Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires

19 | 2018

Photography and Trauma

War, Trauma, and the Dance of History: Anita Brookner, Ettore Scola, and Terence Davies

Laurence Petit

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/3394>

DOI: 10.4000/polysemes.3394

ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher

SAIT

Electronic reference

Laurence Petit, « War, Trauma, and the Dance of History: Anita Brookner, Ettore Scola, and Terence Davies », *Polysèmes* [Online], 19 | 2018, Online since 30 June 2018, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/3394> ; DOI : 10.4000/polysemes.3394

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

Polysèmes

War, Trauma, and the Dance of History: Anita Brookner, Ettore Scola, and Terence Davies

Laurence Petit

“Wait for the dancing to begin”

Anita Brookner

- 1 “The only important thing about history, I think, Sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably going to end” (Swift 7). This provocative statement uttered by troublemaker Price, a young boy attending the history class taught by the narrator Tom Crick in Graham Swift’s 1983 novel *Waterland*, not only launches the story of Tom’s personal life as it intertwines with the collective history of his homeland, the Fens, in Eastern England. It also metafictionally echoes the by now well-known postmodern theories of critics such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, who equate the postmodern condition with the loss of historical consciousness and the fictionality of history. Within that perspective, the Second World War and the Holocaust, by embodying the limits of representation, come to be seen as the arch temporal marker or historical divider that led to the end of history or, as Dominick LaCapra puts it in *Representing the Holocaust*, as the “traumatic point of rupture between modernism and postmodernism” (LaCapra 1994, 188). For him, one is now forever “caught between an illusory attempt at theoretical or narrative totalization and the compulsive repetition of trauma, double binds, or utter fragmentation” (LaCapra 1994, 194).
- 2 These interrogations lie at the heart of three literary and cinematic works that were all released in the 1980s: Italian director Ettore Scola’s 1983 silent film *Le Bal* (*Ballando... Ballando*), contemporary British novelist Anita Brookner’s 1985 novel *Family and Friends*, and British filmmaker Terence Davies’s 1988 film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. What is striking in these three works, despite their different textual and visual nature, is not so much their similar narrative techniques, with their use of photographs and stilled images as well as songs and dances, but the way in which they explore the cyclicity or “dance” of

history in terms that resonate with the postmodern concepts of trauma and dehistoricization.

- 3 Borrowing from a number of critics of postmodernism as well as poststructuralist theorists of the photograph, this essay will show how, in these three works which explore the notions of temporality, memory, and nostalgia, the photographs, which are used as both narrative device and historical evidence, represent far more than just an attempt at fixating and containing the passing of time. By chronicling the second half of a twentieth century marked by the epistemological rupture of the Second World War—present in all three works—and the Holocaust—barely alluded to, and yet omnipresent, in Brookner's novel—they provide a view of history which, from then on, can only be apprehended as an endless and meaningless cyclical return, in which the characters, despite the frail or strong cohesion of actual or metaphorical families, seem forever doomed to alienation and utter solitude.

- 4 Through an original narrative strategy at the frontier between the two semiotic codes of text and image, Anita Brookner's *Family and Friends* presents itself in the form of a fictitious family photo-album spanning three successive generations over the course of the twentieth century. The novel starts and ends with a narrator opening, browsing through, and then closing a wedding-photograph album, which enables him or her to chronicle the saga of the Dorns, a family of Jewish exiles who fled the Nazi regime in Germany to find shelter in London, and then in Italy and California for two of its members. As each fictitious photograph is presented through narratorial injunctions inviting the reader to look at pictures rather than read words—although these pictures never materialize and have a purely textual existence—the reader is encouraged to suspend his or her disbelief and welcome this hybrid literary object as a photo album and not a novel: “Here’s Sofka, in a wedding photograph”, reads the first sentence in the novel (FF 7), “Here they are all, family and friends, in the wedding photograph”, reads the first sentence of the very last paragraph (FF 187). The visual journey through the photo-album is carried out by a narrator, or rather a narrative voice, whose repeated authoritative first-person intrusions remain anonymous, and therefore enigmatic, throughout, despite the narrator’s claim to have, or have had, special links with the family presented in the album. The four wedding photographs—all of which staged around the figure of the matriarch, Sofka—which punctuate the text and intermittently “freeze” the narrative flow before releasing it again constitute, as it were, the temporal and structural pillars on which the narrative stands.

