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**PHOTOGRAPHY, LITERATURE AND MEMORY:
INTERMEDIAL EXCHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY
ENGLISH FICTION**

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*Photography, Literature and Memory: Intermedial Exchanges in
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Contents

ABSTRACT	5
INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER I	13
1. Word-Image Relation	13
1.1. <i>Ut Pictura Poesis</i>	13
1.2. Barthes and the Third Meaning	17
1.3. The Pictorial Turn	20
2. The Photographic Language	24
2.1. The Age of literary Realism	24
2.2. Baudelaire and the first critics	26
2.3. Photography and Nostalgia	28
2.4. Photography's Optical Unconscious	31
3. Photography and Memory	34
3.1. Photography as Memory Text	34
3.2. The Generation of Post-Memory	36
3.2.1 Photography and Points of Memory	39
4. Intermediality	42
4.1. The Literary Montage	42
4.2. What is a <i>Medium</i> ?	45
4.3. Defining <i>Intermediality</i>	47
4.4. Fiction-Photography Interaction	53
CHAPTER II: <i>The Dark Room</i> - Rachel Seiffert	55
2.1. Themes and Narrative Structure	55
2.2. <i>Helmut</i> : the photographic perspective	61
2.3. <i>Lore</i> : the optical aperture	70

2.4. <i>Micha</i> : the photographic development	79
CHAPTER III: <i>Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children</i>	87
Ransom Riggs	
3.1. Talking Pictures	87
3.2. Themes and Narrative Structure	91
3.3. Peculiar Photographs	93
3.4. Third Time	101
3.5. Postmemory and the Peculiars	105
3.6. The Aesthetic of Peculiars as Freaks	113
CHAPTER IV: <i>Extremely Loud And Incredibly Close</i>	127
Jonathan Safran Foer	
4.1. Themes and Narrative Structure	127
4.2. Narrative Witnessing	130
4.3. Codes of Communication	132
4.4. The Use of Photographs	134
4.5. The use of Typography	141
4.6 The Falling Man	147
4.6.1. Photographing Trauma on 9/11	147
4.6.2. Trauma and Media	151
4.6.3. The flip Book	153
CONCLUSION	161
REFERENCES	165

ABSTRACT

By employing the lens of the most recent critical studies on intermediality, the present work aims at demonstrating how both photographs and verbal texts constitute structural elements in the development of the narrative structure and its signification. Depending on the way photos and literary texts are combined, they contextualise, explain or contradict each other on different levels of meaning. In particular, this work shows the relevance of the photo-textual practice for the exploration of issues of memory related to traumatic events, where images become fundamental traces of the past, and define one's related perception of the present reality.

This work focuses upon three contemporary intermedial novels, that share the narration of traumatic events, like the Holocaust and the terroristic attack of 9/11, by means of photo-textual narration: *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) by Ransom Riggs, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006) by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *The Dark Room* (2001) by Rachel Seiffert. In these hybrid texts, the interaction between photographs and verbal text reveals a general disruption and destabilisation of the narratives, that gives way to a multiplicity of interpretations. As members of the generations after the Holocaust, the literary authors had no direct experience of the events at the base of their novels, but find themselves facing the arduous challenge of grasping traumatic memories inherited and never completely elaborated by the first generation. As it will be argued, the combination of photographs and verbal texts, declined into different modalities of representation, becomes the most suitable literary instrument to evoke and capture memories of trauma and loss. In this context, the reader emerges as an active participant in the process of fiction-making, as the act of reading becomes a renewed act of witnessing.

INTRODUCTION

"And what is the use of a book," thought Alice,
"without pictures or conversations?"

Lewis Carroll,
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Since its invention in 1839, photography has played a significant role in literature, but it is only since the late 1990s that a widespread presence of images into literary texts has taken place. As a privileged tool of memory transmission, photography has become a fundamental device into literary narratives dealing with the fictionalization of historical traumatic events, like the Holocaust or the most recent terroristic attacks. Indeed, the intermedial dimension realised by the confluence of the two media devices, the verbal text and the photo, offer new ways to create meaning and to reflect upon the nature of collective and individual trauma, by re-enacting the distortion and the inaccessibility of the memories of those experiences.

This thesis focuses upon three contemporary intermedial novels and analyses in particular the way they negotiate issues of memory and postmemory within the context of personal and collective traumatic experiences. As members of the second or third generation after the Holocaust, the authors considered had no direct experience of the events at the base of their novels, but find themselves facing the arduous challenge of grasping traumatic memories inherited and never completely elaborated by the first generation. As it will be argued, the combination of photographs and verbal texts, declined into different modalities of representation, becomes the most-suitable literary instrument to evoke and capture memories of trauma and loss. In this context, the reader emerges as an active participant in the process of fiction-making, as the act of reading becomes a renewed act of witnessing.

The first chapter provides the critical framework for the analysis of the novels. It starts with the analysis of the relationship between word and image, firstly introduced by the well known Horatian formula *ut pictura poesis*, that brought together ancient writing and painting, and follows the development of the historical discussion on the *paragone*, namely the rivalry between the sister arts that has been at the centre of numerous debates until the most recent times. Indeed, in the last decades of the twentieth century, a lively discussion over the relation between the different arts and literature has taken place encouraged by the greater role exercised by images on literature and vice versa. The study of this interaction is part of the so-called *Visual Studies*, a vast area of research born in England during the '70s. The importance of Visual Studies has increased a lot due to the predominance of the visual dimension in our contemporary society and one of its goals is the study of the interactions between images and literature. Many critics and theorists (Mitchell, Pierce, Arnheim) have abandoned the traditional opposition picture-language in favour of the creative production of mental images produced by the act of reading. Roland Barthes, for instance, has introduced the concept of 'third meaning,' a new kind of significance originated by the combination of word and image and linked to personal perception.

The second section of the first chapter concentrates on the analysis of photographic language. In order to better understand the role photography assumed in contemporary literature, it is necessary to take into consideration the historical period in which the photo-camera was born, namely the Victorian Age. In this period a new visual culture pervaded Europe due to the introduction of optical instruments that lead the human eye to an artificial view of reality. Moreover the illustration becomes a new feature in literature and many authors (like Dickens, Hardy, Carroll) provided a double reading of their novels, a written and a figurative one. After Daguerre's invention of photography in 1839 and its rapid diffusion in the European society, many authors were attracted by the characteristics of impersonality and reproducibility of the photographic image and use used it to document places

and situations which then they described in the novels in a very realistic way. The photograph also gained the important memorial function of depicting, and thus materialising, deceased people in the so-called *post-mortem* representations, images that emphasised particular sentiment of *nostalgia* for the past and the obsessive desire for memory and empirical evidence.

During the 20th century, photography becomes a central point of discussion for many theorists like Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Barthes elaborates an original rhetoric of photography in his work *La Chambre Claire* (1980) based on the distinction between the *studium* of a photograph, that is the generic interest for an image, and the *punctum*, namely a particular and subjective detail that catches the attention of the viewer. Benjamin points out the existence of an 'optical unconscious,' linked to the camera's ability to record parts of reality that sight cannot perceive, through the mechanic mechanical techniques of enlargement or slow motion of the new optical devices. From the new theorisations on photography a new, implied ghostly quality of the image emerges, generated by the dual nature of the image itself, which attests both the presence and the absence of the portrayed person. According to Barthes, then, the photograph represents a "micro-version of death" and this particular quality becomes a *leit motiv* in the photo-textual interactions of the considered novels.

The second part of the introductory chapter, evidences the association between photography and memory in light of the recent theorizations of Annette Kuhn and Marianne Hirsch. Photographs represent an efficient tool for the re-enactment of the past, in fact they constitute 'memory texts,' that trigger subjective performances of memory. Family photographs and photo-albums, in particular, disclose new levels of meaning as a result of the subjective performative act of remembering: this principle is at the base of Hirsch's theorization of *postmemory*. Based on the generational transmission of a traumatic event that could not be directly assimilated when it first occurred, the notion of postmemory creates a gap in the members of the second generation, that needs to be filled by imaginative investment and creation. In this view photography appears to be the best aesthetic vehicle of

transmission of a past traumatic event, as it engages the viewer into an intimate connection and affiliation with it, revealing what Baer calls its “spectral evidence.”

The last part of the first chapter introduces the extended notion of intermediality, focusing on the more recent theories developed in the context of the *Visual Studies*; then, it concentrates on the more specific interaction between fiction and photography. The American Dick Higgins is the first to use the term “intermedia” in 1966 referring to artistic hybrids like installations or performances that it was not possible to classify within a fixed-defined genre of art; later, Irina Rajewsky provided a more general definition of the term, designating those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media. She then proposed a distinction between *inter-, intra- and trans-*medial phenomena according to the degree of transgression of borders between two or more media involved. In the case of the photo-text interaction, a basic distinction has to be made between implicit and explicit modes of appearance of the pictures in the narratives. Hence, photographs can be visually and tangibly reproduced between the pages, or they can be verbally evoked as a literary theme, like it happens in the first novel considered. In both cases, photographs do not only support the narrative level, but interact with it in the co-creation of meaning; as Meek affirms, they ‘interanimate’ each other constructing the story in a complex process of interdependent storytelling.

Chapter II presents the analysis of *The Dark Room*, by Rachel Seiffert, where photography is employed as a structural narrative device to explore the way different generations of Germans deal with the traumatic events of the Holocaust. The title offers a significant key of interpretation to the novel’s understanding: following a so-called ‘rhetoric of the darkroom,’ the physical procedure of development of an image from its negative form to the final outcome is metaphorically applied to the way people deal with the events they happen to experience. The protagonist’s direct observation of reality, through the photo-camera reveals an actual lack of understanding of the historical situation he lives, epitomised by the moment in which he throws

away the photos of a deportation. Similarly, in the second story, the act of gazing at photos of concentration camps is converted into a complete denial of the atrocities represented, as they are even accused of being a setup of the Allies. Lastly, the final step in the procedure of a photograph's development, is symbolised by Micha, who looks for the authentic photos that could clarify the mystery around his family's traumatic past and is able to accept and reconcile with it. In *The Dark Room*, the characters' experience of traumatic events is limited and expanded at the same time, following photography's ability, already emphasised by Benjamin, to enlarge details or to freeze fleeting moments. In this way, the experience of reality alternately constrains and broadens the perception of the readers too, who oscillate between understanding, misinterpreting and revisioning their knowledge together with the different protagonists.

The novel analysed in Chapter III is *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) by Ransom Riggs. The novel represents a striking example of creative interaction between the author and a collection of old anonymous photos. The novel contains a bunch of forty pictures that suggests a powerful visual association with the peculiar characters of the story and leads the reader to identify himself with the main 'photo-textual narrator.' The old black-and-white snapshots are assembled together like in a photo-album and become an important device in the negotiation of traumatic history. Moreover, their aesthetic quality becomes a device to recreate the trope of otherness in a complex inter-textual process of signification with the text. Indeed, the typical anti-Semitic stereotypes are transformed into the freakish aesthetic dimension attributed to the protagonists of the novel.

In the last chapter, the analysis of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer shows how the intermedial narrative strategy employed in the previous novels can be an efficient literary device to deal also with contemporary trauma, starting from the tragic events of 9/11. The story of Oscar, the young protagonist who loses his father during the attacks to the World Trade center, intersects with the stories of his paternal grandparents, who are both survivors of the Dresden bombings during World

War II. Recalling Benjamin's notion of 'literary montage,' the three different traumatic stories are recounted through different visual and narrative devices, which tend to explore the impact of trauma on each individual life and express shock, fear and anxiety. In the course of the novel images interrupt the flow of reading and play a constant, but misleading role in the narrative. As the protagonist finds it almost impossible to talk about his experience of 9/11, the images he collects assume a heightened meaning, as they portray stuff that is important to him symbolically or things that he is thinking about. The production of photographic traces results vague and confusing, requiring the reader to look deeper and behind the surface, in search of the barthesian *punctum*. The visual dimension is strengthened by the experimental typographic strategy employed by the author to evidence the protagonists' struggle to elaborate their traumatic experiences. The presence of pages with red-marks on the text, sequences of numbers instead of letters, blank or almost black pages compromises the fluidity of the text, evidencing the breakdown of language and representation. Thus, the reader has to work hard in order to achieve an understanding of the narrative and he is actively involved in the subjective experience of traumatic elaboration, becoming a witness of the events.

The presence of the famous photo of the 'falling man' is emblematic. After the first, worldwide mediatic diffusion right after the 9/11 attack, it was collectively censored and repressed for many years, due to the debates related to the limits and ethics of representation. The introduction of the final flip-book at the end of the novel, featuring the photographic sequence in reverse order, proves the literary capacity of relieving these images from the constraints induced by censorship providing them with a new meaning. Once embedded into the literary field, the images invite the reader to acknowledge their own process of mourning and to reconnect with their personal and singular memory of that collective tragedy.

CHAPTER I

1. WORD-IMAGE RELATION

1.1. *Ut Pictura Poesis*

The word-image relationship has been at the centre of theories and philosophical considerations from the most ancient times. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace (65-8 BC) introduces the famous formula *ut pictura poesis*, literally translated with: 'as in painting so in poetry,' asserting an essential similarity and equality between literary and visual arts. Horace presumably referred to the idea introduced a long time before, in late sixth century BC, by Simonides of Ceos, through the chiasm: 'Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens,' namely that 'poetry is a speaking picture, painting is a silent poetry.'¹ The Horatian simile occupies a relevant position in aesthetic discourses, since it has become the foundation of a multitude of interpretations and discussions throughout history up to the contemporary time.

During the Renaissance, a period characterised by a flourishing production in literary and artistic fields, the debate on the different art forms becomes vividly alive. Painting and poetry, named as 'sister arts,' are increasingly understood as competitive ones, therefore many philosophers engage in the *paragone* between art forms, affirming the supremacy of visual art forms on poetry. In his *Trattato della Pittura (Treatise on Painting)*, Leonardo Da Vinci glorifies the art of painting as a universal truth capable of recreating the forms of nature perfectly, thus asserting the triumph of the painter over the poet.²

In mid-eighteenth-century, the emergence of the term 'aesthetics' represents an important shift in the way images are understood by philosophers, in terms of perception and production of knowledge. In

¹ Simon Shaw-Miller, "Opsis Melos Lexis: Before and Around the Total Work of Art," in *Rival Sisters, Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism 1815-1915*, eds. James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014): 37-52, 37.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

classical, medieval and Renaissance theories of knowledge, images were considered as products of the human faculty of imagination, playing the mediating function of linking sense perception with the faculty of reason.³ According to many eighteenth-century philosophers, mental images were simple representations of the external world: in Britain, for instance, David Hume affirmed that ideas were just “the faint images” of sensory impressions, then used in thinking and reasoning.

Alexander G. Baumgartner’s famous definition of aesthetics as a “science of perception” paves the way to a new way of considering the connection between images and thought. The new philosophical aesthetic evidences the need of reflecting on how different kinds of external images, like paintings or images of poetry, affect human perception and consciousness.⁴ In his “A Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry” (1744), for instance, English philosopher James Harris aims to investigate the nature of different media by considering their impact on the senses. Sisterly arts are analysed on the base of their perceptual reception, following what might be foreign or relevant to the senses.⁵

In the same period German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing discusses the differences between forms of art in his famous work *Laokoon* (1766). The poet assumes a critical position towards the traditional *ut pictura poesis* statement, starting from the assumption that space and time are different and separate phenomena. As the subtitle suggests: “an essay on the limits of painting and poetry,”⁶ Lessing underlines the sensory and spatio-temporal dimensions of the two media, arguing that time-based arts (*Literatur und Dichtung*) such as poetry, considerably differ from space-based arts (*die bildenden Künste*), like painting or sculpture, in the way they mediate reality. While painting extends in space and activates the sense of sight, poetry develops in time and speaks to imagination. These distinctions

³ Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Khalip, Robert Mitchell, *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), 6.

⁴ Agamben, Khalip, Mitchell, *Releasing the Image*, 6.

⁵ Shaw-Miller, “*Opsis Melos Lexis*,” 40.

⁶ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766), *Laocoön: an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*,” trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).

predispose the two art forms to the realisation of different representations of reality: “signs existing in space can only represent objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.”⁷ As Lessing points out, painters and sculptors are limited to the representation of one single moment, and thus they need to choose that instant in which “the more we see, the more we [are] able to imagine.”⁸ This is made very clear in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s influential observations on the sculpture of the *Laokoön*, which shows the Trojan priest and his sons in a dramatic expression of pain, while assailed by a fearsome sea serpent. A painter or a sculptor, therefore, will not be able to represent the climax of an emotion, since it would not stimulate the spectator’s imagination properly. On the contrary, as Lessing points out, the poet does not need to “compress his picture (*Gemälde*) into a single moment,”⁹ but he can describe extended actions developing in time. While painting is a descriptive *medium* that provides the spectator with one single image to be taken all at once, poetry is a narrative *medium*, which is able to generate a series of images rising up in the reader’s mind. Because of its ability of transforming spatial vision into temporal action, Lessing would consider poetry as a “higher” art than painting.¹⁰

Late romantic writer Walter Pater appreciates Lessing’s contribution to aesthetic criticism and recognises the importance of classifying the specific qualities of a work of art. However, according to Peter, what is significant is not the tension between the verbal and the visual, but the possibility of transcending such limits.¹¹ In the essay “The School of Giorgione” (1877), he affirms:

⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Marie Laure Ryan, “Narration in Various Media,” in *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014): 468-488, 470.

¹¹ Rath Pragyán, *The “I” and the “Eye”: The Verbal and the Visual in Post-Renaissance Western Aesthetics*, (Newcastle; Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 51.

Although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term as *Anders-streben* – a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place to each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.¹²

Pater converts Lessing's concept of artistic limitations into artistic virtues, pointing out that the qualities of art forms are not necessarily those listed by Lessing; rather, no form of art is predominantly imaginative or physical. As scholar Rath Pragyán asserts: "*Anders-streben* is the answer to the new *ut pictura poesis*, where painting is not like poetry, but each can pass into the condition of the other."¹³ In other words, all arts, according to Pater, constantly strive for annihilating the distinction between form and matter and, through what he calls 'imaginative reason,' it is possible to give rise to the ideal art form. The new aesthetic criterion developed by Pater goes beyond the implications between content and material: such condition can be obtained only when the faculties of the eye and the intellect, sensation and imagination, collaborate together producing one single effect.¹⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century modernist literature is moving in the direction of spatial form: writers like James Joyce, Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot conceive their literary works not as sequences of actions anymore, but in subjective moments of time linked to the unconscious. Sustaining that the main characteristic of modernist literature is the tendency to invade the visual dimension of the visual arts, Joseph Frank affirms:

[M]odern literature, as exemplified by such writers as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce is moving in the direction of the spatial form; the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.¹⁵

¹² Walter Pater [1873], "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 83-98, 85.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1963): 62, 8-9.

In modernist works, thus, language becomes “spatial, musical, pictorial, contaminated by non-linear techniques typical of visual arts.”¹⁶ In the same way imagist poetry, that developed in the same period, required an act of reading equivalent to visualization, implying a rejection of the traditional division between spatial and temporal. As Daniela Carpi states in her essay “Ut Pictura Poesis: Literature and Painting”:

The problem of the relationship between language and the pictorial image comes to the forefront in the twentieth century, in the period of the so called “culture of the image. The last years of the twentieth century saw the predominance of the image against the written word, with the devaluation of the latter.¹⁷

1.2. Barthes and the Third Meaning

Roland Barthes’ investigations on the relationship between text and image have been a recurrent theme of his research since the end of the ‘50s until the end of his life. In his first essays, Barthes assumes a pragmatic position in order to assert the predominance of the linguistic sign on other systems of signification.

In “Elements of Semiology,” the French theorist develops the science of semiology, firstly postulated by Ferdinand De Saussure in his “Course in General Linguistics,” by extending its principles from language to all sorts of sign systems:

Semiology [...] aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute if not language, at least systems of signification.¹⁸

While images, behaviours and objects do signify, they never do so

¹⁶ Daniela Carpi, “Ut Pictura Poesis: Literature and Painting,” in *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetic* 8 (AMS Press, 2008): 1-15, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes (1964), *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 9.

autonomously and their meaning is always embedded in language, since, as sign systems, they require “the relay of language, which extracts their signifiers (in the form of nomenclature) and names their signifieds (in the form of usages or reasons).”¹⁹ Meaning, therefore, enters any kind of sign system when it is articulated verbally and language becomes the main perspective of perception. The visual medium has thus its signifying potential, but it is clarified only through the linguistic medium. According to Barthes, this evidences an important difference between language and image: the latter is always polysemic or ambiguous and for this reason text usually disambiguates the image (*anchorage*).²⁰

In his essay “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes keeps sustaining the predominance of the written text on the image following the so-called “civilization of writing:”

Today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image - we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing.²¹

By examining the semiology of an advertising poster, the theorist distinguishes two main functions for the accompanying text with regard to the iconic message: anchorage and relay. The text anchors the image by naming it and has the function of emphasising or clarifying something in it: “the text directs the reader through a meaning chosen in advance.”²² The relay function is more rare and it is used to explain the significance of the image and to move the action forward, like in films and cartoons. In his 1969 essay “Is Painting a Language?” Barthes even declares that the artistic picture does not exist but in the plural linguistic descriptions provided by the

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁰ Gemma Penn, “Semiotic Analysis of Still Images,” in *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound: a Practical Handbook*, eds. Paul Atkinson, Martin W. Bauer, George Gaskell (London, Sage Publications, 2000): 227-245, 229.

²¹ Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana Press, 1977): 32-51, 38

²² Ibid., 40.

observers: "The picture [...] exists only in the account given of it; or again: in the total and the organisation of the various readings that can be made of it: a picture is never anything but its own plural description."²³

In a second phase of his academic career, marking an actual shift from Saussurean semiology, Barthes moves his interest towards the world of significance, starting to investigate and celebrate those elements of the image that elude signification and that can be seen and felt, but not linguistically described. After all his writings on semiotics and structuralism, he is searching for something that "appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information."²⁴ Indeed, Barthes recognises the existence of a third meaning, that he calls 'obtuse sense,' as related to the uncanny and to perception.

In his essay "The third meaning" (1970), Barthes analyses a sequence of filmic stills from Sergej Ejzenstein's films that had astounded him and, reflecting on such visual experience, he affirms: "I read, I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning – evident, erratic, obstinate."²⁵ The 'obtuse meaning' refers to something transgressing and opposed to what the theorist calls the 'obvious meaning,' which comprises the two well-known levels of meaning inherited from structural linguists: the informational and the symbolic level. The 'obtuse' sense is a disruptive excess, that exists beyond the connotative and the denotative, but always an addition to the duality. While the obvious meaning is evident, the obtuse meaning:

extend[s] outside culture, knowledge, information: analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche) it is on the side of the carnival.²⁶

²³ Roland Barthes, "The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation," trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 150.

²⁴ Roland Barthes (1970), "The Third Meaning," in *Image, Music, Text* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1987), 52-68: 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

The obtuse meaning cannot be described nor conveyed in words, since it is “a signifier without a signified”²⁷ and, consequently, the only way to understand it is to experience it through a non-verbal metalanguage. By asserting the existence of the ‘obtuse meaning,’ Barthes leaps over the old image-text dichotomy and recognises the generation of a new kind of significance, that, in the case of iconotextual artefacts, is originated by the combination of word and image and has to do with perception only.

Barthes has employed different metaphors to indicate the experience of something that seems to resist any attempt at theorisation. Such exploration is usually linked to the experience of a particular medium, or a cultural phenomenon. This becomes even clearer in his theorisation of photography in *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1980), where he conceptualises the notions of *studium* and *punctum*, in a clear parallel with the previous concepts of *the obvious* and *the obtuse*.

1.3. The Pictorial Turn

In his essay “Word and Image,”²⁸ (1996) Mitchell provides an interesting comparison between the realms of word and image²⁹ defining them as “two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange and other forms of intercourse.”³⁰ The theorist demonstrates the impossibility to draw unequivocal lines between the visual and the textual, asserting that signs do not exist in a pure state, since the potential for the shift “from word to image” and “from image to word” is always there. The pictorial field is located in histories, institutions

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

²⁸ William J.T. Mitchell, “Word and Image,” *Critical Terms of Art History*, eds. Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁹ For further investigation in the field of *Visual Studies*, see: Margarita Dikovistskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: The Mit Press, 2005); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), a collection of essays from key figures in the interdisciplinary field, including W.J.T. Mitchell and Irit Rogoff. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Visual Culture: Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1999); Matthew Rampley, *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Richard Howells, *Visual Culture*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Richard Howells and Joao Negreiros, *Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012);

³⁰ Mitchell, “Word and Image,” 49.

and discourses, where images are always linked to a symbolic dimension when named:

In the act of interpreting or describing pictures, even in the fundamental process of recognizing what they represent, language enters into the visual field. Indeed, so-called "natural" visual experience of the world, quite apart from the viewing of images, may be much like a language.³¹

In the same way, words represent intelligible verbal signs that can be both visible marks on a sheet or audible sounds in the air, in other words "they present a double face to both the eye and the ear: one face is that of the articulate sign in a language; the other is that of a formal visual or aural gestalt, an optical or acoustical image."³² By underlining relations like the verbal experience of the icon and the visual experience of the printed word, Mitchell makes evident how *sister arts* actually need to be considered and described in their ever-present interdependence.³³ What is important, thus, is not to compare image and text, but rather to explore the relations between the visual and the verbal. Eventually, Mitchell notes that the forms of object relations differ: while the image might directly and literally incorporate a text, it is much more difficult for the text to represent directly an image.

In "Picture Theory," Mitchell acknowledges the fact that our contemporary society is dominated by the continuous proliferation of pictures and visual simulations and claims the necessity of a new theory of image, as we live in a society dominated by the pictorial image, but still unable to understand its power despite an abundance of theories on the subject: "the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image."³⁴ In particular, Mitchell evidences his preoccupation with media images, which actually define an era, that is ascribed to the end of postmodernism. The art historian affirms: "another shift in what

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² Ibid., 51.

³³ See William J.T. Mitchell, "There are No Visual Media," in *Media Art Histories*, ed. Oliver Grau (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010): 395-406.

³⁴ William J.T. Mitchell, "Picture Theory: essays on Verbal and Visual Representation," (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

philosophers talk about is happening, and that once again a complexly related transformation is occurring in other disciplines of the human sciences and in the sphere of public culture. I want to call this shift ‘the pictorial turn.’”³⁵ In a letter to philosopher Gottfried Boehm, who had instead proposed the concept of *iconic turn*, Mitchell tries to explain what he intends by *pictorial turn*:³⁶ “[...] a contemporary paradigm shift within learned disciplines (one that treats non-verbal representations with a new kind of respect[...]), and as what I call ‘a recurrent trope’ that occurs when a new image-repertoire, or a new technology of image-production creates widespread anxiety.”³⁷ The pictorial turn is thus related to the growing relevance that the proliferation of images is acquiring across a broad range of disciplines in contemporary society, to the point of affecting people’s perception and identity. As part of the cultural and societal changes of the past two decades related to digital media, the pictorial turn can be regarded as one of the several features that constitute the post-postmodern paradigm, as scholars Danuta Fjellestad and Maria Engberg affirm in the attempt to describe the post-postmodern model with its characteristics of access and excess.

38

³⁵ William J. T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn,” in *Picture Theory. Essays on verbal and Visual Representation*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press:1994), 11-35: 11.

³⁶ The expression ‘*Pictorial Turn*’ originated in contrast to Richard Rorty’s “linguistic turn,” created in 1967. According to Rorty, the history of philosophy is characterised by a series of ‘turns’ and while ancient and medieval philosophy were concerned with modern ideas, the contemporary scene is mostly engaged with words. Rorty described the genealogy of the linguistic turn through Derrida and Heidegger to Nietzsche, but also often referred to his favourite Ludwig Wittgenstein.

³⁷ Gottfried Böhm and William J.T. Mitchell, “Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters,” *The Pictorial Turn*, Ed. Neal Curtis (London and New York: Routledge, 2010): 8-26, 20.

³⁸ Danuta Fjellestad and Maria Engberg, “Toward a Concept of Post-Postmodernism or Lady Gaga’s Reconfigurations of Madonna,” in *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 12.4, 2013.

2. THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE

2.1. The Age of literary Realism

You cannot claim to have really seen something
until you have photographed it.
Émile Zola

The invention of photography in 1839 represented the culmination of a long series of technological experiments conducted in the previous decades, that placed eyesight at the centre of their analysis. Differently from other inventions of the time, like the telegraph or the steam engine, photography drastically changed the ways of perception of reality and the modes of representing it, giving way to what Roland Barthes then called an “epistemic rupture.”³⁹

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a series of optical devices, originally invented for scientific purposes, became popular optical toys for the masses and deeply contributed to the constitution of a new visual culture. Devices like the zootrope, the kaleidoscope or the magic lantern altered the perception of the world and could display new parts of reality, that previously were not accessible to the naked eye.⁴⁰ After 1839, with the rapid progress of the photographic instrument and the consequent possibility of cheaper reproduction techniques, the production of images grew rapidly and entered everybody’s life. The presence of images proliferated in periodicals, advertisement and everyday print products, but also in the private sphere, in the form of family portraits and *cartes-de-visite*.⁴¹ As scholar Jennifer Green-Lewis argues: “the Victorian period was an intensely visual oriented

³⁹ Helen Groth, *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

⁴⁰ Marit Grøtta, “Baudelaire’s Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and the 19th-Century Media,” (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁴¹ Julia Straub, *Nineteenth-century Literature and Photography*, in Gabriele Rippl, “The Handbook of Intermediality,” 162

Chapter I

culture,”⁴² where the extraordinary rise of photography reshaped conventions of the perceptual field and provided the viewers with a new standard of what was real.

The appearance of photography, whose etymological roots mean ‘drawing with light,’⁴³ shaped Victorian visual culture and, as a consequence, deeply influenced literature by providing new definitions of what is real. The aesthetic notion of realism was largely affected by the statement that photography shows reality as it really is, as scholar Green-Lewis asserts: “photography promised a superior grasp of reality, a realism more real than the thing itself.”⁴⁴ Consequently, the new awareness of a photographic literacy had a remarkable impact not only on the way reality was perceived, but also on how it was narrated. The intellectual discourse and the artistic practice were pervaded by the desire for realist representation, and so, as Nancy Armstrong affirms, “in order to be realistic, literary realism referenced a world of objects that either had been or could be photographed.”⁴⁵ Literature, therefore, “equated seeing with knowing and made visual information the basis of the intelligibility of a verbal narrative.”⁴⁶

Writers of the period as John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, Arthur Conan Doyle, Samuel Butler, Victor Hugo and Émile Zola, to name only a few, were amateur photographers and their literary works were all somehow affected by the photographic imagery. French writer Zola affirmed: “you cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it,” promoting the capacity of photography to grant access to what the eye could not see. The naturalist writer represented the new figure of the writer-reporter who used the camera to document places and situations that would be then minutely

⁴² Jennifer Green-Lewis, “The Invention of Photography and the Novel,” in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literature*, Ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 313-334, 329.

⁴³ The word Photography comes from the greek roots *phōtos*, meaning light, and *graphé*, meaning drawing.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 30.

⁴⁵ Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

described in the novels. In less than thirty years he produced about six thousands images, representing friends and family, and, above all, urban landscapes; Zola took pictures of every hidden corner of Paris and used them to describe meticulously the locations of his stories.

Despite some initial scepticism, literary writers generally embraced the arrival of photography with enthusiasm and responded to it in disparate ways: some included photographs as illustrations in their writing, others employed a photographic aesthetic in their works or engaged with photography metaphorically.⁴⁷ In general, fiction was characterised by the increasing use of pictorial elements and a visual vocabulary to describe both the external world and the characters' psychology.

Different authors used the 'photographic effect' as a writing device in their novels: Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), for instance, includes depictions of Rome, which are so realistic that the novel has been used, in recent times, as a travel guide. In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), instead, photography is personified by the key-character of the daguerreotypist, whose art is positively perceived for its innovative appeal, but, at the same time, it evokes a sense of the forbidden and mysterious. Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) relates to the photographic imagery as a metaphor for finding truth and epistemological certainty, while in Thomas Hardy's *An Imaginative Woman*, a photograph becomes the material embodiment of an absence.⁴⁸

2.2. Baudelaire and the first critics

The introduction of photography into late nineteenth century's western society had been an astonishing event, that transformed and reshaped the limits of science, artistic conventions and the reception of reality through the human senses. After decades of research and technological experiments, photography accomplished what painters never did: the perfect reproduction of reality. The new, extraordinary instrument launched in 1839 by French

⁴⁷ Gabriele Rippl, "The Handbook of Intermediality," 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 165-168.

Chapter I

scientist Daguerre could stop time and freeze the very essence of life in one single picture. From that moment, the sensorial perception of reality would be revolutionised, as well as the concept of realism was completely transformed and the visual arts were challenged with a new competitor.

