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Encontros Fotográficos entre as Mães (In) visíveis em Camera Lucida de Roland Barthes, Austerlitz de W. G. Sebald e Non ora, non qui de Erri de Luca

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Abstract

This article deals with three literary texts by Roland Barthes, W. G. Sebald and Erri De Luca, linked with each other thanks to the employment of photography in relation to the image of the mother. Yet, the ways in which each author negotiates with the mother-son photographic encounter are diverse: while in Barthes the photograph of his mother is substituted by the one of another woman, Nadar's mother, in Sebald the photograph is physically printed on the page and interspersed within the literary narration; finally, in De Luca the photograph is depicted only verbally. On the one hand, photography seems to be the right medium to use in order for the process of recollection to be fulfilled; on the other hand, its employment problematizes some of the medium's characteristics. Indexicality, materiality, and the relationship that the act of viewing establishes between the self and the other, as in such encounters, for instance, "the image becomes

a subject and the subject becomes an image” (Cadava 2009, 9), are indeed put under scrutiny. The distance between the narrators and their mothers is not uniquely temporal (the former are always older than the latter, who are mainly framed as young girls, thus deprived of their motherhood, and deceased at the moment of the narrators’ recollection) but also spatial. Photography, and its usage within verbal narrations, creates in fact a separation—both ideological and material—between the space of the viewer and that of the viewed. In sum, the comparison among these texts promotes a reconsideration of the ontology of the photographic medium, in particular of its presence/absence dichotomy, as “a photograph is always invisible” (Barthes 1980, 18), and a re-contextualization of the space/time units, among other issues.

Keywords

Photography|mother-son|absence|memory|temporality

Resumo

Este artigo lida com textos literários de Roland Barthes, W. G. Sebald e Erri De Luca, conectados entre si graças ao uso da fotografia em relação a imagem da mãe. As formas com que cada autor negocia o encontro fotográfico entre mãe e filho são diversas: enquanto em Barthes a fotografia da sua mãe é substituída por uma de outra mulher, a mãe de Nadar, em Sebald, a fotografia está fisicamente impressa na página intercalada com o corpo do texto literário; finalmente, em De Luca, a fotografia só é representada verbalmente. Por um lado, a fotografia parece ser o meio correto para completar o processo de recordação; por outro lado, o seu uso problematiza algumas características do medium. Indexicalidade, materialidade e a relação na qual o ato de ver se constrói entre o eu e o outro, nestes encontros, cujos “a imagem se torna um sujeito e o sujeito se torna uma imagem” (Cadava, 9), são de facto colocados sob escrutínio. A distância entre os narradores e suas mães não é unicamente temporal (eles são sempre mais velhos que elas, normalmente apresentadas como jovens raparigas, destarte desprovidas da sua maternidade e mortas no momento da recordação dos narradores), mas também espacial. A Fotografia e o seu uso em narrativas verbais criam, portanto, uma separação — tanto ideológica como material — entre o espaço do visualizador e o que é visualizado.

Em suma, a comparação entre esses textos promove uma reconsideração da ontologia do meio fotográfico, em particular da sua dicotomia de presença/ausência, uma vez que “a fotografia é sempre invisível” (Barthes, 18) e a uma recontextualização das unidades de espaço/tempo, entre outras questões.

Palavras-chave

Fotografia | mãe-filho | ausência | memória | temporalidade

Introduction

“It is said that mothers do not have age,” (1989, 15)¹ affirms De Luca’s narrator in *Non ora, non qui* (*Not here, not now*) whilst looking at a photograph of his mother. When considered in its biological and representational forms (i.e., photographic, cinematic or literary), the mother-son bond complicates the linear structure of time and opens up confusion in discerning between presence and absence (Marder 2012), life and death, together with a difficulty in determining the processes that guide memory. With this premise, this paper seeks to highlight and problematize some of these theoretical concerns by focusing on three encounters with the mother in Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and the aforementioned *Non ora, non qui* by Erri De Luca.² What these works have in common, apart from the centrality of the mother, is the crucial involvement of photography in such encounters that also pre-empts any criticism on the arbitrariness of these texts’ selection, and thus on the validity of this research. Whether formally embedded in the text (*Austerlitz*) or figuratively described by the narrator (*Non ora, non qui*), or even thematically prominent but formally replaced with another image as in Barthes’ case of Nadar’s snapshot,³ photography stands for an umbilical cord that connects and also separates the mothers and their sons. Moreover, despite their apparent distance in terms of cultural traditions (French, German and Italian) these authors’ works have been written very close to one another, as the temporal span between *Camera Lucida* (1980) and the other two texts (*Austerlitz* 2001 and *Non ora, non qui* 2003) does not exceed twenty years. Also, it seems that both Sebald