- 5 The novel opens with a wedding photograph highlighting the matriarchal figure of Sofka Dorn, surrounded by her four children, Mimi, Betty, Frederick and Alfred. After a first chapter mainly dedicated to the description of this inaugural photograph, the central character of the mother, Sofka, and the festivities of the day, the narration takes up again, one by one, the main characters of the photo and follows their respective destinies from childhood to middle age, through the photographic or cinematographic technique known as “zooming” or telescopic movement. This technique enables the shift from the panoramic shot of the first photograph to the close-up shot of one particular character, accompanied each time by a change in the point of view. Out of a concern for realism, since the reader is supposed to be leafing through a photo-album spanning some thirty or forty years, each new chapter portrays each new character at a period in his or her life which is different from the one chosen for his or her other brothers and sisters. This device contributes to a large extent to the striking temporal and linear fluidity of the

novel, in spite of the apparent fragmentation that the general structure implies. Indeed, the thematic series of the four wedding photographs in chapters one, six, ten, and fourteen provides the narrative with an internal coherence by creating a narrative syntax as well as a temporal continuity, while the narrative itself, through the description that is given of each wedding photograph, gives substance to the fictitious image and prolongs its conditions of existence in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it animates it within its own frame, by describing and giving life to the contents of the image, and on the other hand it “expands” it, or rather “stretches” it, beyond the limits of its frame, into a space which is outside the picture, that is to say invisible to the viewer. Thus, in *Family and Friends*, the characters, fixed in the conventional pose of the wedding photograph with which the novel opens, become animated at first, as soon as the picture is taken, and then disperse, all the better to gather again according to their age or function (while remaining within the limits of the frame of the initial picture):

I have no doubt that once the photograph was taken, and the wedding group dispersed, the festivities took their normal course. I have no doubt that great quantities of delicious food—things in aspic, things in baskets of spun sugar—were consumed, and that the music struck up and the bride and bridegroom danced, oblivious of their guests, and that the elders gathered in groups on their gilt chairs while the children, flushed with too many sweet meals and the lure of the polished parquet floor, ventured forth until restrained by nurses or grandmothers. (FF 9)

- 6 Then the narrative continues, this time going beyond the spatio-temporal frame of the image it has animated, by focusing on a detail of the picture, the specific character of the mother, Sofka, and transporting it into another narrative space and another narrative time, which constitute what we can call the “narrative off-screen space” of the inaugural picture. A flashback thus takes us back to the morning before the wedding, when Sofka, surrounded by her children in one of the rooms in her house precisely called the “morning-room”, is waiting for the car that will drive them to the place of the festivities: “Sofka sits in her morning-room, waiting for the car to come round” (FF 16). A few lines further down, after a short description of the scene preceding the arrival of the car, followed by a brief return to the banquet, the narration again prolongs the initial image beyond its frame by once again “removing” Sofka and showing her at home still, but this time on the day following the wedding: “Reflecting, on the following day, Sofka will judge the event a success” (FF 17-18).
- 7 However—and this is part of the charm of this novel with its accordion-like structure—in both cases (the morning before, and the day after, the wedding), no sooner has the narration gone beyond the limits of its original frame than it becomes contained again within another frame. Indeed, in the first case, on the morning preceding the wedding, the description of Sofka and her children sitting around her echoes the initial wedding picture, and the metaphorical picture that they compose presents remarkable analogies with the opening of the novel (that is to say, the first photograph in the album). Although Sofka is no longer standing but sitting, we can notice the same hieratic pose (“Sofka stands straight and stern”, FF 7; “Sofka’s back is ramrod straight”, FF 16), the same “beaded dress”, the same hat, and the same presence of her two daughters, no longer behind her as before (“Behind her stand her two daughters”, FF 7) but this time around her (“Around her sit the girls”, FF 16). Moreover, the fixed, pictorial effect of the scene is reinforced by two references to two artistic domains, painting, with the “Pre-Raphaelite dresses” of the young women, and sculpture, with Frederick’s pose which is reminiscent of Leochares’ *Apollo Belvedere*, as well as by the presence of a double frame, the doorframe

where Frederick is standing, representing a frame-within-the-frame: “Lounging in the doorway, with the nonchalant stance of the Apollo Belvedere, is Frederick who enjoys these long celebrations [...]” (FF 17).

8 This very pictorial description is surprisingly similar to those eighteenth-century “conversation pieces” in the manner of Hogarth, for instance, in which the interest of the painting lies in the fact that the characters who are depicted are not presented as specifically posing.¹ Instead, they are shown at home, pottering around or chatting over tea, for example. In our case, the scene takes place in the drawing-room where the characters are depicted waiting for the car that will take them to the wedding, with the eldest son, Frederick, obligingly pouring a glass of Madeira to his mother: “Even now he is pouring his mother a tiny glass of Madeira, placing a small table at her elbow, smiling at her, and very gently teasing her, for she finds these events initially daunting” (FF 17). In the second case, on the day following the wedding, the narration also becomes contained again within a frame, with Sofka apprehending her day as a “perfect picture”, and the pictorial or photographic metaphor, initially used in the first family portrait for narratological purposes—those of the photofiction—can now function fully: “Looking out into the garden, she sees that a wheelbarrow has not been put away. She frowns slightly. How tiresome that so innocent a detail should spoil the perfect picture of her day” (FF 18).

