Out of the Dark Room: Photography and Memory in Rachel Seiffert's Holocaust Tales

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Photography plays a crucial role in Seiffert's debut novel, *The Dark Room* (2001). Not only does it contribute significantly to rediscovering Germany's traumatic past, but it also shares certain common responses with the text: the *narrative of the self*, the *album aesthetics*, *memory*, the *anti-heroic* and the notion of *open work*. When applied to Seiffert's novel, these categories allow not only for new insights into the representation of subjectivities but also for several possible textual readings. This study focuses on Seiffert's concern for the visual, which lingers in a liminal zone between history and memory and reflects a post-Holocaust crisis of representation. The writer rejects the value of using history and documentary photography to handle German Holocaust memory and finds alternative representational approaches to dealing with it in her text. Particular attention is given to the fragmentation of time and space, the self as part of the narrative, the uncovering of unconscious impulses through the visual, the protagonists as anti-heroes, the novel as open work and, most importantly, the concept of *post-memory*, introduced in the representation of history, documentary photography and family portraits through the critical use of *traumatic realism*.

Key Words: photography, Holocaust, post-memory, liminality, narrative of the self, album aesthetics, anti-hero, open work, *traumatic realism*.

1. Introduction

It is often said that a photograph is worth a thousand words and this is certainly the case in today's image dominated world. Nobody doubts that the visual, firstly associated with photography and later with the cinema, has become an influential mode of perception. However, for each individual that views a photograph, those thousand words will be irreversibly thought and expressed in a distinctive way. In other words, images may be regarded as universal language, but they still incite interpretation; they still need to be read. In its still short existence, the camera has made the traditional image-word distinction increasingly difficult to sustain. The productive interaction between the visual and the linguistic has not only blurred the image-word boundary but also produced more hybrid modes of representation. This post-modern conflation has

allowed us to read both *prose photographs* and *visual fictions* (Garret-Petts 2001) and made it possible not only for images to tell stories but also for language to reveal the hidden behind the visible through the creation of new narrative spaces, particularly when dealing with trauma and unresolved memories.

Antonio Ansón highlights the impact of memory as one of the most relevant contributions of photography to the arts suggesting that "*a partir de la fotografía se recuerda de otra manera,*" as a photograph, "*lejos de salvaguardar los recuerdos del olvido, es una puerta abierta de par en par para que nos perdamos en ellos*" (2002: 40).[1] Photography then, like memory, belongs to a private, uncertain space and becomes the means through which the unconscious can be visually recorded. It has, in fact, an elusive quality that seems to blend different worlds and realities, disclosing past mysteries. Moreover, it helps reveal the potential that the photographic image has for projecting an enigmatic atmosphere outside the photograph itself, an aura of mystery, some sort of vibration that seems to be essential for the realization of the photograph as the viewer transforms it into admiration and memory. Apart from regarding photography as a channel for rediscovering past memories, Ansón also deals with some of the common responses literature, films and photography share. While films are popular for having passed the aesthetics of montage on to the other arts – including ellipsis, sequencing, close-up and fragmentation – photography's contributions are less acknowledged but nonetheless relevant. Among them, it is important to mention the *narrative of the self*, the *album aesthetics*, the *anti-heroic* as indisputable protagonist, the notion of *open work* and particularly *memory*, which, as mentioned above, has become a crucial reference linked to introspection (Ansón 2002: 29-42).

Photographic memory, visual themes and images are used by post-Holocaust writer Rachel Seiffert in *The Dark Room* (2001) to explore a German past which "resides in a liminal zone between history and memory – that is, between the past as object of dispassionate study and the past as an affective part of personal and collective consciousness" (Goertz 1998: 33). Seiffert weaves a series of three novella-length stories, chronologically and thematically connected, to deal with collective German Holocaust guilt. As in a tragic photo album, each of the stories bears the main character's name: 'Helmut', 'Lore' and 'Micha'. The writer inserts bits of still images of concentration camps and mass shootings into family snapshots of German people – even Nazis – who are portrayed as ordinary human beings, rejoicing and suffering as everyday people do. The first story is about Helmut, a boy with a physical deformity who becomes a photographer's assistant and records with fascination the evacuation of Berlin and its gradual ruin. The next story begins where Helmut's ends and concerns Lore, a teenage girl whose parents are Party members captured at the end of the war, and who finds herself leading her four younger siblings on a dangerous flight across a divided Germany to reach her grandmother's house in Hamburg. Finally, in the last story, set in the 1990s, a young teacher, Micha, becomes obsessed with the dark past of his beloved grandfather, imprisoned for nine years in the Soviet Union after the war.

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[1] The following translations are my own: "through photography, we remember differently, since a photograph, far from keeping memories alive, is an open door through which we lose ourselves in them" (Ansón 2002: 40).