¹ “Si dice che le mamme non abbiano età”. Due to the absence of official English translations, all the in-text quotations from *Non ora, non qui* will be translated from Italian to English by me whereas the original in Italian will be provided in the footnotes.

² Far from being the only ones that employ the photograph of the mother as a trope, these texts have been chosen as three examples where such topic stands out.

³ Barthes integrates his mother’s portrait with a photograph by Nadar depicting a woman. The photograph provided with a caption saying, ‘The artist’s mother (or wife).’ With this deliberate choice Barthes, according to Hausteijn, “enhances the portrait’s fine, melancholic, eroticism” (2012, 137).

and De Luca read and were influenced by Barthes: the former's works have been frequently compared to Barthes', as they notably engage with some of the French critic's theories; the latter published the short pamphlet *La Parola Contraria* ('Contrary Word,' in English), which critics link to Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* for its focus on semantics opposed to Barthes' on linguistics. Throughout this paper, I will pursue the anxiety for the encounter with the mother's image by questioning when and how the narrators find the photographs of their mothers and the implications of their discoveries for the exclusion or inclusion of photography in the narrative and how the in-between reality that the photograph creates affects the way in which presence and absence are conceived. Moreover, both in the close and comparative reading of the texts, I will examine elements that will respond to the following questions (among others): Do the written descriptions of the photographs help or hinder our understanding of the image? As the mothers at the time when their photographs in question were taken, are always younger than the sons as they view the portraits, what does this display about the encounter itself and the temporal schema of the books suggest? Is the connection with the maternal image that the son struggled to achieve always fulfilling?

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*: Searching for Henriette Barthes

Camera Lucida is the last book by Roland Barthes, published during his lifetime (in 1980, the year of the author's death). It is considered a theoretical work about photography, as it includes concepts such as *studium* and *punctum* together with other speculative reflections on the photographic medium. Barthes combines them with pictures by famous photographers such as Nadar and Kertész, non-famous ones, and two by unknown photographers. Yet it also contains a personal excursus on a photograph coming from his private life that he names Winter Garden Photograph, which also complicates the work's categorization. The image follows a quest for a photograph that could grasp the essence of the writer's mother—or his mother's *true being* as displayed in *Camera Lucida*—and that would matter only for him. He begins a journey through tactile memories and smells, "I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder" (Barthes 1980, 65) that makes it a truly multi-sensorial experience. It is important to note that this process of recollection that Barthes undertakes is posterior to his mother's death, an event that unforgettably marked the writer's life: "one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs. I had no hope of 'finding' her. [...] No, what I wanted [...] was 'to write a little compilation about her, just for myself'" (Ibid, 63). Although Barthes is looking for a recent photograph of his mother, he ends up picking an old one and he gives the readers the following description of it: "[...] the photograph just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven" (Ibid, 67). The (unexpected) certainty of the ages/dates that Barthes

provides is surely meaningful: as these details can only be retrieved through a physical proximity to the photograph (that information must have been written on it, probably in the back), their addition, therefore, aims to prove both Barthes' possession of the photographic document and, more importantly, its existence. However, the photograph in question is not printed in the book. Alongside its large description, in fact, Barthes decides—provocatively yet consciously—to add a photograph of someone else's mother, i.e. Nadar's (Image 1).



Image 1

Nadar: The Artist's Mother
(or wife), 1890 | (c) *Camera Lucida*
(Roland Barthes 1980, 68).