9 Throughout the novel, pictorial descriptions of scenes and characters are indeed presented by the narrator as overtly reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Greek sculptures, or, as above, eighteenth-century “conversation pieces” in the manner of Hogarth, thus enabling this to-and-fro movement of the narration in and outside fixed frames. These metaphorical “pictures” or “pictorial scenes” which also freeze the narrative in time and space thus come to duplicate, at the level of the micro-structure, the formal wedding photographs of the macro-structure through a kind of metonymic shift. This is the case, for instance, of the scene of the Sunday dinner in chapter six, with the roast beef being cut by Alfred, in which the choice of the signifier “picture” in the narratorial injunction to the reader reinforces the pictorial aspect of the scene, turning it into a veritable “tableau vivant”, to use Liliane Louvel’s terminology (Louvel 2011, 94-96):

Picture them at the table. Alfred, flourishing carving knives, prepares to exert his patriarchal will on a large roast of beef, for Sunday is devoted to the consumption of traditional English food [...] Alfred sits at the head of the table because Sofka has decided that he deserves this distinction. She herself sits at the foot, and Frederick is on her right, where he prefers to be. (FF 77)

10 This process itself is reinforced by the numerous photographs that the characters exchange in the text, such as the pictures of his children that Frederick sends to his mother from his place of exile in Italy in chapter eleven, or the photographs of Mimi’s wedding in chapter ten, which duplicate the ones that constitute the backbone of the novel. We have therefore a veritable *mise en abyme* of the narration, in which the description of the image is no longer mediated only by the gaze of the narrator, but also by the focal consciousness of a character who is inside the story, in this case Betty, in exile in the US. Here too, as for the wedding photographs of the macro-structure, the contemplation of the image generates its description by the focalizer, a description which is accompanied, as in chapter one, by a reflection which extends beyond the frame of the image: “But when the wedding photographs arrive and she sees how astonishingly prosperous Mimi looks in her white dress and with all those flowers, Betty turns thoughtful. She reflects that Mimi seems to be doing very well for herself” (FF 160).

- 11 The narrative technique of Anita Brookner's novel *Family and Friends*, with the inclusion of photographs and fixed frames at the level of both the macro-structure and the micro-structure, recalls the one used by Italian director Ettore Scola in his 1983 motion picture *Le Bal* (*Ballando... Ballando*) which, in order to relate fifty years of French history from the Popular Front in 1936 to the early 1980s, stages couples dancing on the dance-floor of a single ballroom to the sound and rhythm of each different period. In this "silent" film—that is to say without dialogues or an identifiable narrator, but with popular music throughout—the narration is based exclusively on the couples forming and "un-forming" on the dance-floor, and the idylls and dramas that result from these pairings. At the end of each significant period of time, on four different occasions in the film (the German Occupation, the Liberation, the 1950s, and the 1960s), the narration comes to a stop when a camera, invisible since located outside the picture, but still noticeable from its loud flash—the closest photographic equivalent to a strong, textual narratorial intrusion—takes snapshots of the dancers. Each time, the "freeze frame" thus obtained—with the noticeable absence of the original colours—turns into a black and white photograph which, endowed with a proper frame, comes to hang imposingly on the wall behind the bar of the ballroom, where it represents a veritable *mise en abyme* of the narration, which can then resume. In this film as in Brookner's novel, the photographs play the part of fixed frames that contain and freeze both the narration and history, while precisely rendering their ineluctable flow. And as in the novel, these macro-structural frames are also duplicated by smaller frames in the form of the large mirrors that can be seen all around the ballroom, reflecting what is happening on the dance-floor, and serving as a narrative device to introduce us, at the very beginning of the film—once the lights of the ballroom have been switched on—to each single dancer as they make and check their appearance in the mirror and on the stage. These mirrors serve a similar narrative function at the end of the film as each dancer individually leaves the ballroom before the lights go off, thus highlighting even further the perfectly circular structure of the whole. Also reminiscent of Brookner's narrative technique are the various pictures hanging on the walls of the ballroom or exchanged by the characters.
- 12 This comparison between the novel *Family and Friends* and the film *Le Bal* appears all the more pertinent as the structural parallel that we have just highlighted functions in conjunction with a thematic parallel as well. Indeed, the two novelistic and cinematographic works explore the same metaphor, that of dancing as a symbol of the cyclical nature of time and history following the trauma of the Second World War. In both Brookner's novel and Scola's film, these photographs or "still(ed) lives", which freeze the movement while paradoxically preserving its dynamic intensity and announcing further intensity to come (very much like Liliane Louvel's "ekphrastic moments"²), prove to be anamorphic variations on the original matrix endlessly repeated, which, combined with the ongoing round of dances, suggests a cyclical vision of time and history. Through the rotation on the same dance-floor, year after year, of couples played by the very same actors performing the very same functions—the romantic lover, the shady individual, the brute, the generous soul, etc.—for each period of time, the film suggests that, following the epistemological rupture of World War II, history no longer follows a linear, chronological progression according to some teleological purpose, but instead merely repeats itself endlessly, all the more so as most of the dances are actually either choreographed round dancing—with couples dancing the waltz, the polka, the rumba or the rock-and-roll, to name but a few—or circle dancing—with couples alternately

exchanging kisses on mock-carpets (a scarf during the Popular Front or a French flag at the Liberation) in the middle of the ring.³ And although dancing, music and clothing styles change according to fashion and historical periods, along with other details such as newspapers, chewing gum, Coca-Cola bottles or beeping watches (which function as so many “clues” for the spectator), what the film fundamentally emphasizes is the immutability of what Balzac calls “the Human Comedy”, as well as man’s fundamental solitude: indeed, when the ball comes to an end and the lights go off, not a single dancing couple is shown as leaving together, thus highlighting the failure of any attempt at bonding beyond the limited spatial and temporal boundaries of the ballroom.⁴