The controversial debates, arose with the invention of photography on the relationship between art and science, led writers and philosophers of the time to take divergent positions. Between the many enthusiastic estimators of the new invention, Edgar Allan Poe, writing from the other side of the Atlantic for the press, described the new medium as “the most important and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science.”⁴⁹ Referring to the daguerreotype for its ability to convey an almost divine representation of absolute truth, Poe asserts that the daguerreotype is “infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands.”⁵⁰ According to Poe, science is not only the source of imagination, but it would also exceed its greatest expectations.

On the opposite side, in the famous article “Le Public Moderne et la Photographie” (1859), Charles Baudelaire strongly criticises the advent of photography, defining the new invention as the absolute enemy of poetry and imagination. The French poet lives in the historical moment when naturalism and the idea that art and truth lie in the exact reproduction of the visual world, while photography is acclaimed as the greatest invention capable of reaching that ideal of ‘exactitude.’⁵¹ In mock biblical prose, Baudelaire writes: “an avenging God has heard the prayers of this multitude [...] Daguerre was his Messiah. And then they said to themselves: ‘Since photography provides us with every desirable guarantee of exactitude (they believed that, poor madmen!) ‘art is photography.’”⁵² The French poet had witnessed the spread of photography in early modern society, as well as the mass commercial

⁴⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerrotype,” *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, January 15, 1840, reprinted in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1981), 37-38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵¹ Francois Brunet, “Photography and Literature,” (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 70.

⁵² Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photographie,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980): 83-89, 86.

celebration of the mechanical tool and its ability to provide perfect replicas of the physical world. According to him, photography was leading to an impoverishment of artistic imagination and sensibility, as well as to a general vulgarity in modern taste. The public seemed no longer able to recognise authentic and beautiful art, but often preferred the vulgar reproductions of images.⁵³ In Baudelaire's opinion photography could not be considered *fine art*, but just a mechanical tool, like a record keeper or an archive, that should be employed as a "humble servant" of the arts, since, as he claims: "poetry and progress are two ambitious men that hate each other."⁵⁴

2.3. Photography and Nostalgia

The invention of photography did not only represent a symbol of modernity, but it also emphasised a particular fascination for the past. Indeed, many of the first pioneers of photography focused their camera on antiquity: Daguerre's images of fossils in 1839, Fox Talbot's collotypes of the bust of Patroclus, and other mid-century pictures of ancient ruins by photographers like Francis Frit, Maxime du Camp and many others, epitomised a unique confrontation of the ages, where modernity placed herself at the service of the ancient past.⁵⁵ As Baudelaire wrote about what, to him, was the only acceptable function of photography: "it might rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring, precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory."⁵⁶

One of the major anxieties of the Victorian age was the possibility of forgetting the past and photography, together with literature, seemed to offer

⁵³ Marit Grøtta, *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and the 19th- Century Media*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 49.

⁵⁴ Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photographie," 88.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Green Lewis, "Victorian Photography and the Novel," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 313-336, 315.

⁵⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1859," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 296.

Chapter I

a concrete antidote against memory dissolution; as scholar Helen Groth argues:

Photography symbolized the possibility of creating an ideal archive to many Victorians, an archive in which no moment or experience need be forgotten. This seductive idea had particular appeal for a generation of writers preoccupied with their own mortality and the erosion of tradition in an age distracted by the ever-changing spectacle of the present.⁵⁷

The photograph represented a concrete and verisimilar record, an actual fact that let its subject exist in the ever present, separating it from the flux of time. Photography could convey the look of the past, which was achieved by turning the camera to ancient subjects, like the excavations in ancient sites of the Mediterranean. The Victorians were strongly fascinated by historical periods, like Roman and Greek antiquity or the Middle Ages, and their obsession for old objects and artefacts was asserted by the necessity of preserving them through fine evidence.

This sentiment of *nostalgia*, as the deep desire of arresting the course of time, led to the proliferation of a wide variety of artistic and literary creations, that involved the use of elements taken from different media and historical backgrounds.⁵⁸ Victorian photographers enjoyed the reproduction of knights and damsels, Shakespearean characters and fairy nymphs, while, in other cases, simple photographs of landscapes were accompanied by poems in the first intermedial references.

Julia Margaret Cameron, for instance, was known for her passion for photography, through which she portrayed famous men of the time, but also fairy children and figures taken from religion, literature and mythology. Through the recreation of fantastic scenes and the use of specific photographic techniques for smoothing the lines, Cameron “explored the

⁵⁷ Helen Groth, *Victorian Photography*, 248.

⁵⁸ Julia Straub, *Nineteenth-century Literature*, 164.

performative and theatrical aspects of photography [...] which attempted to represent the unrepresentable.”⁵⁹

In a period characterised by the production of acts of memory, the rise of photography coincided with the increasing popularity of relics veneration: early photography began to be used to reproduce *post-mortem* paintings, marble busts, death masks, effigies and tombstones. These pictures provided family members with copies of memorial objects that were otherwise difficult to carry or to reproduce, contributing to preserve them in the most verisimilar form.

However, starting from early 1840s, photography quickly became its own form of *post-mortem* depictions. Similarly to paintings and drawings of the just-dead body, these kinds of photographs portrayed the evangelical “happy death” of the deceased with illusory peaceful facial expressions that would, somehow, console their familiars. In Britain, the most common type of *post-mortem* photography regarded dead children, especially infants, whose bodies were treated to appear particularly pleasing at sight, since their innocence guaranteed them a direct entrance to the paradisiacal after world.⁶⁰ The *post-mortem* photographs did not store any documentary quality, since they would not show evidence of tuberculosis or other diseases: the making-beautiful of the dead was a traditional aspect of the grand ritual of funerals in the Victorian period, where the deceased people had to look beautiful and composed, while children appeared innocent and angelic.

Photographs had thus the important memorial function of keeping a trace of perished people through their corporeality, as an evidence of embodiment. In a letter written to a friend about a *post-mortem* daguerreotype recently seen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes how she was fascinated by “the sense of nearness involved in the thing [...] the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever! [...] I would rather have such a memorial of

⁵⁹ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire*, (Melbourne: MacMillan, 2003), 116.

⁶⁰ Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 160-161.

one dearly loved, than the noblest artist's work ever produced."⁶¹ Such pictures, thus, did not only represent pure visual *mementos*, but they asserted their materiality in the same way as other relics, like hair jewellery, did. Indeed, *post-mortem* photographs were usually framed into cases with lids that could be closed, providing them with three-dimensionality, which added consistency to their tangible nature. These 'reliquaries,' moreover, were often accompanied with material fragments of the deceased, like a segment of bone or a bunch of hair. In this way, both sight and touch were involved, while photography acquired the double role of evidence and *simulacrum*: the real body embedded in the pictures guaranteed that the referent was actually there, in the 'here' and 'now.'⁶² These practices emphasise the obsessive desire of the nineteenth century for memory and empirical evidence, but also underline the double aspect of the photograph as a material artefact, that is employed to fix something transcendent that 'has been.'

2.4. Photography's optical unconscious

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has had a close relationship with the supernatural. As scholar Anne Marsh affirms in her treaty on the art of photography:

The indexical nature of the photograph has given rise to both magical and scientific discourses and practices of photography. The intersection of the scientific (the known) and the magical (the unknown or ineffable) produces a more dynamic discourse than the interpretation of photography as a representation of reality.⁶³

Even if the camera was introduced principally as a mechanical and rational tool to be employed for scientific investigations in the visible world, its capacity to produce unpredicted shades and apparitions became soon

⁶¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford 1836-1854* ed. Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan (Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 1983).

⁶² Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom*, 158.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17.

evident and a new kind of fascination emerged from photography's imaginative association with the unknown and the unreal.⁶⁴

Unexpected ghostly manifestations on photographs were usually the result of errors or accidents made during the photographic process: early cameras, for instance, required a long exposure time and if a portrayed subject accidentally moved during that time, the shot would feature a blurred silhouette. Moreover, errors during the process of developing and printing could produce a series of shadows, marks or unfocused shapes that would appear on the image: to an inexperienced eye, such apparitions could seem mysterious and "suggestively supernatural."⁶⁵ Photography's apparent ability to invoke the supernatural led to the rise of spirit photography, which was understood to realise a physical record of the manifestation of the dead. Consequently, the lens of the camera began to be perceived as an artificial eye able to discern uncanny forces invisible to the human perception and, at the same time, the existence of such ghostly figures depended upon the technology of the medium.⁶⁶

Different critics began to consider photography and spirit as related and interdependent entities. In particular, German theorist Walter Benjamin is the first to establish the existence of an 'optical unconscious' as a virtual and non-human dimension created through the camera, depository of those images invisible to the human eye. Reflecting on the cultural impact of photography in "A small History of Photography" (1936), Benjamin recognises the ability of the camera to record aspects of reality that do not match with natural optics because they are too small, quick or scattered. The techniques of enlargement or slow motion actually reveal parts of reality that sight cannot perceive, while the eye of the camera sees an alternative and parallel reality that we must accustom ourselves to:

⁶⁴ See Rolf Krauss, *Beyond Light and Shadow: The Role of Photography in Some Paradoxical Phenomena: A Historical Survey* (Munich: Nazraeli, 1995), 14.

⁶⁵ John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 114.

⁶⁶ Catherine Smale, *Phantom Image: The Figure of the Ghost in the Work of Christa Wolf and Irina Liebmann* (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013), 82-83.

Chapter I

It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously. While it is possible to give an account of how people walk, if only in the most inexact way, all the same we know nothing definite of the positions involved in the fraction of a second when the step is taken. Photography, however, with its time lapses, enlargements, etc. makes such knowledge possible. Through these methods one first learns of this optical unconscious, just as one learns of the drives of the unconscious through psychoanalysis.⁶⁷

Also French philosopher Roland Barthes, in more recent times, adopts the language and imagery of spirit photography in his exemplar work *Camera Lucida*, theorising about the photograph as a ghost, as a “what-has-been.”⁶⁸ While looking to some old photographs of his recently deceased mother, the French theorist is moved by one particular image representing his mother as a five-years-old child, together with her brother, in a winter garden. The photograph actually attests the presence of the mother as a child in a unique and precise historical moment and this becomes the distinctive characteristic of the photograph:

In Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography [...] The name of Photography's noeme will therefore be: 'That-has-been', or again: the Intractable.⁶⁹

The photograph is actually a contact relic, as it is “literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiation which ultimately touch me, who am here.”⁷⁰ In other words, the photograph provides material proof that his mother once existed and had a place in time and space.

The photograph is a sort of certificate of presence, in which the past is

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. A. Trachtenberg (New Haven, 1980), 202-3.

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 87.

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76-77.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

forcefully connected to the present, so that the viewer becomes aware of the future of the past. This becomes clear when Barthes looks at the picture of a boy taken only prior to his death execution and finds his *punctum* in the realisation that the subject is going to die: "I read at the same time: *this will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake."⁷¹ According to Barthes, the experience itself of being photographed represents a "micro-version of Death," in a moment where the depicted subject is neither a person nor the photograph-to-be:

In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of Death: I'm truly becoming a spectre.⁷²

3. PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

3.1. Photography as Memory Text

Visual media, and in particular photography, represent efficient tools for the re-enactment of the past in the present through the so-called 'performances of memory,'⁷³ which provide dynamic interconnections between memory, the personal and the public sphere. Starting from the assumption that memory is not only a private and subjective act, but a process with social and cultural resonance, scholar Annette Kuhn reflects on the way cultural means, like media and material culture, participate in the construction of a commonly shared past:

The question, then, is: how may the past be re-enacted in the present through performances of different kinds? These re-enactments processes are dynamic, interactive, and therefore potentially changing, in flux – contested even: there is memory, and there is counter-memory.

⁷¹ Ibid., 96.

⁷² Ibid., 13.

⁷³ Annette Kuhn, "Memory Texts and Memory Work: Performances of Memory in and with Visual Media," *Memory Studies* 3.4 (2010): 298-313, 298.

Chapter I

Performances of memory, moreover, can be –and are – enacted across a range of activities, places, rituals and media.⁷⁴

Focusing on performances of memory in everyday visual media like film and photography, Kuhn introduces the concept of ‘memory texts,’ as embodiments and sites of creation of memory. Defined as a cultural genre, memory texts stand for their metaphoric quality and their fragmentary and discontinuous temporality: “in the memory text, events often appear to have been plucked at random from a paradigm of memories and assembled in a mode of narration in which causality is not, if apparent at all, a prominent feature.”⁷⁵ Memory texts, thus, own an imagistic quality strictly related to unconscious productions and, significantly, “all of these attributes have to do with *performance*: the memory text embodies a particular approach to, or type of, performances of memory.”⁷⁶

Family photographs and albums are significant repositories of memories and, due to their material condition, they also represent prompts for performances of memory in private, collective and public contexts.⁷⁷ When a photograph is approached with an inquiring attitude towards the past, it unlocks new levels of meaning, or ‘counter-memories,’ as a result of an active work of remembering.

Depending on the nature of the object or the medium considered, each memory work involves different interpretative procedures. Until the spread of digital photography, photographs and albums have always enjoyed a tangible existence, that would locate them in the realm of material culture. Consequently, photographs are not only employed as depositories of memory, but also as instruments of performance, whose material presence provides them with a further significance. Comparing, in cultural terms, family photographs and albums to souvenirs, Kuhn affirms: “As with the souvenir as both token of remembrance and keepsake, value is placed on

⁷⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 303.

keeping – preserving – family photographs and albums, even (and perhaps especially) if they are rarely looked at.”⁷⁸

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*⁷⁹ (1995), Kuhn analyses a bunch of personal and public photographs to explore how the process of remembering may disclose levels of meaning that are not apparent on surface. According to the theorist, a photograph, in order to become evident, should not show a strict relation with the referent in a mimetic relation, but only barely evoke “memories which might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture,” since such a picture “sets the scene for recollection.”⁸⁰

The subjective performance of memory enacted by Kuhn is an investigation of the ways memory actually shapes the stories told in the present about the past, considering photographs in their material presence as “the prompts, the pretexts, of memory; the reminders of the past that remain in the present.”⁸¹ Such analysis into personal photography and memory not only reveal new facets and associations in the private sphere, but also displays components of cultural memory in a social-historical perspective.

3.2. The Generation of Postmemory

Holocaust photographs are the fragmentary remnants
that shape the cultural work of postmemory⁸²
Marianne Hirsch

The exponential growth, in the last two decades, of ‘memory studies’ in both academic and popular fields has been largely solicited by the limit case of the

⁷⁸ Kuhn, “Memory Texts and Memory Work,” 304.

⁷⁹ Annette Kuhn [1995], *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, (Verso: London, 2002).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸² Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103-128.

Chapter I

Holocaust⁸³ and by the impressive literary and artistic production of the so-called 'second-' or 'after generation.'⁸⁴ The effects of the traumatic events of the twentieth century have deepened into the present so strongly and affectively that the efforts made to comprehend and analyse them has become an urgency. Such events, indeed, still defy narrative reconstruction and transcend the faculty of reason. Accordingly, Onega points out "the inadequacy of traditional novelistic forms to represent trauma."⁸⁵ A huge amount of novels, films and artworks recalling and analysing the traumatic events of the last century has been published, underlying the need to elaborate an aesthetic of remembrance.

As scholar Eva Hoffman affirms, the tragic events of the twentieth century have deeply affected the contemporary generations to the point of overwhelming, sometimes, their lives. These generations, though, did not directly experience the impact of such events: they did not suffer nor lived through them, but "our relationship to them has been defined by our very 'post-ness' and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it."⁸⁶ Literary scholar Marianne Hirsch has developed the term 'postmemory' to indicate:

the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up.⁸⁷

⁸³ Within the field of trauma studies, the Holocaust is the predominant event under analysis. Holocaust testimony emerged as a distinct genre in the 1990s and the first trauma theorists who defined its conventions are Lawrence Langer, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman. With regard to Trauma Studies see: Susana Onega and Jean Michel Ganteau, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature Series (Routledge: London and New York, 2013), Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. *The Ethical Component in British Experimental Fiction since the 1960s*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011).

⁸⁴ Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 105.

⁸⁵ Susana Onega, "The Nightmare of History, the Value of Art and the Ethics of Love in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*," in *Ethics in Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008): 360.

⁸⁶ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 25.

⁸⁷ Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 106.

Unlike memory, any experience of postmemory is something one did not confront directly, but has a similar emotional power, since it is a meaningful experience in itself; as Hirsch points out:

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor recreate.⁸⁸

In other words, postmemory's connection with the past is not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.⁸⁹ The idea of postmemory is thus based on the transmission of inherited memories to the most recent generations, who did not experience the catastrophic events directly, but are actually affected by them in a way "as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right."⁹⁰ Hirsch clarifies that postmemory is neither a social movement nor an identity position, rather it is best understood as "a *structure* of inter- and trans- generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove."⁹¹

Hirsch's formulation of postmemory bears a direct link with the concept of trauma itself. The content of postmemory, indeed, derives from the familial transmission of "cultural or collective trauma" and it is characterised by belatedness since, like the initial trauma, it was not assimilated when it first occurred. Such quality is also associated to trauma in its psychoanalytic definition, as Cathy Caruth defines it "not fully perceived as it occurs."⁹² For the members of the second generation, trauma is an historically missed experience.⁹³

⁸⁸ Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by M. Bal, J. Crewe and L. Spitzer (Hanover, NH; London: University Press of New England, 1999): 2–23.

⁸⁹ Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 107.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 18.

⁹³ Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 51.

In her investigation on the process of identification of the ‘generation after’⁹⁴ with those who directly witnessed traumatic events, Hirsch makes a distinction between ‘familial’ and ‘affiliative’ postmemory, as different structures of transmission.⁹⁵ With ‘familial postmemory’ it is intended the response of those who have a personal connection to traumatic events, like the children of survivors: it is thereby an “intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family.”⁹⁶ The affiliative postmemory, in contrast, regards those who do not have any personal connection to traumatic events, but who, nonetheless, empathise with those people affected by them: it is, in this case, an “intra-generational horizontal identification.”⁹⁷ Through this distinction Hirsch is able to differentiate a literal postmemory generation from a figurative one. The affiliative state is not necessarily less authentic than the familial one, even though the latter can provide a structural model for the former. The familial structure, thus, is established on “a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the broader transfer and availability of individual and familial remembrance.”

3.2.1 Photography and Points of Memory

Reflecting on the aesthetic forms that could best transmit the structures of postmemory and the relations between generations, Hirsch finds in photography a crucial and effective vehicle of mediation. In the process of transmission from one generation to the other, it is an important memory that “signals an affective link to the past – a sense, precisely, of a material

⁹⁴ Eva Hoffman coins the term “hinge generation” to describe the second generation after a tragic event or cultural trauma and she point out that it is among this generation that “the meanings of awful events can remain arrested and fixed at the point of trauma; or in which they can be transformed into new sets of relations with the world, and new understandings” (Hoffman 2003: 103). Hence, according to Hoffman, the generation immediately following an event of cultural trauma is the generation that defines how this event can be understood and frames the cultural and ethical impact of such events on generations to come.

⁹⁵ Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 114.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

'living connection' – and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony."⁹⁸

By referring to Charles S. Peirce's tripartite definition of the sign, the theorist evidences the symbolic status assumed by the photographic image, achieved through the combination of the two semiotic principles of indexicality and iconicity: "photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power, makes it a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable."⁹⁹

Photographs from a traumatic past seem to minimise the tragedy they depict by framing it into a small two-dimensional surface, that also evidences its insuperable distance. At the same time, though, such photographs make visible a little part of the past world, conveying a glimpse of its immensity and power to the human senses. As Hirsch points out:

More than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch the past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic 'take.'¹⁰⁰

The symbolic power of photographs of a terrific past induces the reader to look not only for information, but also for a more intimate connection. Moreover, as Hirsch underlines, family photos, differently from public images, tend to enable a subjective identification and affiliation, reducing the distance with the reproduced past.

Hirsch, child of Jewish parents who survived the war in Romania, analyses a photograph of her parents taken in 1942, representing a gracious young couple out for a stroll. In the effort to conciliate such image with the actual historical reality of the time, when most of the city's Jews had been deported and those who remained were subjected to many restrictions, Hirsch asserts that photos reveal more about our own projections and appropriations than

⁹⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 107-108.

¹⁰⁰ Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 115.

about life in wartime.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, when we look at a photo of the past “the questions we pose in examining it, the needs and desires that shape our viewing, inevitably exceed the image’s small size and its limited ability to serve as evidence.”¹⁰²

Hirsch’s view of photography as the prominent vehicle for postmemory follows Roland Barthes’s reading of photography in *La Chambre Clair* (1980) and, in particular, his significant notion of *punctum*. The *punctum* denotes that particular, touching and wounding detail of the picture, separate from its subject matter, that establishes a direct relationship with the person or object within it. Hirsch renames it “point of memory,”¹⁰³ highlighting its powerful and constant influence across time. The term ‘point’ refers both to temporality, as a moment in time, and spatiality, as a point on a map, which intersect in the workings of personal and cultural memory connecting the present with the past. Points of memory are usually small details that generate reminiscence by conveying fragmented images of the past: “Points of memory produce *piercing insights* that traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides. As points multiply, they can convey the overlay of different temporalities and interpretive frames, resisting straightforward readings or any lure of authenticity.”¹⁰⁴ Photographs of the past, as well as objects and other remnants, are powerful points of memory that interpellate the postmemorial subjects. The small detail in a photo usually captures someone’s attention because of a personal connection to it, enabling a subjective act of reading.

In his theorisation of photography, Barthes states the existence of another type of *punctum* besides the mere striking detail: “this new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation.” The punctum of time lies in the discrepancy between the meaning of a given object in the past and the

¹⁰¹ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? Archival Photographs in Contemporary Narratives,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5.2 (2006): 229–252, 235.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁰³ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission,” *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2006): 353–383, 358.

¹⁰⁴ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects,” 358.

one it bears in the present, carrying the awareness of inevitable loss and death. Photos of the past bring to life what has been through their materiality, but, at the same time, they remind us of the absence of what they depict. Photography is thus not only a reminder of the past, as it shows people or things that once were but are no longer, but it also brings it to life again.

In the context of a traumatic past, then, photographs do not only represent important historical documents of knowledge, but they are also powerful 'points of memory,' revealing a spectral evidence of the past and linking memory to postmemory.

By examining the reading of photographs by a family member as well as the processes that direct the taking of family photographs, Hirsch asserts that "the camera and the family album function as the instruments of familial gaze."¹⁰⁵

4. INTERMEDIALITY

4.1. The Literary Montage

The most recent definitions of the concept of intermediality are strictly related to the idea of *literary montage*, a notion that was first introduced by the German theorist Walter Benjamin during the 30s. Benjamin conceived the *literary montage* as a method of creating his biggest work, *The Arcades Project [Passagewerke]*, on which he worked for thirteen years, from 1927 until his death, in 1940, leaving the project unfinished.¹⁰⁶ From the moment

¹⁰⁵ Marianne Hirsch, "Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory," (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁰⁶ In 1927 Benjamin began collecting material on the different facets of nineteenth-century Paris. After many interruptions, he restarted his researches from 1934 onwards and made the last entries in 1940, when he had to flee from Paris. He left thirty-six extensive folders of material, including citations and personal reflections, to Georges Bataille (1897-1962), who was a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale. After the war, the materials were sent to the philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), whom Benjamin had nominated as the executor

Chapter I

of its publication in 1983, followed by its translation into English in 1999, the work has increasingly become relevant for our understanding of today's media culture, since it engages with different interdisciplinary approaches.

Describing his method as a mode of historiography, Benjamin writes in a fragment of *Arcades*:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.¹⁰⁷

Benjamin's ambition is the representation of the early history of modernity in Paris by means of fragmented images. He thus conceives the practice of literary montage as a way to let the meaning of history reveal itself in the new era of technology, where the media practice intertwines with the modern urban experience, producing a sublime feeling that he calls *phantasmagoria*.¹⁰⁸ He then declares of his own method: "To write history thus means to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context."¹⁰⁹

One of his more perceptive readers, Hannah Arendt, goes even further when she evokes "Benjamin's ideal of producing a work consisting entirely of quotations, one that was mounted so masterfully that it could dispense with any accompanying text".¹¹⁰ This mode of construction has the effect of aligning Benjamin's text with the arcades themselves. The fragmentary, piecemeal arrangement of the textual material is analogous to the arrangement of the diverse goods of multiple origins, thrown together pell-mell and cheek-by-jowl, in the windows of the shops in the arcades; and again, on the next level up, to the heterogeneous succession of shops and

of his *oeuvre*, and were published only in 1983 as *Passagen-Werk*, followed by the English edition in 1999, *The Arcades Project*.

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 460.

¹⁰⁸ Jaeho Kang, *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N11, 3/476.

¹¹⁰ Hanna Arendt (1968), "Introduction, Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. A. Arouh (New York: Harcourt, 2000): 47.

windows encountered by the "*flâneur*" who perambulates through an arcade. As the frequenter of the arcades perceives things object by object and shop by shop, so Benjamin's reader assimilates the book's contents piece by piece, fragment by fragment, to be introduced en route into new forms of historical and cultural awareness by the shocks and flashes of unexpected juxtapositions and connections.

In the first decades of the 20th century Paris represents the eclectic metropolis of the modern age, a monstrous and mesmerizing entity, where the perception of space and time is critically affected by the massive transformations of the urban landscape. New aesthetic categories come to replace the traditional systems of representation and the narratability of the metropolis becomes one of the crucial aspects of the debate on modernity.¹¹¹ A narration through images is required in order to convey the perceptual variations of the mind forced by the irruption of modern technologies.

Through *The Arcades Project* Benjamin aims to reconstruct the new modes of experience of the modern society, analysing the interaction between the media spectacle and the urban spaces through the technique of literary montage.¹¹² Benjamin's intent is not the formulation of an abstract theory on media culture, but rather the direct application of his method in the constitution of a work made of fragmented images. His purpose is thus not to describe, but to show.

As Onega and Ganteau observe in the light of their study on traumatic realism, Benjamin's technique of literary montage "works on the principle of accumulation and repetition-*cum*-variation of apparently disparate elements, may be said to echo the mechanism of acting out a trauma."¹¹³ Thus, this narrative principle anticipates the way contemporary authors try to fictionalise the rupture of fragmented memories deriving from traumatic

¹¹¹ Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. Princeton, (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1981), 17.

¹¹² Jaeho Kang, *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

¹¹³ Susana Onega and Jean Michel Ganteau, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature Series (Routledge: London and New York, 2013), 6.

experiences, which will be further explored through the photo-text negotiation.

4.2. What is a *Medium*?

Auch das Wort Medium ist ein interessantes Wort und ist nicht ganz so einfach zu verstehen, wie man im ersten Augenblick glaubt ¹¹⁴
Hans Gadamer

The various and often conflicting definitions of the notion of “intermediality” refer to the more general issue centred around the term “medium,” which itself has collected a vast range of competing definitions. Coming from the Latin, *medius*, which means ‘middle’ and ‘intermediate,’ the term has entered the English language around 1930 to refer to different channels of communication.¹¹⁵ However, as the philosopher Hans Gadamer asserts, the concept of *medium* has become highly ambiguous and contested, most of all within the field of literary studies.¹¹⁶

In the 60s theorist and philosopher Marshal McLuhan provides us with one of the most influential definitions of *media*, describing them as “extensions of man,”¹¹⁷ a sort of prosthesis of the body and of consciousness. While literary scholar Friedrich Kittler, who has developed a hermeneutics of media technologies, uses the term *medium* to refer exclusively to technical channels for transmitting information,¹¹⁸ other theorists, like Aleida Assmann and Horst Wenzel, understand the term in a more extensive way, including non-technical *media* such as the spoken language, writing and the human body.

¹¹⁴ Hans Gadamer, *Kultur und Medien*, in: Honneth, Axel u.a. (Hg.): *Zwischenbetrachtungen im Prozeß der Aufklärung*; Frankfurt am Main 1989, s. 715.

¹¹⁵ Gabriele Rippl, *Handbook of Intermediality*, 14.

¹¹⁶ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Eminent Text and Its Truth,” in *The Horizon of Literature*, ed. Paul Hernadi (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982): 337-347.

¹¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan (1964), *Understanding Media: the Exstensions of Man*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

¹¹⁸ Friedrich Kittler, *Aufschreibsysteme 1800/1900*, (München: Fink, 1985).

According to the more recent definition of theorist Werner Wolf, *medium* is a much broader and flexible concept:

I here propose to use a broad concept of medium: not in the restricted sense of a technical or institutional channel of communication (e.g. letter, book, radio or poster) but as a conventionally distinct means of communication or expression characterised not only by particular channels or one channel for the sending and the receiving of messages but also by the use of one or more semiotic systems.¹¹⁹

Wolf's idea of *medium* is not restricted to its material qualities only, but it is also related to its channels of communication and to the semiotic systems it makes use of. This theory introduces the idea of *medium* as a multifaceted concept, as argued by media theorist Siegfried J. Schmidt. The German theorist has thus underlined the specificity of *medium* as a multi-layered term comprehending four different components: a semiotic system, as the natural oral language; a media technology, like prints and films; a social system, that is, institutions of production and reception of media, as schools and TV stations; specific media products, like novels or TV formats.¹²⁰ Thus, according to Schmidt, these aspects constitute the 'compound term'¹²¹ of *medium* and those who use it usually refer to at least one of its four different facets:

¹¹⁹ Werner Wolf, "Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality: Theoretical Aspects of Word and Music Studies," in *Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field. Proceedings of the first International Conference on Word and Music Studies at Graz*. Ed. Walter Bernhart. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999): 40.

¹²⁰ Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Kalte Faszination: Medien, Kultur, Wissenschaft in der Mediengesellschaft*, (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2000), 93-95.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

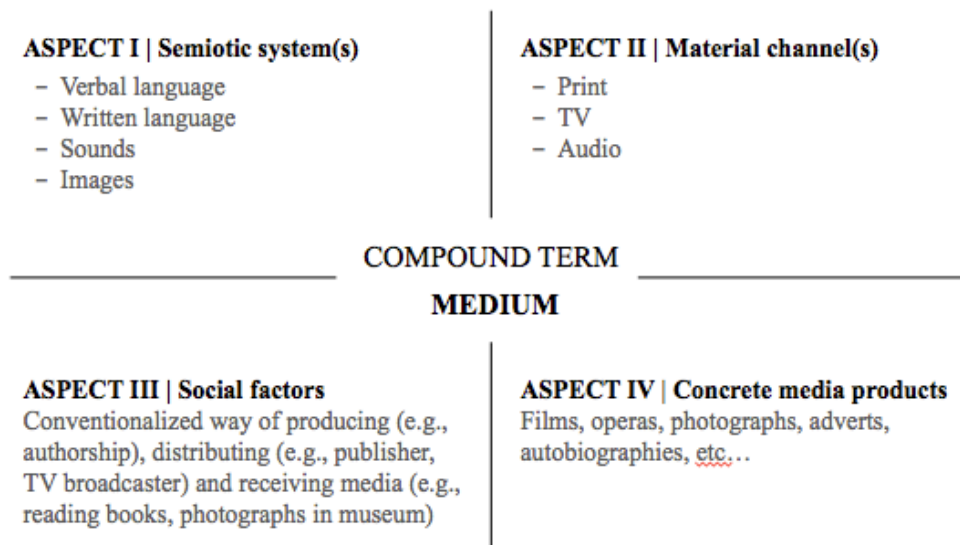


Fig 1: The compound term *Medium*

This short overview of definitions demonstrates how the meaning of *media* is ambiguous and continuously shifting. Media are influenced by many factors, such as social, material and intellectual ones and they change in people’s perception. Today, therefore, literary scholars do not focus anymore on the main specificities that distinguish one media from the other, but they investigate the way meaning is created through cross-medial references. In accordance with William J.T. Mitchell, who affirms that “all media are mixed media,”¹²² it becomes clear that media cannot be examined individually or in terms of their materiality only, especially in our contemporary digital society, where the juxtaposition and the combination of different media, styles and genres has affected every area of research.

4.3. Defining *Intermediality*

The American artist and theorist Dick Higgins is the first to use the term *Intermedia* in 1966, referring to artistic hybrids like installations or performances that could not be classified within a defined genre of art: “I would like to suggest that the use of intermedia is more or less universal

¹²² William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press:1995), 95.

throughout the fine arts, since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality."¹²³ Since the late 1950s an increasing number of artists began to develop art projects crossing the boundaries of art by fusing two or more media forms.

Higgins noted that Samuel T. Coleridge had used the term "intermedium" once referring to a specific issue in the work of Edmund Spenser. In his "Lecture Three: On Spenser" (1812) Coleridge compares Spenser's use of medieval allegory with the superior sense of timelessness of Shakespeare's works; thus he writes that "narrative allegory is distinguished from mythology as reality from symbol; it is, in short, the proper intermedium between person and personification."¹²⁴ Differently from Higgins, Coleridge refers specifically to the two meanings conveyed through the use of an art medium, allegory. The singular term "intermedium" is almost used as an adjectival noun. In contrast, Higgins' definition of "intermedia" has a broader significance, indicating a tendency in the arts that has become both a way of approaching art and a type of art form.¹²⁵

The current and growing interest on the concept of intermediality has led to the production of a broad variety of theories and approaches in the most different academic disciplines. According to theorist Irina Rajewsky, the reason for this achievement is to be attributed to the fact that "intermediality" represents an *umbrella-term*, under which a vast number of heterogeneous phenomena can be incorporated: "A variety of critical approaches make use of the concept, the specific object of these approaches is each time defined differently, and each time intermediality is associated with different attributes and delimitations."¹²⁶ As a result, the proliferation of a variegated number of notions of intermediality may conduct to vagueness and misunderstandings.