The addition of the photograph of Nadar's mother is very interesting: on the one hand, it reveals Barthes's need of somehow filling a psychological and material void by materializing the photograph of *a* mother; on the other hand, it further complicates the concept of indexicality of photography, the quasi-haptic relationship between the photographed and the photograph, which proves that what is photographed has been there. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes' verbal description of the Winter Garden photograph intermingled with Nadar's photograph not only displays the lack of an indexical referent, but it also shows how such absence has been overcome (or better, aims to be overcome) with the creation of a new referent, Nadar's mother's photograph. Because of this photographic substitution and because the mother is younger than the writer, which is what

prevented him from recognizing her, as she is a girl that he never knew, it is likely appropriate to define the encounter between the writer and his mother as utopic.⁴ Apart from the utopian nature, which is easily intelligible and stems from the temporal impossibility of the encounter, as both present and past come into play in the trajectory of photo-viewing, the meeting is also very vague because of the faded description Barthes is giving us. The only thing that allows Barthes to recognize his mother are her lineaments: “I never recognized her except in fragments” (Ibid, 65). Can we as readers really picture the Winter Garden Photograph? Critics have debated this: on the one hand, some claim that “Barthes describes the photograph in detail, both its physical attributes and its image” (Batchen 2009, 13), while on the other hand, others—like Elkins—argue that “If I take my eyes off that face, and look instead at the things crowded around it, then I see almost nothing, because Barthes doesn’t give me anything to imagine. A bit of railing on a wooden bridge; his mother ‘holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do; a plant or two” (2011, 91). Whichever of these positions we want to support, I would argue that it seems as though Barthes deprives the WGP⁵ of any physical elements. What he is showing (though only verbally) is a common picture of a young girl, whose relevance makes sense only for him,⁶ as he claims in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1980, 73). Throughout his book one gets to know some details about Barthes’ relationship with his mother, such as their limited communication, but there is little information that can help to reconstruct Henriette Barthes’ portrait. In sum, what lies behind the writer’s choice to devote so many pages to such a personal element?

The importance of this photograph lies in its indefiniteness. Certainly, we, as readers, are not able to see it (and its verbal description does not help us to visualize the picture); but the WGP demonstrates the challenging nature of interpreting the text, which is missing the image that it talks about, as well as the relevance of the image (or its absence). Ultimately, its evocation brings to the fore the photographic process itself. The WGP is a barthesian punctum, yet clearly an invisible one in this case, but still profoundly linked to the author’s most intimate sphere. This photograph, as *punctum*, breaks the rule between life and death, representation and reality, as it locates its subject (Barthes’ mother) “in a time that is neither a present nor a buried past. The past is still a vivid reality because photography actualizes it in its own physical identity” (Taminiaux 2009, 134). Moreover, not only does photography prove that someone did exist in the past (*has been there*), by making the dead coming back (*still is*), but it subverts the situation by making those who are “alive always dead without being dead” (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca 2009, 125). *Camera Lucida*

⁴ For more information about the utopic aspect of Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, specifically in relation to the encounter with the mother please see J. Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.), *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*.

⁵ From now on, for the sake of readability, I will abbreviate Winter Garden Photograph as WGP.

⁶ This idea comes back from a previous theorization of the writer on the connotative and denotative nature of photography contained in “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills” in *Image, Music, Text*.

is dominated, with the insertion of the WGP—or at least its verbal representation—by a fluctuation, which derives from an overlap of timeframes: we are told about the photograph of the mother when she was five years old, which has been recovered in the present by her son who “gradually mov(es) back in time with her” (Barthes 1980, 67). In *Camera Lucida* the photographic encounter is anticipated by the reconstructions of the last moments of Henriette’s life when Barthes, her son, was taking care of her, becoming a kind of parent for the woman. By doing this, it subverts the conventional mother-son bond, where the former is typically appointed with a privileged role. Despite the fact that with the WGP a switch of positions can undoubtedly be traced, what struck the attention the most is the closure of the life cycle with the figure of the mother depicted as a child in multiple instances: in the present, because of her illness; in the past, because of her age. Furthermore, such photographic encounter includes the time of the future, as the writer is almost envisioning his death: “always contains this imperious sign of my future death” (Ibid, 97). Even though throughout the book the writer mentions more than once that the encounter with his mother triggers a final preparation towards his own death, “From now on I could no more than await my total, undialectical death” (Ibid, 72), the WGP does not function primarily as a foreshadow of death, neither Barthes’s (although it will be effectively his last work before his death) nor Barthes’ mother’s, as she is depicted in the photo as a young girl. On the contrary, it underlines a link between the two, which seems to overcome death and persist in time, as stated by Haustein: “Barthes’s text avoids nostalgic excursion into the past. While passionately seeking to recover something that has been lost it remains strangely attached to the present” (2012, 141). Undoubtedly, this movement back in time, which is the process Barthes is undertaking, represents a way of re-experiencing his mother’s suffering and death, “Of course, I was then losing her twice over, in her final fatigue and in her first photograph, for me the last” (Barthes 1980, 71), but it is also thanks to this moment that the writer is able to approximate her the most, though not as a being nor as an image because of the photograph’s substitution. The photograph in question can be characterized as Janus-faced because it resurrects the dead mother and makes the son see her again, and provokes anguish, as her restoration makes her son relive the pain for his mother’s ‘first’ death: “Barthes posits the WGP as both monster and his Ariadne” (Mavor 2007, 144).

***Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald: The Partial Retrieval of the Mother’s Image**

Published in 2011, *Austerlitz* is probably the most well-known book by the German author W.G. Sebald. As much as the other texts such as *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*, this too is dominated by a photographic bricolage that illustrates the verbal narration and also constitutes the set of the protagonist’s objects of memory. Photographs represent a way in which the main character, Austerlitz, who is also an amateur photographer, tries to make order out of his wavering memories, partially obliterated by personal, historical and political circumstances, which led him to sense a condition of

displacement from an early age. He lives with a foster family who adopted him after his natural parents are deported and who sends him at the age of twelve to a private school. However, the sense of displacement not only remains spatial, but pervades most of the aspects of Austerlitz's everyday life—for example, when he became aware of his real name, i.e. Jacques Austerlitz (instead of Dafyold Elias, the one he had always been using). The feeling of displacement reaches its acme only after many years when he suffers a serious breakdown and decides to begin a journey back in time to recover his identity through an exploration of his and his biological family's past. He will embark on a quest that will eventually bring him to discover why his parents had to abandon him and “even if we do not learn exactly how Austerlitz's mother was killed, (*he*) we do see, in detail, the places where tens of thousands were tortured and murdered” (Zilkosky 2006, 794). While on one hand the main narration is moving chronologically, on the other hand, “the style of the text disrupts this linearity. Meetings between Austerlitz and the narrator in particular appear to be taking place outside of temporal chronology” (Boese 2016, 110). This is because time, by following Austerlitz's point of view, is not linear at all. The protagonist shifts from a classic view of time, typical of the XVII century, and fosters a subjective conception of it, as “time, said Austerlitz in the observation room in Greenwich, was by far the most artificial of all our inventions” (Sebald 2001, 100). He goes further by affirming that time does not exist, but one can trace “only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometrics, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like” (Ibid, 185). As previously seen with Barthes, the conception of time is at stake when dealing with photography, as multiple temporalities form, inform and transform differently the ways in which instances such as remembrance or anticipation are processed. Therefore, it ought not to surprise that also in Sebald's case this would be crucial.

Time implicates the concept of memory, which constitutes a cornerstone of *Austerlitz*. As displayed in the book, memories are latently present, but always hidden, which believe they have all been forgotten: “no sooner had I arrived in Prague than I found myself back among the scenes of my early childhood, every trace of which had been expunged from my memory for as long as I could recollect” (Ibid, 150). Memories only need to be evoked. It happens when they are triggered by something or someone whose connection is relevant for them to come out or simply when one thinks about them, as the moment when, at the railway station of London Liverpool street, Austerlitz visualizes himself in the waiting room of the railways station of Prague, which permits him to get closer to his childhood and, by extension, to his past. Yet, the passage where, in my opinion, the concretization of the aforementioned theorization of memory reaches its pinnacle comes when *Austerlitz* is travelling towards Cologne. It is during the journey that the memory of the places of the past comes back, first almost represented as a dream (not even as facts); then, thanks to the physical experience of travelling through it, the narrator is able to materialize these ‘dreams’ and make them emerge as if they were real:

As I gazed out, a distant memory came to me of a dream I often had both in the manse at Bala and later, a dream of a nameless land without borders and entirely overgrown by dark forests, which I had to cross without any idea where I was going, and it dawned upon me, said Austerlitz, that what I now saw going past outside the train was the original of the images that had haunted me for so many years. (Ibid, 224)

