscrutable facial expression is impossible to decipher:

The photograph is in a silver frame, padded with red-velvet with an oval of glass in the middle from behind which my great-grandmother regards the world with an ambiguous expression.

She stands very straight, one wedding-ringed hand resting on the back of a *chaise-longue*. In the background is a typical studio backdrop of the time, in which a hazy Mediterranean landscape of hills drops away from the *trompe-l'oeil* balustraded staircase which occupies the foreground. My great-grandmother's hair is parted in the middle and worn in a crown of plaits around her head. Her high-necked, satin dress has a bodice that looks as trimmed and stuffed as a cushion. She wears a small locket at her throat and her lips are half-open in a way that suggests she's waiting for something to happen. Her head is tilted slightly backwards but she is staring straight at the camera (or the photographer). In the photograph her eyes look dark and the expression in them is unfathomable. She seems to be on the point of saying something, although what it could be I can't possibly imagine.⁹

The effect the photograph exerts on Ruby is directly reflected in her acute description which pictorializes the viewing scene, as the discourse verbally enacts her minute scan of the portrait. Starting by taking in the full picture, she then closely zooms in on various details that will reappear in the story, such as the hair, the bodice and the silver locket, only to settle on the elusive message, the "unfathomable" expression in her great grandmother's eyes. It is that message which will trigger Ruby's search for clues to her own origins and identity, and to her traumatic childhood, as she is told that Alice, the woman in the photograph, "looks just like her".¹⁰ The portrait thus serves as a unique tool for thinking photographically, allowing the image of a fleeting moment to dissolve into a multitude of possible takes, having it come alive: Atkinson's play on the photograph's indelible indexicality, as a trace of Ruby's great-grandmother's "being there", is crucial to her strategy as it shows precisely what makes photographs different from other images. They seem to be able to "usurp reality", as Susan Sontag says, since "a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)".¹¹ That property is also why people engage with photographs, and, in particular, photographic portraits differently – be it socially, personally or materially. It is that "literal [...] emanation of a referent", as Roland Barthes points out (referring to Sontag), which

⁸ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 28.

⁹ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 27.

¹⁰ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 29.

¹¹ SONTAG. *On Photography*, p. 154.

creates “a sort of an umbilical cord [which] links the ‘body of the photographed thing’ to my gaze”,¹² and which gives photographs their pervasive presence.

In Atkinson’s novel, the “umbilical cord” created by her great-grandmother’s photograph is what motivates the narrative organization into flashbacks (titled “Footnotes”) in the past tense and Ruby’s chronologically dated narrative in the present tense. The switching between these “footnotes” of the past and the chronological “main” narrative of the present¹³ creates a backward tension which is thus driven forward, sustained by the patterns made by “the curious genetic whispers” that link Ruby and her female ancestry. For her great-grandmother, her grandmother and her mother are all women “lost in time”, women whose lives are defined by the men they marry. The lives of these men, in turn, are defined by external events beyond their control. The photograph functions to create a link to the past, providing an opportunity to create lively *tableaux* about these “footnotes” of history – ordinary lives, such as those of farmers, shopkeepers, simple soldiers and women – seemingly too unimportant to influence historical and social events and thus rarely featured in novels or public history.¹⁴ The legacy they were able to pass on from one generation to the next consisted of small everyday objects such as a silver locket or a photograph rather than valuable family property.¹⁵ In Atkinson’s text, it is precisely these objects which remain the center of stability, giving an otherwise unremarkable existence shape and purpose, and creating continuity as they tie the different generations through time.

But the link established between the “body of the photographed thing” and the viewer’s gaze that Barthes mentions above is more problematic than it seems. The photograph that so intrigues Ruby is an obviously staged and manipulated representation. Its romantic Mediterranean backdrop is a collapsible back-cloth which conceals that it was taken in the yard outside a poor farmer’s cottage and, as it turns out, the portrait has been beautified by the itinerant photographer with whom Ruby’s great-grandmother would later elope. Similar strategies of misrepresentation by glamorizing the everyday and the ordinary, the novel suggests, have also often been employed in the documentation of official history. In particular, ideological perspectives have distorted history by focusing on grand, public events, frequently employing a kind of visual order created by the collaboration of fiction and photography while continually dwarfing the importance of those individuals most affected by them. It is the lives of these individuals,

¹² BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 80-81.

