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ABSTRACT: The general aim of this article is to discuss ways in which an acclaimed Canadian writer, Carol Shields, employs, and simultaneously subverts, photographic metaphors in her short story titled "Scenes." Shields skillfully arranges a series of *scenes* from Frances's — the protagonist's — past into a concise biography. Owing to their affinity to photographs, the *scenes* from Frances's life might be attributed the status of objective and honest representations of reality which function as truthful evidence of *what happened*. Importantly, however, while Shields's story evokes the photographic associations, it simultaneously calls in question their documentary reliability. In other words, Frances's fragmentary biography — shown in (verbally constructed) images or flashes — undermines the concepts of both, a photograph as a documentary inscription of the truth, and language as a fitting medium of describing this truth.

KEY WORDS: Photography, representation, biography, language.

The general aim of this article is to discuss ways in which an acclaimed Canadian writer, Carol Shields, employs, and simultaneously subverts, photographic metaphors in her short story titled "Scenes." It is easy to observe that Shields skillfully arranges a series of *scenes* from her protagonist's (Frances's) past into a concise biography. These *scenes* — apparently insignificant, uncalculated and combined into a narrative in a seemingly accidental manner — "are much too fragmentary to be stories and far too immediate to be memories" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 655); indeed, the act of reading Shields's text resembles that of going through a random collection of photographs. It is in the final part of Shields's text that the narrator explains the nature of *scenes* which

> [...] seem to bloom out of nothing, out of the thin, uncoloured air of defeats and pleasures. A curtain opens, a light appears, there are voices or music or sometimes a wide transparent stream of silence. Only rarely do they point to anything but themselves. They're useless, attached to nothing, can't be traded in or shaped into instruments to prise open the meaning of the universe.
>
> SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 655

In subsequent paragraphs, the *scenes* are compared to ornaments, to keys that open nothing, and to colorful Easter eggs. On the one hand, the comparisons emphasize the trivial nature of the *scenes*: they are decorative but — like the Easter eggs "with a hole poked in the top and bottom and the contents blown out" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 655) — empty; they are insubstantial and linked with reality in a vague, uncanny manner. On the other hand, however, the narrator admits that "they are what a life is made of, one fitting against the next like English paving stones" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 655). By means of combining the concepts of light, transparency and emptiness with one of stability and durability ("paving stones"), the narrator avoids unequivocal categorization of *scenes*. Like photographs, they *are* and *are not* the inscriptions of reality; they are subjective (in the sense that they are *pictured* by a third party) but still manage to present a number of facts. Moreover, most obviously, they are what the *story* of Frances's life — the only one there is — is composed of. This fragmentary biography indirectly expresses the "need for a continued assertion of [photographic/biographical] referential power" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 10) — or insists on "coming to grips with the self in the world" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 11) — and, simultaneously, unveils this self as (mis)constructed and proliferated by means of photographic and verbal representations.

Traditionally, photography has been perceived as "truer than other representative images" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 12). Owing to their affinity to photographs, the *scenes* from Frances's life might, therefore, be attributed the status of objective and honest representations of reality which function as truthful evidence of *what happened*. Importantly, however, while Shields's story evokes photographic associations, it simultaneously calls in question documentary reliability. In other words, Frances's fragmentary biography — shown in (verbally constructed) images (or flashes) — undermines the concepts of both, a photograph as a "transparent window onto truth" (BEST, V., 1997 : 174), and language as a fitting medium of describing this truth.

Therefore, my article focuses on how Shields relates to the "problem of referring to the self in language and in image" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 2), or — more specifically, on how she unveils photography, as well

as language, as dubious tools of narrating the protagonist's experience. The paper starts with a brief introduction to the theory of photography. Next, it proceeds to the analysis of selected *scenes*, focusing first on the notion of the mirror image, then on the juxtaposition of photographic fixedness with movement, and, finally, on language as the system of representation. I assume, following Linda Haverty Rugg, that "it is precisely the absence of real photographs [in Shields's short-story] and the use of the photographic metaphor that lead [one] to question the ideology of photography" (Haverty Rugg, L., 1997 : 7). In Shields's biographical narrative, photography becomes the metaphor for memory and history which is always fragmented, subjective, unreliable and *storied*.