Born in Oxford to German and Australian parents, Rachel Seiffert was brought up bilingually. Yet her work can be considered as part of a range of German voices – among them Tanja Dückers, Birgit Bauer, Olaf Müller, Uwe Timm, Ulla Hahn, Monika Maron, Stefan Wackwitz and Tulla Pokriefke – who were affected and influenced by the Holocaust as second- and third-generation writers. These writers focus on the psychological, social and cultural impact of the Holocaust on German society, and their works can be regarded as the product of public debate on the legacy of German culpability and the problem of collective identity and memory. They all attempt to reconstruct the memory of both collective suffering and victimization and contribute to a public discourse in which memory may be transferred in a process of empathy and identification from one generation to the next (Cohen-Pfister 2005: 123).

Photography contributes significantly to the process of "re-membering" history lost or silenced (a term coined by Michael White (1990) as part of his *narrative therapy)*. The primacy of the visual in *The Dark Room* draws both on realism and illusion, history and memory to try to account for an inherited past that has become part of cultural trauma and collective identity. The writer reframes the visible world in her photo-text, a text that displays a concern for photography as one of the most relevant motifs, although photographs are not actually present but re-presented. The description of snapshots – both as family treasures or as criminal evidence – and the impressive array of details enrich the fabric of the text and offer several possible perspectives. The purpose of this essay thus is to give new insights into the descriptive categories exemplified by Antonio Ansón – the *narrative of the self*, the *album aesthetics*, the representation of *memory*, the *anti-heroic* and the notion of *open work* – by exploring the manipulation of the visual and the photo-textual in Seiffert's novel.

2. Realism vs. Narrative of the Self

A comparison can be drawn between the photographic album and the personal diary to account for the *discurso del yo* ('narrative of the self' [Ansón 2002]) as a point of encounter between photography and literature when dealing with subjectivities. Both in the photograph album and the personal diary, the self becomes the centre of attention. While in the photograph album the protagonists are always part of the stories their photographs tell, either because they were in the photograph when it was taken or behind the camera as photographers; in the personal diary the self becomes a stimulating source of thought and the means through which the world can be understood. The subject confesses his or her private thoughts and feelings in first-person present-tense narration. Interior monologue, then, shapes that self, either consciously or unconsciously. This kind of narrative, essentially modernist and highly influenced by Freud's psychoanalytical theory is the closest literature comes to represent consciousness (Lodge 2002: 63).

Although Seiffert's photo-text seems to lack the formal and artistic innovation the modernist novel has achieved – the writer uses short, sharp sentences and plentiful dialogue through which she seems to stay on the surface of the text – there are several instances, particularly in 'Micha', the last and longest novella, in which Seiffert succeeds

in vividly representing the complexity of the mental event. By using ellipsis, switching narrative voice and mixing thoughts and the spoken word, the writer manages to break the linearity of language and places her conflicted Micha in the centre of consciousness in a passage that resembles the modernist interior monologue:

> Even now, with all his certainty about what Opa did, where he did it, the faces on the museum wall he might have done it to, Micha tries, but he can't make it all add up to anything. Guilt, remorse, pride, defiance, shame. Nothing definite. Nothing for Micha to pin everything to.
> Facts, events, places stand separate, distinct, and Dilan screams.
> Micha straps her into the stroller, walks away from the house in search of a shop or a café, a place to buy water, some formula, somewhere to warm it all up. Dilan won't stop crying, and he is afraid.
> *Over two hours home on the train.* (Seiffert 2001: 268)

The profusion of rhetorical figures – repetition and alliteration – gives readers the impression that they are sharing the character's consciousness: Micha's brain working with a myriad thoughts at the same time, his soul being tested, trying to come to terms with his national and family past, feeling guilty and ashamed. In Ansón's *narrative of the self:* "*El sujeto enuncia, evoca, relata, rememora, proyecta en el futuro, supone, imagina desde el ahora de ese sujeto*" (2002: 36).[2] Although Seiffert speaks through Helmut, Lore and Micha using the third person, the mood of the novel is charged with dramatic emotion as free indirect speech is introduced either in the form of rhetorical questions or association of ideas in the character's mind. For instance when Micha's thoughts turn to returning home – "*Over two hours home on the train*" (Seiffert 2001: 268) – or when Lore is confronted with the truth about their saviour – "*What do you want from me?*" (151). Free indirect speech always appears in *italics* in the text and allows for the fusion of the first and the third person perspectives in a single style and, of course, for the intimacy and immediacy of the first person phenomenon of consciousness, that is the *narrative of the self.* The character's concern is expressed "as a silent, private thought in [his] own words, to which we are given access without the overt mediation of the narrator" (Lodge 2002: 37).