¹²³ Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *Some-thing Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (February 1966): 3.

¹²⁴ Thomas Middleton Rayson ed., *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), 33.

¹²⁵ Hans Breder, *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*, (Dortmund: Dortmunder Schriften zur Kunst, 2005), 51.

¹²⁶ Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: a Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermédialités*, 6, 2005, Montreal: 43-64, 44.

Chapter I

Rajewsky's aim is to provide an extensive conceptualisation of intermediality in literary studies, that is applicable to the largest number of media and the phenomena occurring between them. Trying to find a "common denominator" to the vast range of theories developed in different areas of research, the theorist affirms:

"Intermedial" [...] designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media, and which thereby can be differentiated from *intramedial* phenomena as well as from *transmedial* phenomena.¹²⁷

While *intermedial* phenomena denote "any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media,"¹²⁸ (e.g. the relations between literature and photography), *intramediality* concerns the crossing between two artefacts within the boundaries of one single medium (e.g. a painting adapting the style of another painting in the realm of visual arts). Intertextuality can be therefore considered a subcategory of intramediality.

¹²⁷ Rajewsky, "Intermediality," 46. Rajewsky introduces the distinction between *inter-, intra- and trans-* medial phenomena: *intramediality* denotes the transgression of borders between two artefacts (e.g. literary texts) within the boundaries of only one medium, while *transmediality* is about all those phenomena which are neither intermedial nor intramedial, like the appearance of a certain motif across a variety of different media. An example of *transmediality* provided by Rajewsky is the aesthetic of futurism, which was realised in different media.

¹²⁸ Werner Wolf, "Metareference across Media: the Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main forms and Functions," in *Metareference Across Media: theory and Case Studies*, Ed. Werner Wolf, Studies in Intermediality 4 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009). 1-86:61.

Intermediality: Relations between two or more conventionally distinct media	Intramediality: Relations between two or more artefacts of one medial kind	Transmediality: Phenomena that are not bound to any medium; can occur in all media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concerning one artefact: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media combination - intermedial references - concerning two or more artefacts: media transfer (adaptation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>intertextual</i> relations - <i>interpictorial</i> relations - <i>intermusical</i> relations - <i>interfilmic</i> relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discourse modes (e.g. narrative) - frames (e.g. stories) - genres (e.g. parody) - stylistic devices (e.g. irony)

Fig. 2: Intermediality – intramediality - transmediality

In the contemporary debate on intermediality, continues Rajewsky, it is possible to identify at least three main different approaches to the argument in a broad sense. In particular, it is possible to distinguish between synchronic and diachronic perspectives, which concentrate on intermediality “as a fundamental condition or category” or “as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations.”¹²⁹ Diachronic studies, for instance, are oriented on the development of media and their functions throughout history. A third fundamental approach, generally conducted in media studies, “operates at the level of the analysed phenomena *per se*,” in other words the focus is not on already medialised forms (like a film or a text), but on the process of formation of a potential medium.¹³⁰

Considering the heterogeneous and broad quality of the concept of intermediality, Rajewsky’s approach to the argument aims at analysing a vast

¹²⁹ Rajewsky, “Intermediality,” 47.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

range of intermedial phenomena by dividing them into specific subcategories. In literary studies, Rajevsky observes, there is a huge amount of phenomena characterised by the crossing of borders between media such as, for instance, filmic writing, adaptations of literary works, comics, *ekphrasis*, sound art installations, opera, etc.¹³¹ All these elements can be considered as intermedial configurations in a broad sense, but each of them is hardly comparable to the other. Therefore, following a synchronic mode, Rajevsky proposes an accurate distinction of three manifestations of intermediality:

1. [...] **Medial transposition** (as for example film adaptations, novelizations, and so forth): here the intermedial quality has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being, i.e., with the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium. This category is a production-oriented, “genetic” conception of intermediality; the “original” text, film, etc., is the “source” of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process.

2. [...] **Media combination**, which includes phenomena such as opera, film, theatre, performances, [...] so-called multimedia, mixed media, and intermedia. The intermedial quality of this category is determined by the medial constellation constituting a given media product, which is to say the result or the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation. These two media or medial forms of articulation are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way. Thus, for this category, intermediality is a communicative-semiotic concept.

3. [...] **Intermedial references**, for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing. Other examples include the so-called musicalization of literature, *transposition d’art*, *ekphrasis*, references in film to painting, or in painting to photography, and so forth. Intermedial references are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification: the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium (i.e., what in the German tradition is called *Einzelreferenz*, “individual reference”), or to refer to a specific medial

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.

subsystem (such as a certain film genre) or to another medium *qua* system (*Systemreferenz*, “system reference”).¹³²

The three branches identified by Rajewsky are not mutually exclusive, thus an overlapping of categories often occur in many circumstances like, for instance, in intermedial novels, composed of traditional literary texts and other medial elements, like photographs. A single medial configuration, therefore, may suit the criteria of two or even of all three intermedial categories: in the case of a film, it can be classified in the category of media combination, as an adaptation of a literary text in the category of medial transposition and, if it presents direct references to a literary text, it can be classified in the strategies of intermedial references.¹³³

As Rajewsky points out, this subdivision of intermedial practices cannot be considered exhaustive in the intermediality debate as a whole, but it is mainly associated with “analyses of intermediality in the fields of literary studies.”¹³⁴ For this reason she decides to concentrate on the analysis of the third category, the intermedial references, due to their specific mode of producing meaning by way of connecting one given media product to another.

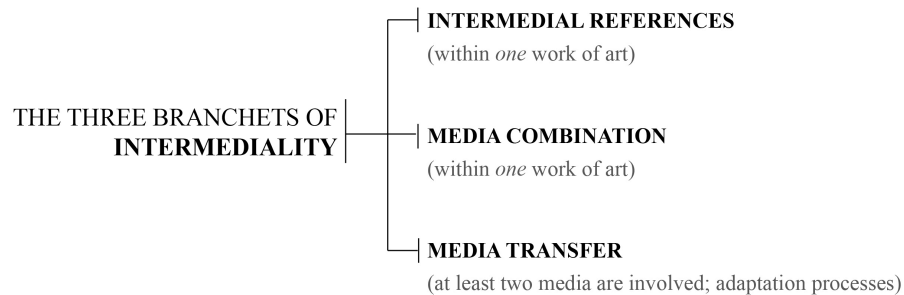


Fig. 3: The branches of Intermediality

Another important distinction to be made in the discourse of intermedial studies is about *hidden* and *manifest intermediality*. As Silke Horstkotte and

¹³² Rajewsky, “Intermediality,” 50.

¹³³ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 53.

Nancy Pedri argue in the introduction to *Photography in Fiction*, a special issue of *Poetics Today*:

the theory of intermediality commonly distinguishes between "manifest" and "hidden" intermedial references: "manifest" intermediality results from actual combinations of two media, whereas "hidden" intermediality is constituted through the implicit evocation of one medium within another.¹³⁵

This kind of categorization might be relevant in order to define the diverse modes of integration of one medium in another, like, for instance, cases of transcription, interference or *ekphrasis*. However, as Horstkotte and Pedri argue talking about the text-image relationship, between the binary poles of manifest and hidden references there is a huge *spectrum* of possible manifestations of interart forms.

4.4. Fiction-Photography interaction

Although the influence of photography on literary narratives has a long history, the use of material photographs in fiction is a relatively new phenomenon and it is only from the 90s that it is possible to observe "a virtual omnipresence of photographic images"¹³⁶ in fictional narratives. The production of narratives combining the verbal with photography and the growing academic interest for this phenomenon can be regarded as part of the pictorial turn, which is linked with the end of postmodernism. Among the contemporary writers who make large use of photographs in their narratives, worth of mention are: Mark Z. Danielewski (*House of Leaves*, 2000), Carol Shields (*The Stone Diaries*, 2003), Penelope Lively (*The Photograph*, 2004), Steve Tomasula (*The Book of Portraiture*, 2006), Aleksander Hemon (*The Lazarus Project*, 2008), Lauren Groff (*The Monsters of Templeton*, 2008), Leanne Shapton (*Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Leonore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street*

¹³⁵ Silke Horstkotte, Nancy Pedri, "Introduction: Photographic Interventions," in *Poetics Today* 29.1 2008: 1-29, 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

Fashion and Jewellery, 2009).¹³⁷ In all of these works the photographic image intertwines with the narrative in different ways producing new levels of meaning.

A first and basic distinction to be traced in the realm of fiction and photography is between implicit and explicit modes of appearance of the picture in the narratives. Photography is implicitly present when it is verbally introduced and evoked as a literary theme or motif, as it often happened in the first decades after the invention of photography, like in Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables* (1851) or in James's short story "The Real Thing" (1892). The explicit mode, on the contrary, consists in the tangible presence of reproduced photographs as graphic images in literary texts, constituting the subgenre of "photo-fiction."¹³⁸ Such mode has never been popular in the past and any occasional incorporation of a photograph was intended to be illustrative only. However, in recent times reproduced photographs in literary texts have become widespread. The explicit mode is bordered by two extremes: on the one hand there may be one single photographic image embedded within the text, while on the other there is the so-called photo-novel, which consists in a series of photographs combined with speech balloons.¹³⁹ In between these extremes there is huge variety of modes of incorporation of photographic images into narratives. Just to mention a few noteworthy examples: Winfried Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), Lauren Groff's *The Monster of Templeton* (2008) and Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) and *Hollow City* (2015).

Photographs in fiction do not only support the narrative level, but interact with it in the co-creation of meaning; as Margaret Meek affirms, they

¹³⁷ Danuta Fjellestad, "Mocking Photographic Truth The Case of HA!," in *Image & Narrative* 14.3, 2013: 178-192, 179.

¹³⁸ The related term "photo-text" was first introduced by Jefferson Hunter in 1987, in his discussion on collaborative works of photographers and writers in the 1930s US, such as Dorothea Lange, Laurence Stallings, Frederick Barber, Margaret Bourke-White, and Archibald MacLeish.

¹³⁹ Danuta Fjellestad, "Nesting-Braiding-Weaving: Photographic Interventions in Three Contemporary American Novels," in *The Handbook of Intermediality*, ed. Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015): 193- 218, 196-197.

“interanimate”¹⁴⁰ each other constructing the story together in a complex process of interdependent storytelling. Starting from Mitchell’s differentiation of media interactions, Danuta Fjellestad suggests three broad categories of encounters between photographic images and texts, namely nesting, braiding and weaving. The analysis of the formal arrangements of the text-photographic image permits to understand how the processes of reading and meaning-making are conveyed throughout the interplay of the narrative and the photograph.¹⁴¹

In the article “There Are No Visual Media” (2005), Mitchell defines nesting as that phenomenon in which “one medium appears inside another as its content,”¹⁴² referring, for instance, to a couple of films in which television is treated as their content. The concept of braiding, instead, takes place “when one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly, most notably in the cinematic technique of synchronized sound.”¹⁴³ In the case of a movie, the sense of sight is fused together with the sound in a continuous narration.

Fjellestad appropriates Mitchell’s categories of nesting and braiding and adapts them to the photo-text interrelation: in nesting, the image appearing in proximity of the text captures and drives the reader’s attention; in braiding, instead, the interplay of word and image gradually reveals itself in the process of reading and the reader is required to actively participate in the construction of meaning. Fjellestad then adds a third term, that of weaving, indicating a balanced presence of the two media, that keeps the reader’s attention focused both on the photographic image and the text. These three categories represent dominant tendencies in the photo-text relation, but also different degrees of intensity of interanimation between the visual and the linguistic medium. 144

¹⁴⁰Margaret Meek, “Children Reading Now,” in Morag Styles, Eve Bearne, and Victor Watson (Eds.), *After Alice: Exploring Children’s Literature*, (London: Cassell, 1992): 172-87, 177.

¹⁴¹ Danuta Fjellestad, “Nesting-Braiding-Weaving,” 199.

¹⁴² William J. T. Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media,” in *Journal of Visual Culture* 4.2: 257-266, 262.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴⁴ Danuta Fjellestad, “Nesting-Braiding-Weaving,” 198-199.

CHAPTER II:

THE DARK ROOM

Rachel Seiffert

2.1. Themes and Narrative Structure

In her debut novel, *The Dark Room* (2001), British novelist Rachel Seiffert¹ uses photography as a structural narrative device to explore Germany's traumatic past and the way different generations deal with it. The three distinct novella-length stories about Nazi Germany are presented in chronological order from the 1920s to the contemporary time, and focus each on a young character, who is portrayed through irregular glimpses of his thoughts and sketches of his knowledge of the world.

Like in a family album, each chapter carries the name of its young protagonists: Helmut, Lore and Micha. Helmut, exempted from military service due to a deformation of his arm, becomes a photo-reporter and experiences Berlin in the pre-war period and during World War II. Lore, instead, has to face the terrible evidence of concentration-camp pictures dispersed throughout Germany after the war, which seem to be related with her Nazi parents' imprisonment. In the last story, set in contemporary time, Micha tries to conciliate the memories of his grandfather, portrayed in the family snapshots as a loving man, with the revelation that he was a member of a Nazi *Sonderkommando*.

The explicit intermediality of the title, *The Dark Room*, already predicts the relevance of photography as a haunting evidence affecting the main characters and encourages, at the same time, a photographic reading of the

¹ Rachel Seiffert was born in Oxford in 1971, to an Australian father and a German mother. Even if she was brought up in England, she was raised bilingually and visited Germany regularly. Her work can be considered as part of that range of writers who were affected by the Holocaust as second- and third-generation writers.

novel.¹ The process of development implied in the title reveals the narrative progression of the three novels, starting from the total negation of reality, that is symbolised by the negative of the image, to the increasing awareness and final acceptance of it. As it is well described in “Helmut,” a “dark room” is the place where analogue photographs are technically developed: the dark cellar is not only the protagonist’s favourite place of work or a safe room where he can hide himself during the war, but it is also the setting of his epiphanic encounter with the images he has personally captured. In “Lore,” it becomes the obscure and shadowy world of lies linked to Lore’s family’s past, which the young girl desperately tries to survive to; in “Micha,” instead, the resulting development of photographs symbolises a new attitude of acceptance and reconciliation with the past. Moreover, as Pascale Tollance evidences, the dark room can also be viewed as “the book itself, a closed space producing images in a sparse, descriptive style that could be termed ‘photographic’.”²

In *The Dark Room* photographs are not tangibly present, but re-presented by means of narration, as a result of the ekphrastic capacity of the author and the figurative attitude of the reader to visualise them. The narration presents three categories of photographs: family snap-shots, documentary pictures and photos of Holocaust atrocities. The images described throughout the novel lead to the creation of an imaginative album, which traces the fundamental steps of its protagonists’ lives in the background of Germany during World War II. In this way, the interaction between text and mental images converge to the assimilation of one media into the other.

¹ 2001 is also the year of publication of *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald, one of the most influential German writers of Holocaust fiction. The protagonist of the story, Austerlitz, is an orphan of Holocaust with amnesia in search of knowledge about his past. Photographs are dispersed throughout the novel and their interaction with the text destabilizes the narrative, recreating traumatic experiences of the past related to the loss of family members and the realisation of the past traumatic events.

² Pascale Tollance, “Freezing Emotion: The Impersonality of ‘Photographic Writing’ in Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room*.” *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth Century British Literature*. Eds. Christine Reynier and Jean- Michel Ganteau. (Montpellier: Université Paul-Valéry-Montpellier III, 2005): 287-298, 289.

Photography recurs insistently throughout the novel as the main source of knowledge for each protagonist, but it always fails in the attempt of disclosing an objective and evident image of reality. As Petra Rau suggests: “Seiffert works precisely with the *limitations* of photography in the Nazi period, since this is a medium habitually entrusted with aiding our access to that past.”³ Indeed, pictures usually hide unpleasant truths and tend to mislead the actual state of reality. Seiffert, thus, evidences the dual nature of photography,⁴ whose transitory essence is well symbolised by the image of footprints in the snow proposed by Marianne Hirsch:

In spite of their evidential force and their material connection to an event that was there before the lens, photographs can be extremely frustrating, as fleeting in their certainty as footprints in the snow. They affirm the past’s existence, its “having-been-there”; yet, in their flat two-dimensionality, in the frustrating limitation of their frames, they also signal its insurmountable distance and unreality. What ultimately can we read as we read an image? Does it not, like the white picture of footprints in the snow, conceal as much as it reveals?⁵

In *The Dark Room*, photography is a blurred medium in which the essential is always obscure, hidden or absent. Photographs reveal as much as they hide and the spectator is led to react to what is not in the picture, that is a painful and obscure representation, that Ulrich Baer calls “spectral evidence.”⁶ Moreover, photographs are often missing, discarded or destroyed, reflecting the sense of failure raised by the protagonists’ attempt to find and understand the truth.

³ Petra Rau, “Beyond *Punctum* and *Studium*. Trauma and photography in Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room*,” *Journal of European Studies* 36.6 (2006): 295-325, 296.

⁴ Roland Barthes uses the expression of “photographic paradox” to indicate the coexistence of two competing messages in the photograph, that are the documentary evidence (denotation) and the rhetoric of the picture (connotation). As Rau evidences, in Holocaust pictures the dimension of connotation is usually more relevant and meaningful than that of denotation. Consequently, the spectator of such pictures tend to respond to something that is not visually evident in the picture, but that is out of the frame.

⁵ Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1, 2001: 5 – 37, 15.

⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, (London: The Mit Press, 2002). Roland Barthes has firstly introduced the term *Spectrum* to refer to the subject/object photographed. He calls it “the *Spectrum* of the Photograph because this word retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (2009: 9).

The fragmentary nature of photography is evoked through specific typographic and verbal techniques. Gaps and issues of meaning are representative features of the narration and the whole text, like a photo-album, consists of short paragraphs separated by blank spaces, whose quadrangular form recalls that of photographs, leading the reader in a continuous back-and-forth movement between the narrative fragments, that prevents the linear flow of narration. In this way, while leafing through the pages, the reader has the sensation of handling a photo-album, where each paragraph conveys a mental image of the story that is being told. The narrative text does not allude to photography only formally, but also on a verbal and semantic level. Its limited-perspective nature is revealed through the use of incomplete sentences and passages lacking descriptions and explanations. Consequently, the reader keeps oscillating between interpreting, misunderstanding and revising his own knowledge of history. As Pividori argues, *The Dark Room* can be regarded as belonging to the tradition of the *album aesthetics*,⁷ since the main characters are portrayed one after the other through irregular descriptions and glimpses of thoughts, while appearing and disappearing in the narration. Moreover, the three independent stories are connected by the presence of photography, that is presented in different forms and modes of interaction.

Photographs do not only trigger their viewers' past experiences and cultural memories, but also reveal secret and unacceptable truths, that inevitably affect the protagonists. The act of viewing is usually an epiphanic moment, that provokes an obsession for the truth and thus a longing for the past. Characters find themselves trapped between the knowledge provided by photographs in the present and the personal memory of the past. The linearity of the text is thus broken into narrative fragments, indirect interior monologues and interplays between memories, dreams and visual images.⁸

⁷ Cristina Pividori, "Out of the Dark Room: Photography and Memory in Rachel Seiffert's Holocaust Tales," *Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*. 30.2 (December 2008): 79-94, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

In Pividori's words, the text is "a gallery of portraits drawn with a strong resemblance in style and composition."⁹

The characters of *The Dark Room* all engage with traumatic historical events through the medium of photography, that has the potential to register more than what it is meant to denote.¹⁰ In *Spectral Evidence*, Ulrich Baer investigates the relation between photography and trauma, as two analogous mechanisms. He first relates to Caruth's trauma theory, according to which trauma is a disorder of memory and time:

"the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself— which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally— nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event. [...] The pathology consists, rather, solely in *the structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it."¹¹

Usually an event becomes an experience once it has been registered into consciousness; however, some peculiar occurrences are assimilated by the psyche without being integrated as part of an individual's consciousness and memory. Trauma imposes itself outside our cognition, as the result of the intrusion of overwhelming events into the psyche, which is incapable to edit and contextualise them, preventing the possibility to become part of one's lived experience.¹² Baer considers the model of trauma as a "reality imprint" because "it signals the presence of unresolved questions about the nature of experience" and juxtaposes it with photography's "illusion of reality."¹³

As Caruth states "to be traumatised is to be possessed precisely by an image or an event"¹⁴ and Baer, thus, evidences photography's capacity to provide an access to traumatic moments: "I read the photograph not as the parceling-out and preservation of time but as an access to another kind of

⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰ Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium," 297.

¹¹ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1995), 4.

¹² Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 10.

¹³ Ibid. 11.

¹⁴ Caruth, *Trauma*, 4.

experience that is explosive, instantaneous, distinct—a chance to see in a photograph not narrative, not history, but possibly trauma.”¹⁵ Photography and trauma are similar systems linked by their blocking function. The way trauma blocks ordinary mental processes from transforming an experience into memory, can be paralleled with the working principle of the photo-camera, that captures an event during its occurrence while blocking its conversion into memory.¹⁶ Consequently, photography becomes a fundamental tool for an engagement with traumatic historical events, since it can record moments or sights that are normally excluded from the individual’s consciousness or the photographer’s control.

When viewers are faced with photographs showing traumatic events, they have to respond to traces of experiences that bypassed memory and cognition. Such pictures, indeed, carry a “spectral, haunted kind of evidence” of the past, that cannot be achieved by other means:

They paradigmatically illustrate the complexity of photographs of trauma by showing aspects of experience that we believe to be true even though no one seems to remember them. As testimony of a past that remains alien even to those who cannot forget it, these slides bear witness to the gravity of an event that defies simplistic notions of remembrance and forgetting.¹⁷

Pictures of traumatic events cannot simply be seen and viewed, but require to be witnessed: viewers respond strongly to such images because they feel responsible for the first time for a past moment that has been omitted from time and memory.

By means of photography, the three protagonists of Seiffert’s novel become indirect witnesses of traumatic events related to the Holocaust and find themselves dealing with the spectral evidence carried by certain images. Seiffert’s characters react to what Rau calls a “spectral *punctum*,”¹⁸ that is a painful obscure presence triggering the viewer’s consciousness, but not

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁸ Rau, “Beyond Punctum and Studium,” 298.

visually present in the picture. In each story, indeed, photography provokes traumatic responses because of what is *not* in the picture: the crucial content of the medium is obscure, limited and absent. What permeates the image is the proof of a loss of subjectivity.¹⁹

2.2. Helmut: the photographic perspective

The Dark Room's first story, "Helmut," narrates the life of a young boy living in Berlin during the Nazi period. Born in Berlin in 1921 to parents who support the Nazi regime for economic reasons, Helmut starts working very soon as apprentice to photographer Gladigau. Due to a congenital physical deformity²⁰ at his right arm, Helmut is exempted from military service and becomes a meticulous witness and reporter of the events in Berlin in the early 1940s.

In this first story Seiffert evidences the nature of photographic evidence and the limited view of the photographer through the use of an impersonal descriptive style of narration. The role of photography as a technical instrument is introduced almost immediately, when Gladigau offers to realise a portrait of Helmut's family every six months, thus recording the quick growth of the young boy:

The family photos show a healthy boy, already quite tall, standing between his parents, both seated slightly in front of him. [...] His right arm rests on his mother's shoulder, and he is standing so that his left side favours the camera slightly. The combined effect is to minimise his lopsided chest, to mask the crooked hang of his arm. For three or four years the family adopts a similar pose, variations coming in the clothes, Helmut's height and the gradual greying of his father's beard. The family looks content, healthier, cheeks plumper than in previous years. For all the artful masking of a son's disability, they are relaxed. Still proud. Still a unit, gradually growing into a kind of prosperity.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 298.

²⁰ As already underlined by Rau, Helmut's physical malformation can be regarded as the trope for evidencing a moral deformity, that is similar to other fictional perpetrators, like Martin Amis's erotically incompetent doctor in *Time's Arrow* (1985), or Günter Grass's monstrous Oskar in *The Tin Tin Drum* (1959), or Bernhard Schlink's illiterate camp guard Hannah in *The Reader* (1995).

²¹ Rachel Seiffert, *The Dark Room*, (London: Vintage, 2002): 11. (Henceforth *TDR*).

Helmut has learned very soon how to pose in front of the camera in order to hide his malformation and guarantee the realisation of the perfect family portrait: his parents, indeed, prefer to look at their son as shown in such portraits as they find it difficult to accept his disability. The habit of taking family pictures regularly and remaining carefully posed is in line with a national ideology to which Helmut's family tries to conform, as a proof of evidence of wealth and pride in the German nation. Indeed, Helmut's family's political commitment is made explicit once the portrait of Hitler is hung together with the other family pictures: "Helmut's parents join the Party; the Führer joins the family portraits on the wall above the sofa" (TDR, 17).

In Seiffert's novel, the story of Helmut also takes the form of a short history of photography, which in a few years develops technically from black and white photos to colour prints and new methods of exposure. Moreover, it depicts its increasing social importance during war time, when the portrait becomes an important item of memory:

The war is not even two years old, but it reaches into every aspect of daily life. [...] In the family portraits which Helmut frames and wraps, there is often a woman in black. New babies are brought to the shop, the pictures to be sent to fathers at the front. And soldiers come in to leave a portrait behind for mothers, sisters or sweethearts to cherish. (TDR, 33)

Seiffert describes a society in a period of political changes, increasing mechanization and warfare, where photography, paraphrasing Sontag's words, becomes a necessary rite for a family to create a portable kit of images that could witness its apparent cohesion. In times of radical changes, indeed, a family's photograph is usually the only thing that remains of it, as a "ghostly trace" that "supplies the token presence of the dispersed relatives."²²

As soon as the war begins, Helmut gets a full-time job with photographer Gladigau and starts capturing the evolution of the city through the photo camera. Helmut notices that his neighbourhood is rapidly getting emptier: "there are plenty of young men here, all willing to die for *Führer* and

²² Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York : Rosetta Books, 2005), 5-6.

Vaterland [...] Helmut still counts himself among them, aches and yearns for uniform, active service, *Kamaraden*. But he knows, he knows, because of his arm, his fault, his flaw, he is left behind, while everyone else moves on.” (TDR, 29). Photography becomes Helmut’s instrument for participating in the military society he has been excluded from and for registering the movements and the changes of the city:

Helmut’s project has moved out of the station and into the city beyond: not just photographing, but also counting, cataloguing, monitoring. Any street with no people on it is noted in one column; streets with between one and ten people in another; between eleven and twenty in another; and any street with more than twenty people is photographed, and the tallied from the print (TDR, 34).

Not only does he experiment and regularly take pictures of the streets, the crowds and railway stations, but he also meticulously records on his notebook arrivals and departures of trains. As time goes by, Helmut notices the city is emptying and has the sensation of documenting a proper *exodus*, but he does never really elaborate or ask himself what is happening in political terms. The narrator uses objective and vivid descriptions of what appears in front of Helmut’s camera, but such accounts completely lack any moral understanding. Helmut’s attitude towards History is made clear the morning after the infamous *Krystallnacht*²³ in 1938: when the young boy notices the pavements of the station covered with glittering glasses, he just “takes his keys, finds a broom and sweeps without saying a word” (TDR, 14). The narrator does not explicitly mention the name of the historical event and the reader is obliged to infer it from his personal knowledge, experiencing, in this way, the limited awareness of someone looking through the viewfinder of the camera. If, on the one hand, Helmut lacks today’s consciousness of the time he’s living in, on the other he chooses to stay in his own ‘dark room.’ Aware that things around him are actually strange, he does not ask for any

²³ The so called “*Krystallnacht*” (Crystal-night), which took place in the night between 9 and 10 November 1938, was a violent action of annihilation carried out by the SA forces together with German civilians against the Jews throughout Germany. The name *Krystallnacht* is related to the residues of broken glass that covered the streets after Jewish-owned stores, synagogues and other buildings had their windows smashed.

explanation or meaning of the events, but, instead, he is appreciated by the guards for his silent assent to violence. Then, he keeps doing what he feels the only appropriate thing to do: recording through the camera.

Like the protagonist of Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1935), Helmut turns himself into "a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."²⁴ In the same way as in Isherwood's novel the camera serves as a protective mask for an English artist alone in a foreign country, in Seiffert's story it also protects Helmut, a vulnerable character exposed to the fear of being marginalized by Berliner society. Indeed, Helmut places himself in the role of a detached observer, as if he intends to deliberately hide his own identity behind the lenses, which become the only perspective he adopts. Indeed, photographs do not only represent the protagonist's experience, but they are his only reality. In this way the reader actually perceives Helmut's experience of the world through the viewfinder, which is verbally expressed in a highly photographic style.

In contrast to the other two stories, the author does not provide Helmut with any voice, as he is exclusively presented through a third person external narration. Seiffert approaches reality by describing it objectively, providing a series of vivid and detached images, as if herself was behind the lenses. The highly descriptive mode employed by the narrator contributes to the constitution of a verbal photographic style, which places the reader behind the camera together with Helmut. Such technique not only evidences Helmut's attitude and lack of empathy towards the events, but it also underlines the more general inability to cope with such an unpleasant and threatening reality. In this way the reader's attention is driven to fill in the gaps left by the protagonist, who is incapable of understanding, by providing insights into the missing moral and emotional significance of the scene.²⁵

Helmut's lack of understanding and sensibility about what happens around him seems to confirm Susan Sontag's argument on the limited ability of photography to trigger a moral impulse towards the events: "What

²⁴ Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Novels*, (London: Vintage, 1999), 243.

²⁵ Pividori, "Out of the Dark Room," 83.

determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow.”²⁶ In Helmut’s case, the great ability of using the camera to document historical changes is not driven by any political consciousness, but from a compensation mechanism to fit within the society and please people around him by doing something excellently. As Zeitlin affirms: “Helmut’s patriotism is born not out of conviction, but as a desire to affirm an identity he cannot fully claim.”²⁷ Photography becomes Helmut’s instrument to create his space in society, but also a screen to hide himself and his fragmented personality.

One day Helmut unintentionally witnesses a brutal episode of deportation of gypsies forced into a train by SS agents:

There are trucks and uniformed men shouting and pushing. There are a hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty people, some milling, some striding, some standing still. Helmut crouches behind a low wall and begins to take pictures. Through the lens he sees possessions scattered: clothes, pots, boxes, sacks kicked and hurled across the muddy ground. An officer stands by screaming order.

[...]

The gypsies are divided and loaded into the trucks. They shout back at the men in uniform, gold teeth barred. Children cry on their mother’s hips and hide beneath their wide bright skirts. Girls bite the soldiers’ hands as they pull the jewels from their ears and hair.

(TDR, 36-37)

Seiffert adopts a highly descriptive narrative style to depict the objective image of what Helmut happens to observe, which is never judged nor commented by either the protagonist or the narrating voice. Instead of the dynamic narration of a scene of violence, which would usually evoke an emotional involvement, the narrator endorses a cold and static photographic vision, no matter how cruel it is. Furthermore, Seiffert applies to the text

²⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

²⁷ Froma Zeitlin, “Imaginary Tales in the Land of the Perpetrators,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5.2, July 2006: 213-228, 216.

some of the photographic techniques Walter Benjamin refers to,²⁸ like enlargements and movements of zooming, which literally permit to broaden and constraint the characters' perception. For example, besides providing a broad picture of the gipsy's deportation, she repeatedly focuses on specific human beings, such as the girls biting the soldiers' hands or the unconscious woman, and also on specific parts of their bodies: "gold teeth," "ears," "hips" or "hands." This movement of 'zooming in' evokes the camera's ability to freeze specific actions, that, combined with the highly descriptive mode, contribute to the realisation of a static and detached 'picture' of the scene. Consequently, the reader has more the sensation of looking at a photograph than reading a text.

In front of this scene of violence, Helmut gets very nervous and reacts by taking as many pictures as he can, reducing the camera into a protective screen to such dramatic moments: "Helmut is afraid, exhilarated. His hands sweat and shake. He clicks and winds on and clicks again, photographing as quickly as the camera will allow: not quick enough. He reloads, curses his fingers, feeble and damp, fumbles and struggles with the focus." (TDR, 37) For the first time Helmut is somehow moved from his behind-the-camera perspective and feels vulnerable, reaching the climatic point of tension when he crosses the gaze of a gipsy being deported: "In the viewfinder his eyes meet the eyes of a shouting, pointing gypsy. Others turn to look, frightened angry faces in headscarves, hats and in uniform too. Helmut's heart contracts." (TDR, 37-8) At this point the German photographer has to escape from the scene. This moment explicitly illustrates Sontag's statement that "photography is essentially an act of non-intervention," where part of the horror is determined "in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene."²⁹

²⁸ Walter Benjamin [1931]: he emphasises the way photography permits a deeper knowledge "with its time-lapses, enlargements, etc."

²⁹ Sonntag, "On Photography," 8.