Even though, since the mid-1800s, the seemingly honest nature of photography has been questioned, more recently and most famously in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* and, at least partly, in *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* by Roland Barthes, it still "offers a way of seeing that is deceptively simple, presenting an image so easily recognizable, and so obviously referential that it offers the viewer a relation to the photographed subject that feels like knowledge" (Best, V., 1997 : 173). What Victoria Best calls the "there-ness" of the photograph (Best, V., 1997 : 174) — understood as its fixedness in a specific moment in time and in a characteristic space — creates the illusion of presence and authenticity. The photographed subject appears to be more real and more embodied than the one who has been represented in a painting or described by means of words. According to Linda Hutcheon, "Photographs are said to carry their referent within themselves: there is a necessarily real thing which was once placed before the lens" (Hutcheon, L., 2002 : 87). Due to this "myth of photographic truth" (Sturken, M., 2001 : 17) and its relation to corporeality, photography has been linked to the concept of the body; viewed as evidence of the past, it has also been connected with the notion of memory, and — consequently — of history, biography, and autobiography.

However, what interests me most in regard to Shields's short story, is the relationship between photography and the (gendered) body, as well as what I call *photographic incongruity* which stems from the fact that as much as photographs appear to be real, objective, and compatible with the photographed subject, they are, in fact, a site of a curious tension between reality and image, subjectivity and objectivity, presence and absence. As Hutcheon remarks:

> Commentators as diverse as Annette Kuhn, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes have remarked on photography's ambivalences: it is in no way innocent of cultural formation (or innocent of forming culture) yet it is

> in a very real sense technically tied to the real, or at least to the visual and the actual.
>
> HUTCHEON, L., 2002 : 42

Indeed, "the photograph cannot be taken as a simple illustration of what was once there before the lens" (BEST, V., 1997 : 175). For instance, "no matter what social role an image plays, the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of *subjective* choice" (STURKEN, M., CARTWRIGHT, L., 2001 : 16). As a paradoxical medium, photography is, in Hutcheon's terms, a "perfect postmodern vehicle" (HUTCHEON, L., 2002 : 116) which combines the features of high and popular art and can be read in the context of creativity or technology. Photography also appears to bear resemblance to narrative fiction because, as Annette Kuhn has it, they both "constitute a highly coded discourse" (Quoted in: HUTCHEON, L., 2002 : 21), and both simultaneously record and transform reality. As a postmodern device, photography points to "a plurality of selves" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 13); rather than operates as a representation of a coherent subject ("not only this image but this one, this one, and that one are the [subject of the photograph]" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 13)).

Even though photographs indicate the presence of the body and prove that the body was *there* — at a particular time, in a particular place — they also inevitably evidence the absence of this body (right now, on the surface of the picture). In photographs, one sees oneself "framed and shot" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 18); the body is "stilled and silenced, its performance arrested, its dynamic mobility denied" (BEST, V., 1997 : 175). Photography "imprisons, arrests, and falsifies time; […] it is submission to and an assault upon reality" (HUTCHEON, L., 2002 : 118). Because of the fact that "photography arrests the flow of life and creates memorials to moments, persons, and objects, the medium was from the first associated with death" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 18). It is the objectification of the photographed body, as well as "the creation of the body as a passive image that cannot resist construction from the viewing subject" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 16) that have been of interest to numerous feminist critics.