While Seiffert clearly privileges *depth* over *surface* when going into the representation of her characters' thoughts and feelings, as in the previous quote for instance, she remains on the surface when representing both photographs and the external world. In the first of the three novellas, Helmut, the protagonist, is made to observe and document not only the decline and then repopulation of Berlin's railway station – "his encyclopaedic knowledge of the timetable impresses many of the other little boys" (2001: 8) – but also the evacuation and devastation of his native city – "The lonely clock tower of the Kaiser Wilhelm Church, and the rubble of the Tiergarten nearby. The grand hotels on Unter den Linden reduced to skeleton structures. Their chandeliers glittering in the debris, tapestries hanging loose and torn" (43). The character's shots of deportations and destruction emerge from the same dark room as the family portraits, the same careful attention to detail noticeable in all of them:

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[2] "The subject enunciates, evokes, relates, recalls, projects into the future, supposes, imagines from his/her present".

> The family photos show a healthy boy, already quite tall, standing between his parents, both seated slightly in front of him. He has a sailor suit on, the regular uniform for boys on Sundays and holidays. His right arm rests on his mother's shoulder, and he is standing so that his left side favors the camera slightly. The combined effect is to minimize 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 graying of his father's beard. (Seiffert 2001: 9)

These accounts seem to be completely devoid of judgement or moral understanding. The method of approaching reality is by describing it, as if the narrator were behind a camera. The representation is apparently objective; Seiffert uses bare description, refraining from commentary. Still, each detail is loaded with significance, perhaps because of the compelling quality of the visual images. Such vivid and disturbing images explicitly engage readers-spectators, who are asked to supply insights into the missing, nonetheless implied, emotional and moral significance of the scene. The text captures elements that mediate between the reader and the photograph with a kind of intensity and resonance that readers cannot ignore. When, in the first novella, Helmut is made to photograph the deportation of the Gypsies, "[he] is afraid, exhilarated. His hands sweat and shake" (Seiffert 2001: 28). Still, he is not allowed to succeed: "He reloads, curses his fingers, feeble and damp, fumbles and struggles with the focus" (28). Through Helmut's fear and anxiety, the writer implicitly shows her own helplessness, a tension between words and images as the photographic medium appears not to be able to record external reality as it is perceived by the eye.

In her study of Holocaust collective memory under the influence of journalistic photographs taken in concentration camps after World War II, Zelizer (1998) questions the ability of atrocity photography to bear witness to the truth of the Jewish Holocaust. Drawing on Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), Zelizer appears to distrust visual representation of Holocaust trauma and to allow for the possibility of different acts of viewing over time: "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (Benjamin 1940 qtd in Zelizer 1998: 15). Constant exposure to traumatic photography as a type of collective remembering may in fact have the opposite effect: it may get viewers used to Holocaust atrocities to the point of neglecting contemporary acts of barbarism. In Zelizer's opinion, then, atrocity photographs would not help remembering to remember but rather remembering to forget. Although Seiffert builds her narrative around the visual, she also seems to criticize photographic perception, implying that "neither photography nor perception can give us what is before the camera or the eye" (Cadava 1997: 91). Both as photographer and witness to the disturbing scene taking place in front of him, Helmut is left only with fragments of the seen, unable to reconstruct the whole. Seiffert's objective representation of the common, phenomenal world appears to fail when faced with the horror of the Holocaust; the rhetoric of abstention becomes an impossible feat when covering such traumatic events. By making Helmut take the photographs, the writer calms the anxiety produced by the scene, but immediately after the photographs, she makes his character a victim of *the seen*. Seiffert's own despair and impotence seem to be filtered through the text when describing Helmut's utter disappointment: "At first he can only cry. Angry tears: the

panic of the day turned to rage. Turned against the photos, against himself, his failure to capture the scene" (2001: 29).

When historical references are introduced in the photo-text a similar thing happens. Public events are never directly addressed. They are added as impersonal, external elements, although the Nazi Party, the Holocaust, and the implicit question of how to remember them, are centrally important in *The Dark Room*. The passive voice is used to describe the National Socialist Party's conquests in the first story: "To the east, new land is found; old land is found again" (Seiffert 2001: 12). This journalistic commitment to detachment may possibly hide Sieffert's post-modern reluctance to rely on History or her intention to undermine the subject of the action. The writer seems to imply that the more thorough is the description of historical events, the less likely will the description account for bereavement and loss.

In the second story, on the other hand, it is through the visual, through the indirect description of the rough posters of emaciated bodies put on public display that Seiffert approaches the hellish world of concentration camps:

> 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. (Seiffert 2001: 77)

It would seem that when confronting genocide and war crimes, "traditional forms of history will not provide an understanding of the past" (Sturken 1999: 10). Nevertheless, despite the absence of authorial voice, history permeates through the represented photographs with diffuse agency as a result of meeting the other's pain and horror. Through the incorporation of the photographs of Holocaust victims into the text, Seiffert appears to perform a mode of conceiving history that is not linear but rather discontinuous.