- 13 In the same way, the novel *Family and Friends* opens with couples dancing at a wedding (“At the wedding they will dance, husbands with wives, fathers with daughters”, *FF* 17), and closes with a promise of further literal or figurative balls: “Wait for the dancing to begin” (*FF* 187). The circular structure of the novel, combined with the recurrence of the weddings and their seemingly endless round of dances, as well as the periodic narrative pauses created by the wedding photographs being taken and then described ekphrastically, contribute to underlining the cyclical nature or “dance” of history. This phenomenon is all the more striking as a close examination of the photographs faithfully recording these family gatherings reveals that they can all be seen as anamorphic variations⁵ of the original matrix forever repeated and textually reprinted through a sort of internal rotation, or “dance”, of the protagonists. Indeed, this view of the entire novel as a vast anamorphic process seems convincing if we cease to consider that the narrator is presenting us with several photographs, and if we consider, instead, that he or she is actually showing only *one* photograph, always the same one, which opens up like a fan from the first page onward, and takes on, throughout the “reading-journey”, new appearances. For one must admit that these wedding pictures always deal with the same subject-matter, the family portrait, always present the members of the family in the same position, surrounding the newlyweds, and above all, always present the exact same characters, Sofka, her children, and the rest of the family. Without even mentioning the four children Mimi, Betty, Frederick and Alfred, whose presence is recurrent, we can remark on the reiterated presence of the two half-sisters, Dolly and Nettie, who are explicitly mentioned in the first, third and fourth pictures (*FF* 8, 136, and 187), and on that of Lilie and Ursie in the last two pictures (*FF* 136 and 187). The presence of the children in the last row is specified in the first and last pictures (*FF* 7 and 187), and their interchangeable names (with their diminutives all ending in “-ie”—“Steffie”, “Carrie”, “Laurie”, or “Charlie”) reinforce the impression that they could well be the exact same children in all the photographs. Each picture provides the exact same details, such as the smile on the face of the newlyweds and their family, the faces that try to charm the photographer (third and fourth pictures), and even Sofka’s hats, mentioned on the occasion of each of the three weddings that she attends (the fourth one taking place after her death). The absence of Sofka in the last picture does not, for that matter, contradict what we are saying, for Mimi, her daughter, replaces her. The resemblance between mother and daughter is emphasized by the presence of three details characteristic of the deceased—the upright pose, the lace dress, and the inevitable hat (“Mimi, upright, in pale lace, with a rather imposing hat, looks very like her mother”, *FF* 187). Mimi has taken over the role of the matriarch (“it is Mimi the matriarch”, *FF* 186), in the same way Alfred is now playing the role relinquished by Frederick (“it is... Alfred the man of property”, *FF* 186). And the leitmotiv that we begin to recognize after each new photograph is reinforced by the recurrence, within the narration, of the by now familiar refrain: “Here

is... Here they are....". The fundamental, immutable structures of the first photograph have thus been respected, and only the faces of the protagonists change through a sort of internal rotation, or dance, in which each character, in turn, comes to occupy the central position of the bride, the bridegroom, the matriarch, the close relative, etc. But it is always fundamentally the same picture which is presented to us, and the successive palimpsestic photographs are merely reproductions, or rather here re-writings, of the first seminal picture, which we may call the "matrix", all the more legitimately as it epitomizes, through the character of Sofka, the matriarch par excellence.