¹³ This is also emphasized by the novel’s structure, in which the main chapters of “1951 Conception”, “1952 Birth”, “1953 Coronation” are consistently interspersed with the stories of Ruby’s family and ancestors in sections called “footnotes”. By turning the “footnote” sections into ordinary chapters, Atkinson is also visually and iconically representing the core theme of her work.

¹⁴ In an interview, Kate Atkinson has said that she got the title for the novel from a dream in which she was walking through the Festival of Britain room at the Castle Museum in York, where the daily lives of Celts, Romans, Vikings, Saxons and Normans are displayed: “I woke up and thought that is what this book is about – behind the scenes at the museum.” She also calls her novel “a repository for a network of objects and things, not for my personal feelings – perhaps that’s why there are so many cupboards in it” (ATKINSON. Interview).

¹⁵ These kinds of objects are, as Vincent Colapietro pointed out to me, often a part of everyday ritual performance, although they may not be recognized as such.

the undocumented “footnotes”, that Atkinson now brings to the fore and has us follow “behind the scenes” to see the other stories behind the public, external events such as two world wars, Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation, the 1966 World Cup or the Falklands War.

At the same time as the photograph functions as an indexical sign of a historical event, it simultaneously turns into a kind of a portal to a virtual reality to which Ruby can travel through time to the past and then back to the present in order to locate her family’s past. For, after generating the urge to read the portrait as a document, to believe in the real existence of her unknown great-grandmother, it now fills her with longing and a desire to create a fictional existence for her ancestor: she “want[s] to rescue this woman from what’s going to happen to her (time). Dive into the picture, pluck her out”.¹⁶ The discovery of the photograph thus introduces an additional iconic element into Ruby’s attempt to read her great-grandmother’s portrait, as it spawns the desire to “dive” into a world of long ago. This is another characteristic of the photographic image which, according to Sontag, defines it as both “a pseudo-presence and a token absence”: photographs function like “a wood fire in a room”, which is why “especially those of people, of distant landscapes and of faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie”.¹⁷ In the novel, Ruby’s “reverie” takes the shape of intertextual excursions into magic realism. Not only does it give Alice the opportunity to have her own giddy wonderland experience¹⁸ – she gets sucked into a marigold and then finds herself “floating like thistle-down on the wind”¹⁹ through a “shimmering”, truly visionary landscape, opening up an escape route away from her dreary everyday life – but it also provides the story with a multitude of implausible patterns and coincidences, allegories and visions.

The photograph becomes a magic portal to a virtual, fictional world, which enables Ruby to slip out of her own troubled existence and into the past in order to trace her family history and to clarify the mystery surrounding “the forgotten Alice”.²⁰ As Ruby finds out, Alice’s enigmatic erasure from Ruby’s family history was only partly caused by her first husband’s denial of the hidden reasons for her sudden disappearance from house and hearth. The main reason was her own children’s inability to separate the real from the invented memories arising from the trauma of losing their mother. These excursions from the actual present back to the past also help Ruby regain her own story that she has suppressed throughout her childhood. She finally recognizes her own traumatization from the crime she witnessed as a child, a crime which she has had to take the blame for. The photograph therefore also generates a tension between family secrets and narrative sequence as it thematizes the problem of how to articulate difficult and painful

¹⁶ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 29.

¹⁷ SONTAG. *On Photography*, p. 16.

¹⁸ There are many similarities between Atkinson’s Ruby and Lewis Carroll’s Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, a work undoubtedly influenced by photography’s ability to manipulate through focus and framing, blowing up or shrinking its subject (cf. NAKAJIMA. Reading Lewis Carroll’s Alice Lidell as the “Beggar Maid”).

¹⁹ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 33-34.

²⁰ ATKINSON. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 28.

truths by opening a dialogue between the underlying story and its various interpretations.²¹ By using the photograph as a narrative prop which both links and prompts a ritualistic story of origins, Atkinson thus challenges photography's claim to document and to represent the real through seemingly true memories or records, while, at the same time, celebrating its potential for creating precisely those unwritten stories of the "footnotes" behind the scenes of the publicly seen.