In order to account for what they call *crises of witnessing*, Felman and Laub (1992) articulate a performative text to deal with the testimonies of the Holocaust and the effect that collective trauma has on the individual mind. Words and images appear as overlapping categories allowing for the construction of new meanings each time they are reinterpreted by readers. Similarly, Cadava (1997:7), in an effort to understand Walter Benjamin's use of photographic language to represent history, refers to the writer's "dialectical images" (Benjamin 1999:462), or, as Cadava calls them, "snapshots in prose" as Benjamin's attempt to write about both modern history and the relation between fascism and aesthetic ideology. Seiffert seems to emulate Benjamin's use of *textual snapshots* not only to write about German Nazi history, but also to uncover "the invisible traces of trauma" (Nunn 2004: 288). The purpose behind Lore's photographic confrontation with Nazi mass executions seems to be the description of "the literal return of the traumatic event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth 1995: 5). By being confronted with trauma Lore is also faced with both the history of her people and her own family history.

The protagonist of the third story, Micha, is also brought face to face with history and unresolved past images as he is made to travel to pay a visit to the "visual sites of memory – memorials, photographs, installations" (Morris 2001: 368) where the character confronts his grandfather's Nazi past:

> All along the final wall are photos taken during the war. Micha sees them out of the corner of his eye while he is still by the uniforms. He prepares himself to look closer; tells himself what they will show. *Public executions, smiling Germans, mass graves, mass shootings.* He is right. Heads hanging loose, bodies hanging long from trees. Young men aiming rifles at kneeling children. Soldiers standing, smoking in the sunshine and behind them, the dead lying pale and naked in rows.
> Micha looks at them all, looks hard into the faces of the soldiers, checks for Opa's cheekbones, his high forehead, his deep-set eyes. (Seiffert 2001: 195)

These 'visual sites of memory' appear as the only way to approach past history for second-hand witnesses, yet they are distrusted. As in the above description, Seiffert's treatment of Third Reich images goes beyond the objective reporting of the external world. The writer creates a *folk-tale* atmosphere, though much cruder, much rougher. Through fiction, Seiffert is able to surpass reality and bear more truth than most studied attempts at historical revisionism. In the same line of thought, Morris refers to Humberto Eco's "travel to hyperreality" as the only possible way to cope with traumatic past through the visual: "The hyperreal blurs the distinction between presence and absence, between photographic image and death, between sound and silence, crafting sites of authenticity that are no longer historic, but instead visual" (2001: 369).

Seiffert demolishes reality with the introduction of photographs in her text and then redefines them in the process of writing (Cohen 1984: 22). Just as Walter Benjamin grieves over the vanishing of the 'aura' surrounding the original piece, that is to say the displacement of reality into the printed image, Seiffert goes one step further by displacing photographs from their traditional medium to cause several subsidiary effects in her text. The writer brings Barthes' "photographic paradox" (1988: 19) into her photo-narrative to challenge the acclaimed distinction between *studium* – the cultural interpretation or the denotation of the photographic image – and the *punctum* – the connotation of the photograph. It would seem, therefore, that *The Dark Room* reveals the "spectral evidence" (Baer 2002) embedded in every image, the ethereal or ghostly afterlife of the photograph's theme. In other words, the writer appears to be willing to show how photography and traumatic memory may intersect in her text. With a similar approach towards the connection between photography and the experience of trauma, Nunn confers crucial importance to the combination of image and text:

> Text and image combined invite us to think about firstly photography's capacity to make us aware of a dimension of reality that is at once there but also is not easily visible or even socially registered. Secondly, on a more structural level, they invite us to develop an analogy between the processes of photography and the experience of trauma. (Nunn 2004: 287)

Seiffert achieves, then, what Sontag calls the "talismatic use of photographs" as "attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality" (Sontag 2002: 16) uncovered by the

photographic image. *The Dark Room* in fact departs from reality to become only a resemblance to *the seen*. The writer introduces some very interesting and subtle visual shadings to deal with trauma in her text, substituting photographic certainty for the partiality of her own view. Seiffert's choice of describing her photographs, rather than presenting them as direct evidence of the horror, seems to be a careful strategy adopted to manipulate verbal description and stress the theme of memory in the novel, denying, at the same time, the value of photographs to convey truth. The problem with representing collective trauma for second- or third-generation writers is that when horror becomes part of the everyday, when horror is generalized, language loses its power to respond to it. As Rostan clearly states it, "collective traumas, then, change how we think about the `real´ – they show extreme, unbelievable, and unrealistic events emerging from the matrix of the everyday" (2006: 173). In the description of the Holocaust photographs, of Helmut's failing to capture the seizing of the gypsies and of Micha being faced with these "visual sites of memory" there seems to be an immediacy and urgency coming from the text that makes the whole discussion of representation problematic.