- 14 In a strikingly similar manner, Terence Davies's autobiographical film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* also uses photographs and stilled images interspersed within the narration to relate the childhood and adolescence of the film director and his brothers and sisters in working-class Liverpool during and after World War II, and also explores, through graphic representations of both the Blitz and domestic violence, the legacy of trauma—in this case the collective trauma of the war and its aftermath, and the individual trauma induced by an abusive father and husband. Like the two works above, the film narrative presents both a circular and a cyclical structure, as it opens and closes (as in *Family and Friends*) with a wedding—that of the elder sister at the beginning, and that of the brother at the very end—and revolves around recurring photographic stills freezing the narrative flow (or giving the impression thereof, as we shall see). Through a narrative device reminiscent of the loud flash in *Le Bal*, a distinct "click" signals a wedding picture being taken at the very beginning of the film, and this initial wedding-picture is then followed by a series of long, silent shots of the lined up family members whose striking photographic quality is, to a large extent, due to their sepia-like colour, "a desaturated brown which comes to signify the past, much as sepia can do in early Lumiere photographs" (Powrie 31) and gives the image "the feel of a faded photograph" (Koresky 39). The recurrence, within the flow of the narrative, of these stilled images which, as Paul Farvey puts it, "invoke photography and seem to *contain* time" (Farley 55), has owed the film the label of cinematic "photo-album" (Wilson 282),⁶ a term we have used previously to describe Brookner's novel. However, the remaining structure of Davies's film differs slightly from the structure of Scola's film and Brookner's novel in that Davies's "family portraits", as Phil Powrie calls them (Powrie 21), are not proper group portraits, as in the other two works, but "pseudo-photographic images", "when the characters are posing as if for a photograph (Powrie 21, emphasis mine), "looking into the lens as though they are about to have their picture taken" (Koresky 112, emphasis mine). The actual freeze-frame effects of *Le Bal* are here fake freeze-frame effects, with Davies playing with the notions of stasis and motion, as well as with stasis and time, inherent in photography and film respectively.⁷ And yet, like the fictitious wedding-pictures in Brookner's novel—and as several critics have suggested (Wilson 282; Everett 2005, 193; Koresky 111-112; Di Mattia)—they contribute to create striking "tableaux"—a term we have also used to describe Brookner's narrative technique—or even pictorial "still lifes" (Koresky 111), as suggested by the polysemy of the film's title. Despite this slight formal difference, what is reminiscent of Brookner's and Scola's works, though, is the accordion-like structure provided by the alternation of narrative moments and frozen (or pseudo-frozen) images, and reinforced, or duplicated, on the occasion of each significant family gathering (christenings, weddings, and funerals), by the recurring close-up shots of one particular framed photograph—that of the deceased patriarch (Davies's own late father)—which, like the framed photographs on the ballroom wall in *Le Bal*, can be seen on the parlour wall. In addition to the many other "frames-within-frames" provided by doors,

halls, and windows in the film, this “further photographic image within the pseudo-photographic image”, to use Powrie’s words (Powrie 21), recalls the *mise en abyme* of the narrative that we have highlighted in *Le Bal* and *Family and Friends*, with in this case, as an echo of the matriarch Sofka in Brookner’s novel, the deceased patriarch dominating the family, “presid[ing] over it” (Koresky 38), “through his central position in the *mise-en-scène* of the photograph” (Powrie 24). Finally, as in *Family and Friends* and *Le Bal*, the narrative in Davies’s film is also punctuated by ritualized dances and songs, but while the characters are shown as constantly singing—the director’s attempt at creating his own “musical”, as he puts it—the dances, which are omnipresent too, are always performed off-camera, and yet intimately connected to the characters, who, in the very words of the patriarch—himself “a very good dancer”—are described as “bleeding dance mad”. Even though they are suggested but not filmed, these dances enhance the circularity of the film, itself described by Davies as presenting “ripples of memory” (Davies 295).

- 15 What is particularly interesting in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, as well as illuminating in that it sheds light on the other two works too through the same kind of rippling effect, is the way in which the backdrop of the dances and songs, themselves “shaped by repetition and silence” (Everett 2004, 6), emphasizes, through two very powerful forms of visual arrest, both the recurrence of the frozen filmic images and the cyclical “return” of the embedded photograph of the violent and abusive father. The choice of the term “return” is deliberate here for its connection with Freud’s notion of the “return of the repressed”, as what we have is in fact the visual expression, as well as endless reenactment, of “traumatic arrest”, as Powrie puts it (Powrie 33), a statement echoed by Koresky, who refers to the stasis of these images as mirroring “the immobility caused by the lingering of past trauma” (Koresky 112), “the emotionally crippling effect of a patriarch’s abuse” (Koresky 13). As Wendy Everett states, the “stasis of trauma” in the film (Everett 2005, 193) reveals “the extent to which the whole family remained traumatized, frozen into immobility and silence, long after [the father’s] death” (Everett 2004, 10-11). In an interview with Michael Koresky, Davies has mentioned how the shooting of the film, and particularly the sequence in which his father is beating up his mother in the hallway, “brought back really horrid memories of being absolutely terrified” (Koresky 138). For Powrie, this traumatic arrest represents what he calls “the Law of Death” (Powrie 33), and the family portraits function as the wound, the “double trauma” (physical and psychological) of the father “who is hated because of his violence and the Law which he represents, but who is revered for the same reason” (Powrie 32).
- 16 If the family, specifically through the abuse committed by his father, is indeed one of the three “loci of trauma” from Davies’s childhood (along with institutionalized suffering and sexuality) which, according to Koresky, are manifest in all his films (Koresky 30), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* hints at a third “locus of trauma”, i.e. the war, present throughout the first part of the film, set in the 1940s, and whose terrifying reality suddenly irrupts into the film when the three children, out in the streets on an errand, have a narrow escape one day during a Blitz air raid as everybody else at home is running for shelter. Although very short, this intense sequence, as well as its lingering effect on Davies years after the event, attest to its traumatic dimension, highlighting this palpable “free-floating anxiety” creating an “emotional estrangement between the self and the environment, and between time and place” which, according to Deleuze, is characteristic of postwar filmmaking (Deleuze 272, qtd. in Koresky 115). Koresky sees a manifestation of these “traumatizing ghosts haunting their maker [Davies]” (Koresky 116) in the “ghostlike”