Austerlitz is not only aware of the presence of memories and of the processes that bring them forth, but he voluntarily sets a barrier against them, “as far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century” (Ibid, 139). It is only by looking back and facing the past that he would be able to fill up, through the restoration of fragments, some of the blind spots that the temporal amnesia left behind: “I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of memory were part of my own life” (Ibid, 141). Similarly to what happens in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, where the writer tries to pull together pieces of memories of his mother, in *Austerlitz* too the protagonist is only able to uncoil the rhizomatic arrangement of his past through the reconstruction of fragments.

The concept of memory is linked together with that of representation, and thus photography. Both memory and photography, for instance, “share a common lack of the thing represented or remembered; this apparent lack is asserted again and again in writing and in images that testify to the force of the insistent ‘presence’ of absence in Sebald’s works” (Sears 2007, 211). As much as for memory, photography displays the removal of the thing that is in a photograph, which is now gone, from the space that the viewer occupies—as in the case with Barthes and his mother, for instance. Undoubtedly, photography plays an important role in this attempt of recovery. Not only is the protagonist an amateur photographer, as previously mentioned, who often goes out with his camera and knows how to develop the images that he takes, but more importantly, photographs constitute the visual counterpart of his fragmented memory: whether objects, outdoors, family album (like the one that belonged to Emyr Elias, the protagonist foster father, whose pages Austerlitz is leafing at the beginning of the narration), or hunted phantoms like Austerlitz’s mother’s, “an image that has no accurate corollary in his memory, but which still constitutes an object of desire that motivates the latter part of his narrative” (Ibid, 212). However, it is important to highlight that most of the photographs in *Austerlitz* depict buildings, therefore inanimate landscapes. This is probably due to the profession of the protagonist, who works as an architect, but it surely implies much more. Not only is that memory firstly triggered by buildings, but the lack of family portraits may also underline the difficulty of the familiar recovery. It is precisely a photograph of the natural mother, Agáta, that Austerlitz tries to retrieve, which occupies the second part of the book. The protagonist contacted his old nanny, Vera (*nomen omen*, as she is the only one who can recognize the *true* features of Austerlitz’s mother), because, as Darby conveys “he (the protagonist) sees nothing, except that sometimes, for a fraction of a second, he believes, he does recollect sense impressions, which, however,



Image 2
Footage from a German movie
| (c) *Austerlitz* (W. G. Sebald
2001, 251)

disappear when he attempts to capture them” (2013, 173). By following Vera’s descriptions of his mother, Austerlitz begins a quest for the photograph that almost follows the patterns of a legendary story, based on obstacles but always accomplished. The protagonist, in fact, does find the true photograph of his mother, but before his discovery he spots other two images that he misinterprets as his mother’s: a photograph of an actress (his mother’s occupation back then), and footage of a German movie (Image 2) where he traces a woman that he wrongly assumes to be his mother.

Both hypotheses are dismissed by Vera. The footage especially strikes the narrator, who uses it as a point of departure to discuss the veracity of the visual apparatus. The images were taken for a documentary used by Germans as propaganda to show an almost idyllic representation of a Bohemian village. Unable to decipher the images, Austerlitz has “the segment slowed down, hoping in this way to catch a glimpse of his mother. In a sense, he attempts to transform the medium of film into something resembling photography, slowing the moving frames into isolated still shots” (Kempinski 2007, 465). By doing this, he also echoes Barthes and his works on the distinction between cinematic and photographic time. Only the third attempt turns out to be effective because in the photograph that Vera finds in the archives, she “recognize(s) Agáta as she had then been” (Sebald 2001, 253). Despite the fact that we, as readers, are provided with the photograph of Agáta (Image 3), Austerlitz does not spend much time on it; moreover, the image depicts a young girl that is an “anonymous actress” (Ibid, 253). As stated by Masschelein, “The ultimate discovery of his mother’s face turns out to be an anticlimax. It does not put an end to his journey. After this, the quest turns to his father and the lost beloved, Marie de Verneuil” (2007, 377). While on the one hand the recuperation of the photograph of the mother has been fulfilled, on the other, such photographic encounter barely moved Austerlitz, who not only was unable to recognize his mother, but who also had to seek someone else’s assistance (Vera’s) in order to accomplish his