In order to understand how both realism and the *narrative of the self* function in Seiffert's photo-text, *The Dark Room* should be read in terms of the interplay of different levels of representation. The writer moves through them, deliberately remaining in a liminal zone between surface and depth, history and memory, the self and the other, and allowing for a continuous interweaving thread of the real, the photographic and the textual with a particular metalinguistic awareness. The novel articulates a crisis of representation, the difficulty in finding the right words to express the guilt and the sorrow intruding upon the lives of the Germans since the end of WWII and the complexity of unresolved post-Holocaust memory. Seiffert's narrative – together with other works that deal with German post-war experience with a similar approach – has been shaped by German Holocaust guilt in such a way that it appears to outline a kind of realist subgenre, that which successfully combines stark realism with the representation of trauma. In *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), Rothberg re-evaluates and examines the role of realism in the representation of trauma, suggesting alternative modes of artistic representation of what he believes to be a seemingly ordinary reality characterized by the presence of numerous instances of collective anguish and shame. Rothberg's notion of *traumatic realism* may be applicable to Seiffert's *The Dark Room* in its attempts to re-define history, collective identity and literary representation under the sign of trauma.

3. Album Aesthetics: The Representation of Memory

When mentioning the common responses literature and photography share in their representation of subjectivities, Ansón refers to the *album aesthetics* and argues that, apart from the self, whose presence is implicit in the photo-album, there is also the notion of *novella mosaico*, *memory*, the *anti-hero*, and *open-work*, which, within the context of the photo-album, take on an entirely different meaning. The disposition of the photos, unlike the pages in a book or the progression of the written language, is not

linear: while "language progresses in linear order through time, photographs are apprehended in a more immediate manner" (Eisinger 1995 qtd in Humm 2002: 213). They open a space for spectators to get lost and an opportunity to see past, present and future all at once. Like the photographs on the pages of an album, Seiffert's characters are constructed and arranged in an array of shapes and sizes, appearing and disappearing without sequential description. As Culver puts it, images are like "fragment[s]violently cut out from a larger whole and never complete in [themselves]" (1989: 191); once incorporated into another representational meaning, they are contextually redefined, telling an entirely different story.

Not only does *The Dark Room* rely on a notion of discontinuous history, but it also resists formal linearity. Though based on a chronological structure, the text develops in the tradition of the *album aesthetics*, that is, as a gallery of portraits drawn with a strong resemblance in style and composition. This montage effect distorts time and space perceptions and from these distortions, metaphors and symbolism are created (Gianetti 1972: 54). While every story is self-contained, the three of them are linked together by the presence of photography: Photographs are captured, treasured, exhibited, hidden and stolen. They not only serve the purpose of reminding viewers of both their past experiences and public history but also take the story back to a past that is inevitably connected to the present, precisely through visual representation.

Ansón explains that the aesthetics of *novela mosaico* is similar to that of the photo album in that it consists of "*párrafos cortos, de diferentes tamaños, que se siguen uno tras otro, completándose, parciales sesgados*" which "*comparten con el álbum su incapacidad para trazar un horizonte*" (2002: 39).[3] Both in the photo-album and in the *novela mosaico*, time linearity is abolished "*para enroscarse en bucles sucesivos que van hacia delante para volver hacia atrás, explicar algo que todavía está por suceder o entender, de repente, algo que ya sucedió pero no estábamos en disposición de conocer porque carecíamos de los datos necesarios para su comprensión*" (2002: 39).[4] In *The Dark Room*, the plot tends to go backwards in time as the presence of photographs not only triggers affective responses and specific cultural memories but also adds another layer to the reading of the text, contributing to this notion of literary montage. In the third story, the description of the photograph of the character's grandfather provides an illustrative example. Although it tells a story of shame, it becomes crucially important for the reconstruction of his family past:

> The second photo was taken just before Michael started school. *Just before Opa died.* This one is in color, 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, Michael sits on his 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

[3] "short paragraphs, of different sizes, following one after the other, completing themselves, partial, biased, [which] share with the album their inability to draw a horizon".

[4] "to roll up in successive curls that go back and forth, explain what is about to happen or suddenly understand something that had already happened though we were not able to know because we lacked the necessary information to understand it".