2. PERFORMING THE SEARCH FOR THE PAST

When actual photographs occur *within* narrative, the introduction of a different semiotic system both supports and disturbs the process of reading. Since photography appears to operate on a different plane than the verbal narrative, it would seem to offer life writing a unique way of authentication from a different perspective. It is, however, frequently the juxtaposition of the verbal one-linear text and the two-dimensional photograph that especially foregrounds the problems of reference in both autobiographic and photographic representation, since it has the reader switch between the two media and compare them. At the same time, the process of reading between two texts invites active participation, as it implicates the reader in the reconstruction of history by forcing her or him to actually perform the evaluation of the documentary fragments of words and images typical of the autobiographical ritual. Its fictional product, the autobiography, would thus seem to involve the interactive practices similar to that of a photograph, since, as Barthes observes,

a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs – in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives [...] And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.²²

Barthes's wordplay on the photographic act as a "spectacle" shows its proximity to the autobiographic act, since what the narrator/ autobiographer does by assembling memories is to create a representation of someone or something absent that suddenly seems to be present. This process is seemingly equivalent to photography's peculiar power to evoke something "that-has-been"²³ but which now is no more, a ghost or a phantom of sorts, called up from our staring at a particular photograph. That is why, Barthes says, "the photograph of the missing being [...] will touch me like the delayed rays of a star".²⁴

²¹ As Colapietro has remarked, the problem of articulating difficult truths is not limited to traumatic narratives of secret and erasure but is pertinent to general modes of 'truth-telling', in particular in the context of familial and national communities in which the truth is rarely told in a 'straight-forward and honest way'.

²² BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 9.

²³ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 85.

²⁴ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 80.

But, because it is just a representation, it makes the object's absence only more palpable; it brings with it "a kind of death, which is the longing for what is absent".²⁵ Hence, photography makes visible the fundamental function of signification, namely that a sign always stands in for something else but can never fully replace the object itself.

Precisely because it so undeniably authenticates presence, the photograph points to the very problematics which lie at the heart of photographic representation: it creates a space in between which is "neither image nor reality, [but] a new being, really; a reality no one can touch" which is why, in photography, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation".²⁶

That is also why the inclusion of family photographs in autobiographical fiction changes the character of the work itself. As Barthes points out in the quote above, spectrum and spectacle are etymologically related (Latin *spectare*, to look at). Spectacle can mean both (theatrical) performance and sight. Both notions are typically evoked in contemporary writers' use of family photographs, which frequently plays on the spectator/reader's voyeuristic instincts and desires for the supposedly true story. That is what creates the fascination of Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, which presents us with a text of fragments, a collection of memories, photographs and poems. The intersections between the photographs and the verbal fragments become the very space in which this autobiographical odyssey across Sri Lanka engages with the problematic process of reconstructing public and personal histories. But, by highlighting both the spectacular and the performative aspects of life writing and photography, Ondaatje seems to deny photography a more "authentic" representational status than writing.

Ondaatje's narrative strategy puts the focus precisely on the referential dilemma that underlies the autobiographic genre. As we have seen in our earlier discussion of Atkinson's text, autobiographical detail consists of both "true" and "false" memories plucked from a fictionally constructed larger context. Photographic images, in contrast, are truly 'fragments of the real', as Lucia Santaella puts it, because they are "records of the confrontation between a subject (in this case an agent) and the world, framing the events and then freezing them, thereby fragmenting the real".²⁷ By combining these "fragments of the real" with the symbolic representation of language, which is, as Barthes points out, "by nature fictional",²⁸ Ondaatje has the two media perform the assemblage and conjecture typical of the autobiographical act. In particular, by sprinkling family photographs throughout the novel, Ondaatje teases readers' expectations and perception by first showing a photograph entirely out of context, and only afterwards, after one or more intervening chapters, starting to discuss it. At one point, for instance, we encounter a blind woman describing a particular photo from memory:

She has looked at it for years and has in this way memorized everyone's place in the picture. She reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see. It has moved tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here.²⁹

²⁵ SANTAELLA. *The Prephotographic, the Photographic, and the Postphotographic Image*, p. 267.

²⁶ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 87, 89.

²⁷ SANTAELLA. *The Prephotographic, the Photographic, and the Postphotographic Image*, p. 128.

²⁸ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 87.

²⁹ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 112.