Until that moment, Helmut's photographic approach has always been devoted to the achievement of the perfect picture, based on established technical parameters. In barthesian terms, he focuses on the *studium* of the picture, that is the interest for the general composition of the image, which also implies the range of cultural meanings that any spectator can infer from it. The *punctum*,³⁰ on the other hand, is a detail that unexpectedly attracts the gaze of the viewer and wounds him, it is very subjective and transcends language. During the episode of the gypsies' deportation, the *punctum* is represented by the gaze of a gypsy girl who notices Helmut and indicates him, not only revealing his hidden presence to the Nazi guards, but also implicitly denouncing his missed intervention during a dramatic circumstance. In this inversion of the gaze's movement, where the photographer becomes the object under examination, the traumatic effect on Helmut is manifested through the physical refusal of what he has witnessed. When Helmut returns to the studio and develops his films in the dark room, he gets disappointed finding out that the photos are too grainy and blurred and do not convey what he actually observed that day:

The bright skirts of the gypsy women are just drab rags in his photos [...] The dark SS uniforms blend into the soot-black walls of the buildings making them almost invisible [...] He blows up the image, but the grain evens out the angry lines on the face of the officer who was screaming orders by the jeep, and he barely looks like he is shouting. (TDR, 40)

Helmut tries to give himself a series of aesthetic explanations that could justify the missing match between the images impressed in his memory and those physically printed, like the difficult conditions for shooting, but also the technical inadequacy of the medium. Helmut is more affected by his technical incompetence than by the episode of deportation he has witnessed, revealing that photographs represent his only reality, the one he has failed to capture.³¹ Moreover, he finds that what was most important to him is missing:

³⁰ In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines the *punctum* as "an element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow."

³¹ Rau, "Beyond *Punctum and Studium*," 300.

Helmut searches and searches, but the shot of the gipsy looking into his lens, pointing and shouting, the shot which scared him into running away, is not amongst the photos. Nor is it among the negatives[...] Finally, he reasons with himself. Got to the end of the film and didn't know. Panicked. Ran away before the shutter released. Coward. [...] He knows he should keep the pictures for Gladigau, show how he made use of his time, but he is ashamed. On his way home across the back yard, in the dark, Helmut throws the bag and its hated contents into the bin. (TDR, 41).

The picture of the gipsy who looked into his eyes, revealing his silent complicity with the Nazi regime, does not exist. The *punctum* that struck him so intensely to lead him to escape terrified, has not been registered. Deeply disappointed, Helmut decides to throw away both the negatives and the prints.

With this episode, Seiffert criticises photographic perception and demonstrates its actual incapacity of conveying an objective and qualitative resemblance of reality. As Pividori asserts: "she makes his character a victim of the *seen*,"³² since Helmut is left only with scattered fragments of his visual experience and is not able to materially reconstruct it. While photographing, Helmut struggles to record not only what he sees, but also how it feels. The final prints demonstrate photography's limited capacity of representing history and, above all, of providing a response to it. Indeed, the protagonist's missed photographs indicate the actual temporal disjunction between the moment a picture is taken, and is thus influenced by intense emotions, and the moment it is developed, with its consequent response. Such temporal delay, as Hirsch asserts, is "no less enormous within the very brief time frame of the scene in the narrative (no more than several hours) than it is for second-generation viewers like us."³³

Helmut's technical ability for documentary photography does not prevent him from discarding pictures that might have been important historical documents in the reconstruction of historical facts. At his eyes, indeed, they are just failed reproductions of his reality. The protagonist's lack of any

³² Pividori, "Out of the Dark Room," 83.

³³ Marianne Hirsch, "What's Wrong With this Picture?," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 239.

historical and ethical consciousness demonstrates the fragmentary and arbitrary nature of pictures, whose meaning changes according to the context where they are seen.³⁴ As Sontag claims in "The Heroism of Vision," photographs can have, but often do not have an emotional impact on the spectator: "photographs can and do distress. But the aestheticising tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it."³⁵ Despite being a direct witness of every-day-life in Berlin during the Holocaust, Helmut does not have the historical perspective to realise the magnitude of what he experiences. Such position collides with the reader's awareness of the facts, who is given the task of interpreting and making his own observations on the character and on what he fails to comprehend.

Helmut's lack of knowledge can be discussed as part of the "*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*"-attitude, that the first generation of Germans adopted in the post-war period to reply to the accuses of being collectively guilty. Such astonishing position is well exemplified in the character of Helmut, who loses any chance of dialogue with other spectators when he decides to destroy all the pictures of the gypsy deportation, and seems to deliberately ignore any other situation that could lead him to knowledge. The reader follows him until the end of the story hoping and waiting for an illuminating moment, which however never comes. Indeed, every hope in this sense is abandoned at the end, when Helmut, despite the imminent falling of the Reich, is still "confident of victory" and determined "to remember it all, the best time of his life." Thus, he decides to take a group picture of himself and some other left *comrades*. He is so enthusiastic that "he is doing something which he never did in any of the many pictures lovingly printed by Gadigau over the course of his childhood. Helmut is standing high on his rubble mountain, over which Soviet tanks will roll with ease: he is smiling." (63) Helmut's final smile not only denotes his ignorance and lack of consciousness, but also interrogates

³⁴ Sontag, "The Heroism of Vision," 91.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

the position of the broader first-generation of Germans who witnessed the events, leaving a frightening sense of helplessness.

As Zeitlin affirms, Helmut is an “uncomprehending witness to the world that has largely excluded him”³⁶ and symbolises the first step of the progressive growth of moral awareness that has taken place starting from the post-war denial to the contemporary quest for truth and responsibility. While Helmut reflects on the initial lack of awareness, the protagonist of the second story, Lore, represents the delicate and painful passage between the fall of innocence and the initial confusion of someone who starts to comprehend, although never entirely, the extent of what has happened during the war period.

2.3. Lore: the optical aperture

The second story, “Lore,” starts when “Helmut” ends, in early 1945 and depicts post-war Germany as seen through the eyes of a young adolescent, Lore. When her Nazi parents get captured by the Allies, she undertakes a long and dangerous journey through Germany, together with her younger siblings, to reach her grandmother in Hamburg. During the voyage, Lore progressively loses her childish innocence and acquires some awareness about her frightening family’s past and the horrors of war. In Zeitlin’s words: “her journey is a progressive initiation into uncertainty, moral confusion and an irretrievable loss of innocence.”³⁷ Photography plays a crucial role in Lore’s crisis of identity, since she happens to observe family snapshots and Holocaust pictures, which lead her to question her origins and search for the truth. Differently from “Helmut,” that is concerned with the photographer’s moral gaze and the effective production of photographs during the war, “Lore” is about the effects of photography on the audience and the way the protagonist reacts to incriminating pictures.

³⁶ Zeitlin, “Imaginary Tales,” 221.

³⁷ Ibid., 222.

One night during the last months of the war, Lore's father, a Nazi officer, secures his family into a farm away from the city. In such an uncertain period, Lore's mother decides to eliminate all the incriminating proofs regarding their political commitment to the Nazi Party. Besides books, badges and uniforms, *Mutti* also includes the family photo album, as a proof of evidence of the past that needs to be burnt. However, before lighting the fire on the table, she saves some of the pictures: "Lore stocks the stove from the piles on the table and watches *Mutti* sorting through the photo album. She pulls out the pictures too precious to lose, slipping them gently out of their white corner fastenings, lining them up on the quilt next to her." (TDR, 76). Those pictures epitomise much more than innocent family snapshots, as they document their engagement with Nazism.

Lore's incapacity to understand the situation is not only due to her age, as she is only twelve years old, but also to the fact that her parents try to hide the truth from her. Even if she and her family have to flee the city, she believes in her parents' words, according to which the war will be won soon: "*Over soon. You will see. Months fall by and nothing changes. She does her chores, adjusts herself to the waiting, the war will be won soon. Only a matter of time.*" (70) The narrator uses italics to indicate the comforting, but devious words told to Lore, that she keeps repeating herself.

Lore's beliefs about her family are strained when *Mutti* sends her to a stream to throw away the metal swastika badges that did not burn. Lore does not question her mother's command and just accomplishes it, deciding to bury them under a bush because they would be too visible in the water. Even if unaware of the reason why she must eliminate her family history, Lore has the feeling that being a German daughter of Nazi parents is somehow wrong. This feeling is progressively strengthened by other people and situations, like the farm boy who pushes Lore calling her *Mutti* a "Nazi whore mother" (85) and insinuating she will be soon imprisoned.

Lore struggles between a growing uncanny feeling that her family has done something wrong and the comforting words of her mother. When *Mutti* announces she has to leave and tells her daughter to accompany her siblings

to her grandmother's house in Hamburg, Lore asks her if she is going to prison, but the mother replies she is going to a camp and not a prison, because "prisons are for criminals." (89) When Lore starts her long journey to reach Hamburg, she has to comfort her own mind: "*The war is lost. The Americans have camps, not prisons. For people like Mutti who haven't committed crimes.*"(90) Italics are used once again by the narrator to indicate the reassuring words of Lore's mother, that she keeps repeating herself in an act of self-conviction. Before leaving for Hamburg, Lore looks through the photos which Mutti didn't burn, searching for some sense of continuity in a world that has totally changed: "But the pictures she finds are more confusing than comforting. All taken long ago, long before the war. They don't look like her father; more like an older brother; an anonymous young man in civilian clothes." (89)

On her journey to Hamburg, while wandering into a town looking for food, Lore is confronted, for the first time, with a new kind of images. She notices a group of people silently gathered around a tree to which some photographs have been glued:

Large, blurry photos have been stuck on to a long plank and nailed to the trunk. The group stands a pace back in silence, an orderly distance. In front of Lore is a picture of a rubbish heap, or it might be ashes. She leans in closer, thinks it could be shoes. Below each of the photos is a place name. One of them sounds German, but the other two don't. All unfamiliar. The glue under the photos is still wet, the paper is wrinkled, and the images confusing. Lore squints, frustrated, hot in the silent crush. (TDR, 102)

Lore finds herself in front of a series of posters, publicly displayed by the Allies in a post-war campaign to instruct civilians about the horrors and atrocities committed in concentration camps. Like Helmut, Lore is incapable of interpreting the images she happens to observe, which appear "unfamiliar" at her eyes. In her personal process of interpretation, the blurry and confusing images assume different forms and meanings, depicting initially a rubbish pile, then ashes and, later, shoes. Such shapeless forms do not convey any human trait, but rather symbolise the actual process of de-humanisation

inflicted to the victims of concentration camps. The reader is initially disoriented by Lore's reading process, whose misinterpretation of the images is the result of an innocent gaze put in a non-contextualised situation.

After different attempts at investigating the confused content of the images, Lore seems to have focalised a definite subject:

The pictures are of skeletons. Lore can see that now, pulling her hands back, tugging her sleeves down over her glue-damp palms. Hundreds of skeletons: hips and arms and skulls in tangles. Some lying in an open railroad car, others in a shallow depression in the ground. Lore holds her breath, looks away, sees the next picture: hair and skin and breasts. She takes a step back, trapped by the wall of the crowd. People. Lying naked in rows. Skin thin as paper over bone. Dead people in piles with no clothes on. (TDR, 103)

At this point, the reader evidently recognises concentration camps pictures. Those images were publicly displayed for the first time in front of thousands of people right after the war, as part of a campaign aimed at inducing collective guilt in Germany. Photographs showing skeletal prisoners or dead bodies in the camps were taken by the Allies and their existence was something new, whose vision provoked a profound shock as they revealed a horrifying reality.

Even if unaware of the real significance of the images, Lore is unconsciously shocked by their emotional force, which will gradually lead her to feel guilty for her inherited past. Lore's response can be easily compared to the "negative epiphany" described by Susan Sontag when faced, for the first time, with photographs of Holocaust atrocities:

One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen - in photographs or in real life - ever catch me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, It seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. [...] when I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt

irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feeling started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.³⁸

To twelve-year old Sontag, the act of viewing Holocaust-related pictures constitutes such a traumatic event, that it irremediably shapes her personal emotional history into a before and an after that moment. Like Lore, young Sontag has no historical knowledge to contextualise those photographs, but their emotional impact is so deep, that they become a milestone of her human experience.³⁹ In Barthesian terms, both young girls accidentally experience the encounter with a painful photographic *punctum*, which cannot be explained for its spectral quality, but gets anyway interiorised. Indeed, as Barthes affirms: “The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.”⁴⁰

Lore’s knowledge of her family and the world around her is irremediably marked by the visual experience of the concentration camps’ photographs, which provokes a disruptive personal response. Even if inexplicable and confusing, such pictures carry Baer’s “spectral evidence,” as the represented atrocities are somehow related to her past and family. Lore’s initial confusion about the meaning of the pictures turns into a crisis of identity that will affect her from that moment onward, leading not only to an uncanny, growing sense of guilt, but also to a delay in understanding.

At one point of the journey, Lore meets Tomas, a mysterious young boy who claims to be a survivor of Buchenwald camp. He accompanies Lore and her siblings during their journey to Hamburg and providentially helps them to pass through different checkpoints by repeatedly showing the Allies the documents of a Jew dead in a camp. Tomas’ stolen identity is related to the photograph of the Jew he resembles and then it remains unclear who he really is, as he eventually disappears. In contrast to Lore’s family pictures, that need to be destroyed because what they reveal could lead her to death, a

³⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*, 16.

³⁹ Rau, “Beyond Punctum and Studium,” 306.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida- Reflections on Photography*, Trad: Richard Howard, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 51.

photograph of a Jew hiding someone's identity helps her and her siblings to make their way into safety.

Lore's old photographs of her family become a disturbing element, that seem to reflect an unknown sense of guilt she cannot rationalise. In Fuchs' words, these "affective memory icons are [now] invested with the affected imprints of a traumatic historical experience."⁴¹ Indeed, when Lore looks at the family snapshots with the hope of feeling relieved by the view of her parents, she just gets more confused and detached, as they don't depict anymore what she used to remember. On the contrary, they progressively acquire a threatening and painful meaning and become as incriminating as the posters of concentration camps displayed by the Allies. Aware that such pictures carry an unidentified but dangerous truth, Lore decides, during her journey to Hamburg, to get rid of them: "[S]he pulls the photos of Vati from her bag and slips out in the trees behind the barn. She digs a hole with her fingers and buries them as deeply as she can, pressing the heavy soil down firmly with her heels [...] After that, she runs around the trees to confuse her tracks." (TDR, 102-103) The elimination of a family album implies, according to Fuchs, "the loss of the only iconic record that would have the power to authenticate and construct her family's existence before its extinction."⁴² The extreme gesture of Lore denotes the urgency to reject both her family identity and the scary truth of her past. The wish for memory denial, that will be Lore's only hope at the end of the novel, is a reaction to the impossibility to cope with traumatic memories.⁴³

People around Lore seem willing to hide the shocking contents of the new reported photographs. Two elderly ladies, indeed, take her away from the view of the images affirming that "there is nothing here for you to see" (104). On another occasion, Lore overhears a conversation between two boys discussing whether the Allies' photographs of the camps are authentic or not.

⁴¹ Anne Fuchs, "From Vergangenheitsbewältigung to Generational Memory Contests in Günter Grass, Monika Maron und Uwe Timm," *German Life and Letters* 59.2 (2006): 169-186, 184.

⁴² Fuchs, "From Vergangenheitsbewältigung to Generational Memory," 185.

⁴³ Pividori, "Out of the Dark Room," 91.

She then intervenes telling them she has seen the pictures as well and thought that the depicted people were actually dead. One of the boys reassures her affirming that the low quality of the pictures proves they are fake attempts of the Allies' propaganda: "It's all set-up. Pictures are always out of focus, aren't they. Or dark, or grainy. Anything to make them unclear. And the people in those photos are actors. The Americans have staged it all, maybe the Russians helped them, who knows" (175). Since those pictures challenge everything Lore believes of her parents, it is much easier for her to deny their evidence and accept the more comforting theory of conspiracy, according to which the pictures are fakes used to denigrate the Germans.

The attitude of rejecting the objective evidence conveyed through photography is, according to Sontag, a constant of west cultural history:

Images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera. To photographic corroboration of the atrocities committed by one's own side, the standard response is that the pictures are a fabrication, that no such atrocity ever took place.⁴⁴

One of the paradoxes of photography is that its documentary evidence is mistrusted when reality seems to defy belief. By the end of WWII, photography was the most powerful instrument used to prove the indisputable evidence of what had happened in concentration camps. The considerable amount of images, both professional and amateur, of the camps denotes the astonishment of the photographer's gaze and the subsequent urgency to bear witness. As Rau reports, when American photographer Lee Miller shot pictures of the liberation of Dachau for *Life* magazine, he sent them to the editor together with a note: 'I implore you to believe this is true.' This message reveals how the photographer herself seemed to be aware that the pictures lacked evidence. The liberation images, thus, did not only document the historical events, but also embodied the traumatic experience of the photographers.⁴⁵ The Allied campaign to reveal German civilians the

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003): 11-12.

⁴⁵ Rau, 303-4.

atrocities committed during the war was part of a program of re-education, but the exposure to such images was clearly not enough to provide an adequate explanation of the complexity of the events.⁴⁶ Through the character of Lore, Seiffert well evidences how the exposure to an image representing atrocities is not enough to comprehend reality, but rather provokes a struggling and confusing response.

One day, after Lore has finally reached her grandmother in Hamburg, she hears two women on a tram discussing about some photographs on the journal similar to those she had seen during her journey. When Lore tells them that the depicted people are American actors, one of the women finally tells her the truth, affirming they are Jews killed with “gas and guns” by SS, SA and Gestapo. Then, she shows Lore the photos of the Nazis on the newspaper, affirming that “they were bad men and they are in prison now, where bad men belong” (102). The two women argue about what it is appropriate for the young girl to know, concluding that the Americans will anyway teach it at school. When the two women leave, Lore takes the newspaper, barely looks at the camp pictures and lingers on the portraits of the Nazis: “Lore turns the pages quickly past the skeleton people to the portraits. She looks closely at the clothes, the eyes, noses and jawlines. Some wear Vati’s uniform, none have Vati’s face.” (203) The narrator does not reveal what is Lore’s direct response to this episode, but it is clear that she is finally looking for the truth, seeking her father in the newspaper between the Nazi officers, in the attempt to rationalise an incomprehensible reality through the prism of her family. Lore is trying to infer what is the relation between her personal family snapshots, the Allied liberation posters and the newspaper images of Nazi generals: by themselves, none of them would provide a sufficient image of the complexity of the historical situation. However, each of them increasingly acquires significance from the others, achieving its spectral *punctum*, in the sense that, according to Rau, “each

⁴⁶ Ibid., 304.

photograph can only mean something if it also relates to something that it does not actually denote but which is at the same time a loss."⁴⁷

Even after Lore is told the truth about the concentration camps and its perpetrators, she cannot properly assimilate what she has seen until the end: logic seems not enough to fully comprehend the pictures she has been faced with, although she has the strong, frightening sensation they are much more connected to her personal past than what she could imagine. Her initial lack of awareness about the facts turns first into horror, then denial, and finally to a partial realisation of her father's position. Nonetheless, her trauma-experience never evolves into an effective comprehension of the facts, but keeps oscillating between a state of fear, disorientation and thirst for knowledge.⁴⁸

When, after a few days, Lore asks her grandmother why her parents are in prison, she answers by saying "They did nothing wrong [...] Everything has changed, Lore. But your father is still a good man" (211). Oma's comforting words do not appear in italics like those spoken by her parents at the beginning, implying that Lore is finally stepping out of her childish innocence and cannot accept them as true anymore.

At the end of the novel, Lore displays her own image of hope for the future:

She looks forward when there will be no more ruins, only new houses, and she won't remember any more of how it was before. She stands on her own and the wind claws her skin, tears through her clothes. Lore doesn't look down at the water, faces the far shore ahead. [...]
Lore hears and tastes and feels only air. Her eyes are closed, seeing nothing, streaming brittle tears. (217)

Lore wishes that every visible reminder of the war, and its memory too, could be cleansed by the wind. Her hope for the future seems to be a state of oblivion symbolised by clean streets and new houses. However, the childish wish to forget everything is coupled with the painful knowledge of the horrors lying in front of her: "the far shore ahead." The arduous way to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 305.

⁴⁸ Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium," 305.

acceptance is the most painful and frightening one and Lore's final bitter tears seem to represent the first step in the long way to reconciliation with the past.

In "Helmut" and "Lore," the narrator closely follows the point of view of two young and deeply involved German witnesses, whose responses to the historical events are defined through the traumatic act of seeing. The encounter with incriminating photographs is initially felt only on the irrational sphere, and only later, in Lore's case, on the cognitive one. Images progressively acquire meaning, but the protagonists' personal knowledge remains limited and fragmentary, as if blocked by their own consciousness. While Helmut ignores the importance of photographic evidence and Lore wishes she could forget her traumatic discoveries, Micha, the protagonist of the third story, is instead obsessed with the past and longs to find out the truth about her grandfather.

2.4. *Micha: the photographic development*

The Dark Room's third story, "Micha," is set in contemporary times and focuses on Michael Lehner, a school teacher of English in his thirties, who becomes obsessed with his grandfather's war history when he finds out that he was a Waffen-SS officer. Michael's painful research into his Opa's past develops within a family unwilling to collaborate, where the unspoken things must remain hidden. Photography is again a key motif, as Micha's only resource to explore and find out more about his grandfather's hidden story in the war context.

Family photographs, in particular, become a link not only between family and national history, but also the main tool through which he tries to reconcile his familial identity with the Holocaust images found on books.

Like the protagonists of the previous stories, Micha has inherited, and is thus affected by, the spectre of the Holocaust perpetrators.⁴⁹ However, his quest for knowledge sets him apart from the first two figures, as he is a teacher who knows the Holocaust's history through his education and, as a member of the third generation is positioned at a certain historical distance from it. The figure of Micha resembles, for different aspects, writer Rachel Seiffert. Even if she was born and raised in Britain, she was bullied for her German origins and occasionally called a "Nazi." Like Micha, Seiffert feels the weight of the past, as she herself has inherited part of the guilt related to the crimes committed by the Germans during World War II. In an interview she affirms that "being German is not quite right and I still have that feeling... The Holocaust was such an appalling crime, still within living memory, and it can't help but resonate... it's unfortunate for people who were not alive at the time, but it is still a part of their lives." Moreover, she finds surprising that: "there isn't more German literature about the war [...] because Germans take that period of history extremely seriously. I come across many people outside Germany who perceive it as a silent nation who can't deal with the past. I think it's the opposite."⁵⁰

As a member of the third generation, Micha can only witness the photographs of his family and the documentary images found on books and visual archives, that lead him to a frustrating sense of guilt and confusion. Referring to *The Dark Room* as an example of postmemory, Hirsch affirms:

[T]he third-generation retrospective witness is left only with the ambiguous evidence carried by the photographs he inherited, and onto which he projects his own anxieties, needs and desires—feelings disproportionate to what the pictures can, in fact, support. The truth about the past always seems to lie somewhere else, just beyond the frame. At most, the photographs can gesture toward that elsewhere, and be powerful conduits between what was

⁴⁹ In an article published in 2006, Froma I. Zeitlin evidences the rise of a new trend in Holocaust literature, that she refers to as "imaginary tales in the land of perpetrators." In the last years, fictional literature has shifted its attention from the victims of the Holocaust to its victimisers, as well as to average Germans. One example is represented by Martin Amis' *Time Arrow*. In *The Dark Room* none of the three protagonists commits atrocities, but each of them is affected by the inheritance of the crimes committed by the perpetrators of their families.

⁵⁰ Susanna Rustin, "On Their Marks," review of Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*, Financial Times (London edn.), 13 October 2001, 4.

then and what is now. A question thus emerges: Can this type of ambiguous but affective evidence—what Ann Cvetkovich has termed “an archive of feeling”—be mined as a resource by historians seeking to grasp and transmit the past’s emotional truth⁵¹

During a conversation with his grandmother about the family’s history, Micha notices there is an unexplained absence throughout the years of war, since his mother and his uncle were born many years apart. Oma Kaethe innocently reveals to him that “Opa came back New Year 1954. He was a *Waffen* SS, you see,” as if he knew it already. Until that moment Micha had no idea that his grandfather, Askan Boell, had been a member of the SS elite military force and when he tries to know something more, his family responds with silence and indifference. When, for instance, he tries to talk to his mother about her father’s actions, she replies: “How can you know? He was my Papa[...] he wasn’t capable.” (TDR, 297) In another occasion, he shows his elder sister some images that, according to him, should prove Askan’s being a Nazi killer, but to her they do not provide the same meaning, as she insists that: “They don’t show anything, the pictures. They’re family shots, you know? Celebrations, always happy. You can’t see anything” “He always looked away from the camera, though. Did you notice that? After the war?” (TDR, 302). Micha realises that in his family there are unspoken things supposed to be known, so that they can remain tacit. Indeed, the two preceding generations choose to remember Askan as the loving husband and father depicted in the family album, refusing to consider his involvement in the Nazi regime. This fact leads him to distance himself from his family: he stops visiting his grandmother and has vivid discussions with his sister and his pregnant wife, Mina.

Micha becomes obsessed with finding out the truth about the extent of his grandfather’s implication with Nazism and starts a meticulous research in libraries, visual archives and war crimes databases, hoping to spot Askan’s face somewhere. However, Micha fails in his attempt: the disturbing images of the Holocaust he is faced with do not help him, since they “conceal as much

⁵¹ Hirsch and Spitzer, “What’s Wrong with this Picture,” 241.

as [they] reveal,” and even if they provide evidence of the past, they simultaneously present “only a partial, and thus perhaps a misleading, knowledge about the past.”⁵² In Micha’s case, indeed, this becomes evident when he confronts some pictures and videos representing Hitler as a kind man surrounded by his family, and thus concealing his obscure side, with some of his private album snapshots.

Micha conserves two photographs of himself with Opa Askan:

The first one is black and white, taken when Michael was a baby. [...] He has one baby hand held up to his grandfather’s face, and Opa smiles back at him, eyebrows raised. It is supposed to be a formal portrait, but Opa has forgotten about the photographer. [...]

The second photo was taken just before Michael started school. *Just before Opa died.* This one is in colour, taken at a family dinner, with Opa in shirtsleeves and Michael in pyjamas, orange and blue. *It was time for bed. I was sent down to say good night, and Opa let me stay.* In this photo, Michel sits on Opa’s lap, legs dangling, smiling into the lens. Behind them, his uncle Bernd is laughing, facing the camera, wineglass raised. Opa has his hands folded across Michael’s tummy and is smiling, too, but not at the lens. He is looking only at the boy on his lap; his food and wine abandoned on the table, the photographer forgotten again.

(TDR, 233-234)

Micha has only good memories of his grandfather and what he likes most of the pictures with him is that he seems to have eyes only for his grandson, as if he had forgotten the presence of the photographer in front of him. The personal and emotional meaning conferred to Opa’s gaze in the family album is totally redefined when Micha, during his scrupulous research into visual archives, finds a film footage of the Führer at a Christmas party:

A Christmas party, probably early in the war. At Hitler’s mountain home, and everyone there: Göring, Speer, Bormann, all their wives and children. The footage is black and white, shot inside, but sickled with dust that look like snow. Adolf Hitler sits among the children, and they look around at the camera and smile. Four and five and six year olds; shy and uncertain in lederhosen and dirndl skirts. But they also smile at him, at Hitler, and talk. It is silent, so Micha doesn’t know what the children say, but he can see that they aren’t afraid. They like him. One girl comes running into frame to tell him something, and he raises his eyebrows, open-faced and all ears while she speaks. Godfather and

⁵² Hirsch, “Surviving Images:” 15.

favourite uncle, with soft eyes and smiles. Who doesn't look at the camera, only at the child. (259)

Micha notices that none of the children surrounding Hitler is afraid of his presence, but, instead, they even seem to like him. The Führer appears as a loving uncle, whose eyes are only for the child in front of him and never looks at the camera, just like his Opa did with him. Such coincidence strikes and hurts Micha, who interprets it as an evidence of guilt, which considerably changes the way he sees his grandfather. The same pictures that once made Micha proud of him start to assume meanings going far beyond their instant evidence: indeed, his quest for the truth culminates in the identification of Askan's elusive gaze in front of the camera with that of Hitler, as a proof of their culpability.

Photographs representing tender and lovely relatives with their grandchildren turn out to be images of guilty war criminals, responsible for the death of thousands of people. As Rau affirms: "any spectral *punctum* is retroactively constructed through the *studium*," in the sense that when confronted with certain photographs "we respond to what the images do not show but interpret what we see via our imported extraneous knowledge."⁵³ This is what happens to Micha, who is deeply struck by some innocent family snapshots rather than any other cruel and violent image of the Holocaust found during his archival researches. Finding out whether his Opa was a war criminal, and to which extent, is fundamental to his personal identity, as it defines both the relation to his family and to his unborn child. As Rau affirms: "'Micha' is about the difficulty of reconciling the private family album with the larger historical image of national guilt."⁵⁴

One day, Micha steals a photograph from his Oma's private album, representing a young Askan Boell during his honeymoon. The picture becomes a haunting spectre that will travel in his pocket until the end of the story, in search of an explanation that could reveal the truth about the man depicted on it. For this reason, Micha decides to go to Belarus, in the little

⁵³ Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium," 310.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 310.

village where Askan spent the last years of the war. The only thing he wants to know is the answer to a question that he can barely repeat to himself: "*This is my Opa. Do you remember him killing the Jews?*" (TDR, 327)

During his two visits to Belarus, Micha finds a man who collaborated with the Germans, Jozef Kolesnik, and decides to interview him. Even if his testimony is significantly full of silences, gaps and pauses for the nature of what he tells, he candidly admits that he actually chose to kill and he doesn't even try to provide excuses that may mitigate the atrocities committed: "Orders were orders," "I chose to kill" (345). Differently from him, the position of his wife Elena is more ambiguous, as she is both a victim - she had to hide from the Germans and the Russians to survive - and a victimiser - her husband and brother were collaborators. Moreover, she remains silent all the time, since she cannot speak German and is thus unable to speak to Micha. In line with Horowitz's⁵⁵ main statement, Elena can be regarded as the figure symbolising muteness in Holocaust fiction, as the main response of both traumatised perpetrators and survivors.

Micha then takes a picture of Kolesnik with his wife Elena, but when the latter proposes to take a picture of him and her husband, Micha refuses. Significantly, Jozef does not look at the camera when the picture is taken. Micha keeps circling around the most important question, but eventually finds the courage to show Kolesnik his grandfather's honeymoon picture. When the man seems to recognise him, Micha pronounces the question he has been avoiding for so long: "*Did you see my Opa do anything?*" (TDR, 362) Kolesnik's answer is not wholly exhaustive: on one hand he never saw Askan shooting, but, on the other, he clearly remembers the few who refused to kill, and Micha's grandfather was *not* among them: "There were too few who didn't do it. I could tell you all the names and faces who didn't do it because they were so few." (TDR, 363) Kolesnik, thus, cannot provide any certain answer to Micha's quest, as he didn't directly witness Askans's participation in killings. Even if Micha knows, deep in his heart, that his grandfather was

⁵⁵ Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

among the perpetrators, the sense of frustration increases when he realises there is no tangible and evident proof of his crimes:

Where is my proof? I have no reason not to believe it. There are no pictures of him holding a gun to someone's head, but I am sure he did that and pulled the trigger, too. The camera was pointing elsewhere, shutter opening and closing on the murder of another Jew, done by another man. But my Opa was no more than a few steps away. (TDR, 370-1)

There might be pictures incriminating other murderers, who were physically close to Boell during the executions, but there is no decisive image confirming his violent actions. What is only left is the ambiguous evidence provided by the photograph of Askan on his honeymoon, which is invested of a post-memorial spectral *punctum*⁵⁶ after the declarations of Kolesnik. Again, even if the evidence is there, it is not irrefutable: the truth always seems to lie "just beyond the frame."⁵⁷

Micha's discovery becomes a disturbing entity that keeps dominating all his thoughts. His initial obsessive wish to detach himself from his thoughts about perpetration evolves into resignation and, lastly, acceptance of his family past. He realises that the past cannot be changed, nor completely known, so he finds a way to cope with his personal guilt by reconciling himself with it.

When Kolesnik dies, his wife Elena asks Micha to return to Belarus for the last time and he accepts. Once there, she brings him to the field where the Jews got shot: he experiences the returning spectre of the crimes committed by his grandfather and feels them in his own body. Elena keeps crying, not for the crimes committed by Jozef, but because she has lost her husband. Michael starts to understand her position and parallels it with his grandmother, who also misses her husband, not as a Nazi Officer, but as loving man. After the last visit to Belarus, Micha's attitude towards his family changes and becomes more open and willing to restore a contact.

⁵⁶ Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium," 314.

⁵⁷ Hirsch, "What's Wrong with This Picture?," 241.

Chapter II

The final scene of the novel, that is the last picture of the album, is emblematic, as it reunites several generations. While Micha investigates into his grandfather's past, he becomes himself father of a girl named Dilan: when Mina suggests to name her after her grandmother and not his, he feels relieved. For the first time after the discovery of his grandfather's past, Micha decides to visit again his grandmother Kaethe and bring his daughter with him to let them know each other:

Micha looks into his daughter's face, watches her accept another family member without a flicker. Her family map spreads out; unproblematic, curious, unhesitant. Painful for Micha to see. He lifts Dilan on his shoulders.