goal. A considerable portion of this book, as for the second part of Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, is focused on a maternal photograph (its description in Barthes, its recollection in Sebald), and again, it seems as if both texts convey a certain disappointment at the end. How can we explain this choice? Is it because Austerlitz doubts its truthfulness, as the other two photographs were 'false' representations? Is it because he does not fully trust his memory? I tend to think that he is discouraged both by the photographic medium, by memory, and, I would add, by the in-between space that the medium (together with its act of viewing) creates, as endorsed by Katherine Fry, who affirms that Austerlitz's "interaction with photography, far from achieving the messianic fusion of past and present [...], produces a *heterotopia*, a site of incapacitating difference in which Austerlitz approximates himself to the past without being able to make meaning out of what he sees" (2018, 139-140).



Image 3
Austerlitz's mother,
Agáta | (c) Austerlitz (W. G.
Sebald 2001, 253)

De Luca: The Incommunicability of Photography in *Non ora, non qui*

Non ora, non qui is the first work published in 1989 by Erri De Luca, an Italian journalist, poet, translator and writer born in 1950 in Naples. The book represents an important starting point when considering De Luca's fictional narratives. Not only does the text encapsulate themes that can be found throughout the writer's production, such as loneliness, unhappiness and misery after World War II, but it also establishes a dialogue with visual arts, in particular photography. The discovery of the narrator's mother's photograph is what awakens the protagonist's memory, as "the visual element triggers the memory of the smell of winter Sunday, which collapses the boundaries between reality

and fiction” (Spunta 2001, 393). The story is set in Naples and it is built around two different temporalities: the present of the narrator, already in his sixties, who is looking at photographs taken by his father years ago, and his past, evoked by one of those pictures (his mother’s), when he was a young, seven-year-old child. As for Barthes’ and Sebald’s cases, previously analyzed, the mothers are deceased at the time when this photographic remembrance happens; plus, like in Barthes, the narrator is certain about the age of the photographed subject(s), but he does not give any account on how this is so. The readers, though, are informed that the family was living in a humble, Second World War-era neighbourhood in Naples, profusely pervaded by starvation, bad smells, and working-class dialects, and that the protagonist/narrator was suffering from stuttering. In spite of the fragmentary composition of the text, which well mirrors the disjointed structure of memory, the narrator’s remembrance turns out to be clear-headed, truthful and thoroughly organized, for instance “each section presents a clear snapshot, a complete and coherent picture, which at the same time is linked to the previous and the following one through strong thematic and structural coherence, building a kind of photographic album” (Ibid, 387).

The character of the mother appears promptly in the text when the narrator is recalling the story of a yellow ball that he used to play with in his childhood. The first impression we get from the narrator’s description of his mother is one of submission: “her voice used to govern my breath and stop it as soon as her tone rose”⁷ (De Luca 1989, 9). Additionally, by following the narrator’s recount of past events, the existence of a problematic relationship between the two grows more evident, both because of their incommunicability, “You were no longer speaking to me, you were not telling me what was going on [...] You used to say that I changed, I remember you telling this to dad by enumerating (*my*) physical transformations in order to demonstrate the others”⁸ (Ibid, 75), and tension, “once, as exasperation for my deficiency you accused me of stuttering on purpose”⁹ (Ibid, 20). It is interesting to notice how the mother’s depiction in the verbal narration substantially differs from the one brought up by the photographic encounter, which conversely, seems to reveal the narrator’s attempt to heal the pain caused by the mother by rewriting—albeit melancholically—the past.

The narrator comes across a photograph depicting a scene of everyday life, which acquires a personal value when he zooms in, through a quasi-cinematic procedure, on the faces of those who were passing-by: “I look at the photograph. I am not surprised about how it is enlarging and of the details that I can grasp”¹⁰ (Ibid 1989, 14). Staring at the photograph and posing his attention on its details, he eventually recognizes the face

⁷ “la sua voce governava il mio respiro e lo fermava appena alzava anche di poco il tono”.