It was Simone de Beauvoir who — founding her argument upon theories of Jean-Paul Sartre — famously identified (generic) Woman as the Other, necessarily and unavoidably objectified by (generic) Man's gaze. Woman's otherness presupposes both her inferiority and visibility: she is (perceived as) her body and "she must pretend to be an object, and a fascinating one" (BEAUVOIR, S., 1952 : 380). Whereas Man gains the status of the "bearer of the look" (MULVEY, L., 1990 : 62), Woman is a body, an image, and an *objet d'art*. She is "the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor" (GUBAR, S., 1985 : 293). Since in a pho-

tograph the body of the subject is objectified and open to view, "the photograph offers a typically gendered viewing position for a mastering masculine gaze over a passive and silenced feminine image" (BEST, V., 1997 : 175). "It is no coincidence, therefore," as Annette Kuhn asserts,

> […] that in many highly socially visible (and profitable) forms of photography women dominate the image. Where photography takes women as its subject matter, it also constructs 'woman' as a set of meanings which then enter cultural and economic circulation on their own account.
>
> Quoted in: HUTCHEON, L., 2002 : 21—22

The glass coffin in which the perfect, ultimately passive and intact body of Snow White is exhibited for everyone to see, serves, accordingly, as a fitting metaphor of a photographic frame. In her transparent coffin, Snow White (serving as a paragon of docile femininity) is degraded to the position of a beautiful, erotic object, and is, so to speak, not her*self*.

Taking a photograph of someone has also long been perceived as an act of violation and appropriation — once it is *taken* (and, therefore, once a part of *me* is taken), it ceases to be in the exclusive possession of the photographed. Because of the fact that photographs tend to be perceived as "most intimate expressions of ourselves" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 4), in many literary works photography is depicted as an art which can be particularly threatening. In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman,* for instance, Peter, the fiancé of the main protagonist (Marian), is both a keen hunter and a keen photographer and takes equal pleasure in both ways of shooting. When Peter attempts to take a photograph of Marian and aims at her with his camera, the woman feels like an animal facing a barrel: "[…] her body [freezes, goes] rigid. She [can't] move, she [can't] even move the muscles of her face as she [stands and stares] into the round glass lens pointing towards her […]" (ATWOOD, M., 1969 : 242). Even though she tries to convince herself that "it's just a camera" (ATWOOD, M., 1969 : 242) and, therefore, apparently nothing to fear, she feels terrified at the ominous usurpation (which she barely and accidentally manages to escape). Similarly, the heroine of Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* — a young prostitute named Sugar — fears photographs; this time, however, the menace springs from their permanence:

> Whatever violations she routinely submits to in the privacy of her bedroom, they vanish the moment they're over, half-forgotten with the drying of sweat. But to be chemically fixed in time and passed hand to hand forever: that is a nakedness which can never be clothed again.
>
> FABER, M., 2002 : 40—41

In her short story, Shields avoids such direct references to photography, as well as to the potential dangers photography carries. Instead, she focuses on images which subvert photographic fixedness and relate to movement and transgression. In the subsequent part of my article, I will show how Shields's text transcends the norms of linearity and coherence, and, at the same time, how it problematizes the theory of mimetic representation, both in reference to photography and to language.

Even though Carol Shields's short story brings into question the nature of representations, its fragmented form *mirrors* the constant movement of the protagonist. For instance, the narrative immediately starts with one of the *scenes* and not with the *proper* introduction of its heroine. Instead of proceeding in a linear, chronological manner, the text unexpectedly shifts from the past to the present, in order to end in the past. The fragmented biography corresponds with the concept of fragmented memory, and draws one's attention as much to the *scenes* described as to the gaps between them. Photographs, which the *scenes* resemble, refer to very specific moments in time and fail to portray the continuity of Frances's experience: mostly, as the narrator asserts, they only point to themselves.

Although Shields does not refer to photography straightforwardly, some of the *scenes* presented in her short story contain images which relate to photographic fixedness, its deathly qualities and immobility it imposes upon its subjects. The first of these images is one of the mirror which belonged to Frances's grandmother and, after her death, was handed over to the protagonist. Importantly, the detailed description of the looking-glass — and of Frances's attraction to it — focuses on its wooden frame on which "leaves, vines, flowers and fruit are shallowly carved" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 647) and not on what and how it reflects. The carving on the frame "might be described as primitive — and this is exactly why Frances loves it, being drawn to those things that are incomplete or in some way flawed" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 647). Mesmerized, Frances spends many an hour in front of the mirror, admiring the imperfections of the frame. Her fascination is mistaken for narcissistic enchantment with her own reflection, and Frances is accused of vanity. As long as she remains a child, however, Frances remains thoroughly indifferent to her own image. Although seeing the mirror for the first time marks a crucial moment in Frances's childhood — "the mirror is the first thing she remembers seeing, *really* seeing, as a child" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 647) — her experience is a parody of Lacanian mirror-stage for she is only interested in this part of the looking-glass which does not *mirror* anything. In other words, she is not taken in by misrepresentations; rather, her fascination with the richness, complexity and deformities of the carving, points to her inherent conviction that appearances are deceptive.