-- *Is she there?* (TDR, 390)

But then, he "lets himself enjoy this moment, down here with his daughter, humming and waving, steadying herself with a small hand pressed on the top of his head" (TDR, 390). The encounter between the new and the old generation in a beautiful day of spring suggests a will to reconcile; indeed, Micha's choice symbolises the openness of the German third generation towards the past and its wish to bring up and clarify hidden truths, even if potentially painful and difficult to face.

CHAPTER III

MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN

Ransom Riggs

Sometimes, if you're lucky, you discover that a picture that
seemed so ancient, so indecipherable, can talk.

Ransom Riggs

3.1. Talking Pictures

The successful trilogy of *Miss Peregrine* (2011-2015), by young novelist Ransom Riggs, epitomises a significant example of photo-narrative creation, that has been deeply influenced by the profound obsession of the author for old vintage photographs. Interestingly, the development of Riggs' literary photo-textual creation can be inferred from the private selection of photographs included in *Talking Pictures*, a blog where the author used to show some of the images from his immense private collection. Starting from here, it is possible to state how the impact of a single, emblematic photograph has affected Riggs' imagination and has been transposed in his subsequent literary production.

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, the first novel of the trilogy, would have never come to life if it wasn't for the author's attraction for old photographs. In order to better understand the strict image-text relation at the base of the novel, it is necessary to focus on the author's fascination for a specific category of images, namely the "odd or disturbing photos that suggested lost back stories."¹

Since 2010, Ransom Riggs has been the founder and author of a blog post called *Talking Pictures*, where he has selected and organised old snapshots from his vast private collection into macro categories. "Clowning Around,"

¹ Maria Russo, "A Book That Started With Its Pictures", in *The New York Times*, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/31/books/ransom-riggs-is-inspired-by-vintage-snapshots.html> (last access: January 15, 2017).

“Life During Wartime” and “Unsolved Mysteries” are some of the groups under which he has assembled the anonymous photographs collected for years from flea markets or second-hand shops. Differently from *Miss Peregrine*, the published book *Talking Pictures* (2012) has no fictional narrative, but as the author affirms: “It is kind of a narrative; the pictures tell their own stories of war, love and marriage, times and trouble. I try to make the photos tell a narrative in relation to one another.”¹

In the preface the author recounts how his passion for old snapshots began when he was only a kid and his grandmother brought him to “Sunday afternoon antiquing expeditions.”² In such occasions, Riggs would entertain himself by sifting through bunches of old, abandoned pictures: “they were photos of strangers, of weddings and funerals, family vacations, backyard forts, and first days of school, all torn from once-treasured albums and dumped into plastic bins for strangers to paw through.”³ Once discarded by their owners, private pictures of people portrayed in disparate events would become anonymous and deprived of their original value. More than the images themselves, Riggs is fascinated by the reasons why someone would casually give pictures of his familiars away and, most of all, why strangers like him would be attracted to such images.

The very first snapshot to catch Riggs’ gaze is the anonymous portrait of a beautiful girl resembling one of his summer crushes. In particular, what actually strikes him is her smile, that he imagines being oriented to him: in barthesian terms, this detail would be indicated as the *punctum* of the picture. After having spent months wondering how her life might have been, young Riggs accidentally finds out some handwritten words on the back of the image, indicating the girl’s name and her fate: ‘Dorothy. Chicago. Age 15. Died of Leukemia.’ Such piece of information destroys Riggs’ fantasies: “the discovery that Dorothy, who looked so young and alive in her photo, had

¹ Susan Rife, “Love of old photos (with writing) sparks a coffee-table book,” in *Herald Tribune*, available at: <http://ticket.heraldtribune.com/2013/05/31/love-of-old-photos-with-writing-sparks-a-coffee-table-book/> (last access: January 15, 2017).

² Ransom Riggs, *Talking Pictures: Images and Messages rescued from the Past*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), ix.

³ *Ibid.*, ix.

likely died just months after it was taken, hit me pretty hard. [...] Smiling and doomed, Dorothy haunted me for some time.”⁴



Fig. 1: Talking Pictures, xi

As Barthes asserts in *Camera Lucida*, the subjective experience of looking at a photograph is defined by the essential singularity of the photographic image, as an index indicating “*That-has-been*” of the referent. In other words, photographs anticipate the death of their referents. Indeed, when Barthes is confronted with a snapshot portraying a young boy before his execution, the awareness that he is going to die becomes the *punctum* of the photo. Hence, while observing that picture, he can already see death: “I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.”⁵ Similarly, Rigg’s realisation of Dorothy’s death through the written words on the back of the snapshot, becomes the new *punctum* of the picture. In his childish fantasies, Dorothy had her whole life in front of her and, suddenly, he realises she had died only a few months later the picture was taken. The photograph shows

⁴ Ibid., X-Xi.

⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

both what she has been and what she would be: in other words, following Barthes' thesis, the referent is both present (visually evident in the photo) and absent (it has been there, but it is not anymore). In other words, the referent haunts the picture like a ghost. Such event has a traumatic effect on young Riggs, who stops buying snapshots for the next fifteen years. Instead, the ghostly quality of photographs will become a remarkable *leitmotiv* of Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, that will be further analysed.⁶

After the episode of Dorothy's snapshot, Riggs realises the considerable value provided by the use of short captions linked to images and becomes an obsessive collector of snapshots with writings on them. According to Riggs, an ordinary and not-aesthetically relevant photograph can acquire a powerful dramatic meaning because of a few words accompanying it: "the best inscriptions make a snapshot feel current, no matter when it was taken. They have an immediacy that transcends era, and counteracts the distancing effect old snapshots can have."⁷ In her book *Family Frames*, Hirsch also asserts the importance of the phenomenon of the image-text: "text and image, intricately entangled in a narrative web, work in collaboration to tell a complicated story of loss and longing."⁸ Riggs demonstrates how a very flat and ordinary picture, showing a wall and some bushes, acquires pathos and drama once it is flipped on the back side, where some words have been anonymously written: "*Rock Wall near Rose Bowl Pasadena, California, where Dorothy found a baby girl on January 24, 1961.*"⁹ This inscription smooths the distancing effect of an old and anonymous picture by giving way to a series of hypothesis regarding the unusual situation Dorothy had found

⁶ The way Riggs has assembled a bunch of anonymous vintage photographs and has given them life through the narration of *Miss Peregrine's* novel strongly parallels the literary method employed by German W.G. Sebald in the creation of *Austerlitz*. Indeed, similarly to Riggs, Sebald has introduced in the narrative a great number of photographs belonging to other people and mostly found by the author himself from different sources. Such images are then connected to the memory of Austerlitz, but also disorient both the reader and the protagonist.

⁷ Riggs, *Taking Pictures*, xiii.

⁸ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 4.

⁹ Riggs, *Taking Pictures*, xiii.

herself in. Riggs himself fantasises about the reason why the picture is blurred and imagines Dorothy taking the picture after the discovery of a baby in that area: “she couldn’t stop her hands from shaking as she took [the camera].”

In *Talking Pictures*, the reader is confronted with hundreds of snapshots reproduced both on their front and back side, displaying the original caption written on each image. As the title explicitly anticipates, the verbal and pictorial elements of such photo-textual combinations are equally indispensable to the constitution of meaning, as they create stories and trigger memories much more than what the two forms in isolation would do. One of the most fascinating categories of anonymous snapshots is “Hide This Please,” which includes images of people containing self-deprecations or sarcastic sentiments such as “This one came out terrible don’t show it to any one”, or “My shadow isn’t bad to look at.” The group “Unsolved mysteries,” instead, features photographs of ambiguous and mysterious entity, where the verbal captions seem to deepen an implicit threatening feeling of unknown.

3.2. Themes and Narrative Structure

*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*¹⁰ (2011), the debut novel of American author Ransom Riggs, follows the adventures of adolescent Jacob Portman in a mysterious island along the coast of Wales, where his grandfather spent some time during World War II. As the title anticipates, the novel deals with the precarious boundary between truth and fiction: on the one hand, it incorporates fantastic elements like time-travelling and supernatural powers, while, on the other, it is set in the historical background of World War II and the Holocaust’s persecutions. The book features a series of black-and-white vintage photographs embedded into the narrative thus creating the impression of a family album, whose

¹⁰ Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011) (Henceforth *MPC*). From the moment of its publication, Riggs’ novel has rapidly become a popular worldwide best-seller: besides having been inserted in the *New York Times* bestseller hits, the film rights of its movie adaptation has been sold to 20th Century Fox. The movie “Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children” has been directed by Tim Burton in 2015 and has arrived into theatres at the end of 2016.

documentary function is however often put under discussion by their ghostly and eerie quality, which intensifies the sense of otherness pervading the novel both on a narrative and structural level.

The cover book featuring a photograph of a levitating girl explicitly evokes ambivalent expectations, since it visually introduces questions of credibility associated to the liminal gap between truth and fiction. Photography's ability to transcend death becomes a recurring theme of the novel, as it keeps its portrayed characters safe into its frame, in the same way a fictional temporal loop preserves them from the atrocities of WWII. As Anastasia Ulanowicz argues, ghost images represent "an appropriate metaphor for second-generation memory, which involves the merging of images of the past with those of the immediately experienced present and [...] unsettles conventional notions of space, temporality, and identity."¹¹ Hence, the incorporation of over forty eerie snapshots into the narrative actively contributes to a cultural aesthetization of historical trauma.

Miss Peregrine's begins in contemporary Florida, where sixteen-years-old Jacob witnesses his Grandpa's bloody and horrific death. Convinced of having seen a nightmarish creature killing him, Jacob is diagnosed with an acute stress disorder. He then tries to elaborate Abraham's last words, alluding to the fantastic stories he used to tell him when he was a child. Even if fascinated by these tales, Jacob had interpreted them as fantasies related to Grandpa's traumatic childhood: indeed, "Abe" Portman was a Polish Jew, who escaped the Nazi persecution during World War II and found repair in an orphanage in the UK. In the attempt to find out the truth behind Abe's death, Jacob travels to the Welsh Island of Cairnholm and visits the children's home in ruins. Eventually, during a second visit, he mysteriously finds himself into a temporal loop, which brings him back to September 3, 1940, the day before a bomb dropped by a German air-raid destroyed the orphanage: the building, perfectly intact, is inhabited by the "peculiar," about whom Abe talked to Jacob. He learns that the peculiar are children with superhuman powers,

¹¹ Anastasia Ulanowicz, *Second-Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature*, (Routledge, New York: 2013), 5.

who live in a temporal loop created by Miss Peregrine to hide themselves from their persecutors, creatures called 'hollowgasts' and 'wights.' Jacob starts visiting the loop and its inhabitants every day and finds out that he belongs to the peculiars too: like his grandfather, he has the ability to see the hollowgasts, that are usually invisible to everyone. When the young protagonist starts considering the possibility to join the circle of peculiars permanently, a hollow attacks Miss Peregrine and the time loop collapses. Accordingly, Jacob decides to stay in 1940 with the peculiars and struggle with them to solve the situation.

The story of Jacob and the peculiar children continues in *Hollow City* (2014), the second book of the Miss Peregrine's trilogy, where the protagonist and his companions journey to London during World War II in the attempt to rescue their protector, Miss Peregrine. In the final and concluding novel, *Library of Souls* (2015) Jacob dives into Victorian England together with Emma, in order to rescue the peculiar children from a heavily guarded fortress. Like in the first book, narration is accompanied both in the second and third novel by a series of authentic old-vintage photographs, which contribute to the development of the story and to the reader's engagement with the parallel reality presented.

I have decided to focus on the first novel of the trilogy, since it introduces not only relevant discourses relating to photography and its functions in the narrative, but also the themes of the Holocaust and traumatic memory. In particular, I will focus on the process of image-text signification embedded in the novel, which is fundamental for the development of the trope of otherness, intended both on a fictional and historical dimension, and visually asserted through the *medium* of photography.

3.3. Peculiar Photographs

During the reading of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, the reader encounters more than forty pictures enclosed in the narrative, displaying the extravagant characters inhabiting the orphanage during war time. The

images are original black and white old vintage snapshots and studio images, mainly portraying children in particular poses and costumes.

The integration of photographs is motivated on a diegetic level: a good amount of snapshots belongs to Abe Portman, Jacob's Grandpa, who conserves them in a cigar box and repeatedly draws the reader's attention on them to provide a tangible proof of its tales. Some pictures are then found by Jacob in a trunk in the orphanage in ruin, others are part of Miss Peregrine's private album and a couple are exhibited at the local Welsh museum.¹²

Each photograph's physical occurrence in the narrative is previously introduced by first-person narrator Jacob, who finds himself dealing with the particular elements displayed on each image and provides then his emotional response to it. For instance, he informs us about a photo of "two young women posed before a not-terribly-convincing painted backdrop of the ocean. Not so strange in and of itself; the unsettling thing was *how* they were posed. Both had their backs to the camera." Immediately after, he tells us about a snapshot representing "a lone girl in a cemetery staring into a reflecting pool - but *two* girls were reflected back" (110) and again "another one of a disconcertingly calm young man whose upper body appeared to be swarming with bees." (MPC, 110). By turning the page, the reader can see the corresponding images in sequence.

¹² Danuta Fjellestad, "Nesting-Braiding-Weaving: Photographic Interventions in Three Contemporary American Novels," in *The Handbook of Intermediality*, ed. Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015): 193- 218, 200.



Fig. 2: MPC, 112

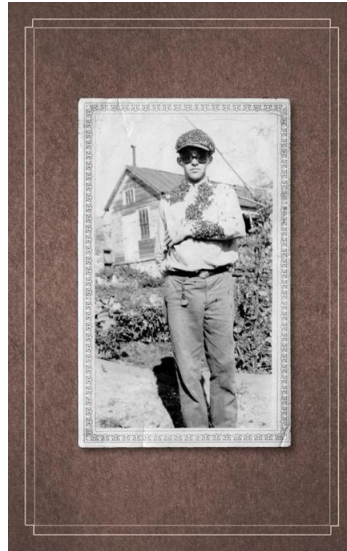


Fig. 3: MPC, 113

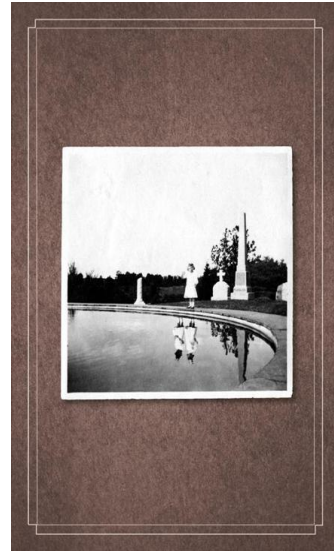


Fig. 4: MPC, 114

The young protagonist often underlines the odd quality of the pictures he happens to observe, defining them as haunting, bizarre, and so creepy to remind him “something out of David Lynch’s nightmares” (MPC, 45). Indeed, according to Jacob, the photographs are “fuel for nightmares” as they “would give any kind of bad dreams.” (MPC, 111)

The unusual individuals portrayed in the pictures of *Miss Peregrine's* novel are fictionally introduced in the prologue by Grandpa Abe as his companions in an English orphanage during wartime. Seven-year-old Jacob is amazed by his grandpa’s fantastic tales and wishes to live an adventurous life like him, but, as he grows older, he starts questioning their actual credibility. When confronted with his nephew’s scepticism, Abe reacts by mentioning what he retains to be the most powerful tool of objective evidence: “Fine, you don’t have to take my word of it, [...] I got pictures!” (MPC, 10). Thus, he takes out an old cigar box, where he has collected a series of “wrinkled and yellowing snapshots” (10). Abe’s statement seems to recall Susan Sontag’s claim that “photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it.”¹³

The first four images showed to Jacob, and so to the readers, fail in the attempt to prove their own authenticity. Indeed, the young protagonist finds

¹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.

them unconvincing due to the presence of supernatural elements: a levitating young girl, a man without his head, a boy lifting a boulder and a face painted on the back of someone's head. Jacob decides that the photographs are manipulated and his grandfather's stories are just fairy tales. When Jacob's father tells him about Abe's traumatic past, being the only member of a Polish-Jew family escaped to the Nazi's persecutions, the fragile boundary between truth and fiction gets problematized. The monsters that Abe mentioned are the Nazis, while the orphans he lived with are young survivors of war. Photographs re-acquire their *status* of evidentiary reliability, but still emanate a strong, implicit, tension between the real and the unreal. Jacob finally convinces himself of the legitimacy of the pictures when he meets the children in the orphanage. During one of the first visits to the ruined home, he finds an old trunk full of vintage photographs resembling those which belonged to his granddad. Almost shocked by such recovery, Jacob starts conceiving the possibility that the pictures might be 'literally true,' and confirm, in this way, his grandfather's stories:

It couldn't have been a coincidence, which meant that the photos my grandfather had shown me – that he'd sworn were of children he'd known in this house – *had really come from this house*. But could it mean... that the pictures were genuine? What about the fantastic stories that went along with them? That any of them could be true – *literally* true – was unthinkable. (MPC, 116)

As he is observing the singular pictures portraying a series of children, he notices "a half dozen kids kneeling around the craggy jaws of broken floor, peering down." (MPC, 117) In a double movement of gazing between Jacob and the peculiars, the first realises that the familiar faces in front of him are the same of the images previously studied. As Fjellstad underlines, in this moment "Jacob becomes a focal point, the pictures 'staring up' at him, 'the children star[ing] down.'"¹⁴

If all the pictures are narratively nested in the fictional world, the way they are physically enclosed in the novel highlights their otherness as a *medium*. Indeed, each photograph is printed on a single, separate page and

¹⁴ Fjellestad, "Nesting-Braiding-Weaving," 117.

displayed on a dark-brown background. White lines mark the margins of the page, while the pictures are framed into white vintage-like borders typical of old snapshots, giving the impression of being glued on the pages.¹⁵ Such visual disposition of images underlines the material quality of the photographs, which seem to compose a proper old-fashioned family album. Thus, the reader has truly the impression of leafing through the pages of a photo-album, whose main subjects are children with creepy traits or in unusual poses.

Interestingly, the reader is explicitly informed about the original provenance of the photographs in a note at the end of the novel, where the author states the fundamental quality of the rescued, authentic snapshots. Riggs thus affirms:

all the pictures in this book are authentic, vintage found photographs, and with the exception of a few that have undergone minimal postprocessing, they are unaltered. They were lent from the personal archives of ten collectors, people who have spent years and countless hours hunting through giant bins unsorted snapshots at flea markets and antiques malls and yard sales to find a transcendent few, rescuing images of historical significance of arresting beauty from obscurity-and, most likely, the dump. (MPC, 350)

Similarly to the parentless children of the novel, the old snapshots actually represent “orphaned material artifacts,”¹⁶ that have been saved by certain extinction. Such pictures, indeed, are given a new life through the literary framework provided by the narrative itself: like the orphans are secured into time loops, the photographs are preserved in the fictional arrangement provided by the narrator.¹⁷ *In fact, as Fjellestad points out: “the real lives of the people are unrecoverable; the life they acquire is that which the fictional narrative bestows on them.”*¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 202.

¹⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹⁷ The photographs embedded in the narration of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* are all authentic vintage snapshots: some of them come from the personal collection of Riggs, others are borrowed from collectors like Robert E. Jackson, Peter Cohen and Jack Mord of the Thanatos Archive, that is a collection of *post-mortem* and mourning photography.

¹⁸ Fjellestad, “Nesting-Braiding-Weaving,” 202.

The author's final note not only provides important information about the genuine authenticity of the snapshots embedded in the novel, but decisively contributes to dissolve the hesitations of the doubtful reader, confronted with a high degree of ambiguity until the end of the narration. Indeed, the continuous interplay between photographs and uncanny fictional elements mistakenly leads the reader to assume that the images have been specifically realised with the purpose of supporting the narrative plot itself. On the contrary, a bunch of authentic snapshots has provided the first, original narrative *nucleus* around which the whole novel has been developed. Such revelation directly affects the reader, who is lead to reconsider all the photographs encountered throughout the novel in the light of their authentic reliability. Consequently, his most immediate and genuine response would be browsing through the pages to go back to the photos and observe them in their new, powerful connotation of authenticity. Such physical gesture recalls that of handling a family photo-album, where photographs, indeed, primarily focus on people rather than places or objects.

In *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* images and text work together in the creation of narrative meaning. Even if the reader first encounters the words and then looks at the related pictures, the latter have the key role of providing visual information about the characters, but also of producing mood and participating in setting.¹⁹

Although a reader doesn't know anything about the origin of Riggs' collected snapshots, each image, combined with its caption, discloses an intimate world into someone's else life and triggers the reader's ability to fill in the gaps by creating his own fictional narrative. In this sense, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* is the result of the author's ability to realise a fictional tale on the basis of a bunch of old vintage snapshots, which are assembled together into a sort of private photo-album, "as if somehow they'd all come from the same batch" (MPC, 11).

¹⁹ Ibid., 215.

In Riggs' novel, Jacob owns the fundamental role of "photo-textual narrator,"²⁰ as he provides a narrative account of most of the photographs depicting the peculiars. Through his narration, the anonymous snapshots are transformed into a collection of pictures organised in a photo-album, which operates as a crucial device in the negotiation of traumatic history.²¹ Jacob is the necessary reporter capable of narrating what lies behind the images, since he has inherited the peculiar ability of seeing what the other peculiars cannot and, for this reason, he becomes their guide for survival. The capacity of "seeing" parallels the ability of narrating and contextualising the pictures he finds.

Photographs are usually introduced by the protagonist-narrator, Jacob, but, in a few cases, they are also presented under the author's favourite rough form of image-text, with an original handwritten caption. At one key-point of the story, for example, Jacob assists for the first time to the air-bombing that would destroy the orphanage. Aware to be safe into the temporal loop, all the peculiars feel relaxed and excited to watch the "fireworks" provoked by the Nazi attack. Jacob, on the contrary, is scared and very nervous. At that point, the reader is shown with a picture of what the air-attack should have looked like in that moment: a frightening sky with "billows of black smoke roll[ing] across the sky" (MPC, 167). Instead, a caption written on the same picture tells: "Our beautiful display."

²⁰ Danette DiMarco, "Time Appropriation and Phototextual Intervention in Ransom Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*," in *Misfit Children: An Inquiry into Childhood Belongings*, Ed. Markus P.J. Bohlmann (London: Lexington Books, 2017), 121

²¹ *Ibid.*, 119.



Fig. 5: MPC, 169

The inscription on the photo (Fig. 4) completely overturns the reader's expectations, as it discards the conventional meaning initially attributed to the image. The association of the word "beautiful" with a war-like-picture produces a subversion of values, as it assumes a positive connotation linked to a form of entertainment; following the narration, Jacob explains:

This nightly assault had become such a regular part of their lives that they'd ceased to think of it as something terrifying – in fact, the photograph I'd seen of it in Miss Peregrine's album had been labelled *Our beautiful display*. And in its own morbid way, I suppose it was. (MPC, 167)

The use of the image-text in Riggs' novel recalls a similar effect achieved by Foer's final flip-book in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The sequence of fifteen pictures, representing the falling man, are organised in backward sequence and gives the illusion of the man's body flying towards the sky instead of falling. Through the performativity of the images in sequence, the reader is given the visual impression of a moment of recovery, where tragedy is avoided. Similarly, the caption on the air-raid's snapshot becomes, at the reader's eyes, a tool subverting the disaster provoked by a war-attack into a fireworks' show. Both cases also represent the result of children's ability to

look at things with different eyes: a possibility that is granted to the reader through the visual devices embedded in the narrative.

3.4. Third time

One of the aspects of magic realist representation is the so called *third time*. In the context of literature of the Holocaust, in particular, this narrative device is employed to represent the temporal contradictions deriving from the attempt to deal with such traumatic experience. According to Brenda Cooper, third time is a complex time “which is neither linear nor circular but results from the blending and collision of different forms of time;”²² Sangari then adds that “the play of linear time with circular time achieves its cognitive force through marvellous realism’s capacity to generate and manage various kinds of alignments, tensions, and discontinuities between sequential and non-sequential time.”²³ In this way, magic realist time allows an engagement between a plurality of temporal and individual experiences with the historical reality. In the case of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, it is possible to argue the emergence of third time, provided by the interplay between sequential and non-sequential temporalities, narratively presented both on a textual and visual level. Such interactions illuminate a space suspended between the historical context of the Nazi persecutions and the orphanage with its supernatural inhabitants, who are both present, by means of the correspondent referents in the photographs, and absent, since they are like ghosts trapped in a loop turning backwards each 24 hours.

In Riggs’ novel, time is thus a relevant motif presented in its suspended form through the enactment of the temporal loop where the peculiars live, and the incorporation of a prominent photographic dimension, symbolising the arrest of time and the preservation of its portrayed people. This temporal

²² Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London: Routledge, 1998), 32-3.

²³ Sangari Kumkum, “The Politics of the Possible, or the Perils of Reclassification” in *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, Histories, Narratives, Colonial English* (London: Anthem Press, 2002): 1-28, 14.

'hybridity' enables Jacob to travel through his granddad's personal memory, in a journey suspended between a precise historical context and a supernatural dimension.

Miss Peregrine personifies circular time and represents the key-figure of the children's caretaker, a shape-shifter able to create time-loops and control time with the aim of preserving the peculiars.²⁴ When Jacob finds himself into the temporal loop back to 1940 for the first time, he is informed about the way time is manipulated by Miss Peregrine herself:

"Time? I thought you turned into a bird."

"To be sure, and therein lies the key to my skill. Only birds can manipulate time. Therefore, all time manipulators must be able to take the form of a bird."

She said this so seriously, so matter-of-factly, that it took me a moment to process.

"Birds ... are time travellers?" I felt a goofy smile spread across my face.

Miss Peregrine nodded soberly. "Most, however, slip back and forth only occasionally, by accident. We who can manipulate time fields consciously — and not only for ourselves, but for others — are known as *ymbrynes*. We create temporal loops in which peculiar folk can live indefinitely." (MPC, 151)

Miss Peregrine is thus an *ymbryne*,²⁵ namely a creature able to manipulate time under her bird-like form. The term 'ymbryne' is an old English word indicating a circular and recurring perception of time, that is made explicit in the narrative by the repetition of September 3, 1940 in loop. On that day, during World War II, a German raid would bomb and destroy the orphanage and all its inhabitants, who, instead, are preserved in the temporal loop re-enacting that day endlessly. Miss Peregrine explains to Jacob that while the day keeps repeating over and over, memory is not subdued to the same process and registers, instead, the lived experiences of each day:

²⁴ In *Hollow City* the system of time-loops gets more complicated and the linearity of time disappears completely: the children find out that there is a whole connection of loops within the loops, that are called interloops.

²⁵ The term 'ymbryne' is an Old English word literally meaning "a running around" (from 'ymb,' that means 'around' or 'about,' and 'ryne,' meaning 'course'). In the liturgical calendars of the Catholic Church, the Ember Days (in Latin *quattuor anni tempora*) were four separate sets of three days within the same week dedicated to fasting and prayer. The four sets of days occurred equidistantly in the course of one year.

"What do you mean? It's only the one day? It repeats?"

"Over and over, though our experience of it is continuous. Otherwise we would have no memory of the last, oh, seventy years that we've resided here."

"That's amazing," I said.

"Of course, we were here on Cairnholm a decade or more before the third of September, 1940 — physically isolated, thanks to the island's unique geography — but it wasn't until that date that we also needed temporal isolation."

"Why's that?"

"Because otherwise we all would've been killed."

"By the bomb."

"Assuredly so." (MPC, 152)

Miss Peregrine then admonishes Jacob for mentioning the technologies of the twenty-first-century to the kids. Since the peculiars are destined to live in 1940 eternally in order to survive, they need to be protected from any reference to thrilling items or idea coming from the future, that could influence them to the point of abandoning the loop. Indeed, if they decided to leave for the ordinary world, they would grow old and die in a very short time. The children are thus preserved in the loop like precious objects in a trunk, similar to the one found by Jacob in the bombed-out orphanage, containing precisely the snapshots portraying the peculiars.²⁶

The suspension of time provided by the temporal loop enacts a reversal in the perception of war catastrophes and thus the consequent feelings of fear and despair. For instance, the German bomb raid of September 3, 1940 is deprived of its killing power and becomes, instead, a spectacular performance of fireworks, that the children enjoy each day in the loop.

Since Jacob has never experienced such traumatic event, he can't imagine what it must be like "to find yourself in the midst of an otherwise unremarkable afternoon, suddenly in the shadow of enemy death machines that could rain fire down upon you at a moment's notice" (MPH, 133), but he *eventually does*. During his first dinner with the peculiars in the time loop, a strong and close explosion resonates all over: Miss Peregrine invites the children to finish their dinner rapidly and leave the house. Jacob realises what is actually happening: "This was the night of September third, 1940, and

²⁶ Danette DiMarco, "Time Appropriation," 109.

in a little while a bomb was going to fall from the sky and blow a giant hole in the house. The buzzer was an air-raid siren, sounding from the ridge” (MPC, 166) While Jacob immediately panics and starts yelling to get out from the orphanage before the bomb hits and kills everybody, the peculiars keep calm and relaxed. They know, indeed, that nobody is going to die, because the bomb raid corresponds to the moment of changeover, that is going to transport them back to the start of the day.

The children are enthusiastic of having a new guest to show the spectacular moment of the air-bombing and ask Miss Peregrine the permission to bring Jacob outside to watch it. Miss Peregrine agrees, but under the condition that all of them wear a gas mask. Once outside, Jacob is confronted with an apocalyptic scene of war:

The children stood scattered like chess pieces on an unmarked board, anonymous behind their upturned masks, watching billows of black smoke roll across the sky. Treetops burned in the hazy distance. The drone of unseen airplanes seemed to come from everywhere. Now and then came a muffled blast I could feel in my chest like the thump of a second heart followed by waves of broiling heat, like someone opening and closing an oven right in front of me. I ducked at each concussion, but the kids never so much as flinched. (MPC, 167)

In an ordinary context Jacob would have run away terrified, but, in this occasion, he cannot but trust and follow the peculiars’ usual response to the war-raid, that shouldn’t provoke any negative aftermath. While the other kids serenely sing following the rhythm of the bombs, Jacob is panicked and frightened by the heavy noises coming from the air attack. The peculiars, instead, have seen it so many times and are thus so accustomed to that situation, that they perceive it as a marvellous performance of fireworks to applaud:

The kids applauded like onlookers at a fireworks display, violent slashes of color reflected in their masks. This nightly assault had become such a regular part of their lives that they ceased to think of it as something terrifying – in fact, the photograph I’d seen of it in Miss Peregrine’s album had been labelled *Our beautiful display*. And in its own morbid way, I suppose it was. (MPC, 168).

Through the device of time reversal, the historical episode of a Nazi air-raid bombing an orphanage is deprived of its deadly effects and acquires, instead, a positive connotation of entertainment. Such mechanism does not only imply a chronological backwards to the start of the day, but also a subversion of moral values: accordingly, the children do not even consider the negative implications of a war attack, but convert it into an harmless moment of amusement. Moreover, they make fun of it by singing some lyrics perfectly timed to the rhythm of the bombs: “*Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, RUN! Bang, bang, BANG goes the farmer's gun. He'll get by without his rabbit pie, so Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, RUN!*” (MPC, 167) The song ironically evidences the peculiars' everlasting condition of security from the metaphorical “farmer's gun.”

3.5. Postmemory and the Peculiars

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch employs Hoffman's definition of “hinge generation” to refer to the children of Holocaust survivors, who have inherited the traumatic memories directly from their relatives. Hirsch's definition of postmemory primarily concerns the Holocaust's second generation, but it might be also applicable to the third generation and beyond.²⁷ Thus, from this point of view, Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* can be considered as a third-generation postmemory text, in the sense that it concerns a young boy's attempt to investigate the traumatic experience of his grandfather through the return to the orphanage where he lived during World War II.²⁸

²⁷ Jenni Adams, “Magic Realism and Dialogic Postmemory: David Grossman's *See Under: Love*,” in *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature*, Ed. Jenni Adams, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 51.

²⁸ Anastasia Ulanowicz finds Hirsch's concept of “postmemory” too much restricted, since it includes a very restrained group of people. She therefore proposes the broader term “second-generation memory” to be applied to generations with no biological connections to a traumatic event, or to victims of other traumatic historical events, such as those who witnessed the events of September 11. In *Second-Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature: Ghost Images*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), Introduction.

The concept of postmemory is strongly related to the experience of trauma, since it deals with the generational transmission of a traumatic event that could not be directly assimilated when it first occurred. Consequently, members of the second generation find themselves in the arduous challenge of grasping traumatic memories, that have never been completely elaborated by the first generation. There is thus a gap to overcome, that, according to Hirsch, has to be filled by “imaginative investment and creation in the reconstructed past in order to reintegrate the scattered documentary traces and familial oral narratives into a coherent and personally significant whole.”²⁹ In Hirsch’s words “postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall.” In the case of Riggs’ novel, the imaginative elaboration is a central process occurring both in the first generation, with Abe’s fantastic stories about the peculiars, and the third generation, represented by Jacob, who physically returns where his grandfather lived during the war in the attempt to give coherence to his own memories. Since the theme of the Holocaust is presented in the novel on two parallel levels, namely the real history of Nazi’s persecutions and the fantastic world of the Peculiars, the photographs become the key to interpretation where the two narratives intersect. Images, then, act as physical devices of connection between the first generation, represented by Abe, and the later one, represented by Jacob, but also as tools for preserving a continuous tension between the real and the imaginary dimensions.