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.
Why not earlier?
Another question which circles Michael's brain.
It should have been important all along. (Seiffert 2001: 168)

The album aesthetics is stressed not only by the presence of narrative fragments and interior monologue in the form of free indirect speech but also by this journey in time that reveals the character's obsession with the recent acquired knowledge that his dear grandfather had been a member of the Nazi Party's fighting force, the Waffen SS. Seiffert's photo-text then posits a double experience, forcing characters and readers to relive the scenes in the photographs. Micha seems to be trapped in the photographs he has seen as both his imagination and his memory retain these images over time. The act of viewing involves not only a desire for the truth, no matter what form it takes, but also a longing for a sense of the past, or better said, for a sense of the viewer's past. New interpretations of the photographic image can turn both memories and images inside out. The following quote from the third story reproduces the atemporal quality of the photo album together with the power of the visual "to mobilize conscience [and] bring news of some unsuspected zone of misery" (Sontag 2002: 17). The scene takes place at the university library, and the character goes backwards and forwards in time, juxtaposing past and present in tireless lucubration, as he watches, not photographs this time, but an old video collection about the Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler, who, in the character's unconscious, is inevitably linked to his own Opa:

> The video hums on in front of him, quieter as he slips away. When he wakes up, the tape is playing in the machine. Heinrich Himmler inspects his ranks of saluting SS. Chin receding into skinny neck, coat belted high over his chest. The headphones have slipped out of their socket, silent pads cover Micha's ears. He hears his breath loud and long; still in the pattern of sleep. Memory rattling out Himmler facts. *A school-teacher. Had copies of* Mein Kampf *bound in human skin. Said the SS were righteous killers; right to kill Jews. Great nations must march over thousands of corpses. Something like that.* (Seiffert 2001: 174-75)

The narrative seems to be fragmented into half-remembered, brittle moments, as all the possible images that were prevented from coming to light by war trauma seem to struggle to the surface. Everything is happening in the mind: past and present, repressed drives and desires. Readers jump from image to image as the character does, reproducing, to a certain extent, not only the experience of looking at a photo album but also that of the moviegoer. An interesting interplay between visual images, memory and dreams and their relation towards trauma is introduced as the half-asleep character's unconscious optics is triggered. In her essay 'The Cinema' (1926), Woolf uses the image of "the eye and the brain" that Seiffert clearly explores in the previous quote: "The eye is in difficulties. The eye wants help. The eye says to the brain, 'something is happening which I do not understand. You are needed'" (Woolf 1926: 1). This is precisely the visual process that takes place when Micha is made to watch Himmler's images. His mind tries to bring back what is unconscious to make it conscious again. By using free indirect speech, Seiffert describes his character's obscure

memories, hidden and covered by other memories – and puts him in a drowsy state in which reality and sleepy visions combine as disturbing images are recalled.

As for the representation of memory, its crucial importance is emphasized over and over both in the photo-album and in Seiffert's photo-text. Through the representation of Micha's dream state, Seiffert stresses the power of the visual to trigger traumatic memory, implying, as Cathy Caruth brilliantly states, that "to be traumatised is to be possessed precisely by an image or an event" (1995: 4). Micha's memories do not seem to depend on the character's will-power. What is more, images become more meaningful and disturbing with time, as they unexpectedly return and Micha is made to remember.

By bearing witness to a traumatic past which has not faded with the generation that personally witnessed the horrors, Seiffert manipulates actual Holocaust photographic evidence, to produce a non-conventional effect. Due to the traumatic relationship of post-holocaust generations with memory, the pre-eminence of the visual in *The Dark Room* has to do with the writer's longing for the truth but also with dreaming and illusion –like in Plato's cave myth. Being a second-hand witness, the writer can only rely on history, "visual sites of memory" and her imagination, so she moves in a liminal, in-between state, where traumatic fantasies seem to coexist with the power of historical reality.

The memory of the Holocaust for post-holocaust generations is, as Marianne Hirsch has called it, a "post-memory" (1992). The concept applies not only to the memories of the children of survivors, but also to the process of cultural memory itself since it describes "a hybrid form of memory that distinguishes itself from personal memory by generational distance and from history by a deep personal connection" (Hirsch qtd in Goertz 1998: 33). Hirsch's notion of *post-memory* seems to flow as endless sorrow in German time and space "echoing in the ruins of the city that is in a constant state of (re)construction" (Morris 2001: 369). After the Holocaust, both history and the visual lose their representational power. *Post-memory* implies a rethinking of the experience of representation and the mediation of the past in the present. Seiffert allows for a post-memory's rethinking of traumatic memory as she manipulates the documentary photograph as a haunting symbol of the past. By interpreting the photographs in the text, the writer gives them a past and a future, as past memory and present feeling are fused in the representation. The effect of Holocaust photographs is thus far more successfully attained in Seiffert's *post-memory* representation than as published photographs, because the writer's memory traces represent ongoing states or processes rather than still, frozen images.