beginning of the film (Koresky 114), when the empty house seems haunted by the memory of the family members' presence. Just like Brookner's *Family and Friends* and Scola's *Le Bal*, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*—as reflected in the very caesura of its title—suggests, rather than stages, the epistemological rupture of the Second World War and the terrors and traumas it induced.

- 17 In both Brookner's novel and Scola's and Davies's films, the endless recurrence of the dances and the photographs seem therefore to point to a vision of history as forever cyclical after a certain moment in time which, in all three cases, corresponds to the late 1930s with the rise of fascism and its culmination in World War II and the Holocaust. One might be tempted to see in the repetitive pattern of both the novel and the films a manifestation of what Dominick LaCapra, in *Representing the Holocaust*, calls "the return of the historically repressed" (LaCapra 1994, 169). In this book, LaCapra presents modern history as essentially "traumatic", echoing Lawrence Langer's comment on the Holocaust as being a "communal wound that cannot heal" (Langer 204-205).⁸ The danger, according to LaCapra, is that this "traumatic point of rupture between modernism and postmodernism" (LaCapra 1994, 188) that the Holocaust represents induces a "discourse of trauma" that endlessly enacts a "compulsive repetition of trauma" (LaCapra 1994, 194) and ultimately threatens to "generate aporias" (LaCapra 1994, 221). Following this interpretation, the repetitive temporality of history in Brookner's *Family and Friends* might precisely be the symptom of the endless return of the trauma of the Holocaust, here not just psychologically, but also textually or narratively repressed. Indeed, if, to the dismay of some critics like Bryan Cheyette in *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, the word "Holocaust" itself is hardly ever mentioned in Brookner's fiction, despite her direct autobiographical connection with these events as the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Poland, the Jewish genocide provides nonetheless a backdrop for most of her novels, and especially this one, but always in a covert, one might say "repressed", mode. For example, in *Family and Friends*, a most elliptical dialogue at the beginning of chapter 8 between the matriarch, Sofka, and a woman who just rang her doorbell ("Your children?" "Safe. Here", FF 99) is the only direct allusion to the horrifying events in the entire novel.
- 18 However, one might precisely see in these recurrent photographs of Holocaust survivors the inscription, or rather "encryption", of the compulsively repetitive trace of this fundamental trauma, the photographs thus becoming those "memory sites", to borrow Pierre Nora's expression, that LaCapra re-appropriates as "trauma sites" (LaCapra 1998, 10) or even "mourning sites" (LaCapra 1998, 44) in his book *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. In this respect, Brookner's novel might function according to a pattern of repression that LaCapra sees as fundamentally postmodern. The photograph, which, by nature, is evidence that "ça a été", "that-has-been", as Barthes puts it in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 120), ends up losing its quality of presence-within-an-absence to emphasize solely, in Brookner's fiction, absence and death, and particularly the absence of the father.⁹ But beyond the quest for the missing father, the recurrence of the photographs as traces of the past in Brookner's *Family and Friends* might be a manifestation of what LaCapra calls a "compulsive and melancholic acting-out" (LaCapra 1994, 14) of trauma in which the wedding photographs forever projecting an institutionalized picture of order and harmony could also be seen as a screen barring access to, while giving evidence of, the repressed trauma of the Holocaust, and thus preventing a "working-through" of that trauma.

- 19 At a further level, one might see a manifestation of that same compulsion of repetition at work not just in the recurrence of the photographs in *Family and Friends*, but in the recurrence of Brookner's novels themselves—twenty-four at the rate of one a year for two decades—to the dismay and delight of both her critics and readers. It all works as if Brookner, through her prolific activity as a fiction writer, kept “acting out” the traumatic past of Jewish Diaspora and relocation without ever “working it through”, in other words without ever achieving any kind of closure. In any case, whether the traumatic past has to do with the Holocaust, as in *Family and Friends*, or more generally with World War II and the human misery it caused, both individually and collectively, as in *Le Bal* and *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, the endless rotation of the dancers in familial or institutional ballrooms seems to represent an apt metaphor for this never-ending “acting out” of trauma.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baltrusaitis, Jurgis. *Les Perspectives dépravées*. Tome II. *Anamorphoses* (1955). Paris: Flammarion, 1996.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, Noonday Press, 1981. (First published as *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* [Paris : Gallimard/Cahiers du Cinéma/Éditions du Seuil, 1980]).
- Baudrillard, Jean. “Simulacra and Simulations”. *Selected Writings*. Mark Poster (ed.). Polity: Blackwell, 1988.
- Bazin, André. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”. *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.
- Brookner, Anita. *Family and Friends*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985. (FF)
- Cheyette, Byan. *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*. London: Peter Halban, 1998.
- Campos, Maria Consuelo Cunha. “Dançando sobre um vulcão: O baile, o fim de festa”, *Espelho: Revista Machadiana* 1 (1995): 31-37.
- Davies, Terence. “A Pebble in the pool and ships like magic” (Interview with Nigel Floyd), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 657 (1988): 295-296.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. (First published as *Cinéma 2, L'image-temps* [Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1985].)
- Di Mattia, Joanna. “Terence Davies”. *Senses of the Cinema* 84 (2017).
- Everett, Wendy. “Distant Voices, Still Lives”. *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*. Brian McFarlane (ed.). London: Wallflower press, 2005.
- Everett, Wendy. *Terence Davies*. Manchester: ManchesterUP, 2004.
- Farley, Paul. *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. London: BFI Publishing, 2006.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