The main protagonists of Riggs’ novel have all been subjected to different traumatic experiences. In particular, Grandpa Abe is the only member of his Jewish-polish family to have escaped the ‘monstrous’ Nazi’s persecutions during World War II: all the fantastic stories he recounts to grandson Jacob about his past life in the orphanage with the peculiar children appear as an elaborated version of his traumatic past. When Jacob is still a little child, he is so fascinated by his granddad’s adventurous tales that he dreams to become an explorer and have an exciting life like him:

²⁹ Marianne Hirsch, “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,” in *Poetics Today* (1996) 17.4: 659–86, 662.

Growing up, Grandpa Portman was the most fascinating person I knew. He had lived in an orphanage, fought in wars, crossed oceans by steamship and deserts on horseback, performed in circuses, knew everything about guns and self-defence and surviving in wilderness, and spoke at least three languages that weren't English.

[...]

More fantastic still were his stories about life in the Welsh children's home. It was an enchanted place, he said, designed to keep kids safe from the monsters, on an island where the sun shined every day and nobody ever got sick or died. (MPC, 8-9)

The stories of Abe sound as entertaining fairy-tales for children, made of travels, monsters to fight and enchanted places to live in. As Jacob gets older, though, he starts to have doubts and naturally believes that his granddad's tales are all figments of his imagination. When, in a second moment, his dad finally reveals the real story of Abe's past to Jacob, all his fantastic tales are understood in a whole new light, assuming a realistic, but terrifying, connotation.

During the narrative, then, the reader is also informed about the real life of Mr. Portman in the historical context of the Holocaust only by means of his son's words, who decides to explain the truth to Jacob once he gets old enough to understand:

It wasn't until a few years later that my dad explained it to me: Grandpa had told him some of the same stories when he was a kid, and they weren't lies, exactly, but exaggerated versions of the truth – because the story of Grandpa Portman's childhood wasn't a fairy tale at all. It was a horror story.

My grandfather was the only member of his family to escape Poland before Second World War broke out. He was twelve years old when his parents sent him into the arms of strangers, putting their youngest son on a train to Britain with nothing more than a suitcase and the clothes on his back. It was a one-way ticket. (MPC, 17)

Abe, instead, never mentions his Jewish origins, nor any historical detail about life during the Nazi time or on his Polish family. The only family he keeps evoking is that of the children he used to live with in the orphanage in Wales, whose 'supernatural powers' are then interpreted by Jacob as the salvific fortuity of having survived to the Nazi crimes: "They were orphans of war, washed up on that little island in a tide of blood. What made them

amazing wasn't that they had miraculous powers; that they had escaped the ghettos and gas chambers was miracle enough." (MPC, 17) Thanks to the rational explanation provided by his dad, Jacob realises Abe's difficulty to cope with his traumatic memories through any possible form of realistic narration. Abe is therefore not lying, but his stories are a sort of necessary self-therapy; in fact, when he falls into dementia, the reason of his obsession becomes even more evident: "The fantastic stories he'd invented about his life during the war – the monsters, the enchanted island – had become completely, oppressively real to him." (MPC, 22). Moreover, the obsession of collecting guns and knives, with which sometimes Abe even used to sleep, is cleared as an habit that "sometimes happened to people who used to be soldiers or who had experienced traumatic things." (MPC, 25). Accordingly, Jacob feels ashamed for having been too superficial when he had once judged his granddad's stories as imaginary inventions:

I stopped asking my grandfather to tell me stories, and I think secretly he was relieved. An air of mystery closed around the details of his early life. I didn't pry. He had been through hell and had a right to his secrets. I felt ashamed for having been jealous of his life, considering the price he'd paid for it, and I tried to feel lucky for the safe and extraordinary one that I had done nothing to deserve. (MPC, 18)

Abe's traumatic past is thus conveyed to the following generations by means of his fantastic stories, supported by an archive of authentic photographs of the past, whose mysterious quality seems both to support and discredit his version of events.

Later on, Jacob happens to assist to Abrahams's horrific death in a wood under supernatural circumstances, like in the worst of gothic nightmares, where he is left with cryptic instructions from his granddad. Such event has a strong traumatic effect on Jacob, who, in the following months, falls into deep depression and is haunted by nightmares with strange creatures: accordingly, he is diagnosed with "acute stress reaction" by his psychiatrist. When he gets sixteen, Jacob receives *The Selected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, a book found between Grandpa's stuff. The book contains a letter coming from Cairnholm Island written by Headmistress Alma Le Fay

Peregrine, accompanied with an old snapshot depicting a woman's silhouette with a pipe in her mouth. The photo-text sequence finally leads Jacob to comprehend his grandpa's last words referring to a bird smoking a pipe. What he meant, therefore, was an indication to reach his old headmistress at the orphanage in Wales, which could be finally traced to a specific geographic place.

In the attempt to discover the truth behind his family's past, Jacob decides to travel to Cairnholm Island, in Wales, looking for the abandoned orphanage where Abe Portman used to live during the war. Even if, from this moment onwards, the liminal boundary between truth and fiction gets more blurry and confusing, Jacob's course into his granddad's past is made of acts of memory, namely the discovery of old photographs, the encounters with people who knew him and, most of all, the experience of life in the orphanage. As Hirsch affirms in *Rites of Return*:

The return to family through acts of memory is a journey in place and time. In the most common form of the genre, the returning son or daughter seeks connection to a parent or more distant ancestor and thereby to a culture and a physical site that has been transformed by the effects of distance and the ravages of political violence. They wish to see, touch, and hear that familial house, that street corner, the sounds of the language that the child often does not speak or perhaps never did. Never straightforward, the return to the generational family is always dependent on translation, approximation, and acts of imagination.³⁰

Like Hirsch well describes, Jacob is eager to find that 'enchanted' place so much acclaimed by his grandfather, where he used to live in peace with the other survivors of the Holocaust. His physical return to the orphanage is the first step to perceive and explore what it should have been like, for Abraham, living there, but he is also aware that his journey to the past is a difficult process: "It was all just guesswork, though. I didn't know, and there was no one to ask. Anyone who might have had the answer was long dead" (MPC, 98) While on the island, though, Jacob is lucky enough to meet a war-survivor,

³⁰ Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller, *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.

Oggie, who shares his memories about life during the war and, specifically, about the night the orphanage was bombed:

He launched into a long-winded description of what life on the island was like under the threat of German air raids: the blaring sirens; the panicked scrambles for shelter; the volunteer air-raid warden who ran from house to house at night making sure shades had been drawn and streetlights were put out to rob enemy pilots of easy targets. They prepared as best they could [...] But one night, the bombs began to fall. "The noise was dreadful," Oggie said. "It was like giants stamping across the island, and it seemed to go on for ages" (MPC, 98)

Jacob learns from Oggie that all the inhabitants of the orphanage in ruins were killed by a German bomb-attack in 1940, except for his grandfather, who was the only survivor: "I reckon there were. Just one. A young man, not much older than this boy here." (95, MPC). Through such personal account, Jacob is somehow brought to contemplate the horrors of war: he is indeed touched by the man's report and while walking to the end of a dock, he imagines his grandfather, in a state of shock after the terrible event, waiting for a boat that could take him away from that catastrophe. As Jacob's dad then comments, Abe had already lost his family twice: once in Poland, and then again here, "his adopted family" (MPC, 97).

During the exploration of the abandoned orphanage in ruins, Jacob finds a trunk full of photographs depicting the peculiar children, that he recognises to be the same as those collected by his granddad. Such pictures are connoted with an intense spectral quality, in fact it can be affirmed that they portray human ghosts, namely those individuals that, in the narrative, are blocked into a temporal loop, out of which they would not be alive. This is the condition of the peculiars, and more generally of all the victims of wars and persecutions: their memory needs to be kept alive and their existence is often enclosed in a few, but highly meaningful images, denoting the barthesian "that has been." As Ulanowicz points out in her investigation on post-memory in literature, the figure of the ghost "marks an absent presence, or, inversely, a present absence; that is, the liminal figure of the ghost signals a disturbing gap that exists between the recognition of an event's 'having been' and its

'being no longer.'"³¹ It is therefore this gap what most concerns the bearer of second-generation memory. Hence, Jacob finds himself in between the ghosts of the past, those who have experienced such traumatic events together with his grandfather and do now appear in front of him under the form of peculiar children living in a time-loop.

During the series of supernatural encounters with the young companions of Abraham's past, with whom Jacob experiences life in an orphanage of 1940, the reader is presented with the corresponding *photograph of the peculiar, in a parallel metaphorical encounter with the past*. As Hirsch asserts: "the blind faith in the indexical qualities of the photographic image make it a powerful vessel to transport more or less accurate facts through time and even beyond the grave as proof of the unimaginable."³² The presence of photographs, indeed, seems to restore a certain validation of accuracy at the eyes of the readers. Moreover, those snapshots that originally came from disparate places and archives in anonymous form, are assembled together in a way that a reader has the sensation of leafing through the pages of a photo-album, where the depicted people are part of a familiar context, due to a common position of oppression.

The peculiar children inhabiting the orphanage have been subjected to a process of othering, due to their innate supernatural powers or extraordinary physical features. The construction of the troop of otherness, that will be later analysed more in depth, is constantly paralleled, and often converges, with the historical othering of the Jews. Indeed, during a conversation between Jacob and Oggie, one of the last survivors of war on the island, the latter remembers that the children in the orphanage "weren't your regular sort of orphan children [...] Some of 'em couldn't even speak the King's English. Or any English, for that matter." Jacob, having in mind his grandfather's example, then replies by pointing out their status of fugitives from Nazi's persecutions: "Because they weren't really orphans [...] They were refugees from other countries. Poland. Austria. Czechoslovakia..." (

³¹ Ulanowicz, *Second Generation Memory*, Introduction.

³² Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 107.

MPC, 94). In the same way, the oppressive antagonists of the peculiars, called Hollowgasts and Wights, symbolically evoke the historical figures of the Nazis. Besides the striking phonetic resemblance with the word 'Holocaust,' the term 'Hollowgast' is interestingly composed of the words 'hollow' and 'ghast,' recalling a ghost-like figure. In the narrative, indeed, hollows are monstrous creatures that evolve, at some point, into the human form of 'wights.' As Riggs explains in the novel, wights tend at passing unnoticed, as they:

adopt personas invisible to society: the grey-suited man on the train; the indigent begging for spare coins; just faces in the crowd. Though some have been known to risk exposure by placing themselves in more prominent positions – physicians, politicians, clergymen – in order to interact with a greater number of people, or to have some measure of power over them, so that they can more easily discover peculiars. (MPC, 261)

Similarly to wights, the most dangerous representatives of the Nazi regime were those intellectuals and politics of German society, whose fatal decisions affected the life of thousands of people. It is no coincidence that Jacob's psychiatrist proves to be a dangerous antagonist, recalling the figure of the lethal Nazi doctors inside of concentration camps.

Towards the end of the novel, some wights attack the peculiars and arrest the mechanism of the time loop: the orphanage gets destroyed from the air-raid and a nightmarish landscape appears in front of the children. While wondering where the ymbrines could have been taken, Horace, a children whose peculiarity is having visions and making prophetic dreams, seems to have the answer. Since he has only seen the place, he draws it:

Where are they taking her, Horace?

He shook his head.

"I don't know the name," he said, "but I've seen it."

"Then draw it," I said.

He thought for a moment and then rose stiffly. Looking like a beggar evangelist in his torn black suit, he shuffled to an ash pile that had spilled from the cracked-open house and bend to gather a palm full of soot. Then, in the soft light of the moon, he began to paint on a broken one which broad strokes.

We gathered around to watch. He made a row of bald vertical stripes topped with thin loops, like bars and razor wire. To one side was a dark forest. There was snow on the ground, rendered in black. And that was all. (MPC, 333)

When faced with Horace's drawing, the reader easily recognises the sketch of a concentration camp, represented through some vertical bars connected with barbed wire. Horace asserts it is a cold place, while another child affirms that it looks like a prison. The children are not aware of what and where that place could be, since, presumably, they have never seen one, except for Horace, whose vision might be the result of a childish traumatic memory. Despite the fact that Riggs does not contextualise the image into the narrative more specifically, such visual presence powerfully recalls the tragedy of the Holocaust and the traumatic effects of a tragic situation affecting a group of children. Since the time loop is not working anymore, that vision could represent the tragic fate of the children. Differently from all the other pictures, usually representing people, the photograph of a sketched concentration camp entails the reader's knowledge of history together with the empathic dimension built during the reading of the story.

When, at the end of the novel, Jacob and a bunch of peculiar children leave the island on three rowboats, they only take a camera with them and none of the old photo albums. The last picture represents a small boat surrounded by battleships in the background, anticipated by Jacob last commentary "We rowed faster." The final act of movement is revelatory, as it appears as a move toward freedom from tyranny, but also to a new journey. Indeed, the same image opens *Hollow City*, and its brand new photographic album.

3.6. The Aesthetic of Peculiars as Freaks

In Riggs' novel, the trope of otherness is largely conveyed both on a narrative and structural level. Starting from the title itself, the notion of "peculiarity" is immediately introduced as a condition of alterity characterising a restricted group of people, in this case children and adolescents, who are rejected from

society for their distinctive features and abilities. The peculiars, a “hidden branch” of the human species, have chosen to retreat from the world due to the intolerance and persecution inflicted by other creatures, namely ‘hollowgasts’ and ‘wights,’ who represent their oppressive antagonists. In light of the critical lens employed, it can be argued that the fictionalised construct of otherness on the peculiars, visually asserted through the *medium* of photography, draws a parallel with the historical process of othering imposed on the Jews. Jacob himself, while reflecting on the stories of the fantastic children narrated by his grandfather, claims the relation between the conditions of Jewishness and peculiarity into the narrative:

The peculiarity of which they'd been hunted was simply their Jewishness. They were orphans of war, washed up on that little island in a tide of blood. What made them amazing wasn't that they had miraculous powers; that they had escaped the ghettos and gas chambers was miracle enough (MPC, 17)

The Jewish origin of the children is metaphorically revealed through the fictional depiction of their supernatural abilities, which serves as a device of discrimination in the world of Miss Peregrine.

The peculiars are the manifestation of otherness due to powers or physical qualities that do not conform with what is conventionally considered the norm. For instance, Emma can produce fire, Olive floats constantly and Hugh can manage bees without harming himself. Due to their condition of “diversity,” Riggs’ characters can be regarded as misfits, namely “children who do not fit the concept of ‘the normal child.’”³³ According to Markus Bohlmann, misfits made their appearance in particular from World War II onwards, an historical period marked by the rigid institutionalisation of the body:

Just as the concept of the nuclear family was on the rise after World War II, so were the many children who did not fit the picture of an ideal family. Misfit children have come into cultural view as “the monstrous child,” “the disabled child,” “the poor child,” “the postcolonial child,” and

³³ Markus P.J. Bohlmann, *Misfit Children: An Inquiry into Childhood Belongings*, (London: Lexington Books, 2017), xiii.

the “queer child,” among others. However, despite the abundance of children who do not fit the concept of “the normal child,” that is, a child of innocence, asexuality, whiteness, and middle-class status, this normative concept prevails³⁴

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the first use of the word ‘misfit’ dates back to the beginning of the eighteenth century to denote clothes which do not fit the wearer’s shape. The term, interestingly, not only suggests the influence of clothing to alter someone’s identity, but it also implies that there is something both missing and/or exceeding, that does not fit in the configuration of a child. The disparity defining misfit children assumes forms of absences or excesses, that deprive them of the basic quality of purity. Riggs’ characters are stigmatised as social misfits due to special qualities that destabilise the boundaries between the human and the non-human, making them inadequate and unfit to society. Emma, for instance, is abandoned at a circus by her parents when they understand they cannot sell her to one, due to her destabilising quality which makes her too diverse for being accepted by adults.

In *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, the reader’s encounter with alterity occurs through the visual dimension provided by the photographs, where the peculiars assume a freak connotation. Freaks represent a central theme in the history of photographic portraiture: the *carte-de-visite*, in fact, became a popular device for their exhibition at the beginning of the twentieth century. The freak was usually represented by following the conventions of pose and expression imposed by portrait photography, which increased the contrast between the familiar context and the freak’s astounding features. It can be argued, indeed, that the cover picture of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* acts as a *carte-de-visite*, through which Riggs introduces the very first depiction of freakishness, as it displays a levitating girl wearing a crown in a deep austere mood, recalling a feeling of mystery and bizarreness. The title, moreover, leads the reader to an intuitive association between children, defined *peculiar*, and the freakish aesthetic dimension conveyed by

³⁴ Ibid., xiii-xiv.

the cover. The theme of freakishness is endorsed in the first pages of *Hollow City*, the second novel of *Miss Peregrine's* trilogy, which contains a series of *cartes de visite* displaying all the children through a text-image combination of each one's portrait and a caption with the description of his abilities. They are labelled as *Peculiar Personae*, in contrast with the *Nonpeculiar Personae*, of whom there is only a brief presentation, but no image.



Fig. 6: *Hollow City*, iv.

Later on, while Jacob is investigating on his grandpa's death, he finds his old cigar box filled with portraits of peculiar children. He is immediately astounded by a couple of images, that he labels for their nightmarish quality; he recognises, moreover, the freakish connotation denoting a couple of twins:

As if these weren't bizarre enough, the last two were like something out of David Lynch's nightmares: one was an unhappy young contortionist doing a frightening backbend; in the other a pair of freakish twins were dressed in the weirdest costumes I'd ever seen. Even my grandfather, who'd filled my head with stories of tentacle-tongued monsters, had realized images like these would give any kid bad dreams. (MPC, 45)

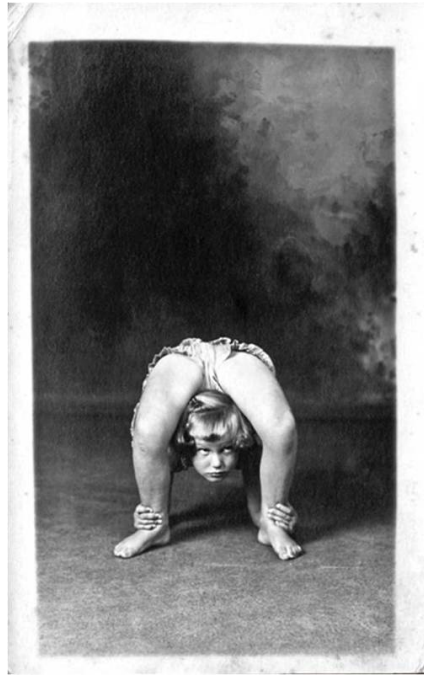


Fig. 7: MPC, 49



Fig. 8: MPC, 50

The young contortionist and the twins in weird costumes are portrayed in performative acts of strangeness: the neutral background conventionally used in portrait photography intensifies the contrast with the unordinary poses assumed by its subjects. The little girl shows off the physical ability of bending her back like an acrobat, while the twins, wearing creepy white costumes, are positioned with their legs crossed in the same direction. Even though the portrayed children do not present any tangible physical deviation, the unconventional way in which they are depicted triggers feelings of fear and aberration.

As a matter of fact, the trait of freakishness³⁵ associated with the human body is a variable quality, which depends more on the performative context

³⁵ For literature on freak-shows and freak photography, see: Bogdan, Robert, *Beggar, Picturing Disability: Freak, Citizen, and Other Photographic Rhetoric*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Bogdan, Robert, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988); Fiedler, Leslie, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); Hevey, David, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*. (London: Routledge, 1992); Hevey, David, "The Enfreakment of Photography," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard Davis, (New York: Routledge, 2006): 367-78.; David A. Gerber "The 'Careers' of People exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization" in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles o/the extraordinary Body*. For literature on disability studies, see:

where it appears than on actual abnormal physical attributes. Photography, indeed, owns the potential to make anyone look odd and very different from reality, confirming Benjamin's claiming that "[i]t is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye."³⁶ The photograph, therefore, becomes an aesthetic space, where the construction of otherness is achieved through a deliberate manipulation of conventional parameters, with the aim of conditioning the visual experience of its recipients. The depicted children are thus perceived as freak characters, since photography establishes a binding identification between the bizarre costumes or postures of their bodies, and themselves. Moreover, a photograph intensifies the sense of Otherness, since it facilitates the reader's gaze focusing on the frozen moment depicted, and freed, therefore, from the confrontation with a living person and the feelings of pain, guilt or comfort that might ensue.³⁷

Later in the novel, when Jacob finally reaches the old orphanage in Wales, he finds an abandoned old trunk full of vintage photographs. He notices a certain common "nightmarish quality" with his grandfather's snapshots and tries to give himself a rational explanation. When he gets to find an image depicting the same freakish twins, already seen throughout his grandpa's photos, he realises that the latter undoubtedly come from the same archive laying in front of him:

My grandfather's pictures had come from the trunk that lay smashed before me. I wasn't certain, though, until I found a picture of the freaks: two masked ruffle-collared kids who seemed to be feeding each other a coil of ribbon. I didn't know what they were supposed to be, exactly—besides fuel for nightmares; what were they, sadomasochistic ballerinas?—but there was no doubt in my mind that Grandpa Portman had a picture of these same two boys. I'd seen it in his cigar box just a few months ago (MPC, 111)

Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002); Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2015); David Mitchell e Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Tobin Sieber, *Disability Theory*, (Michigan; University of Michigan Press, 2008); David M. Turner, Kevin Stagg, *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁶ Walter Benjamin [1931], "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (New York: Verso, 1997), 243.

³⁷ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 113.

The image depicting the twins is different from the one observed before, but it evidently belongs to the same series, as the pair are wearing the same bizarre clown-like costumes. This photograph looks even weirder than the first one: the boys stand across from each other and one seems to take a “coil of ribbon” out of the other’s mouth. Jacob, quite impressed of such eccentricity, ironically labels the twins as “sadomasochistic ballerinas.” Another example of grotesque bodily representation is provided by the picture of the back of someone’s head, with a clownish face painted on it. Grandpa Abe explained, at the start of the novel, that even if the painted face had been realised in occasion of a circus’ performance, the portrayed man actually had two mouths (MPC, 16). The visible presence of such figures directly evokes the clownish and grotesque subjects, that are recurrent literary motifs in the representation of the Jews. Indeed, through a deep process of narrative and visual aestheticisation of misfit children, relegated as “other” entities, Riggs internalises and dramatizes the typical anti-Semitic stereotypes, based on the racist ideology which sees otherness as innate in the Jews’ body and mind.



Fig. 9: MPC, 115



Fig. 10: MPC, 15

From the narrative point of view, the decisive moment when the peculiars become full-fledged freak characters is the show organised for Jacob, the new guest of the 1940-time loop. The performance of the kids' special abilities is a clear allusion to the popular freak shows of early 20th century, where people with unusual physical features and abnormalities were exploited as entertainers of spectacular exhibitions. Miss Peregrine, introduced by the host of the exhibition, is the first to perform on the stage, where she shows off her transformation from a peregrine falcon into a human. She then rapidly explains to Jacob, that she and the peculiars used to tour around the continent with that show, as it was the easiest way to benefit of their unordinary abilities:

"Mr. Portman!" she said, peering down at me from the stage. "I'm so happy you've returned. This is a little exhibition we used to tour around the Continent back in the halcyon days. I thought you might find it instructive." And then she swept offstage in a flourish, heading into the house to retrieve her clothes. One after another, the peculiar children came out of the audience and took the stage, each with an act of their own.

[...]

When Emma returned to her seat, I turned to her and said, "I don't understand. You performed this for people?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Normal people?"

"Of course, normal people. Why would peculiars pay to see things they can do themselves?" (MPC, 181-2)

Jacob is thrilled by his companions' acts: Olive, the levitating girl originally appeared on the cover, performs some gravity-defying exercises, Emma makes fire by blowing it out of her mouth, while Millard juggles glass bottles in a state of invisibility. Considered too diverse from the norm, the peculiars had no other choice than living by performing their own alterity for the sake of the survival into society

In the first half of the twentieth century, people were fascinated by the display of spectacular otherness operated by freak shows. The fear of the unknown guaranteed an exciting experience at safe distance from the stage. Freaks were defined by their difference from the norm, which was highly

emphasised by the use of extravagant costumes and through exotic presentations questioning the freak's *status* as fellow human beings. Theatricality was in this sense a central tool of manipulation in the "enfreakment" process of a subject.³⁸ In fact, as Bogdan points out: "freak is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation."³⁹ Therefore, within the cultural perception of normality, freaks were those marked by a specific stigma that labelled them as other, or ascribed with qualities of otherness, without which they would otherwise be considered as normal. In the historical context of totalitarian regimes, where the human body had to conform to strict and specific physical parameters, all that could be labelled as freakish had to be erased. As a consequence of the Nazi eugenics programs, freaks were transported to concentration camps, where their bodies usually became objects of sordid experimentations.

Except for tangible and biological physical deformities, that visually affirmed many individuals as *freaks of nature*, the trait of otherness was, in most of the cases, the result of an aesthetic construction realised through costumes, gestures and staging, creating the so-called *freaks of culture*. As one of the first managers of freaks shows has asserted in the 1930s: "aside from such unusual attractions [...] freaks are what you make them. Take any peculiar looking person, whose familiarity to those around makes for acceptance, play up that peculiarity and add a good spiel and you have a great attraction"⁴⁰ This is what happens, for instance, to Fiona, a girl who has to wear an extravagant costume, specifically fabricated to make her look like a savage from the Jungle, although she is actually Irish:

Emma flipped through the stack of postcards to Fiona's. "Her card's my favourite," she said. "We worked for days on her costume." I looked at it. She was dressed like a beggar girl and stood holding a chicken. "What's she supposed to be?" I asked. "A homeless farmer?"

³⁸ Emma Louise Backe, "The Aesthetics of Deformity and the Construction of the "Freak," in *Student Anthropologist*, 3.2 (2012): 27-42, 30.

³⁹ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

Emma pinched me. “She’s meant to look *natural*, like a savage-type person. Jill of the Jungle, we called her.”
“Is she really from the jungle?”
“She’s from Ireland.” (MPC, 185)



Fig. 11: MPC, 182



Fig. 12: MPC, 187

The popularity of freak-shows from mid-nineteenth century onwards coincided with the birth and development of photography, which was rapidly exploited as a tool to promote the exhibitions. As introduced before, photographic *cartes de visite*⁴¹ became in early 20th century a very common freak-show’s *souvenir*: they consisted of a small image of the subject mounted on a cardboard, which usually incorporated some biographical details and a brief description of the freak’s “abilities.” Such image-text devices were popular gadgets often juxtaposed with portraits of family members or

⁴¹ Besides the popular phenomenon of the *cartes da visite*, the display of the deviated body during the twentieth centuries took also a scientific domain. The camera’s paradoxical capacity to document reality played a significant role in transforming freaks’ extraordinary features into disabled bodies. Clinical photography thus depicted the same subjects as case studies to be analysed from an analytical gaze only, depriving them of the aura of wonder and mystery that made them objects of popular fascination. From the 1930s onwards, most of the performers were no longer allowed to participate in freak shows, unless they could produce a medical certificate attesting their mental and physical health. As a consequence of the Nazi eugenics programs, many of them were transported to concentration camps, since their bodies did not conform with the parameters. established by the regime.

friends, that transformed freaks into recognisable, or even famous celebrities.⁴²

In Riggs' novel, a pile of so-called *cartes de visite* pops up during the show of the peculiars and passes through the curious spectators. Miss Peregrine had used the promotional cards to advertise their act while on tour: each of them portrays a peculiar in unusual costumes and posture, with the intent of shaping the viewer's aesthetic reception. Besides Fiona's snapshot, Jacob also observes the card representing Bronwyn, a girl with the peculiarity of being unusually strong. Surprisingly, she is not manifestly showing her strength in the picture, but a caption on the back designates her as "The amazing strong girl of Swansea." She therefore performs by lifting a giant boulder overhead.

As it has been previously stated, the figures of the freak, the clown and their grotesque bodies are frequent literary motifs related to the representation of the Jews.⁴³ As Hezser points out: "Freakishness, clowns and the circus have a subversive potential: they constitute a digression from what is considered normal appearance and behaviour and play with presumptions, expectations, and social values."⁴⁴

By tracing the roots of the grotesque and freakishness starting from antique Greco-Roman festivals, Hezser points out that the individuals' practice of adopting temporary symbolic self-representations as clowns or freaks is a frequent phenomenon in many societies and cultures. The so-called "Feast of Fools," for instance, does not only belong to the Jewish tradition, but, according to Eli Rozik, can be applied to all "communal manifestation which revolve around the inversion of the established rules of normative behaviour

⁴² Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 114.

⁴³ The theme of morphing into a clown or a freak is very common in contemporary Jewish literature, art and culture. An exemplar prototype is represented by Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis* (1915), namely the story of the protagonist's transformation into the grotesque body of an insect-like creature. The story became the basis of Woody Allen's movie *Zelig*, where the main characters adopts a variety of different personas, including a Nazi in the Third Reich. Significantly, American Jewish Philip Roth writer has once declared in the 1960s that he is not a Jewish sage, but a Jewish freak. For further investigation : Catherine Hezser, "Freak, not Sage: An Exploration into Freakishness in Modern Jewish Culture" *Culture and Dialogue* 3.1 (2013), 51-72: 52.

⁴⁴ Catherine Hezser, "Freak, not Sage: An Exploration into Freakishness in Modern Jewish Culture" *Culture and Dialogue* 3.1 (2013), 51-72: 52.

and the social hierarchy for a limited period of time.”⁴⁵ It consists in the symbolic inversion of the social values, conveyed by means of the appearance of the body and disguises. Clothes and masks are used to subvert one’s appearance and assume a new role: such inversion of the normal order had a powerful resonance especially in medieval and early modern times, when dress codes were rigid and meaningful.⁴⁶ Similarly, during the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the human body undergoes a process of standardisation based on rigid parameters, out of which it would be considered a deviated form to be eliminated. In this light, clothes and masks become the expression of freakishness and grotesque, generating misfit bodies out of the established rules.

During the Catholic rituals, like the Carnival in Italy and Spain, the Fool represented the scapegoat bearing the sins of the community, who was then symbolically sacrificed through the burning of an effigy or by throwing a play-acting fool into water. Such figure stood for the non-human other, which needed to be removed from the society to bring back order and purity.⁴⁷

Since medieval and early-modern time, Jews have often been labelled as the “other” and used as scapegoats of societies. Indeed, according to Sander Gilman “the non-Jewish mind has entertained since ancient times all forms of incredibly deformed, exaggerated, malignant, absurd and grotesque fantasies about the Jewish body.”⁴⁸ The anti-Semitic propaganda during the Nazi regime was specifically based on the presumption that Jews embodied abnormal qualities, which were imagined to be primarily physical. Therefore, Jews were meant to have grotesque bodies and, accordingly, they needed to be set apart. Moreover, Nazi’s adoption of the Greek ideal of classical body strengthened the urgency of rejecting the degenerated body.

Following Bakhtin’s study of comedy and folk humour from the Middle Ages onwards, the notion of the grotesque body emerges as a fundamental

⁴⁵ Eli Rozik, *Comedy: A Critical Introduction*, (Eastbourne and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 160.

⁴⁶ Hezser, “Frek, not Sage,” 56-7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁸ Sander Gilman, “The Jew’s Body” (London: Routledge, 1991), ?

aesthetic category, that is counterposed to the classical body. According to him, the grotesque is related to a bodily and material entity in a state of continuous transformation, from degradation and death to a new birth and becoming.⁴⁹ The representation of the grotesque is achieved, for instance, through the physical theatre, where the focus is on the body and its movements. Moreover, props and clothes become fundamental instruments to create grotesque characteristics, like obesity or a multiplicity of heads or arms on a single character. Such performances have the aim to shock and amuse the audience. Similarly, freak shows present grotesque bodies by employing particular costumes and gestures, with the aim of highlighting specific odd features. However, what distinguishes the latter from theatre performances is that the freaks are not actors, but real human beings reduced to a shameful stylization of themselves for profit reasons.⁵⁰

In Riggs' novel the notion of freakishness is visually employed to dramatize the Jewish perception of otherness and the social condition of being distanced and persecuted. As pointed out before, freakishness is principally a social construct, a frame of mind and a way of presenting people, as well as the racist theories inflicted to the Jews and the other minorities. The freaks presented on the stage, and therefore in Riggs' photo-album, were the "Others" who needed to be at safe distance from the "human" spectators in the audience, whose gaze at them was just voyeuristic and exploitative. In some way, through the photographic depiction of unordinary peculiars, the reader himself can leap into the role of a freak show's spectator, with the same advantage of being put at 'safe distance' through the bi-dimensional nature of photography itself. What changes is the way of gazing at such images and their consequent reception: the modern reader, endowed with a historical consciousness, is more keen to emphasise with the portrayed children.