By making the memorized photograph a metaphor for the act of calling up an evanescent past, Ondaatje seems to be playing with photography's inherently paradoxical nature, for a photograph both arrests a fleeting moment *and* makes someone or something that is absent become present – but only to the extent that is allowed by the viewer's power of imagination. In addition, the blind aunt's recollection is a nostalgic imagining of a past that is no longer there to be seen; it creates an imaginary space which is only accessible through the patching together of memories and other fragments, the recollection of which will always be subjective and partial. In fact, her mental recreation of the family photograph is a verbal enactment of the very process of reconstructing the past set in motion, making the text perform the autobiographical act itself as it weaves in the various names and faces, and their respective histories. By contrasting the photograph with his aunt's conjuring up an elusive past in words, Ondaatje seems to be implying that verbal language with its suggestive metaphors is a more efficient medium than photography for representing a "true" version of the past, or at least an equally efficient one.

In the sections called "April 11, 1932" and "Honeymoon", Ondaatje attempts yet another strategy to maintain a grip on a past that is quickly fading from both private and public memory. The first passage opens with the narrator declaring, "I remember the wedding".³⁰ The wedding in question is that of his parents, before his birth, followed by their "Honeymoon".³¹ However, neither wedding nor honeymoon is actually described in the text. Instead, the "wedding" section concerns the guests' difficulty in getting there, while "Honeymoon" consists of listings of background minutiae and other events going on around this time: the weather, newspaper headlines, the price of beer, the movies playing and ideals of female beauty. These lists function like photographs: as bits and pieces of the real they can never give the full picture, which makes them both mutually inclusive and exclusive representations. Ondaatje thus replaces the traditional photographs we are expecting – conventional wedding and honeymoon shots – with another indexical representation that gives fragmentary information about things that all, in some respect, influenced the lives of his parents as newlyweds. This information cannot simply be contained in a single photograph; it is also equally "factual" information that must be picked out of a contextual whole.

But Ondaatje gives his search for the truth in the pictures of the past yet another twist. At the beginning of the section called "Photograph", almost at the end of the book, the narrator declares: "This is the photograph I have been waiting for all my life. My father and mother together. May 1932. They are on their honeymoon". He continues the discursive description of the unexpected performance delivered by the elegant, well-dressed couple in the photograph:

My father's pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well-combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a

³⁰ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 36.

³¹ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 37.

postcard and sent through the mails to various friends. On the back my father has written 'What we think of married life'.³²

As Linda Hutcheon remarks, at this point, we, the readers, have also been waiting to see what this couple looks like – if not all our lives, then “at least for 135 pages of fragments”.³³ Ondaatje, however, seems to be striving to show the redundancy of the visually perceived, as he goes on for a page and a half verbally describing the photograph in detail. Only afterwards, on the following page, do we finally get to see it (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1

Yet the photograph also functions to describe his unconventional parents' problematic marriage, as it foreshadows the theatricality that will characterize it. In the following chapter, named, like the photograph's caption, "What we think of married life", Ondaatje describes his mother's staging their family life as theatrical performance: "Whatever plays my mother acted in publicly were not a patch in the real-life drama she directed and starred in during her married life".³⁴ The mixture of his mother's dramatic personality – she ran a dance and theatre school in Colombo – and his father's manipulative and manic character would indeed turn out to be an ongoing "spectacle". On the one hand, their "shared code of humour" helps them create a "world of themselves",³⁵ which is what their performance in the photograph transmits. They both seem to be greatly enjoying themselves, ridiculing the bourgeois norms of the marriage ritual in which the wedding picture plays an important part and playing out their individuality and character in full.

³² ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 161-162.

³³ HUTCHEON. *Running in the Family: The Postmodernist Challenge*, p. 305.

³⁴ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 171.

³⁵ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 170.

On the other hand, each time his father humiliates his mother in his manic drinking bouts, she strikes back with “some grand gesture”, always in public, “selecting the one action that would be remembered by everyone in the vicinity of the tea-estate and would reach Colombo in twenty-four hours”.³⁶ This histrionic marriage was to last for fourteen years, after which she “played her last scene with him”: appearing at the divorce court “in a stunning white dress and hat (she had never worn a hat before) [she] calmly asked for a divorce, demanding no alimony – nothing for her, nothing for the children”.³⁷