However, Seiffert's treatment of memory through the visual is not always limited to the documentary photograph; there are also the family portraits, which are regarded as "affective memory icons" (Fuchs 2006: 184) in the stories that take place before the war. Family photographs – generally catalogued in photo-albums – protect the family past and keep personal memories alive. Although Hirsch states that "the tension between documentary and aesthetics, between the photograph as memory and as evidence, is particularly complex in family photographs" (qtd in Sturken 1999: 21), Seiffert is not afraid of using them in her dealing with German history and the Holocaust. Not only do the family snapshots represent subjectivities, but they also play an important role in

the reconsideration of personal and cultural memory. In the second story for instance, Lore is made to evoke memories connecting past to present through the family photo-album, particularly through the photographs of the absent Nazi father, who becomes precisely "an affective memory icon" coming back to the present as a ghostly image belonging to a happier life:

> Lore looks at them [the pictures] while her mother sleeps. Mutti, Vati, and Oma in Hamburg. By the railing along the *Jungfernstieg*, with the lake behind them. *Before I was born*. Their faces are familiar but unfamiliar, too. All three smiling, holding on to their hats, the wind pulling their coats stiffly to the right. (Seiffert 2001: 62)

As Barthes puts it in *Camera Lucida* (1980), the photograph becomes an emblem of mortality, as it freezes in time a moment now vanished, irreversibly shattered. Lore's family photographs both give the character "an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal" and become "a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (Sontag 2002: 9-16). By jealously keeping those photographs, Lore is able to recover the paternal figure and protect her family identity as an important source of self-validation. While "she [Lore] 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" (Seiffert 2001: 57), Seiffert progressively discloses the family photo-album to her readers-viewers both as a valuable possession to be treasured and as a nostalgic reminder of idyllic days.

Although family past and memories are sacredly kept in the photo-album, when Lore is made to embark with her siblings on the journey to Hamburg, Seiffert distances her character from the past by making it almost impossible for Lore to recognize her father in the photographs. The character is given no choice but to look at the future and the immediate needs that require her attention – the hunger, the cold – in order to survive the journey. There is no time for coming to terms with the past. The war has changed everything. The old photographs start acting as a disturbing element. Although cherished in the past, these "affective memory icons" are now perceived as a disruption in Lore's current life as they "are [now] invested with the affective imprints of a traumatic historical experience" (Fuchs 2006: 184):

> *The war is lost, The Americans have camps, not prisons. For people like Mutti who haven't committed crimes.*
> She thinks of her father, wonders what he is doing now the fighting is over. Peter dozes against her chest, and Lore looks through the photos again, wants to see a picture of Vati before she sleeps. But the pictures she finds are more confusing that 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. Lore is tired, hungry again, her eyelids heavy. (Seiffert 2001: 67)

The interplay between image and text in this passage "construct[s] a region of the unknown … both prior to and adjacent to memory" (Mitchell 1994 qtd in Humm 2002: 213) which moves beyond the surface aesthetics into both repressed subjectivities and self-referential discourse. It seems the photographs reflect a part of a mistake that the character should mend. Reality seems to be the character's only connection to life; photographs are no guarantee of truth. So Lore, at risk of having become 'the wrong kind of German', is made to bury them:

> Shortly after dawn on the third day, when Lore is sure Tomas is sleeping, she pulls the photos of Vati from her bag and slips out into 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, and covering the spot carefully with twigs and leaves. After that, she runs around under the trees to confuse her tracks, and before she goes back to the barn, she takes care to wash her hands clean again in the stream. (Seiffert 2001: 102-103)

Family photographs become as incriminating as the Holocaust posters displayed in the village squares. Thus, the destruction of the family photo album implies "the loss of the only iconic record that would have the power to authenticate and construct her family's existence and togetherness before its extinction" (Fuchs 2006: 185). Lore's getting rid of her family portraits represents a strong need to deny both her sense of the past and her family identity; memory denial can be understood as a failure or impossibility to come to terms with traumatic memories.

4. The Anti-hero

The protagonists of the photo-albums are described as ordinary people with ordinary lives, "*haciendo cosas absurdas y familiares e irrelevantes*" (Ansón 2002: 41).[5] Thanks to photography and the family photo-album, ordinary lives become extraordinary. As Günter Grass explains it in *The Tin Drum* (1959), the anti-hero, a central character in modern and post-modern literature, originates with the advent of photography and the development of portraits and photo-albums as they become the ideal setting for anonymous adventure. Anti-heroes can be clumsy, selfish, alienated, mean, hateful, submissive, pathetic, insensitive, or just ordinary. "*El antihéroe es el hombre que pasea anónimo por la calle, al que nunca le ha ocurrido nada extraordinario, y descubre un día que su vida merece ser contada. Y la cuenta*" (Ansón 2002: 41).[6]

As mentioned in previous sections, *The Dark Room* reproduces the logic of the photo-album, enclosing snapshots of the main characters' everyday lives. Seiffert speaks from the point of view of the Germans: they are portrayed as ordinary people and, as such, exposed to readers, who, like viewers of a photo-album, look into the characters' private lives as they are uncovered by the photographs. No Jews are introduced in the novel – except in the Holocaust posters displayed in the village squares. Yet the absent figures are tacitly there as shadows of the survivors, as reminders of the past. The idea of the photograph organized around the absent is inherent to *The Dark Room*; Jewish identity is defined as uncomfortable silence, but experienced as a presence that dominates public and private life. In fact, the figure of the absent is associated not only with post-Holocaust guilt but also with the difficult need of reconciliation with the past.