⁴⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rebelais and his World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1-34.

⁵⁰ Hezser, "Frek, not Sage," 63.

In the preceding analysis it has been demonstrated how *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* represents a remarkable example of photo-textual creation, that has come to life from the author's creative elaboration of a series of vintage photographs. Such images, once anonymous and dispersed throughout different archives, have become the main *nucleus* around which the intermedial narrative has been developed. The protagonist's role of "photo-textual narrator" directly parallels the author's process of authentication of the snapshots, which are assembled together like in a photo-album, becoming, in this way, a crucial device in the negotiation of traumatic history. Indeed, photographs represent the main tool of investigation into the protagonist's traumatic past, that is epitomised, in the narrative, by the central episode of the air-bombing of the orphanage where the 'peculiar' live. The narrative's inter-textual process of signification is crucial for the development of the trope of otherness, that is visually asserted through the *medium* of photography. The typical anti-Semitic stereotypes are therefore internalised by means of the freakish aesthetic dimension attributed to the literary protagonists of the novel, the peculiar. Following the protagonist-narrator, the reader becomes an active spectator of the novel, who is lead to engage an intimate relation with the parallel world presented in the narrative photo-album.

CHAPTER IV:

EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE

Jonathan Safran Foer

One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany.¹
Susan Sontag

The intermedial narrative strategy employed in the precedent novels, namely the photo-textual narration, is also applied to novels dealing with contemporary terrorism, starting with the tragic events of 9/11. The visual impact of the terroristic attack, simultaneously envisioned worldwide, has been much more immediate and has deeply marked the memory of millions of people within a few minutes. In this sense, it becomes particularly interesting to see how authors have dealt with and/or counteracted such visual impact in their narrative employment of the photo-textual technique.

4.1. Themes and narrative structure

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*² is a post-9/11 novel narrating the story of nine-year-old Oskar Schell³ two years after the loss of his father during the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center in 2001. Oskar has been

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 19.

² Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, (London: Penguin, 2005) (Henceforth *ELIC*). Safran Foer is also the author of *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), a novel about a man who travels to Ukraine and into the past in search of a woman depicted on a photograph. She appears to have saved the protagonist's Jewish grandfather during World War II. During the search of Augustine, the protagonist, the narrator and his grandfather are painfully confronted with their own identities. Similarly to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Safran Foer employs different narrative voices, time shifts and photography as a means to explore the past and one's personal identity.

³ The young protagonist is modelled on an elaborate set of intertextual references to famous literary children, like Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Oskar Matzerath, the unreliable narrator of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also a recurrent significant figure, evoked different times throughout the narrative to evoke themes of mourning and loss.

traumatised from the events to the point of developing a series of phobias, like nightmares and sleep disorders, but also recurring cases of self-injury. When, early in the novel, Oskar discovers a vase in a closet containing a mysterious key enclosed in an envelope labelled “Black,” he starts to search obsessively for the corresponding lock all over Manhattan. Oskar irrationally believes that the key will lead him to something that his father legacy has left for him and his desperate research becomes a quest to make sense of his death and to, somehow, reconnect with him. The absurd effort made by Oskar, looking up every New York resident with the surname “Black” to question them about the key and his father, is also a way of dealing with his feelings of guilt. Indeed, when his father called him just before being killed in one of the collapsing Twin Towers, Oskar, petrified and scared, did not answer, leaving the responsibility to the answering-machine; Oskar cannot forgive himself for such a betrayal: “that secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into” (ELIC, 71).

The story of Oscar, in first person narrator, intersects with the stories of his paternal grandparents, whose narratives are told in first person through letters between the chapters. The letters entitled “Why I’m not where you are” are from Oskar’s grandfather, Thomas Schell Sr., to his son, while the group of epistles called “My feelings” are written by Oskar’s grandmother to his grandson. Both of them survived the Dresden bombings during World War II and they narrate their life stories, which they have never been able to speak about. In February 1945, during the bombings of Dresden, they lose their families, including Anna, who was both the pregnant girlfriend of Oskar’s grandfather, and his grandmother’s sister. After emigrating from Germany, the two meet in New York by chance and decide to live together, but never managing to come really close to each other. When the woman gets pregnant, Thomas Sr. leaves her and returns to New York only after their son, Thomas Schell Jr., dies on 9/11.

The narrative structure of the novel takes the form of a self-reflexive montage composed of three separate narratives told with the distinct voices of their protagonists: while the main focus lies on Oskar’s personal traumatic

experience, the stories of his grandparents are intertwined within the novel with chapters consisting of both sent and unsent letters written in first person, revealing their traumatic experiences during World War II.

The author employs experimental narrative techniques to focus his readers' attention on matters of communication and legibility, and, consequently, on topics of memory and loss. By contrasting different large-scale shocking events, such as 9/11 attacks, World War II and even Hiroshima, Foer explores the impact of these incidents on individual lives, proving that the psychological consequences are always the same despite different times and continents: there is anxiety, shock, trauma and the need to search for a meaning to what happened.¹ In order to explore such universal themes, Foer employs an unusual aesthetic strategy that emphasise the visual dimension, not only by reproducing a series of photographs, drawings and diagrams in the novel, but also by adopting an unconventional typography, through the inclusion of red marks and pages filled with numbers instead of letters (ELIC, 269-71).² The written text is thus challenged by the visual domain, which acts as an interference within the main narrative, as asserted by Keith Gessen: "the rest of Foer's novel is filled with a series of typographical and other visual effects, all of them stressing an impatience with the written word as a marker or describer of reality"³

Pictures and language reproduce properties of each other and are therefore assimilated, in a way that they sometimes come to obstruct both

¹ Christine Schwanecke, *Intermedial Storytelling*, (WVT-Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: Heidelberg, 2012), 157.

² Foer's narrative devices strongly recollects the first great experimental novel in English, Laurence Sterne's

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy (1759-69). Going against the conventions of eighteenth-century narrative, *Tristram Shandy* is a highly intertextual novel, appealing to different authors and genres and described as a collection of fragments. The text employs an array of visual and graphic elements interrupting the narrative and, in some cases, replacing the textual meaning with the visual one. The novel's storytelling is demanding, as Sterne's typographic playfulness interrupts the flow of reading and manipulates the reader's experience. The visual metaphor of a black page, recalling the death of a character, can be also found in Foer's novel, expressing the characters' impossibility to communicate.

Moreover, Foer has also been inspired by the works of postmodernist writers, such as *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968) by William Gass, in which the author employs similar devices, like colored paper and different typefaces.

³ Keith Gessen, "Horror Tour," *The New York Review of Books* (September 22, 2005): 68-72.

visibility and legibility. In this way, Foer underlines the insufficiency of language to represent trauma, and proposes other ways to cope with personal suffering.

4.2. Narrative witnessing

As Alison Gibbons points out, the novel's stylistic choices and the use of multimodal devices call readers to actively participate into witnessing and in the traumatic experience of the main characters.⁴ The high level of interaction between the narrator and the reader/witness is at the centre of the so-called *Talk Fiction*⁵ theory by Irene Kacandes. As Kacandes states: "Talk fiction requires active readers [...] active readers interpret what they might be feeling, thinking, or doing as a reply to the move of the text."⁶

After having analysed different levels of interaction between the reader and selected contemporary novels, Kacandes identifies a specific category of texts that "talk as witness." These novels require their readers to respond not only through the simple act of reading, but by providing "specific answerings to specific matters that have been raised by the text as statement."⁷ The reader thus responds by means of emotional reactions to sentiments described in the text, intellectual connections or the recalling of personal occurrences evoked by the narration: "what distinguishes the communicative circuit from any other literary one is the self-conscious perception by readers that they are formulating a reply invited by some feature of the text."⁸

Starting from Kacandes' literary theory, Gibbons demonstrates that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a text that invites active reader-responses, since its multimodal representation can act "as a traumatic

⁴ Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2012): 143.

⁵ Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction – Literature and the Talk Explosion*, (University of Nebraska Press: 2001) in Alison Gibbons, "Cotwitnessing Trauma in Reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer," in *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Kacandes, *Talk Fiction*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

testimony from the author in which the reader is a complicit witness.”⁹ Indeed, the reader represents the *conditio sine qua non* for Oskar’s traumatic rehabilitation, as the externalisation of the event can occur only with the presence of a listener, who is also a co-witness of 9/11 events, as the huge mediatic diffusion has become part of his personal experience.

Kacandes identifies six typologies of narrative witnessing relevant to the literary text:

1. Intrapsychic witnessing: a character witnesses to the self about the character’s own experience;
2. Interpersonal witnessing: two characters cowitness to trauma suffered by one of them;
3. Surrogate witnessing: two characters cowitness to a third character’s trauma;
4. Textual witnessing: narrator and narratee cowitness to the trauma of/in text;
5. Literary-historical witnessing: text and its contemporary reader cowitness to the trauma of/in the text;
6. Transhistorical-transcultural witnessing: text and its later or foreign reader cowitness to the trauma of/in the text.¹⁰

While the first four configurations of narrative witness are realised within the fictional world, the last two situate themselves between the extra- and the intradiegetic level. It is possible to identify in Foer’s novel all the circuits of narrative witnessing except for the last one, as the very tight temporal proximity of 9/11 events does not allow any trans-historical witnessing yet.

Gibbons focuses then her analysis on circuit four, considering how Foer’s multimodal novel engages actual readers in direct experiences of witnessing. The stylistic features employed by Foer, like the use of images, colours, numbers and a playful typography, actually “talk to the reader of trauma, the reader whose cognitive and multimodal engagement can ‘talk’ back.”¹¹ In this view, the meaning of the title “extremely loud and incredibly close” could be understood as metaphorical for the reader’s experience with the novel, whose involvement might become very “loud.”

⁹ Gibbons, “Cowitnessing Trauma,” 23.

¹⁰ Kacandes, *Talk Fiction*, 97.

¹¹ Gibbons, *Multimodality*, 166.

4.3. Codes of communication

As it has been observed above, two traumatic events intertwine in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: the story of Oscar, who has lost his father during the 9/11 attacks, and the story of his grandparents, who are escaped survivors of the bombings of Dresden in World War II.

Foer employs alternative methods of communication linked to the visual realm to let his characters narrate their story. While Oskar's events are recounted through images and photographs that he finds or takes by himself, his grandparents' stories are conveyed by means of typographic strategies that visually recreate silences, words' excesses, pauses and shadows of past memories. Both forms represent the attempt to find alternative ways to communicate, since the verbal system is not adequate enough.

As Philippe Codde points out, the use of non-conventional languages in Foer's novel can be metaphorically compared to Ovid's myth of Philomela.¹² Philomela gets her tongue cut off after having been raped by Tereus, her sister's husband, and finds in art an alternative way to communicate the traumatic event: indeed, she manages to weave a tapestry to tell her story to her sister Procne. As Codde points out:

In his insistence on these alternative forms of communication to try to fill the void left by traumatic experiences, I would argue that Foer is consciously rewriting the classical myth of Philomela. [...] Foer did not, however, simply create a one-for-one metaphorical rewriting of the Philomela myth; instead he consciously and wittily composed a variation on a number of the myth's predominant motifs. The most conspicuous motif in Philomela's story is obviously the inexpressibility of a traumatic event that one desperately tries to transmit via

¹² The myth of Philomela can be found in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and narrates the tragic story of Philomela, whose sister, Procne, has married Tereus, king of Thrace. After five years of marriage, Procne asks his husband to visit her sister and he agrees to escort Philomela from Athens to Thrace. Upon arriving in Thrace, Tereus forces the maiden to a lodge in the woods and brutally rapes her. In shock, the victimised Philomela begs to die, threatening to make the incestuous crime public. Tereus silences her by cutting out her tongue and locking her into the cabin. Unable to speak anymore, Philomela communicates her traumatic event by weaving a tapestry, which she manages to get delivered to her sister. In revenge, Procne kills her and Tereus' son and serves him as a meal to be eaten. The two sisters are then transformed into birds and can escape from Tereus' rage.

alternative semiotic, non-linguistic, means.¹³

Similarly to Philomela, Foer's characters have been muted by the traumatic events they have been subjected to and cannot verbally express their feelings. Oskar refers to 9/11 as "the worst day," not even able to pronounce its name and cannot definitely express his failure to answer his father's last call. He tries to express the traumatic instance of his life by weaving his father's last words, preserved on the answering machine, into a Morse code turned into a bead chain, hoping that his mother will comprehend his call for attention. Thomas Sr., Oskar's grandfather, loses his ability of speech after having lost his beloved Anna and their child during the attacks on Dresden: he ends up interacting with the external world through a notebook and a "yes" and "no" tattooed on his hands. The only way he tries to interact with his current wife is by tapping numbers on a phone dial, creating a coded message that she is not able to decipher. Oskar's grandmother, in turn, having lost her sister Anna in Dresden and being a survivor of World War II, can only testify her traumatic experience in the form of thousands of blank pages, counterposed to Thomas' equally illegible black pages.¹⁴ Attempts of verbal communication are doomed to end either in total blackness or in the vacuum of the blank page. Even if each of the three characters finds an alternative code of communication, no one seems able to listen to the other's complain.

Through the inclusion of experimental forms of representation, Foer demonstrates the failure of words in capturing a traumatic past and, thus, conveys an idea of the condition of the traumatised mind. As Onno van der Hart and Bessel van der Kolk point out from the perspective of clinical psychology:

When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience "speechless terror." The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to

¹³ Philipp Codde, "Philomela Revised: Traumatic Iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," *Studies in American Fiction*, 35.2, 2007: 240-254, 246-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level.¹⁵

The impact of a traumatic event is engraved in memory in terms of images or icons, rather than words, as the most direct and effective reaction to such experiences. This confirms the distinction made by Pierre Janet between a “narrative memory,” whereby experiences are ordered following a linear and rational sequence, and a “traumatic memory,”¹⁶ made of glimpses, fragmentary images and involuntary flashes that cannot be coherently arranged.

As Foer has asserted in an interview:

I also think using images makes sense for this particular book. First because the way children see the world is that they sort of take mental snapshots; they hoards all these images that they remember 20 or 40 years later. And also because September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history.¹⁷

It is precisely the visual nature of traumatic memories to act as foreground feature of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where the protagonist’s obsession with pictures actually reflects the mental repercussions produced in the years following his father’s death.

4.4. The Use Of Photographs

In the course of the novel images interrupt the flow of reading quite often, playing a constant, but misleading role in their reception. In particular, still photography is the most prominent aesthetic feature of the novel, having the role of responding to and documenting 9/11, especially in relation to trauma. The protagonist, Oskar, finds it very difficult to talk about his experience on

¹⁵ Bessel van der Kolk, Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995): 158 – 180, 172.

¹⁶ Pierre Janet, *Les Médications Psychologiques: études historiques, psychologiques et cliniques sur les méthodes de la psychothérapie*, vol.3 (Paris: Société Pierre Janet, 1984), 274.

¹⁷ Alden Mudge, “Up Close and Personal: Jonathan Safran Foer Examines Violence through a Child’s Eyes,” *Bookpage*, April 2005, available at: <https://bookpage.com/interviews/8295-jonathan-safran-foer> (last access: 18 June 2016).

9/11 and refers to it as “the worst day” (ELIC, 11, 86) “because of what happened” (ELIC, 14), communicating only indirectly a few details of that day.¹⁸ In absence of an adequate linguistic representation of 9/11 events, the images put between the pages assume heightened meaning. As Cathy Caruth affirms in her work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: “The event is not experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.”¹⁹

Almost all the pictures contained in the novel belong to Oskar’s personal collection, a notebook entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me*, where he gradually collects and preserves fragments of pictures found in the streets, film and television stills, internet and printed press images and photographs that he takes by himself. Part of the pictures collected by Oskar are apparently unrelated to the plot: there are, for instance, images of humanoids at the Museum of Natural History, a box full of gems, a couple of turtles and people on a roller coaster. Then, there are pictures that barely allude to the drama of 9/11, like the images of flying birds, a cat falling and a Staten Island ferry crashing. Moreover, there are pictures representing mysteries that need to be solved: a notepad with his father’s name scribbled on it, a person Oskar interviews, doors and keyholes that need to be unlocked and photos of a falling body. Indeed, most images represent stuff that is important to him symbolically or things that he’s thinking about, and a very few of them represent things that actually happened in his daily life.

Through the inclusion of almost fifty images into his novel, Foer evidences the predominant role that TV stills and photographic pictures of the attacks had in the mediation of the terrorist events of 2001, confirming what Marianne Hirsch has then stated: “Photography [...] is the visual genre that best has captured the trauma and loss associated with September 2001.”²⁰

¹⁸ Laura Frost, *Still Life*, 186.

¹⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, (Baltimore and London: JHU Press, 1995), 4.

²⁰ Marianne Hirsch, “I Took Pictures: September 2001 and Beyond” in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, ed. Judith Greenberg (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003): 69-86, 71.

Besides the huge mediatic impact of images in the formation of a cultural memory, the author also draws the attention to the limits of language in representing trauma. As Foer affirms in an interview: “to speak about what happened on September 11 requires a visual language. My singular motivation was to create the most powerful book I could.”²¹ Photography has thus a crucial role in the articulation of trauma as an experience of discontinuity, that Hirsch tries to explain:

If still photography is the visual genre that best captures the trauma and loss associated with September 2001 – the sense of monumental, irrevocable change that we feel we have experienced – it is due to the photograph’s temporality. Photography interrupts, actually stops time, freezes a moment: it is inherently elegiac. The feeling that time stopped around 9.00 a.m. on September 11 has created an immeasurable gulf between before and after.²²

Oskar’s collected pictures can be divided into two main groups: one is formed by what Barthes would call “traces,” namely photographs taken by Oskar himself during his research to archive his encounters and other details. The other, instead, is a group of “symbolic” pictures gathered by Oskar, that serves to narrate and disclose his emotions.

Through the photographic act, Oskar wants to collect and preserve traces of his encounters in order to impress permanently, along with Barthes’ theory, what he has found. Oskar follows a scientific method based on data collection and finalised to the resolution of the mysterious origin of the key. Despite the scientific purpose chased by the protagonist, the pictures he takes appear totally marginal and ambiguous to the readers’ eyes: the people he interviews, for instance, are portrayed in their backside, so that they are not recognisable; pictures of doorknobs are never located nearby their verbal connotation; other images of found objects, instead, are enlargements of minimal details, that macroscopically become abstract forms. The production of photographic traces results thus vague and confusing and requires its

²¹ Gabe Hudson, “Everything is Interrogated” – Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer, March 22, 2005, available at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/everything-is-interrogated-7138041> (last access June 13, 2016).

²² Marianne Hirsch, “I Took Pictures,” 71-72.

observers to look much deeper and beyond the surface: the barthesian *Punctum*, the little trauma subjectively perceived in a picture, has to be found elsewhere than in the frame. In the same way, Oskar needs to find that traumatic “elsewhere” beyond any represented door, beyond any conversation with strangers: photography, indeed, stimulates the observer to look further and deeper, but, at the same time, protects the gaze from fearful otherness.

The second group of symbolic images is significant to comprehend the production of meaning through intermediality. Oskar integrates pictures apparently irrelevant to his research representing, for instance, Hamlet, Stephen Hawkins, or the scheme to construct a paper airplane. Since Oskar is verbally unable to express his emotions and memories, these pictures become compelling for the comprehension of his life and feelings.

Part of Oskar’s notebook is presented in the novel as a picture series (ELIC; 53-67):



Fig.1

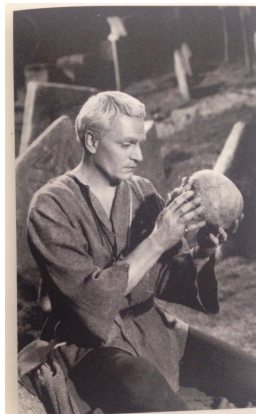


Fig. 2

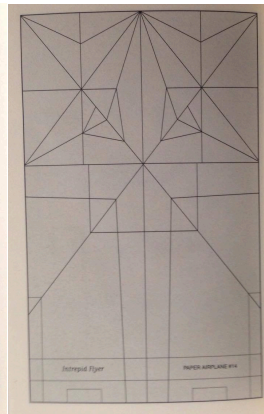


Fig. 3

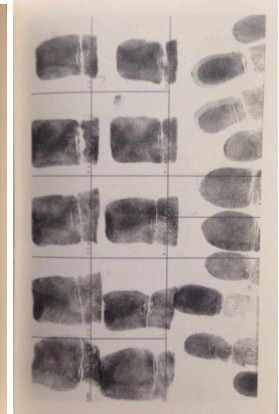


Fig. 4

The picture representing Laurence Olivier as Hamlet holding the skull of Yorick in his hands (Fig.2) not only refers to the movie adaptation of 1948, but also to the story of *Hamlet* with the murder and loss of his father. In particular, the gravedigger scene depicted in the picture actually mirrors Oskar’s situation, as it deals with the desperation of a young man having lost his father. Even if Oskar is usually not explicit about his feelings, the reader can easily trace parallels between the Prince of Denmark and Oskar’s state by

“narrativising the picture.”²³ In this way, it is possible to confer the emotional state of the former, his feelings of desperation and depression for his loss, to the latter, who never talks about his despair.

Not all the images in Oskar’s diary are that easily inferable: the picture of a turtle, for instance, situated in the same sequence of images including that of Hamlet, remains of unknown meaning up to twenty pages later, when Oskar, one night, realises that life is made of painful losses and feels “like the turtle that everything else in the universe was on top of” (ELIC, 74). Through this remark, a semantic connection is established between the content of the photograph and the protagonist’s feelings, as he expresses his despair and mourns for his father’s loss. Thus, the image of the turtle reinforces the metaphor expressed through Hamlet’s photo, revealing Oskar’s emotional state.²⁴

Similarly, the image representing the construction’s scheme of a paper airplane (Fig. 3) not only recalls Oskar’s relationship with his father, as the two used to play together with “intelligent” games, but also evokes the airplanes that collided into the towers. The theme of flight is then maintained in a series of images representing flying birds, a falling cat and, lastly, a falling man.

If part of the photographs contained in “Stuff That Happened to Me” have the function to fill the gaps left in the verbal narrative by the traumatised narrator, another bunch of images is used to symbolise and remark the states of trauma and repression. This is the case of a series of images depicting various doorknobs, that are interspersed throughout the grandfather’s narrative and whose meaning, at first glance, remains mysterious. In a 1910 lecture, Sigmund Freud illustrates the concept of “repression” to the students by conceiving an image reminiscent of the “doorknob:”

Let us suppose that in this lecture-room and among this audience, whose exemplary quiet and attentiveness I cannot sufficiently commend, there is nevertheless someone who is causing a disturbance

²³ Schwanecke, *Intermedial Storytelling*, 160.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 160

and whose ill-mannered laughter, chattering and shuffling with his feet are distracting my attention from my task. I have to announce that I cannot keep proceed with my lecture; and thereupon three or four of you who are strong men stand up and, after a short struggle, put the interrupter outside the door. So now he is "repressed," and I can continue my lecture.²⁵

According to Freud's example the door, that is physically present in the room, represents a barrier suppressing any possible disturbing lament. Similarly, the door is literally present in the novel through the metonymical representation of the doorknob, indicating the repressed emotions and disturbing thoughts of the grandfather, who does not talk anymore since the loss of Anna, during the bombings of Dresden. From that moment he communicates only by means of his "yes" and "no"-tattooed hands and by writing sentences in a notebook.

During the bombings in Dresden, Thomas burned his hand on a doorknob, which was all that was left of his home and family: from that moment the image of the doorknob becomes the symbol of his traumatic experience, which obsessively returns and accompanies him in its photographic form. Indeed, after getting married in New York many years later, Thomas compulsively photographs everything in his and his wife's apartment, in case anything happened to their belongings, and keeps the images of the doorknobs in his personal notebook. In some of the photographs the doorknobs are locked, while in others unlocked.

These pictures suddenly appear and interrupt the flow of narration in different points of the text, suggesting a parallel with the appearance of repressed emotions in Thomas' life by means of nightmares and repeated flashbacks. Although Oskar's grandfather tries "to ignore whatever needed to be ignored" (ELIC, 28) by excluding his past, the loss of Anna and their unborn child, his fears and experiences re-emerge and disrupt into his consciousness, interrupting the flux of his ordinary life. Not only do the pictures of the doorknobs externalise Thomas' emotional distance and repressed grief, but also symbolise the sentimental barriers between the

²⁵ Sigmund Freud [1910], "Second Lecture," 2001: 25.

protagonists, who are physically close, but feel extremely lonely and emotionally far from each other. When Oskar meets his grandfather for the first time, for instance, the restricted space between two rooms becomes a huge emotional distance between the two characters:

The doorknob turned. [...] The door opened. [...] We stood there. He was in the room. I was in the hall. The door was open, but it felt like there was an invisible door between us, because I didn't know what to say to him and he didn't know what to write to me. (ELIC, 236-7).

Despite a very tight physical distance, there is no communication between the two characters, caused by the unspoken things: Oskar, indeed, does not know that the man is his grandfather, nor does he know why it is that Thomas left his Grandma and their unborn child.

Later on in the narration, the pictures of the doorknobs seem to provide a link between Oskar and his grandfather. The two photographs of keys appearing in the story narrated by Oskar, and thus associated with him, might be seen as complementary with the pictures of doorknobs with a lock. Indeed, the protagonist's main purpose is to find the lock that opens to the key he has found in his father's closet. When, after eight months of research, Oskar finds out that the key has nothing to do with his father, he is devastated, but finally reacts to his father's death and decides to dig up the empty coffin that he, his mother and grandmother had symbolically buried two years before. He reveals his plan only to the unknown man, who is his grandfather, saying: "Because it's the truth, and Dad loved the truth [...] That he is dead" (ELIC, 321) and they finally dig up the coffin together, fill it with thousands of unsent letters of Thomas Sr. to his son and bury it again. This operation is an important act of liberation, that reveals the complementarity of the two characters united by the grief for the same person and finally able to reconcile, at least partially, with their past.²⁶

²⁶ Schwanecke, *Intermedial Storytelling*, 164.

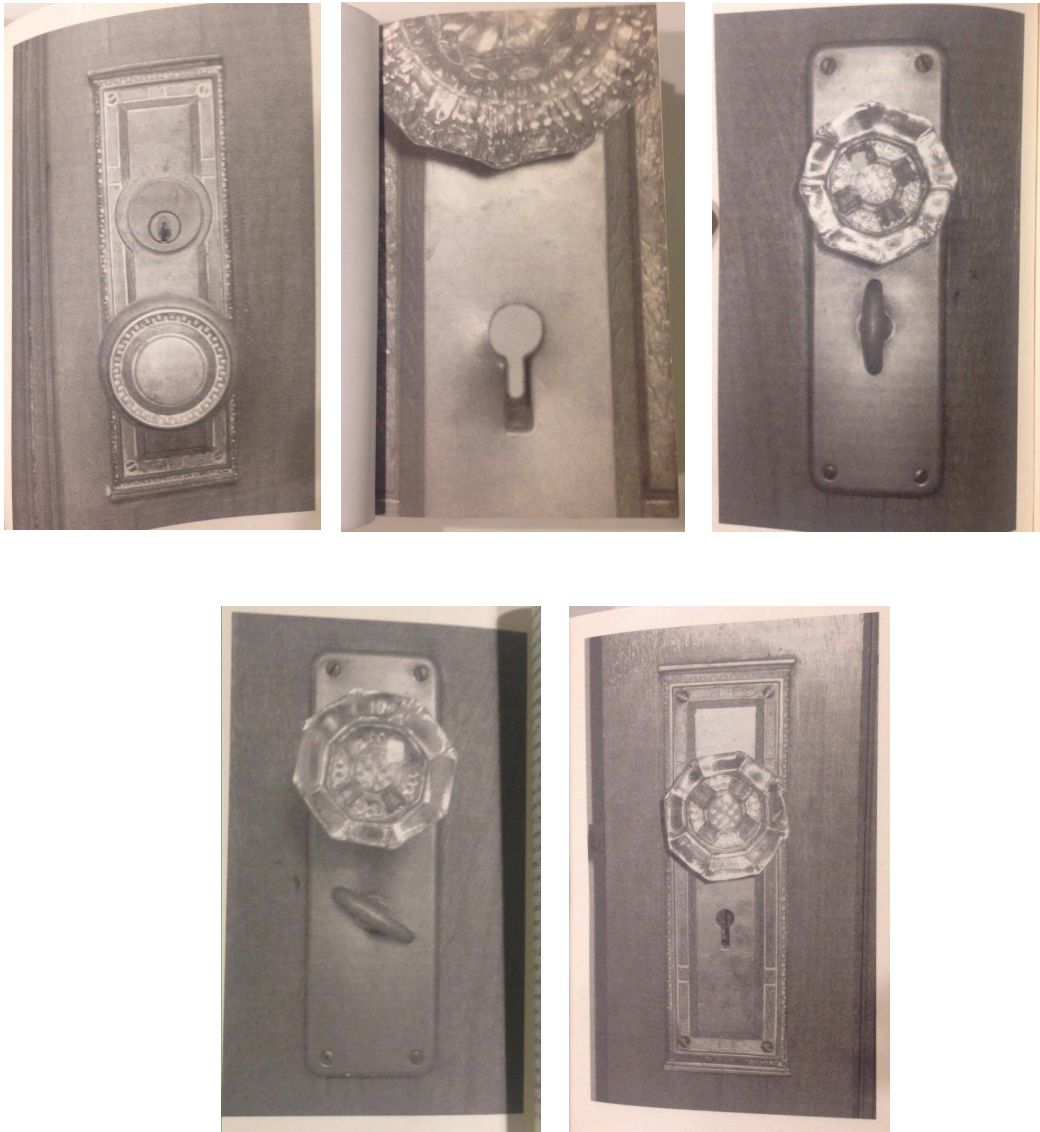


Fig. 5

4.5. The Use Of Typography

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Foer employs experimental typographic strategies, including pages with just one printed line, others containing colourful handwritten signatures, and some others with red-markings on the text, giving the impression that the novel is still in the process of being edited. In other pages the author includes lists, sequences of numbers instead of letters, reproductions of visiting cards and other features that emphasise the visual dimension during the reading process. Such

unconventional choices of typography and layout compromise the fluidity of the text and evidence the breakdown of language and representation; in some cases, indeed, the text is made incomprehensible and the reader has to work hard in order to achieve an understanding of the passage. In this way he is actively involved in the subjective experience of the protagonists' struggle to elaborate their traumatic experiences, becoming a sort of witness of the events.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen written verbal language has to be considered multimodal, since it does not consist of wording only, but has a visual side too, that is provided by typography and its characterising shapes and colours. In the attempt to create a sort of "grammar of typography," Kress and van Leeuwen identify the distinctive features of different typesettings (like curvature, orientation, slope, expansion, etc.) and their contextual potential meaning.²⁷ Typography in literary narratives is usually not much considered by readers, especially when it is set in conventional black-on-white typefaces.²⁸

The visual device of typesetting in *Extremely Loud* permits the reader to distinguish the three main narrative voices and to realize the communicative deficiency related to their post-traumatic condition. While the story of Oskar is presented through a conventional typeset in first-person narration, the grandmother's letters to Oskar present wide spaces between sentences and a lack of full stops. The grandfather, who becomes mute after the attacks of Dresden, communicates by writing on notepads and his messages are recognisable from the very irregular typesetting: sometimes there is just a single line per page. The impossibility to express a trauma finds his own expression in the gaps, the blank spaces and the disjunctions of meaning between the different media implied in the text.

²⁷ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (London: Arnold, 2001).

²⁸ Nina Nørgaard, "Multimodality and the Literary Text: Making Sense of Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," in *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, ed. Ruth Page (Routledge: New York and London, 2010): 115-127, 116.

When Oskar runs into a key enclosed in an envelope labelled “Black,” he contacts a series of people that could help him finding the right lock for that key, believing that it will somehow lead him to know something more about his father. A woman in an art supply store finds it “sort of interesting that the person wrote the word ‘black’ in red pen” (ELIC, 44) and shows Oskar a display of ten pens next to a pad of paper. On the following pages, readers are shown actual papers with handwritten scribbles in different colours, that stand out from the conventional typeface because of the irregular coloured typing and chaotic layout. Oscar, and thus the reader, is then given an explanation by the woman in the store:

“See,” she said, “most people write the name of the color of the pen they are writing with”[...] when someone tests a pen, usually he either writes the name of the color he’s writing with, or his name. So the fact that ‘Black’ is written in red makes me think that Black is someone’s name. [...] And I’ll tell you something else. [...] The b is capitalized. You wouldn’t usually capitalize the first letter of a color. [...]Black was written by Black” “What?” “Black was written by Black! I need to find Black!”(ELIC, 46)

Oskar realises that “Black” is probably a name and from that moment he starts looking for all the people living in New York named like that, hoping to find somebody linked to his father.