Because these narratives of the photograph’s quite extraordinary objects are only revealed later in the book – and only after the story of his father’s second marriage – they compel the reader to turn back in order to scrutinize it, imitating the narrator’s own searching look for vestigial clues to his parents and, in particular, to his father. For, if the photograph at first seemed primarily comic, the narrative detail added two sections later makes it shocking, even to the reader who has no personal investment in these two photographic objects. The impact of the photograph is therefore twofold. It could also be interpreted in terms of what Barthes calls “studium”, the field of cultural interest that the photograph represents, and the “punctum”, “that unexpected flash” that “pricks”³⁸ the spectator. Although at first sight, the photograph, in its outrageousness, would seem to fit into the first category, as it fits the narrator’s description of the elegant and high-flying life in Sri Lanka at the time, there is also something else in that “glazed-over” look in his father’s eyes that makes him look forlorn. Therefore, although the main impact is that of the “studium”, there is something there which corresponds to Barthes’ notion of the “punctum” as “what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*”.³⁹ There is something about his father’s eyes in that histrionic pose of recklessness which has us turn back to have another look at him and which stays with us when we join the narrator in his search for his father. In particular, it “pricks” us because we know that this man’s manic fits of alcoholism will ruin his children’s childhood, causing the trauma which will later be the reason behind the narrator’s odyssey for the lost time depicted in the photograph. Furthermore, because the photograph has been announced from the very beginning, it has somehow set our imagination in motion, consciously or unconsciously building up our expectations of what this elusive couple of parents would look like. The photograph is all the more effective, since there has been no previous information about them that could have prepared us for this striking photographic scene, the dramatic outcome of which is then offered by the subsequent verbal narrative.

In fact, the parents’ resistance to social conventions could be seen to have an equivalent in their son’s defiance of generic categorization and of literary emplotment in his exploration of life as narrative. Traditionally, the function of plot is to mediate between the “multiple incidents” and the story, to give preference to concordance over discordance and to control the tension between sequence and configuration.⁴⁰ That is

³⁶ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 170.

³⁷ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 172.

³⁸ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

³⁹ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 55.

⁴⁰ RICOEUR. *Life in Quest of Narrative*, p. 22.

what Ondaatje seems to openly resist, by refusing to give in to any of these stock features of “life narratives” that would have transformed his memories into a coherent story with a satisfying closure. To add to the confusion, he also plays with the roles of author, narrator, writer and reader. Therefore, not only does he deny the reader a convenient access to the narrative configuration but also, by making these roles interchangeable and dynamic, he forces the reader to join him in the process of patching together the history of his parents, his family and himself. In so doing, he challenges unproblematic self-referentiality; at the same time, he draws attention precisely to one of the fundamental problems inherent in the autobiographical process, namely that our knowledge of other people’s lives and histories is always limited. The narrator comes to realize that “[t]ruth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships”:⁴¹ the recollections of his father by various people can never substitute for his person, nor can discoverable facts tell the son what his father was “really” like, since “there is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him”.⁴² Readers, too, are left with a heap of fragments that needs to be interpreted, much like the narrator and his sisters and brothers who see how difficult it is to turn these various “documents” into a comprehensible whole: “in the end, all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues”.⁴³ The photographs “scattered” throughout this text therefore serve both to document and to complicate the reading of a text which is, in itself, an attempt to make sense of selected fragments among other fragments of the past. By forcing readers to join him in his scrutiny of his personal history, Ondaatje thus has them actually participate in the autobiographical act by having them perform its ritual, the hermeneutic process of ordering, reordering, interpreting and recontextualizing the fragments of private and public experience. In so doing, he shifts the emphasis of the fundamentally indexical character of the photographs as traces of the past onto the iconic, thus introducing new space for opening up the text to the reader’s imagination.

3. HIDDEN PATTERNS

Although the photograph seems so intrinsically tied to what it represents, it always refers to other contexts; in Barthes’ words, “it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*”.⁴⁴ That is why photographs can point to other, hidden patterns and features that may not be so easily perceived, even though the reconstruction of these “fragment(s) of the real”⁴⁵ will, as we have seen, always result in an imaginary construct. This is the case of *The Stone Diaries*, in which Carol Shields pushes to its limits the indexical relationship between the image and its referent by showing obvious discrepancies between image and text. In

⁴¹ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 53.

⁴² ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 200.

⁴³ ONDAATJE. *Running in the Family*, p. 201.