The mirror is passed to Frances after her grandmother's death. Frances does not attend the funeral itself but is taken "to the funeral home to bid goodbye to her grandmother's body" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 647). Like Snow White, the grandmother is *framed* by the edging of the coffin, "her powdered face pulled tight as though with a drawstring into a sort of grimace" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 647—648). It is this artificial stillness of the woman's body that pushes Frances to her first transgression: she touches "her grandmother's lips with the middle finger of her right hand" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). Even though "the lips [do] not turn to dust" and feel like "the side of a rubber ball," Frances "grows rich with disgust" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). "Later, she would look at her finger and say to herself, 'This finger has touched dead lips'" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). Although the powdered surface of her dead grandmother's skin appears to demarcate a clean boundary of the dead body, Frances recognizes the illusory character of the borderline and is repulsed and enthralled with what the surface covers. Frances sees the dead body as grotesque and abject; it is the body which is made up to look like a corporeal whole, but, in fact, it is in the process of decomposing and is open to transformations. Unstable and repugnant, the dead body is also contagious and some of its in-betweenness is transferred onto Frances's finger which from then on is sentenced to violate bodily taboos:

> With the same middle finger she later touched the gelatinous top of a goldfish swimming in a little glass bowl at school. She touched the raised mole on the back of her father's white neck. Shuddering, she touched horse turds in the back lane, and she touched her own urine springing on to the grass as she squatted behind the snowball bush by the fence.
>
> SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648

The bodily transgressions bring Frances back in front of the mirror. This time, she focuses on the glass which, however, instead of forming a smooth surface that faithfully reflects reality, is "beveled all the way round" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). Frances habitually "[lines] up her round face so that the beveled edge [splits] it precisely in two" and once writes in her diary that "Life is like looking into a beveled mirror" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). Next day, however, "she [crosses] it out and, peering into the mirror, [sticks] out her tongue and [makes] a face" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 648). Clearly, the *scenes* described above point to Frances's awareness of the capricious nature of mirror images: mirrors reflect reality in a highly suspicious manner and bring attention to fragmentation and proliferation of the self. Accordingly, in Frances's view, representations are not to be trusted as *true*; rather, they are to be critically studied, de-composed, deconstructed, played with, and mocked.

The passivity of the grandmother's body, confined to the photographic frame, is juxtaposed with the series of actions performed by Frances. Another *scene* built upon the same contrast mentions the protagonist's neighbor, Louise Shaw, who has been asleep for ten years. When Louise's mother tells Frances how lively the girl used to be before she fell into coma — "forever running or skipping rope or throwing a ball up against the side of the garage" — Frances feels obligated to the woman and "whenever she [sees Mrs. Shaw] she [makes] her body speed up and whirl on grass or do cartwheels" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 651). The physical activity evolves into Frances's fondness of basketball — in time, "she [becomes] obsessed with doing free throws" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 652). Importantly, by means of becoming "the queen of free throws," Frances takes over the boys' realm of "the back lane" — the space "between board fences, garbage cans, garage doors and stands of tough weeds" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 652). The back lane is where Frances learns to swear and to kiss boys, and where her body becomes "newly nimble and strong" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 652). It is also where she experiences her first private victory (one morning "she [throws] twenty-seven perfect free throws before missing" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 651)) thanks to which she "[knows] for the first time the incalculable reward of self-possession" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 652). What becomes evident in these *scenes* is that by means of her constant movement Frances transcends the *frame* established as appropriate for the feminine body. In other words, she identifies herself through her actions, rather than is gazed at by others, contemplated, and judged on the basis of her looks.