⁸ “Non mi parlavi più, non mi dicevi le cose che succedevano [...] Dicevi che ero cambiato, te lo sentivo ripetere anche a papà nominando le trasformazioni fisiche per dimostrare anche le altre”.

⁹ “Una volta, per esasperazione verso il mio difetto mi accusasti di balbettare ad arte”.

¹⁰ “Guardo la fotografia. Non mi stupisco di come si vada ingrandendo e dei particolari che riesco a cogliere”.

of one woman that he identifies as his mother, “I examine with my eyes people’s faces, among them yours”¹¹ (Ibid, 15). The peculiarity of the narrator’s mother is her age, as she is stuck in time at the age of thirty, “how old are you in this winter? Presumably half as old as I am, you are in your thirties”¹² (Ibid, 16), whereas the narrator is in his sixties. The shift of the mother and son’s age not only “allows a reversal of roles, which puts the son in a speaking position and the mother in a listening one” (2001, 389), as stated by Spunta in “A balanced displacement,” but also, it highlights an epistemological change, which brings consequences in terms of the linearity of time and position of power, as I will underline in the upcoming and last section. By following the composition of his mother’s photograph, the narrator is almost becoming part of it: he imagines himself catapulted inside of a bus, that is present in the snapshot, and he makes up a hypothetical and parallel narrative by thinking about what would happen in the case he could get off that bus and meet his mother:

Now in the photograph that stops us I would get off at this stop. I would meet you by crossing the street. It would be possible to have a continuation. I would come to give you my arm. What would we do? We would comprehend. By walking arm in arm with each other we would comprehend all our life. We would see it in the separations that had not weakened the affection, in the returns that did not strengthen it either”¹³ (De Luca 1989, 51-52).

The scene is pervaded by a dynamism typical of the cinematic medium made possible by the verbal narration, and it problematizes the static nature of photography as much as it happens, for instance, in ‘Las Babas del Diablo’ (Blow Up) by Julio Cortázar.¹⁴ However, the gaze of the mother, corresponded to by the son’s, is compared to the pictorial “that follow[s] the spectator anywhere s/he is moving. This is for me now: you look and I have the impression to be seen”¹⁵ (De Luca 1989, 18). De Luca is playing with the static and dynamic nature of both media by integrating them in the verbal narration. The epiphanic encounter between the narrator and his mother is marked by a match of gazes, which creates a scene that is mystic thanks to the introduction of the light

¹¹ “Perlustro con occhi i visi dei passanti, tra essi vedo il tuo, mamma”.

¹² “Quanti anni hai in questo inverno? Forse la metà dei miei di adesso, sei nei trenta”.

¹³ “Ora nella fotografia che ci ferma io potrei scendere a questa fermata. Ti verrei incontro attraverso la strada. Potremmo ancora avere un seguito. Verrei a darti il braccio. Cosa faremmo? Noi capiremmo. Sottobraccio capiremmo tutta la nostra vita. La vedremmo nelle separazioni che non ci hanno indebolito l’affetto, nei ritorni che non ce l’hanno rinsaldato”.

¹⁴ Blow up by Julio Cortázar establishes a very dynamic relationship between the photographer and the photograph. When the photographer comes home and starts looking at the photograph he took, thanks to photographic close-ups, the image seems to be moving and revealing aspects that were hidden to him when he was taking it. The cinematic movement of the photograph makes possible his understanding (or at least it tries to make possible): “[...] when I saw the woman’s hand beginning to stir slowly, finger by finger. [...] The kid had ducked his head [...]; he had turned up the collar of his overcoat [...]. Now the woman was talking into his ear, and her hand opened again to lay itself against his cheekbone” (Cortázar 1995, 209).

¹⁵ “che seguono lo spettatore ovunque esso si sposti. È così per me adesso: tu guardi e io ho l’impressione di essere guardato”.