⁴⁴ BARTHES. *Camera Lucida*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ SANTAELLA. *The Prephotographic, the Photographic, and the Postphotographic Image*, p. 128.

so doing, she points to gaps in the representation that not only reveal hidden narrative patterns but also stimulate new narrative acts, which suggest the creative power of the “primary act of imagination”.⁴⁶ This turns out to be the protagonist’s means of surviving within the restricted life of most women born at the turn of the twentieth century. Oppressed by her “long days of isolation, of silence, of boredom”, she realizes that the only way to give her life’s story point and purpose is through her own self-willed “act of imagination”, because “her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps”.⁴⁷

By thematizing precisely those “dark voids” and “unbridgeable gaps” – events that take place in one’s inner life, and, therefore, are never recorded, even though they might be crucial for one’s development – Shields’ story highlights the necessarily fictive dimensions of auto/biography. Ironic and self-reflexive, *The Stone Diaries* is a compelling specimen of life writing that plays with both the biographic and autobiographic genres by presenting us with the seemingly traditional and ordinary life of Daisy Goodwill Flett – a dutiful daughter, wife, mother and friend – in a multivocal narration comprising a plethora of various narrators, lists, diary entries, letters, recipes and notes. Sporting a family tree at the beginning and a cluster of 25 family photographs in its centerfold, the novel is divided into ten sections with titles of significant events: “Birth, 1905”, “Childhood, 1916”, “Marriage, 1927”, “Work, 1955-1964”, “Sorrow, 1965” etc. At first sight, the novel would therefore seem to tell the story of an average middle-class North American woman whose life primarily consists of fulfilling family and social obligations and duties. Born in 1905 as the daughter of a stone cutter who makes a fortune as a monument carver and quarry owner, Daisy marries a civil servant in Ottawa in 1935 after a disastrous first marriage; when her second husband dies in 1955, she becomes a gardening columnist, a job she loses in 1964. After bouts of depression, she moves to Florida in the 1970s, where she later dies. Her life could therefore be said to be typical of the upwardly mobile *bourgeoisie* of the period, as her relatively frugal childhood is replaced by an increasingly comfortable lifestyle through her husband’s professional career and her father’s legacy. That is also the first impression the reader gets from the cluster of photographs.⁴⁸ The photo gallery begins with a picture of Daisy’s parents, followed by a seemingly random selection of people – many of them of only marginal importance for the narrative – and including a photograph of her own large residence with a big car in the driveway. The contrast between the modest surroundings of Daisy’s parents and her own dwellings would therefore seem to suggest that these family snapshots function as a social commentary on Daisy’s life and times. That would confirm Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that family photographs quickly became a class marker of the growing *bourgeoisie*, which used photography as a means to document their growing affluence.

⁴⁶ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 75-76.

⁴⁸ As Bourdieu points out, “just as the peasant is expressing his relationship with urban life when he rejects the practice of photography [...] the meaning which *petits bourgeois* confer on photographic practice conveys or betrays the relationship of the *petite bourgeoisie* to culture, that is, to the upper classes (*bourgeoisie*) [...] and to the working classes from whom they wish to distinguish themselves”.

There is, however, something strange in the seemingly stable and predictable existence signalled by the family photo gallery. First of all, the reader has difficulty in recognizing the persons in the photographs from the discourse descriptions. Daisy's mother, for instance, whom Daisy has never met since she died at her birth, is described as being "one inch or two" taller than Daisy's father, "extraordinarily obese" and "possessing jelly-like features".⁴⁹ But when we try to match photo and text we find that not only is Daisy's father half a head taller than her mother, but she does not even appear to be particularly fat. This disjunction is repeated several times in, for instance, the photographs of Daisy's Aunt Clarentine, the woman who raises her. In one photograph, she is seen as a young and pretty woman at a time when she is described in the text as being middle-aged, and in a second one, which she seems to look more "like" she should age-wise (Fig. 2), as figured during the time of Daisy's childhood, she does not seem to be the same woman.