- Koresky, Michael. *Terence Davies*. Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield: U of Illinois P, 2014.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998.
- Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.
- Louvel, Liliane. "Tours et retournements du 'moment ekphrastique': histoires de rideaux, de mousseline et de frêles voiles de chair", *Polysèmes* 13 (2015): 1-13.
- Louvel, Liliane. "Déclinaisons et figures ekphrastiques: quelques modestes propositions". *Arborescences: revue d'études françaises* 4 (2014): 15-32.
- Louvel, Liliane. *Poetics of the Iconotext*. Ed. Karen Jacobs. Trans. Laurence Petit. London: Ashgate, 2011.
- Nora, Pierre. *Les Lieux de mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- Powrie, Phil. "The 'family portrait', Trauma and the *punctum* in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988)". *The Seeing Century: Film, Vision, and Identity*. Wendy Everett (ed.). Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, 20-35.
- Rose, Steve. "Distant Voices, Still Lives: N°21". *The Guardian*, 20 Oct 2010.
- Schneider, Michel. "L'image dans le passé". *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 35 (printemps 1987), "Le Champ visuel", Paris: Gallimard.
- Swift, Graham. *Waterland*. London: William Heinemann, 1983.
- Zagarrio, Vito. "La sceneggiatura circolare: Strutture narrative in tre film di Ettore Scola". *The Italianist* 29.2 (2009): 265-280.
- Wilson, David. "Family Album: *Distant Voices, Still Lives*". *Sight and Sound* 57.4 (1988): 282-283.

NOTES

1. Liliane Louvel in *Poetics of the Iconotext* describes the reference to a pictorial genre as a case of "archpictoriality" (Louvel 2011, 57).
2. "Je propose donc de nommer 'moment ekphrastique' ce moment du texte occupé par l'ekphrasis et qui a des résonances dans un avant et un après du texte narratif en prose ou en poésie narrative" (Louvel 2014, 18). See also "le moment ekphrastique" (Louvel 2015, 6-8).
3. Vito Zagarrio sees this "circularity", as well as what he calls the "claustrophobic location of the ballroom", as characteristic of Ettore Scola's vision of the world: "La 'circolarità', d'altronde, sembra essere una visione del mondo di Scola: si veda il già citato *Ballando Ballando*, con l'enfasi sui 'ritorni' di una Storia che torna sempre uguale a se stessa, e l'uso del piano sequenza a sottolineare il 'cerchio' del set (la location claustrofobia della sala da ballo) come della narrazione" (Zagarrio 267).
4. Maria Consuelo Cunha Campos, for her part, talks of "teatrum mundi" and of "desespero trágico" ("tragi-comic despair") (Campos 31-32).
5. "Anamorphosis" is the term used in the visual arts to describe the reversal in perspective that occurs when the viewer of a painting starts moving laterally, a reversal that makes objects or subjects which were until then hidden or deformed suddenly spring into view. There is thus a

strong distinction between a frontal, direct vision of the painting and a lateral, indirect vision revealing a new meaning (see, among others, Jurgis Baltrusaitis 7 and Michel Schneider 281).

6. See also Steve Rose's comment: "It's like a photo album of Britain's pre-pop culture collective memory—a series of snapshots and impressions, truer to the nature of memory than the demands of commercial cinema." "Distant Voices, Still Lives: N°21", *The Guardian*, 20 Oct 2010.

7. For further reflection on the differences between photography and cinema with respect to stasis, motion, and time, see, among other critical works, Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (Bazin 9-16), Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, with his notions of "posed" time and "passed" time in relation with still and moving images (Barthes 78), and Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989).

8. In her article "Dançando sobre um vulcão: O baile, o fim de festa", with its indirect reference to Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie / Endgame*, Maria Consuelo Cunha Campos likewise uses extremely violent terms such as "hecatombe", "desastre", "fracasso" and "naufrágio" to convey the apocalyptic world depicted in the film *Le Bal* (Campos 1995, 110, 112, 113).

