

**REVISITED MENTAL PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE PAST IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S
OUT OF THIS WORLD.
RESHAPED STORIES, RESHAPED MEMORIES**

ELISABETA SIMONA CATANĂ
POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest, FILS–DCLM

Abstract: *The essay analyses the concept of the past in Graham Swift's "Out of this World", a novel organized like a collection of revisited mental photographs. It associates the characters' piecemeal accounts with their mental photographs of the past, evincing their vision upon their remembered past experiences and upon their perceived reality. The past is presented as mental photographs which turn into fragmented stories.*

Key words: *different perspectives, mental photograph, the past, story.*

1. Introduction

Investigating a theme approached by most British writers of the 20th century, this essay focuses on Graham Swift's technique of presenting the past piecemeal, as if it were a photograph taken from the narrators' perspective in *Out of this World* (1988). It argues that in Graham Swift's novel, the art of photography seems to have influenced the form of literary fiction, as we witness a narrative strategy which turns the readers into the creative interpreters of the story-like snapshots, putting them together in order to make sense of them. Piecemeal narrative, piecemeal identity and piecemeal time are represented like snapshots turned into a literary work. The characters' mental photographs, which look like the Lego pieces of the story we have to reorder in our minds, are alternatively introduced to us in a simple postmodernist discourse.

Graham Swift's novel, *Out of this World*, blends the common points of literary fiction form and the art of photography. We are introduced to Harry, Sophie, Joe and Anna's memories presented piecemeal like snapshots. We are indirectly invited to put the pieces of their narratives together to make a comprehensible, coherent story. Their piecemeal remembrances and reported stream of consciousness are the separate parts of the novel presented alternatively: Harry's 17 parts, Sophie's 16 parts, Joe's 1 part, Anna's 1 part.

This essay analyses Harry and Sophie's accounts and their perspectives on the past. Anna's account is in fact a letter addressed to Harry, focusing on her vision on the concept of happiness and paradise. Joe's account is a snapshot of his married life, of his vision on happiness associated with enjoying life to the full.

The novel starts with Harry's account of his remembrances of the last moments he spent with his father before dying in a terrorist bomb attack. Harry's first lines of the novel refer to his father as if he were an ordinary person, a cold person, devoid of feelings. He recalls having spent the evening together, watching the first men on the moon on TV, having just returned from Vietnam as a professional photographer and having felt that "nothing was real" (Swift 1988:12). An experienced photographer, Harry Beech finds it easy to tell us what

he is haunted by: a painful past, a tormented soul longing for *out-of-this-world* love, purity and beauty. He associates his present age with the Bronze Age and the Iron Age due to the development of technology, of weapons to the detriment of empathy, love and understanding of the mere essence of life which longs for *out-of-this world*-liness. The novel ends with his desire to evade into “the age of air” (Swift 1988:208), which cannot be depicted by a photograph. He enjoys flying as a way of evading from the rigid world he had to cope with in order to carry out his duty in his family and at work, and in order to survive a war. Harry symbolizes the artist *par excellence*, longing for a timeless aesthetic beauty beyond his present technological Age.

The Age of Photography gives the postmodernist writer of *Out of this World* an enhanced ability to present fictional reality piecemeal. It upholds the Postmodernist principle of multiple perspectives on represented reality which is to be deciphered by the readers’ vision and experienced analysis. It gives rise to a simulacrum of reality turned into a literary work wherein the past is viewed in different hues and shades according to the narrators’ perspective. It is this Age of Photography which excludes the concept of *grand narratives* and imposes snapshots as stories and evidence of represented truth and reality. It is an emblem of Postmodernism turning the readers into interpreters and foretellers of what might become of the given piecemeal reality evinced by the narrators’ camera pictures. The viewer’s interpretation builds the story behind the photograph.

The Age of Postmodernism is the Age of Photography wherein, according to Harry, “it’s no longer easy to distinguish the real from the fake, or the world on the screen from the world off it” (Swift 1988:188). Harry turns into a theorist of this age, explaining the shift from a historical representation of reality to a recorded limited representation of it, to what he calls “the new myth of its own authentic-synthetic photographic memory” (Swift 1988:189). Values have been reconsidered in the Age of Photography, the simulacrum replacing authentic reality and events. In *Out of this World*, the simulacrum of reality is presented as natural by Harry the photographer: “The camera first, then the event. The whole world is waiting just to get turned into film. And not just the world but the goddam moon as well” (Swift 1988:13). Literary fiction in Graham Swift’s *Out of this World* seems to be the result of what camera shooting implies: piecemeal snapshots of the characters’ vision upon their remembered past experiences, upon their perceived reality and future prospects.