Fig. 2

The discrepancy in referentiality between the photographs and the verbal narrative opens some interesting narrative questions, in particular since the cluster of photographs is placed in the centrefold. This location deprives them of yet another possibility of indexical reference, namely by the way they are placed within the text, which automatically creates a contextual relationship. The fact that they are provided with captions only increases the referential dilemma: who are we supposed to believe, the verbal narrative or the visual representation that does not correspond with it? Who has put this disparate collection of snapshots together? Why was it placed in the centerfold – for editorial or auditorial reasons? The relationship between the photographs and the verbal narrative becomes even more disorienting when the narrator openly declares that "(b)iography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams".⁵⁰ In

⁴⁹ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 196.

addition, whereas the family tree which opens the book is neatly and precisely delineated (although we have to look closely to find Daisy), the selection of photographs seems haphazard and random: some family members appear several times, whereas other characters who play important parts in the verbal narrative do not figure at all. In particular, we are not shown one single picture of Daisy, not even of her first wedding, although we read how her children (from her second marriage) comment on a photograph of Daisy and her first husband. Drawing conclusions that radically diverge from the true events of her first marriage – which Daisy for her own good reasons does not want to remember and thus has kept silent about – they fill in the gaps in the text, thus performing the fallibility and instability of life writing, and its tendency to fictionalization:

‘This beautiful man falling out a window. Her lover. Her brand new husband. Think if that happened to you. Would you want to talk about it?’
‘Repression. Sometimes repression’s a good thing. How else was she going to continue with her ...?’
‘Surely Dad must have known – about him.’
‘He must have. I mean, she may have been secretive, but –’
‘Remember how sometimes she’d just want to lie down on her bed in the middle of the day. Not sleeping, she’d just lie there looking at the ceiling.’
‘Keeping it all in her head. Remembering.’⁵¹

As the discourse in this viewing scene shows, the social use of photography causes a photograph to, in Bourdieu’s words, be “structured according to the categories that organize the ordinary vision of the world”, which is why the photographic image is “seen as the precise and objective reproduction of reality”.⁵² Accordingly, it seems to present Daisy’s husband in the role of bridegroom as the clearly more interesting object than his bride, even in the eyes of Daisy’s own children. The hidden story behind the image, that this good-looking couple could be a terrible mismatch and the “beautiful man” a hopeless drunkard does not even occur to them. Owing to the social expectations associated with the wedding photograph genre, Daisy’s children place certain expectations on their mother’s first marriage, which shows in their surface analysis of the photograph and in the interest that her husband’s dramatic death by falling from a window generates. The photographic discourse, as a part of the genre, becomes that superficial and generalizing “ideogram or allegory, as individual and circumstantial traits take second place”, that Bourdieu talks about,⁵³ as Daisy’s children are more enthralled by the fictitious family romance than by the true motives behind their mother’s silence. The discourse thus indexically refers to the lack of authority Daisy’s voice is given. Nobody seems to be interested in Daisy’s own story of her life – not even why she would “just lie there looking at the ceiling”. Similarly, when she falls into a deep depression after losing her job as a columnist, a section called “Sorrow, 1965” provides a detailed account of everybody else’s theory on what is wrong with her – since “surely no one would expect Mrs. Flett to come up with a theory about her own suffering”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 76.

⁵² SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 351.

⁵³ BOURDIEU. *Photography*, p. 77.

⁵⁴ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 261.

The discourse of the photographic viewing scene above and the cluster of photographs thus form verbal and visual diagrams of Shields' narrative strategy, respectively.⁵⁵ Both reflect Daisy's predicament iconically, as they demonstrate the extent to which Daisy does not inhabit the center of her own life narrative. Her story is crisscrossed by a multitude of other voices and crowded by their life stories, mapping her in a "network of relationships", as Colapietro remarks, in which others assume the authority to speak about her without listening to her point of view. Daisy's official, public narrative of her life, the one that conforms to the genre of autobiography, is constantly undercut by Shields' strategy of providing a host of often contradictory narrators and narrations with a constantly shifting point of view. The official story, the chapters which chronologically mark Daisy's birth through the predictable phases of "Marriage", "Motherhood", "Illness and Decline" through "Death" could therefore be likened to a conventional photo album with carefully staged representations; whereas the cluster of snapshots are those pictures that did not make it into the album but, precisely because of that, often present a more candid and less censored version of a situation or an event, since they were spontaneously taken. Therefore, in this novel, it is the subtexts that are significant, and they lurk behind the seemingly perfect family narrative that Daisy would have us believe as she presents herself as the embodiment of the ideal twentieth-century daughter, mother and wife in an upwardly mobile family. As Gordon Slethaug remarks, Shields seems to "highlight the lack of a consistent and unitary persona", providing us with unbounded narratives that are "like a chorus of socially dialogized voices that play against each other".⁵⁶ Daisy remains elusive: although she functions both as a narrative center and as a link with the events and views presented by others, she is never really present. Like many women of her time, she feels that she is "a person arbitrarily named" and "accidentally misplaced"; she is "caught in a version of her life, pinned there",⁵⁷ without any real sense of her own self, which seems to have been erased at an early age. Nor does she claim to be particularly reliable "when it comes to the details of her life; much of what she has to say is speculative, exaggerated, unlikely. [...] Daisy Goodwill's perspective is off".⁵⁸ Yet, that is precisely what allows Daisy to escape from the restricted existence assigned to her by using her imagination to seize and reshape her own narrative by filling in the gaps between the public version of her life and the "box of snapshots",⁵⁹ the private and random version of memories which are her own.