9. "For her husband, their father, is absent, gone before, dead, mildly disgraced. Gambling, they say. In any event, he was an older man, scarcely compatible, out of reach to his young children, amused by his young wife but easily bored by her inflexible dignity. Out of it in every sense" (FF 8). The fathers' absence is indeed a recurrent motif in Brookner's work: dead (*Look at Me*), unknown (*Providence*), absent (*A Misalliance*), incompetent (*A Start in Life*), or impotent (*A Closed Eye*), the fathers are flawed, yet they are present as photographs in the living-rooms and bedrooms in portraits which, while celebrating them, underline their fundamental absence.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines three literary and cinematic works which were all released in the 1980s: Italian director Ettore Scola's 1983 silent film *Le Bal* (*Ballando... Ballando*); contemporary British novelist Anita Brookner's 1985 novel *Family and Friends*; and British filmmaker Terence Davies's 1988 film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. What is striking about these three works, despite their different textual and visual nature, is not so much their similar narrative techniques, with their use of photographs and stilled images as well as songs and dances, but the way in which they explore the cyclicity or "dance" of history in terms that resonate with the postmodern concepts of trauma and dehistoricization. Borrowing from a number of critics of postmodernism as well as poststructuralist theorists of the photograph, this essay will show how, in these three works which explore the notions of temporality, memory, and nostalgia, the photographs, which are used as both narrative device and historical evidence, represent far more than just an attempt at fixating and containing the passing of time. By chronicling the second half of a twentieth century marked by the epistemological rupture of the Second World War—present in all three works—and the Holocaust—barely alluded to, and yet omnipresent, in Brookner's novel—they provide a view of history which, from then on, can only be apprehended as an endless and meaningless cyclical return, in which the characters, despite the frail or strong cohesion of actual or metaphorical families, seem forever doomed to alienation and utter solitude.

Cet article étudie trois œuvres littéraires et cinématographiques publiées dans les années 1980 : le film muet *Le Bal* (1983) du cinéaste italien Ettore Scola, le roman *Family and Friends* (1985) de la romancière britannique contemporaine Anita Brookner, et le film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*

(1988) du réalisateur britannique Terence Davies. En dépit des différences de nature entre texte et film, on est frappé, dans ces trois œuvres, non pas tant par leur technique narrative similaire (avec l'utilisation de la photographie et de l'image fixe ainsi que de chants et de danses), que par leur manière d'explorer la cyclicité ou « danse » de l'histoire en des termes qui font écho aux concepts postmodernes de trauma et de déshistoricisation. L'article se fonde sur un certain nombre de critiques du postmodernisme ainsi que sur les théories poststructuralistes de la photographie pour montrer comment, dans ces trois œuvres qui explorent les notions de temporalité, de mémoire et de nostalgie, les photographies, utilisées à la fois comme ressort narratif et comme témoignage historique, représentent bien plus qu'une simple tentative de fixer et de contenir le cours du temps. En faisant la chronique de la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle, marquée par la rupture épistémologique de la Seconde Guerre mondiale (présente dans les trois œuvres) et de la Shoah (omniprésente dans le roman de Brookner même si elle y est à peine évoquée), elles offrent une vision de l'histoire qui, dès lors, ne peut plus être appréhendée que comme un éternel retour dénué de sens, dans lequel les personnages, quels que soient les liens (fragiles ou intenses) qu'ils entretiennent avec leurs familles (réelles ou métaphoriques), semblent irrémédiablement voués à l'aliénation et à la solitude absolue.

INDEX

Keywords: photo album, photograph, freeze frame, tableau vivant, cyclicity, dance, War World II, History, dehistoricization, trauma, acting out, alienation

oeuvre citée Bal (Ballando... Ballando) (Le), Family and Friends, Distant Voices Still Lives

Mots-clés: album photographique, photographie, arrêt sur image, tableau vivant, cyclicité, danse, Seconde Guerre mondiale, Histoire, déshistoricisation, trauma, compulsion de répétition, aliénation

AUTHORS

LAURENCE PETIT

Laurence Petit est Maître de Conférences au Département d'études anglophones de l'Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier 3 et membre du laboratoire de recherche EMMA (Etudes Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone - EA741). Elle a publié de nombreux articles portant sur les rapports texte/image dans la littérature anglophone contemporaine. Elle a co-dirigé "Text and Image in Children's Literature" (*Image (&) Narrative* 19.1 et 19.2, 2018), *Point, Dot, Period... The Dynamics of Punctuation in Text and Image* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), *Picturing The Language of Images* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), "La couleur : entre silence et éloquence" (*Polysèmes* 14, 2015), "Musing in the Museum" (*Word & Image* 30.1, 2014), et "Photographic Text(ure): The Grain and the Dot" (*Image & Narrative* 15.2, 2014). Elle a par ailleurs traduit en anglais deux ouvrages théoriques de Liliane Louvel, *L'Œil du texte* et *Texte/Image : Images à lire, textes à voir*, réunis sous le titre *Poetics of the Iconotext* (Ashgate, 2011).