2. From Photographs to Stories. The Past as a Photograph

Since stories are nothing but one’s glance cast upon one’s experienced reality, they can be associated with photographs taken from a particular perspective. Similar to a story, a photograph does not reveal a complex objective reality. It just illustrates bits and pieces of a reality captured from the photographer’s perspective. Stories and photographs present the narrator’s and the photographer’s perspective upon reality whose hues and shades are left to readers and onlookers to interpret. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon (2002:117) considers photography “the paradigm of the postmodern”, evincing its objective and subjective manners of representation, and what she calls its “paradoxes”:

Postmodern photographic work, in particular, exploits and challenges both the objective and the subjective, the technological and the creative. (...) But since I am here defining postmodernism in terms of its contradictions, the inherently paradoxical medium of photography seems even more apt than television to act as the paradigm of the postmodern. As Susan Sontag has argued at length, photography both records and justifies, yet also imprisons, arrests, and falsifies time; it at once certifies and refuses experience; it is submission to and an assault upon reality; it is ‘a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete’ (1977:179). Postmodern photographic art is both aware of and willing to exploit all of these paradoxes in order to effect its own paradoxical use and abuse of conventions – and always with the aim of disabuse (Hutcheon 2002:117-118).

In Graham Swift's novel, the past is represented as a collection of mental photographs taken by the characters telling their stories. They ponder on and speak of their past experiences in order to get rid of their obsessions and traumas. Their words draw the picture of the past they reveal to us, of their identity, which is nothing but another photograph. To enlarge upon the idea that words can build up a detailed picture of a certain reality, in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie (1998) remarks that

recently there has been renewed interest in the interaction of words and images, not only as multimedia juxtapositions, but in the eckphrastic [sic] power of the written word to construct pictures. (...). The idea that language is not adequate to express everything in the human mind (...) characterises a distinctly modern crisis in the relative ability of words to document visual experience. (Currie 1998:127)

In Graham Swift's *Out of this World*, the tension between words and images exists at the level of the reader's perception. We perceive the organization of the novel, the characters' short alternative accounts as if they were snapshots either taken by professional photographers like Harry or by patients like Sophie, who goes through mental therapy by telling the story of her past. She just remembers bits and pieces of her past, presenting it piecemeal as if it were a photograph. The novel does not signal any end to their stories, leaving their pictures to our interpretation. We perceive their storylines as an ongoing struggle with memories for their catharsis.

The struggle with memories, which hide a tormenting past reality, is suggested by Harry's use of discourse strategies that convey the tension between our vision upon reality and reality itself. Thus, in his twelfth account, Harry questions the concepts of happiness and love by exclamatory sentences reminding us of Hamlet's famous words, "to be, or not to be" (Shakespeare 1982:812): "To be happy in Nuremberg! To fall in love in Nuremberg!" (Swift 1988:133); "To dance in Nuremberg" (Swift 1988:136). These exclamations are ironical and regretful for a devastating past Harry struggles with at a mental level. He met his wife in Nuremberg, fell in love in this city but lost his happiness once his beloved wife died.

The characters' mental photographs and stream of consciousness constitute what Patricia Waugh (1984:28-34) defines as "frames" whose analysis is the readers' job for their illumination. According to Waugh (1984:29-30), "frames" are part and parcel of "metafictional" works:

Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins. (...) Analysis of frames is the analysis (...) of the organization of experience. When applied to fiction it involves analysis of the formal conventional organization of novels. (Waugh 1984:29-30)

The ultimate meaning of the literary frame is always subjective, the same as all art is. Its purpose is to give food for thought to the readers for their personal interpretations. Harry's framed stories evoke his memories briefly the same as snapshots following his stream of consciousness. For instance, in his third account, he talks about his mother's death at his birth and about his cold relationship with his father who offered him a camera as "an emblem of guilt" (Swift 1988:30) for his mother's death. In the same account, he talks about his marriage to Anna and how she died on Mount Olympus. In his fourth account, he confesses his love for flying and for Jenny whom he sees as "out of this world" (Swift 1988:36). In his fifth account, Harry goes back to his memories of his father, Robert Beech, the owner of BMC, "Beech Munitions" (Swift 1988:48), a man concerned more with his military duties than with his

parental duties. In his eighth account, Harry Beech invites his audience to look at him as if he were a living photograph:

Now look at Harry Beech. Former rover of the world, former witness to its traumas and terrors. (...) Now look at Harry Beech, sitting at his kitchen table (...). He is writing a letter. Struggling with the words. (Swift 1988:82)

Then, he addresses Sophie, trying hard to find his words to announce his intention of getting married at sixty-four years old. In his ninth account, Harry introduces us to a series of photographs that he enlarges upon, as if they were framed stories. Photographs turn into stories which we have to fill in to make them comprehensible.

Cut to 1941. A rare, brief clip of Robert Beech in a factory yard with Mr. Winston Churchill (...).
Cut to R.B. with Max Beaverbrook and Royal Ordnance directors outside sandbagged offices of the Ministry of Supply.
Cut, by way of photo-library material, to 1875 (...).
Cut to period photos of: the new ('Robert Beech') Wing (Amputees' Rehabilitation Centre) of the King George Hospital at Guildford, Surrey, opened 1925 (...).
Cut to village children on the lawn at Hyfield, mid 1930s (local press material). Cut to local worthies with R.B. on same lawn, same period. Cut to general view of the house and grounds. (Swift 1988:89-91)

Harry and Sophie's stories investigate a cold past they would do their best to get rid of. The two characters reject the technological past from different perspectives. On the one hand, Harry gives up photography, associated with a cold piece of technology, with a simulacrum of a complex reality, and, on the other hand, Sophie does not allow cameras in her house. Thus, she intends to put an end to a haunting past associated with her father's hobby and job which separated them after her mother's death. Besides cameras, she does not accept toy-guns in her house, as they remind her of her beloved grandfather, who owned a munitions company and who died in a bomb explosion. Thus, she mentally rejects the negative aspects of her past suggestively represented by toy-guns and cameras. Unlike Harry, Sophie, his daughter, goes through therapy and makes a big effort to tell Doctor K the story of her childhood, of her marriage to Joe, of her mother's death, getting lost into resentments and hatred for her father. She can hardly find the words for turning her memories into a story. If Harry aspires to "the age of air" (Swift 1988:208) "out of this world", Sophie aspires to revisiting her past, the Old World (England) she left after she got married. She starts her first account by explaining to Doctor K that she hopes to belong to "the new world" (Swift 1988:15) – a cathartic world to be filled in with her memories of the past. She revives her memories of the past, whereas Joe, her husband, "sells (...) just the same dream only in reverse: golden memories of the Old World" (Swift 1988:15). Sophie views the past as a shelter of her childhood memories and enlarges upon this fact:

Yet if you want to know, that's how I used to think of Hyfield once. I had this thing about the past. It used to be a good refuge, once, the past. (Swift 1988:65-66)

To go through therapy successfully, the doctor advises her "to learn how to tell", as "it's telling that reconciles memory and forgetting" (Swift 1988:74). The doctor implies that through storytelling we fill the gaps of our memories, healing our mental wounds by pondering on them and by finding a meaning to the tormenting past. Living in "the land of cancelled memories", "the land without a past", "the land of amnesty", "the land of the gun" (Swift 1988:16), as Sophie describes America, she has to make a big effort to share her memories of the past. She recalls coming to America in 1972, giving birth to twins, and having short affairs. She addresses Doctor K at the beginning of most of her accounts, asking

him questions and answering them herself. Sometimes she has a dialogue with Doctor K whose questions help her to refresh her memory and to narrate the story. She cannot describe Harry, her father, as she has never been close to him. She tells the doctor how her parents met and got married and why she thought that Harry had been disinherited. She remembers that her father used to protect her and to love her, and that her mother disappeared on Mount Olympus and was never found. She explains that her father started going away, leaving her with her grandfather whom she came to love more. Revisiting one's memories of the past in order to come to terms with the present is the key theme of this novel. The photograph of the present is blurred by the photograph of the past which awaits our artistic interpretation.