Other *scenes* related to transgression spring from an important process through which Frances attempts to characterize her relationship with herself and the world. It is learning to read, which for Frances is "like falling into a mystery deeper than the mystery of airwaves or the halo around the head of the baby Jesus" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 650). Frances finds language to be a problematic structure:

> Deliberately she [makes] herself stumble and falter over the words in her first books, trying to hold back the rush of revelation. She [sees] other children being matter-of-fact and methodical, puzzling over vowels and consonants and sounding out words as though they were dimes and nickels that had to be extracted from the slot of a bank. She [feels] suffused with light and often [skips] or [hops] or [runs] wildly to keep herself from flying apart. Her delirium, her failure to ingest books calmly, [makes] her suspect there [is] something wrong with her or else with the world […].
>
> SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 650

What seems to make Frances uneasy about reading is the discontinuity between the word and the "revelation" of understanding its meaning. Whereas other children do not see the discrepancy, Frances grows feverish over the words which represent but never touch the real world. Frances's recognition of the fact that language is artificial and that it forms the slippery ground upon which she stumbles and falters, poses a threat of "flying apart" — or of the de-construction — of her self.

Moreover, her distrust in language translates into Frances's skepticism towards the school librarian — Miss Mayes — and the woman's claim that "a good book will never let you down" (Shields, C., 1990 : 650). Frances remains indifferent to Miss Mayes' account of the apparent wonders books can engender ("Books could take you on magic journeys; books could teach you where the rain came from or how things used to be in the olden days. A person who truly loved books need never feel alone" (Shields, C., 1990 : 650—651)). However, she is thoroughly thrilled with the list of shameful things people do to books, and particularly with one of the enumerated mischiefs: a strip of bacon was once "wrongly, criminally inserted between fresh clean pages" (Shields, C., 1990 : 651). As Frances experiences reading in terms of (semi-religious) revelation, the strip of bacon, by means of which the crime against books is accomplished, becomes "a porky abomination [whose] ends […] flop out obscenely" (Shields, C., 1990 : 651). However, the girl finds the way in which the sin was committed absolutely thrilling:

> Someone, someone who lived in the same school district, had had the audacity, the imagination, to mark the pages of a book with a strip of bacon. The existence of this person and his outrageous act penetrated the fever that had come over her since she'd learned to read, and she began to look around again and see what the world had to offer.
>
> Shields, C., 1990 : 651

Frances is *cured* by this creative transgression against language as a system of representation; the fact that you can sabotage the seemingly sacred laws guarding the process of reading brings her enormous relief. Consequently, when Frances herself starts working in the university library (while, at the same time, she studies languages), she invents her own rebellious prank that she — together with a friend named Ursula — starts every day with. Namely, before anyone else comes in, the two girls "[gallop] at top speed through the reference room, the periodical room, the reading room, up and down the rows of stacks, filling that stilled air with what could only be called primal screams" (Shields, C., 1990 : 653). The "exquisite pleasure" of the run escapes rationalization: Frances "[is]

in rebellion against nothing she [knows] of" (SHIELDS, C., 1990 : 653). The *scene* again juxtaposes stillness (of books and air) with the energy of movement and, most importantly, the kind of organic expression that precedes language. The "primal screams" mark Frances's momentary return to a pre-linguistic sphere in which — indeed — one *knows* of nothing.

As Shields's text can be seen as a series of photographs converted into text, the short story appears to form the space in which the apparent borders between photography and fiction disappear. The selected *scenes* I discussed above, point to both photographic images and language as "constructions, manipulable and manipulative, masquerading as fact" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 1). The biographical subject — Frances — is de-centered, multiple and "divided against [herself] in the act of observing [reading the world] and being [in the world]" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 2). Simultaneously, however, the use of the photographic metaphor — the metaphor for history and memory (no matter how unreliable and fragmented) — points to the pursuit of "the presence of an integrated, authorial self, located in a body, a place, and a time" (HAVERTY RUGG, L., 1997 : 2). Even though the pursuit takes place within photographic/verbal structures, Frances only comes in touch with her*self* through transcending these structures, in numerous acts of transgression.

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