Interestingly, Seiffert's characters are ordinary people who live ordinary lives but are also capable of doing terrible things. Evil actions are presented as disturbingly human, and monstrous acts are perpetrated by fathers, friends and brothers:

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[5] "doing absurd, familiar and irrelevant things".

[6] "The anti-hero is the man who wanders the streets anonymously, the one to whom nothing extraordinary has ever happened, and who one day discovers that his life is worth retelling. And so he does".

> Helmut appears likeable in his status as an outsider, but it is his disability that prevents him from participation. Lore's parents are high-ranking Nazis, yet are loved by their children. Askan is a doting grandfather, but responsible for countless deaths. The elderly man who befriends Micha is a collaborator and killer. And Thomas, Lore's benefactor, helps the children but steals Jewish papers from a corpse. These actions are monstrous, yet their perpetrators are not monsters. (Spencer 2002: 2)

Readers are faced with gray areas that, curiously enough, become part of human experience as the problem of evil is exposed in the particularly difficult form of everyday life. The contradictory images of people loving, suffering and killing reveal appalling and entrenching human misery. Seiffert chooses to show her characters' humanity, but also their corruption. In *The Dark Room* moral good is inseparable from the possibility of evil, and Seiffert tries to humanize evil even if she is aware that her characters will never get rid of it. However, accepting that ordinary people may commit evil deeds or succumb to social pressure to commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable brings no relief; on the contrary; wrongdoings become even more dramatic and shocking. Seiffert finds no excuse for immoral behaviour; for such people "there is no punishment … not enough sadness and no punishment" (2001: 254).

5. Open Work

A photograph is always open to interpretation. What happens in the photograph does not have an end, because there is no possible end. Photographs do not tell stories, they are the story. Sontag claims that "photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (2002: 23). The idea of *open work* is essential in today's world of images. However, just like photographs, there are literary works that suggest rather than tell stories. They require the intervention of the reader as an active participant, because the text, like the image, is perceived as a constructive process.

The fact that *The Dark Room* is seen as interplay of different levels of representation – the real, the photographic and the textual – suggests an openness that allows for different readings and demands individual recreation. Moreover, though the three stories can be regarded as transitional steps towards reconciliation and a more detached appreciation of the German past, they still "[remain] open-ended and unresolved in terms of how this memory will manifest in the next generation" (Goertz 1998: 37). The end brings gladness but loss too as it opens to a future that seems uncertain. Despite the imminent fall of the Reich, and surrounded by weak and elderly *comrades*, Helmut is finally made to pose and smile for the photograph, "standing high on his rubble mountain, over which Soviet tanks will roll with ease" (Seiffert 2001: 47). Lore, in the second story, "looks forward to when there will be no more ruins, only new houses, and she won't remember anymore how it was before" (156). And finally Micha, whose thorough investigation seems an inventory of Seiffert's own, wonders how he can reconcile the happy memory of his grandfather with the recent discovery. Still, the final scene, when Micha is made to take his granddaughter to his Oma's home, reflects Germany's new openness to the past:

> 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?* (Seiffert 2001: 278)

The Dark Room, like all other literature dealing with German healing "ultimately affirms the importance of memory as the means through which re-workings, engagements and confrontations with the past can take place" (Sturken 1999: 24). The three characters are made to step out of the darkroom – a necessary space for reflection and mourning – and face the light.

6. Conclusion

From what has been argued here, it would seem, then, that analyzing the opening of a photographic dimension in Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* has significant repercussions on the articulation of *traumatic realism,* as a realist subgenre, and *post-memory* as the means through which German traumatic past can be reconstructed and reinterpreted in the present time. Seiffert's photo-text builds on alternative representational approaches to deal with collective Holocaust trauma. In so doing, *The Dark Room* might contribute to questioning both history and documentary photography's capacity to record reality in post- post-holocaust literature. Moreover, Seiffert's novel stresses the growing power of a narrative that lingers in a liminal zone between history and memory in order to read photographic and historical evidence of trauma. By analyzing and underlining Seiffert's *textual snapshots*, then, readers are encouraged not only to listen to the new voices in the text but also to become participants and provide symbolic meaning to the photographs they cannot see or trust.

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