That is why Daisy, the protagonist and main narrative instance, never even once appears in the photo gallery and is strangely absent throughout her own autobiography. Although she finds her voice (or voices), she is always simultaneously spoken by others. When her own diary is lost in the middle of the novel, it is replaced by a plethora of other diary substitutes, entries such as letters, recipes, invitations, announcements,

⁵⁵ Cf. LJUNGBERG. *Diagrams and Diagrammatization in Literary Texts*.


⁵⁶ SLETHAUG, Gordon E. *The Coded Dots of Life*, p. 62-63.

⁵⁷ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 148.

⁵⁹ SHIELDS. Interview.

notes and newspaper articles by various authors, which, although they concern Daisy, reveal as much about their authors as they do about her. By having these various voices filter in and out of the narrative, Shields articulates Daisy's lack of power, a sense of self that is "emptied out" to produce a complex and kaleidoscopic narrative of absence, the problematics of which resonates in the inclusion of the cluster of snapshots. That is, not only do these photographs reflect Daisy's narrative and thus disclose the hidden pattern of the novel's narrative maze; but the disjuncture between discourse and image also suggests that the issue of "revealing the true self" is as problematic as Daisy's own story, "written with imagination's invisible ink".⁶⁰

In *The Stone Diaries* and in my two earlier examples by Atkinson and Ondaatje, photography therefore emerges as a unique vehicle for negotiating dynamic approaches to issues concerning referentiality and representation, as it opens up the fictional text to introduce space for plurality and imagination. Although the novels by Atkinson and Shields both concern giving voice to middle-class women silenced by history and society and although they both question the truth value of photography, the ways in which they use photography is radically different. Atkinson's use of the unexpected discovery of a photograph generates a tension between family secrets and narrative sequence, triggering her plot "behind the scenes of the museum". In contrast, Shields' "box of snapshots" in the novel's centerfold points to the random and haphazard selection of memories that constitutes a life and to the fallibility and instability of life writing. As for Ondaatje, the strategy he has chosen for *his* family narrative is again different, as he turns it into a poetic odyssey patching together the vestigial traces of his own childhood, at the same time as he has his readers participate in the hermeneutic process of constituting the autobiographical act. In all three cases, the examination of the interstices between the photographic and the verbal representation of memories results in unmasking the enactment of rituals of remembrance as a necessarily fictional enterprise. Thus, by making use of photography's claim to represent a factual, historical past, writers not only explore what procedures these narrative rituals entail but they also, by creatively exploiting the tension generated between the visual and the verbal texts, celebrate the redeeming power of imagination by triggering new and eloquent images of the seeming and the seen. 

⁶⁰ SHIELDS. *The Stone Diaries*, p. 149.

RESUMO

Argumenta-se que o uso da fotografia na ficção pós-moderna e pós-colonial funciona, primeiro, como estratégia poderosa para enfatizar os modos criativos e subjetivos empregados na produção e apresentação de imagens verbais e visuais e, segundo, como forma de validar a exploração de eventos na narrativa verbal, além de proporcionar um acesso especial a acontecimentos e experiências porventura olvidados ou desconhecidos. A fotografia emerge então como um particularíssimo veículo de oscilação entre passado e presente e de uma espécie de pensamento fotográfico, enquanto a imagem de um fugaz instante temporo-espacial deixa-se dissolver numa profusão de tomadas possíveis, integrando variáveis perspectivas e espaços-tempos, passados, presentes e futuros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Narrativa, fotografia, memória, ficção auto-biográfica, pós-moderna, pós-colonial

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