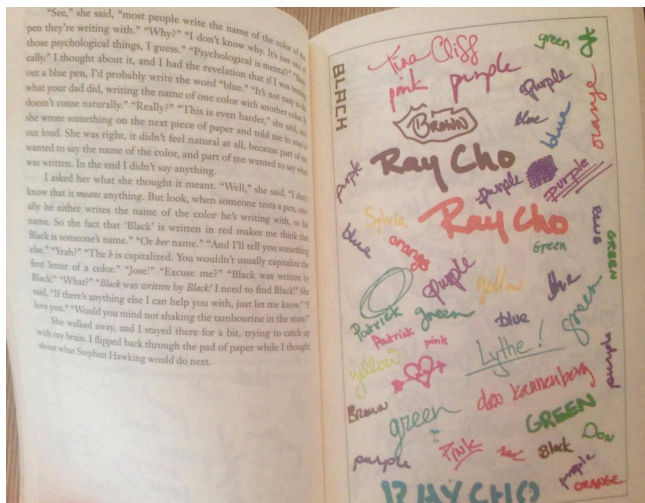


Fig. 6

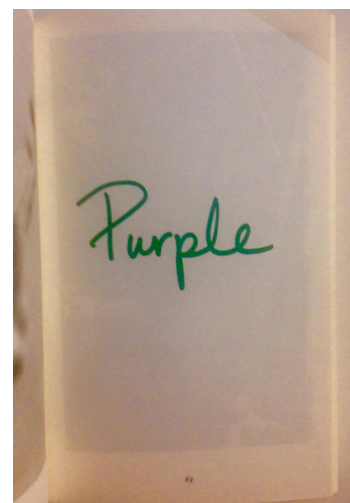


Fig. 7

Through the visual representation of the colourful scribbles, the reader can actually experience what Oskar observes once in the store, as the “typographic signifiers appear to invoke the material origin of their own coming into being so that we (along with Oskar) come to see them as indices that the people who tested the pens were actually there.”²⁹ Later in the novel, the reader comes across a page of Oskar’s notebook “Stuff that happened to me,” with nothing but the word “purple” written in green ink (Fig. 7), contradicting the idea, previously stated, that one usually writes the name of the colour he is using. In this way Foer establishes a tension between the visual dimension of the text and its literary content, emphasising the artificiality of language and its incapacity of representing reality. As writing the word “purple” in green ink appears to be logically incoherent and discordant to the reader, the same is with the view of falling bodies out of buildings, later visualised in the novel and remarked as absurd and incomprehensible.³⁰

In the four chapters entitled “My Feelings,” Oskar’s grandmother narrates her memories from her childhood to the failed marriage with Thomas Sr. in a sequence of letters addressed to Oskar. While in the first letters she recounts about her childhood and the meeting with her husband in the United States, she then reports her version of the 9/11 events, which are juxtaposed with the bombings of Dresden, where she lost all her family. The flow of narration is obstructed by the physical spacing between sentences, that actually underlines the fragmentary nature of her speech. Moreover, most of the sentences are short and repetitive, often reporting insignificant details that affect the narration with a monotonous effect. During the day of the attacks, Oskar’s grandmother was home watching the TV: “Maybe it sounds strange, but I didn’t feel anything when they showed the burning towers [...] I wasn’t even surprised” (ELIC, 224-5). But then, the destruction and the

²⁹ Ibid., 118.

³⁰ Julien Bringuier, “Fiction after 9/11: a Journey through the Desert of the Real” in *Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel*, ed. Madalena Gonzalez, (New Castle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010): 220-238, 226.

accompanying smoke and fire evokes traumatic memories from her childhood:

When the second plane hit, the woman who was giving the news started to
scream.
A ball of fire rolled out of the building and up.
One million pieces of paper filled the sky. They stayed there, like a ring around
the building. Like the rings of Saturn . . .
Your mother called.
Are you watching the news?
Yes.
Have you heard from Thomas?
No.
I haven't heard from him either. I'm worried.
Why are you worried?
I told you. I haven't heard from him.
But he's at the store.
He had a meeting in that building and I haven't heard from him.
I turned my head and thought I would vomit.
I dropped the phone, ran to the toilet, and vomited.
I wouldn't ruin the rug. That's who I am.
I called your mother back.

The description of the events is fragmentary and scattered. Through the repetition of short sentences, sometimes made up of one word only, and huge blank spaces in between, the author conveys the idea of the struggle of a traumatised mind in the attempt to articulate his feelings. The failure of verbal expression is then epitomised by the presence of a few blank pages interspersed in the novel, standing for the grandmother's incapacity of uttering her pain.

In Thomas Sr.'s narrative, made up of a group of letters entitled "Why I'm not where you are" and addressed to his son, a group of pages displays one line per page, which provides the reader with the idea of how he uses his

notebook and what it might be like to communicate with him, since he has lost the capacity of speech. From a visual point of view, the blank and unfilled space affects the visual experience of the reader, conveying the idea of silence and emptiness.³¹ In a following passage of Thomas Sr.'s narrative, he feels he has so much to express that he starts worrying there won't be enough space on his notebook: "There won't be enough pages in this book for me to tell you what I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?" (ELIC, 276). As Thomas expresses his concern, the text simultaneously proceeds towards an excess of words, that start overlapping while the type spacing gradually decreases until the text is no longer readable. According to Ganteau and Onega, the hyperbolic nature of language is used to represent trauma, since "the central characteristic of trauma is the unknownability and inassimilability by the conscious mind of the event that has triggered the traumatic condition, so that trauma always has an element that *remains in* excess of representation and understanding." For this reason, therefore "this excessiveness is also consistent with the nature of trauma, as trauma is characteristically registered as a surplus of affects that cannot be accounted for or channelled properly."³² At the end of the chapter, the text is so dense with words that the page becomes almost completely black (ELIC, 284). Even in the case of excess of words, legibility is suspended and the reader gradually loses the access to the text.

³¹ Nørgaard, "Multimodality and the Literary Text," 120-121.

³² Susana Onega and Jean Michel Ganteau, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature Series (Routledge: London and New York, 2013), 7.

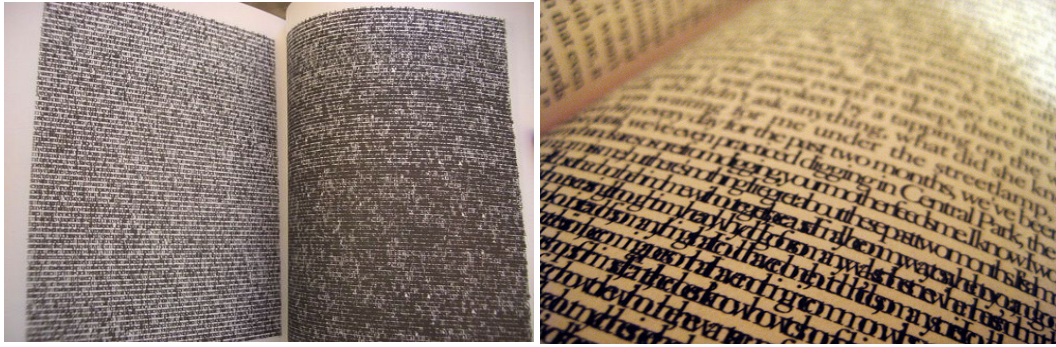


Fig. 8

The continuous effort of the characters of the novel to communicate finds its equivalent in the attempt of the reader to interpret their signals, while the experimental and visual narration, made of visible gaps and disjunctions, leads to the self-expression of trauma's incomprehensibility.

4.6. The falling man

4.6.1. Photographing Trauma on 9/11

To catch death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras can do, and pictures taken by photographers out in the field of the moment of (or just before) death are among the most celebrated and often reproduced of war photographs.

Susan Sontag,
Regarding the Pain of Others

On 11 September 2001 at 9.41 am, associated Press photographer Richard Drew took a photograph of a man falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center. The picture, representing a person falling headfirst after jumping from the tower, does not have an official title, but has become commonly known as "The Falling Man." Although a huge amount of similar falling-body pictures were taken by both professional and amateur photographers that day, Drew's one has become the most popular, as it was published on page seven of *The New York Times* and in hundreds of

newspapers around the world the day after the attack.³³ The picture, immediately criticised as an obscene and non-ethical representation of human death, rapidly disappeared from public circulation as result of a global media self-censorship.

Although humanity has mourned the loss of human life during 9/11, there is almost no visual record of actual death: those who died on the flights were invisible, while the people falling from the World Trade Center became the most visible victims of the tragedy. As journalist Anthony Lane wrote in the *New Yorker* two weeks afterward: “The most important, if distressing, images to emerge from those hours are not of the raging towers, or of the vacuum where they once stood; it is the shots of people falling from ledges.”³⁴

In a 2003 article for *Esquire* Tom Junod writes: “In the most photographed and videotaped day of the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus taboo – the only images from which American were proud to avert their eyes,”³⁵ opening a huge debate around the limits and ethics of representation of history. Jeffrey Melnick talks about a “complete media blackout,” affirming that “in the first few years after the attacks virtually no major cultural figure dared to represent the falling bodies of 9/11.”³⁶ Defined as “pornographic,” the images of falling people had been censored, since the act of witnessing such scene was considered shameful in civilised societies.

In *The Cruel Radiance*, Susie Linfield reacts to the arguments in support of censorship pointing out that the act of looking serves an ethical function, in particular when observing the photograph of the falling body: “Not until then did the true horror of the event, which had nothing to do with burning buildings and everything to do with burning people, begin to penetrate my numbness and shock.”³⁷ Linfield thus asserts that the act of looking is much

³³ Aaron Mauro, “The Languishing of the Falling Man: Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer’s Photographic History of 9/11,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57.3 (2011): 584-606, 584.

³⁴ Anthony Lane, “This is not a Movie,” *New Yorker* (September 24, 2001): 79.

³⁵ Tom Junod, “The Falling Man,” *Esquire Magazine*, September 3, 2003.

³⁶ Jeffrey Melnick, *9/11 Culture: Under Construction* (Chirchester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 80.

³⁷ Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 254.

more than a passive exploitative act. In his political analysis of contemporary art, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jaques Rancière affirms that we need to revise the idea of gazing as a simple voyeuristic act, since the “[e]mancipation [of the spectator] begins [...] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets.”³⁸ Photographs of injustice should drive people to respond with an ethical approach, since the identification with the image is the first premise to let the observer meditate upon ethical questions regarding pain and vulnerability.

Reflecting on the theme of falling, Allen Meek explains its specific significance for trauma theory, considering the role of technological media, in particular photography. As Walter Benjamin had argued, the camera is able to freeze and reveal virtual realities that were previously inaccessible to the human eye. Thus, in the case of 9/11 events, photography “can capture the multiple and complex movements of a body falling, second by second through space, in ways unavailable to unmediated human perception and to verbal description.”³⁹ However, the photograph of the falling man reveals a failure of reference: the individual is not recognisable and remains anonymous, giving way to feelings of frustration in the observers. Even if the photograph provides a visual account of the body in motion, it freezes the action drawing the attention to the unknowable quality of the suffering subject. In this way the photograph fails in the attempt to represent the experience and the trauma of falling.⁴⁰

Reflecting on the role of authors and intellectuals after 9/11, Baudrillard underlines, in his *The Spirit of Terrorism*,⁴¹ the difficulty to process and analyse contemporary events, which are constantly changing and developing:

³⁸ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York: Verso, 2009, p. 13.

³⁹ Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media*, 184.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, in Jean Baudrillard (Ed.), *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trad. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002): 1-34.

the whole play of history is disrupted by this event, but so, too are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time. While events were stagnating, you had to anticipate more quickly than they did. But when they speed up this much, you have to move more slowly – though without allowing yourself to be buried beneath the welter of words [...] and preserving intact the unforgettable incandescence of the images.⁴²

The initial literary reaction to 9/11 was completely antithetical to the writing of fiction, as writers were not able to put into words what had happened because of the overwhelming impossibility to comprehend and elaborate such destruction and tragedy. Discussing the impact of 9/11 on English authors of fiction, Jay McInerney affirms:

Most novelists I know went through a period of intense self-examination and self-loathing after the terrorist attacks.[...] For a while the idea of “invented characters” and alternate realities seemed trivial and frivolous and suddenly, horribly outdated. [...] I was so traumatised and my attention span was shot to such an extent that for months I was incapable of reading a novel, or anything much longer than a standard article in the New York Times, even though I was fortunate enough not to have lost any close friends in the attacks.⁴³

A few years after the initial reaction of repression towards the photographs of falling bodies, artists and authors have begun to reconsider such images by incorporating or engaging with them in their works. In this way, new meanings and contexts of reception have been provided giving way to numerous literary debates. The picture of the falling man has thus become a recurring metaphor of post 9/11 literature, provoking a series of questions regarding the visualisation of atrocities, the ethical implications and the personal experience of trauma. Jonathan Safran Foer has included the picture of the falling man in his novel, by conferring it new perspectives and possible interpretations; when asked in an interview about how he felt in writing on such emotional subject, Jonathan Safran Foer answered: “I think it’s a greater risk not to write about it. If you are in my position – a New

⁴² Ibid., 4.

⁴³ J. McInerney, “the Uses of Invention” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2005, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/17/fiction.vsnaiipaul> (Last access: June 7, 2016).

Yorker who felt the event very deeply and a writer who wants to write about things he feels deeply about – I think it’s risky to avoid what’s right in front of you.”⁴⁴

4.6.2. Trauma and Media

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close focuses on the crisis of memory and representation affecting the traumatised subjects in the era of mediatisation. Indeed, the triggering event at the base of the novel, the attack to the World Trade Center towers, is considered one of the most mediatised events of the contemporary time.

As Allen Meek underlines in his work *Trauma and Media*,⁴⁵ media actually play a fundamental role in the spread of trauma:

Because the experience of trauma is delayed and displaced, the location of trauma as a physical event is complicated by its repetition and rearticulating as a psychic event. This problem of where trauma is located is also endemic to various visual media, which represent and reconstitute events in contexts that are always removed in space and time, yet often experienced with a powerful sense of immediacy and involvement. Just as trauma is transmitted without reference to a clearly situated memory, media representations can become events in their own right, displacing access to any original context.⁴⁶

The complex relationship between a traumatic experience and its technological mediation to a larger community has become a focal point with the events of 9/11, that Meek considers an example of “virtual trauma.”⁴⁷ In this case, indeed, the notion of a collectively experienced trauma has acquired a new significance due to the central role assumed by media in redefining the witnessing community, indeed, as Meek underlines: “a collective identification with trauma is a feature of a society in which visual

⁴⁴ J. W. Shenk, “Arts: Living to Tell the Tale,” interview with Jonathan Safran Foer, *Mother Jones*, June 2005, available at: http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/2005/05/Safran_Foer.html (last access: June 20, 2016)

⁴⁵ Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

media define much of our relation to the past.”⁴⁸

Differently from the case of the Holocaust, which took decades for the trauma experienced by its survivors and their communities to be publicly recognised, the 9/11 events were “immediately traumatic.”⁴⁹ Images and videos of the attacks were viewed live worldwide and, as Allan Young has observed, the same media transmitting the events defined them as traumatic. In this way not only those who experienced the events directly, including their families and friends, became victims of a traumatic experience, but anyone who was made aware of the events through the media – TV, Internet, newspapers, telephone – was a potential participant of that traumatic occurrence. Moreover, the events of 9/11 were often described by media commentators as unfolding “like a movie,” recalling popular images of terrorist disasters produced in Hollywood. Thus, the mass circulation and the continuous screening of images of planes crashing into the towers has led to an apparent contradiction between the feelings provoked by a shocking and traumatic event and an already familiar scenario created through popular movies.

As Walter Benjamin has asserted in the first half of the XX century, film and photography have assumed the important function of shock absorbers in those societies characterised by the growth of visual stimuli and rapid social changes.⁵⁰ The production and the repetitive visualisation of images of catastrophes seem to make them more familiar and less disturbing to its viewers, becoming a sort of protective screen to their traumatic effects. However, as Meek points out, such events have stressed “the gap between the immediacy of the media images and the ability of the public to make sense of the events, or even to believe what they were seeing.”⁵¹

As Joshua Hirsch affirms:

If photography – in its ability both to reproduce a moment of vision and to be itself mechanically reproduced and disseminated endlessly

⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁵⁰ Meek, *Trauma and Media*, 173.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

throughout society – shattered the traditional “aura” of art and replaced it with a new politics of the image, as Walter Benjamin argued, then one of the effects of the new politics is the potentially endless reproduction and dissemination of trauma.⁵²

The continuous reproduction of traumatic media images might lead to the uncontrolled spreading of trauma, without any chance of collective elaboration. Such dissemination is understood by Hirsch as the literal transmission of trauma through, for example, the Holocaust films and the consequent identification with the visualised cases of collective suffering. As Hirsch points out, trauma is connected to a crisis of representation, produced by the dissociation occurring between what the mind perceives in front of traumatic visual narratives, and the impossibility to comprehend it. Even if incapable to elaborate the visualised trauma, its memory is preserved “intact and unassimilated”⁵³ in the mind.

4.6.3. The Flip Book

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar’s personal understanding of the tragic events is deeply bound to a collection of photographs and documents held in a notebook that he calls “Stuff That Happened to Me.” Among random images taken from newspapers, books or photographs, one particular image appears many times: a black and white picture of a man falling from the World Trade Center. This photograph becomes the focal point of the novel’s memorable epilogue.

The picture of the falling body appears twice in Oskar’s personal notebook (ELIC, 59, 62) and the latter one is zoomed in (Fig. 10); a third similar image can be found later in the novel during Oskar’s visit to his psychologist, while a long sequence of the same picture visually concludes the novel.

⁵² Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage – Film, Trauma and the Holocaust*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

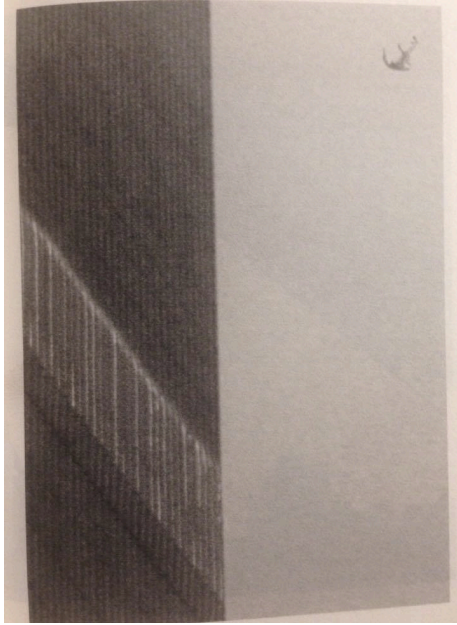


Fig. 9

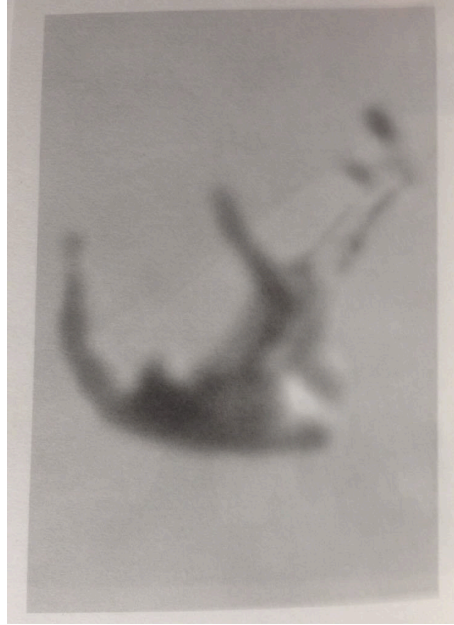


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

While searching for details about his father's death, Oskar feels exasperated since the public sources for information have been blocked in USA as a service to the families of the dead. Instead, he finds videos of falling men from the World Trade Center towers on a foreign site, and thus he is suddenly forced to face with the cruelty of 9/11 that his country tries to ignore:

I found a bunch of videos on the Internet of bodies falling. They were on a Portuguese site, where there was all sorts of stuff they weren't showing here, even though it happened here... Whenever I want to try to learn about how Dad died, I have to go to a translator program [...] It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know

things that I can't, because it happened *here*, and happened *to me*, so shouldn't it be *mine*? (ELIC, 256)

While it is clear how the victims who were working on the floors where the planes stuck died, it is much more difficult to determine the fate of those who were on other floors of the WTC. The frustration felt by Oskar, as well as by a huge amount of friends and relatives of the victims, is thus provoked by the impossibility of an accurate knowledge of how his loved one actually died:

If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors... and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building [...] There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his. (ELIC, 256)

Even if Oskar imagines different possible ways his father died, the only actual images of death that he finds are those of the falling bodies, but the repeated return to those pictures do not really help him to comprehend what happened to him. The visual evidence provided by the images do not produce the knowledge Oskar is looking for.⁵⁴ In the desperate attempt to recognise somehow his father, the protagonist prints a close-up version of the picture (Fig. 10), that is still blurry, but apparently seems to reveal more details about the man's identity:

I printed out the frames from the Portuguese video and examined them extremely closely. [...] There's one body that could be him. It's dressed like he was, and when I magnify it until the pixels are so big that it stops looking like a person, sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can't. It's just me wanting it to be him. (ELIC, 257)

While imaging that the falling body in the picture could be his father, Oskar realises that his wish to know what really happened is influencing him to the point of misreading a blurry and unclear image (Fig. 10): "I started thinking about the pixels in the image of the falling body, and how the closer you looked, the less you could see" (ELIC, 293). Through the enlargement of the

⁵⁴ Laura Frost, "Still Life. 9/11 Falling Bodies," in *Literature after 9/11* Eds. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge): 180-208, 190.

most emblematic photo of 9/11, Foer problematizes the traditional dualism of visibility and knowledge: the bigger the photo, the less is visible. The frustrated attempt to access the image increases the reader/viewer's desire to see more, but the result is a block of the gaze and the personal realisation that certain things are beyond comprehension, both on a visual and textual level. The impossibility to clearly decipher a photograph that, once manipulated, becomes even more blurry and enigmatic, seems to confirm what Roland Barthes affirmed in a famous passage of *Le Chambre Clair*:

I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I retard, in order to have time to *know* at last. The Photograph justifies this desire, even if it does not satisfy it [...] I live in the illusion that it suffices to clean the surface of the image in order to accede to *what is behind*: to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side [...]. Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance.⁵⁵

The difficulty to cope with so much brutality forces Oskar to read images of death through an imaginative counter-narrative, that serves as an escapist way to treat traumatic events. The presence of pictures representing flock of birds in the novel is strictly related to the photo of the falling man: not only does the blurred figure of the human body resemble the shape of a bird, but it lets Oskar imagine birdseed shirts that could help people in emergencies. Being aware that jumping out from one of the towers could be a possible explanation to his father's death, Oskar dreams of birds that could carry down safely those who had to jump off a building.

At the end of the novel and after many researches, Oskar finds out that the key was mistakenly left in the vase and thus not meant for him, but for another child from another father. The sense of frustration and despair permeating Oskar, his longing for a reversal of the events and the nostalgia for his father and their life together, culminate in the final pages of the novel:

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida – Reflection on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1982), 99-100.

Finally I found the picture of the falling body.
Was it Dad?
Maybe.
Whoever it was, it was somebody.
I ripped the pages out of the book.
I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last.
When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky.
And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of.
Dad would've left his messages backwards, until the machine was empty, and the plane would've flown backward away from him all the way to Boston.
He would've taken the elevator to the street and pressed the button for the top floor.
He would've walked backward to the subway, and the subway would've gone backward through the turnstile, then swiped his Metrocard backward, then walked home backward as he read the New York Times from right to the left.
He would've spit coffee into his mug, unbrushed his teeth, and put hair on his face with a razor.
He would've gotten back into bed, the alarm would've rung backwards, he would've dreamt backward.
Then he would've gotten up again at the end of the night before the worst day.
[...]
We would have been safe.
(ELIC, 325-6)

The last words of the novel precede the final flip-book⁵⁶ of fifteen pictures, representing the figure of the falling man previously found in Oskar's notebook. Oskar decides to print some photograms taken from the video of the falling man and to organise them in backwards sequence, so that the body close to the tower seems to move gradually from the bottom to the top of the sky, until it disappears.⁵⁷ This final group of images recalls Grandma's dream

⁵⁶ Flip-books were invented around 1860s and became popular optical devices simulating movement and animation. By scrolling rapidly the pages, figures appear animated and create a narrative, that is nothing other than the prelude to cinema.

⁵⁷ In *ELIC* the sequence of the falling figure is mentioned in the copyright page as a "photo illustration based on a photo by Lyle Owerko." The original image, contained in Owerko's collection *And No Birds Sang*, is in colour and the falling man is much smaller, but it is evident that the person is falling with his feet first and open arms. Lyle Owerko became famous by providing the cover image for the September 14, 2001, special issue of *Time*, representing the instant the south tower was hit by United Airlines flight 175. In Foer's novel the image of the falling man reproduced on page 205 and in the final flip book is a modified version of Owerko's photograph contained in his collection *And No Birds Sang*.

about the bombs released on Dresden flying back into the airplanes to prevent the destruction: "In my dream, all of the collapsed ceiling re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward" (ELIC, 306-7) and seem to visually mirror Oskar's last words: "We would have been safe" (ELIC, 326).⁵⁸

The author does not provide any explanation about his choice to create a reverse flip-book and put it at the end of the novel, but the reader is given the chance to actively participate in the constitution of his own understanding. Mitchum Huhels points out that the flipbook is an embodiment of performativity, as the main function of the text as a whole, describing it as "performatively coextensive with Oskar's journal." He then affirms:

Oskar thinks he will be healed if he can reverse time. While this reversal is clearly just so much wishful thinking, its temporal form – the flip-book's cinematic, real-time performance of motion – proves crucial to Oskar's healing process. He must relegate the event to the past by embracing time's forward progress into the future.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Martin Amis has introduced the narrative strategy of time reversal in his novel *Time's Arrow: or the Nature of Offence* (1991) to represent the impact of trauma on the individual's mind. The story narrates the life of a Nazi war doctor backwards, from death to birth, including a period spent at Auschwitz's concentration camps. In the reversed version of reality, the doctor heals the sick and the genocide becomes a miracle of creation. Time's reversal does not only affect the chronological order of life, but also the sphere of morality. Amis' narrative strategy alters the common perception of time experienced by the reader, who feels disoriented and deprived of the usual ease of reading, but, at the same time, is actively involved in the creation of meaning.

⁵⁹ Mitchum Huehls, "Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11's Timely Traumas," in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. Ann Kenniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (London: Routledge, 2007): 43-59, 52.

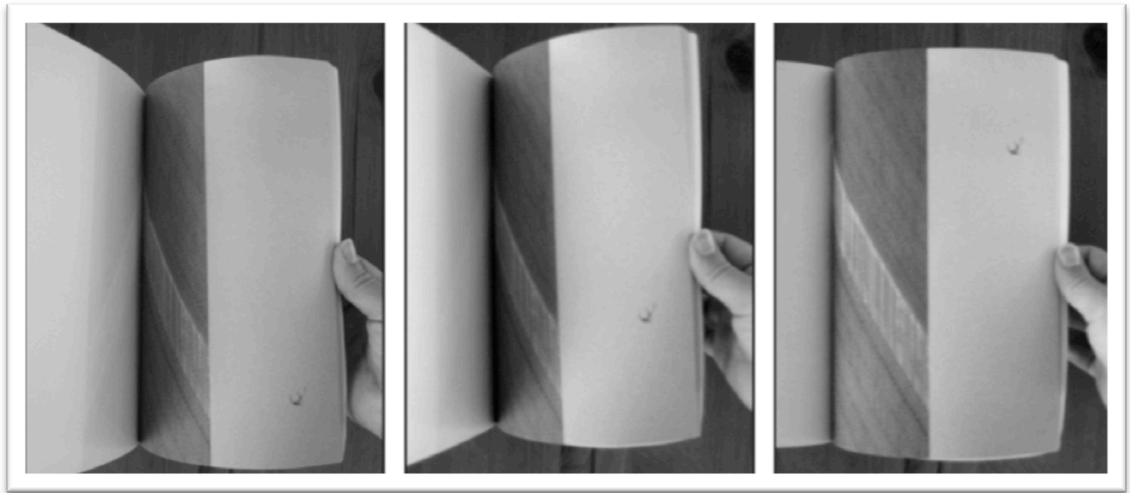


Fig. 12

By flipping the pages quickly, the reader is directly involved with the falling-man image and experiences its upwards movement, thus sharing Oskar's wish to bring his father safely back into the tower. In the same way, since the author has not included numbers on the pages of this section, the reader can decide to flip the pages in reverse, giving way to the tragic falling movement of the body to death. As Chris Vanderwees points out: "In a sense, there is no beginning or end to the flipbook, only the suggestion of a continuous cycle of floating and falling, forwards and backwards."⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Chris Vanderwees, "Photographs of Falling Bodies," 188.

CONCLUSION

The critical analysis of the novels presented in this work has relied on the most recent critical studies on intermediality, and has aimed at demonstrating how both photographs and verbal texts constitute indispensable elements in the development of narration and its signification. Depending on the way photos and literary texts are combined, they can contextualise, explain or contradict each other and attain different levels of meaning. In particular, this work has shown the relevance of the photo-textual practice for the exploration of issues of memory related to traumatic events, where images become fundamental traces of the past, which affect the characters' perception of their current reality. In the hybrid texts considered, the interaction between photographs and verbal text has revealed a general disruption and destabilisation of the narratives, which has subsequently given way to a multiplicity of interpretations. In this context, the viewers/readers come to assume the position of witnesses and engage in an elaborate process of meaning-making.

As the three analysed novels show, photographs and verbal texts are skilfully intertwined in the literary narration of personal traumatic memories. Such inter-textual engagement with the past can be defined as *postmemory*, that is, according to Hirsch, the memory of an event of mass atrocity that is "delayed, indirect, secondary."¹ This affects the cultural memory of generations to come, who have not experienced the catastrophic events directly, but are affected by them as if they were real personal memories. As members of the generations *after*, their memories are shaped by means of the stories and images they have grown up with, whose overwhelming effects continue also in their present life.

The protagonists of Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*, all belong to the so called hinge generation,

¹ Hirsch, 1997.

Conclusion

a term that identifies people who have received or inherited traumatic memories from their relatives and are affected by them in the development of their personality. While Riggs's protagonist, Jacob, discovers he is the nephew of a Jewish man escaped from the Nazi persecutions, the main characters of Seiffert's novel find themselves dealing with the Holocaust events in almost an unconscious way in the different stories; lastly, Foer's novel presents the confluence of two dramatic events, the Holocaust and the 9/11 terroristic attacks in the life of characters belonging to two different generations in the same family. In these different cases of negotiation with traumatic memories and experiences, the medium of photography emerges as a crucial instrument of mediation with the spectres of the past. More specifically, photographs act as "performances of memory"¹ providing dynamic interconnections between memory, the personal and the public sphere.

In *The Dark Room*, photographs trigger negative epiphanies for each of the three main characters, who find themselves reacting to something that is not shown in the pictures, but located beyond the frame. Photographs, therefore, become important points of memory carrying a "spectral *punctum*"² of the past, that is not visually present, but appeals to the viewers' consciousness. A very similar *punctum*, evidenced in a photograph representing a young girl died of leukaemia, has been the starting point for the conception of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs. The author's recognition of the powerful meaning of anonymous photographs accompanied by written words led him to choose a bunch of more than forty anonymous old pictures and embed them into a novelistic framework, creating the effect of a peculiar photo-album. Such images come to represent a fundamental aesthetic space for the construction of the trope of otherness, which triggers feelings of fear and aberration in the protagonist, as well as in the reader. In Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

¹ Annette Kuhn, "Memory Texts," 298.

² Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium," 298.

Conclusion

photographs, together with the unconventional typography adopted, represent a visual device for the articulation of personal trauma, which is rendered as a discontinuous experience made of glimpses and fragmentary visions. Dealing with the events of 9/11, the novel focuses on the crisis of memory in a visual era in which the media play a fundamental role in spreading the impact of trauma all over the world. While the first two novels are concerned with personal memories related to the Holocaust, whose traumatic effect took decades for its survivors and their communities to be publicly recognised, Foer's novel deals with the 9/11 events, that were immediately perceived as traumatic. The image of the falling body, known worldwide as the symbol of the tragedy, becomes a personal tool in the healing process of the protagonist, who creates a counter-narrative displaying a last feeling of hope. In this case, the barthesian *punctum*, the very personal detail wounding someone's gaze, has shifted into the dramatic awareness of an entire society, who has witnessed the vision of certain images and has been traumatised by them.

The critical analysis of the novels has highlighted the relevance of the photo-textual narration in the reader's active engagement with the traumatic experiences of the main characters. Indeed, the use of multimodal devices stimulates a high level of interaction between the narrator and the reader, who assumes the role of co-witness of the events. As Horstkotte affirms: "When photography and text are juxtaposed [...], the reader becomes to a large extent responsible for their integrative interpretation so that the role of the recipient is self-consciously foregrounded."³ As a matter of fact, the presence of two distinctive modes of narration, the photographic and the textual one, creates gaps of meaning that the reader is actively called to fill in. Accordingly, the novels considered in this thesis can be regarded as texts that "talk as witness[es]"⁴ and call readers to actively participate in the process of recovering.

³ Silke Horstkotte, "Photo-Text Topographies: Photography and the Representation of Space in W. G. Sebald and Monika Maron," in *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 49-78, 62.

⁴ Kacandes, *Talk Fiction*, 24.

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