3. The Author / Photographer in Graham Swift's *Out of this World*

Postmodernist authors like Graham Swift, or Peter Ackroyd (throughout his literary work), view the past as the essence of the present. *Out of this World* offers a subjective representation of the past associated with the cold technological age the main characters would like to escape from and do away with. The photograph of the past blurs the photograph of the present which illustrates the characters' visions, expectations and hopes in Graham Swift's novel. The past prevails over the present, shaping the characters' identity and outlining their vision. They are defined by their past, whose complex essence cannot be depicted by mere photographs no matter how objective they might look. We are more than the image we see in a mirror or in a photograph. Thus, in his fifteenth account, Harry remarks that the world, which can be associated with literary fiction or with a photograph, must draw its essence and meaning from the past, which is its shadow.

The photographer's role, which can be associated with the author's role, is viewed differently by the characters of Graham Swift's novel. Thus, Mrs. Evans, whose words Harry remembers, takes the photographer's job for a historian's job. The distinction between fact and vision does not exist for her. Harry recalls Mrs. Evans telling him that he

should take up 'the photography' again. People ought to know about 'those things'. They ought to know. Someone else can take the pictures now. (Swift 1988:20)

Mrs. Evans takes photographs for objective evidence of historical reality. She does not view photographs as pieces of art. On the other hand, Harry admits that photography is a simulacrum whose author must be detached from:

A photographer is neither there nor not there, neither in nor out of the thing. If you are in the thing it's terrible, but there aren't any questions, you do what you have to do and you don't even have time to look. But what I'd say is that someone has to look. Someone has to be in it and step back too. Someone has to be a witness (Swift 1988:49).

When you put something on record, when you make a simulacrum of it, you have already partly decided you will lose it. (Swift 1988:55)

He further implies that photography should be more than a framed object evincing a certain reality. It "should be about what you cannot see" (Swift 1988:55), remembering that Jenny "wants [him] to take 'real photographs' again" (Swift 1988:55). He suggests that photographs should reflect the history of the past. Defining good photography as authentic and devoid of prejudice, Harry, the symbol of the postmodernist author, attempts to demonstrate that the photographer should possess the art of imposing his vision upon the things to be represented:

The great value of photography was its actuality, its lack of prejudicial tact, its very power of intrusion (Swift 1988:117).

The problem is your field of vision. (...). The problem is selection (...), the frame, the separation of the image from the thing. The extraction of the world from the world. The problem is where and how you draw the line. (Swift 1988:119)

He further defines the photograph as an “object” associated with “something defined, with an edge” (Swift 1988:120) the same as a book, questioning its power of depicting the complex reality.

Each photo is the photographer’s and the viewer’s vision upon what it depicts, just as stories are what the readers make of them through their interpretations. Stories can be interpreted differently according to the different readers’ culture and experience. Harry concludes that photos are pieces of art: “a photo is a reprieve, an act of suspension, a charm” (Swift 1988:122). At this point, we can notice a tension and a contradiction in Harry’s theory of photography as, on the one hand, it is viewed as an objective thing in a frame we can see and touch and, on the other hand, a piece of art with a particular vision. The same contradiction marks literary fiction which is always subject to the readers’ transformation through interpretation, decoding and revaluing.

4. Conclusion

In Graham Swift’s novel the past is recreated by the characters’ stream of consciousness and piecemeal narratives which look like their mental photographs. Their stories and memories are reshaped as snapshots. The novel revolves around the characters’ mental photographs of the past presented alternatively, without indicating a particular end of their stories and experiences, leaving them to our free interpretation. The past bears the hallmark of their vision upon its events. It is subjective and open to interpretation, the same as photographs are.

By pondering on the past, the two main characters, Harry and Sophie, acknowledge their present identity, prospects and perspectives. Both narrators, Harry and Sophie, view the act of telling the stories of their past as a cathartic act meant to take them out of the rigid world of technology their present is associated with. They make a big effort to bridge the gap between the objective cold reality of their present and the subjective reality of their mind and recollections. The past becomes a present reality. It is brought to life similar to a collection of mental photographs taken from the narrators’ different perspectives which we have to illuminate and make sense of.

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Note on the author

Elisabeta Simona CATANĂ is a Lecturer of English at the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Romania. She holds a PhD in Philology awarded by the West University of Timișoara in 2010. Her published papers include essays on literary topics, English language teaching and e-learning.