(possibly the flash of the camera). The addition of this particular interestingly recalls Barthes' acknowledgment of light in *Camera Lucida*, "light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (1980, 81); therefore, it sets an additional comparison among the two works:

I look at your face: you look. It is strange that on the street you are laying your eyes on something. You are looking at the bus. You moved from the sidewalk, but you keep your feet together, you are not trying to cross. It seems as if you were suddenly stopped. There are not cars coming. An intense light is filtering bright and dense — it might come from high clouds.¹⁶ (Ibid, 17)

The only element that impedes the encounter to be fulfilled is the presence of the bus window, which acts as separation between the two yet enables the narrator to fleetingly see his mother. The mirror sets the limit between the time of the narrator and that of the mother, and therefore it defines two temporalities that seek to reach each other but that cannot collide: "There is a window and you can't hear me not even if I scream. There is a window that protects you, there is a window in everyone's death"¹⁷ (Ibid, 90). In *Non ora, non qui* we find a continuous spatial and temporal fluctuation between the time of the narrator and the one of the mother, that independently carry on by following their natural flow: "We are stopped in a photograph, but you know what is going to happen because you moved forward. Otherwise, I know who you are, but not the after that you know. I know your name, you know my destiny. This is a strange condition"¹⁸ (Ibid, 44). Nevertheless, there is the addition of the crystallized time of the photograph, which is neither the mother's nor the narrator's; it is something in between that allows the other two temporalities to get closer. In sum, the (photographic) encounter between mother and son is only partial: the two are able to finally *communicate* probably for the first time after years. It happens in the idyllic world of the photograph that does not allow its realization both because of the window that circumscribes the space of the meeting, which keeps the distance between the two, and of the different temporal span, which impedes even a physical recognition between them: "You don't recognize me"¹⁹ (Ibid, 41). The narrator's approximation to his mother (or at least to her image) can be seen as a *memento mori*, as he sees her many times throughout the recollection of his memories: "I know that my death is coming. Others before me saw their mother coming without recognizing,

¹⁶ "Guardo la tua faccia: tu guardi. Strano che in strada tu posi lo sguardo su qualcosa. Stai fissando l'autobus. Sei già scesa dal marciapiede, ma tieni i piedi uniti, non stai cercando di attraversare. Sembra che ti sia fermata di colpo. Non ci sono vetture in arrivo. Una luce forte filtra bianca e densa, forse da nuvole alte".

¹⁷ "C'è un vetro e non mi puoi ascoltare neppure se grido. C'è un vetro a proteggerti, c'è un vetro nella morte di ciascuno".

¹⁸ "Siamo fermi nella fotografia, ma tu sai quello che sta per accadere perché tu hai proseguito oltre. Io invece so chi tu sei, ma non il seguito che conosci. Io so il tuo nome, tu sai il mio destino. È questa una strana condizione".

¹⁹ "Non mi riconosci".

they called her name, but maybe there was a window. [...] You warn me of this: you will come towards me, like you used to come towards my bed to turn off the light”²⁰ (Ibid, 45).

Conclusion

The three books that I took into account throughout this paper have much in common. Apart from the evident elements of time and distance, they share issues of memory, silence and cinematic movement. Memory is obviously the driving force at the base of any of these recoveries. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that in the case of *Austerlitz* and *Non ora, non qui* personal memory mingles with a collective one: in Sebald the protagonist is the emblem of “the catastrophe of modern European history, a history of war, violence, displacement, and destruction, of which the Holocaust is the ultimate manifestation” (Brockmeier 2008, 352); in De Luca’s, the narrator is likewise recalling one of the most difficult moments of his personal and Italian history. The aspect of silence connects *Non ora, non qui* with *Camera Lucida*, as the former “is nothing rather than a research of communication of a son with his mother (even though in the wrong time and space)” (Fabris 1994, 48). In the same way, Barthes affirms that he never “‘spoke’ to her, never ‘discoursed’ in her presence, for her; we supposed, without saying anything of the kind to each other” (Barthes 1980, 72). The photograph is the place where it is finally possible to voice that silenced contact between them. Moreover, there is the element of the moving image that links *Non ora, non qui* and *Austerlitz*: while the narrator of the first needs the photograph to be enlarged (through a quasi cinematic process) in order to distinguish its details, the protagonist of the second is misled by footage of a German movie.

Not only do the three texts depict stories of displacement in time (and space), but they also play with the idea of movement back and forth in time of the photographic medium and by doing this, they challenge Newtonian notions of linearity, chronology and sequentiality in favor of a more dynamic organization of memory. Photographic time is a non-time: it is a frozen moment tied both to present, past and future.²¹ As affirmed by Hughes referring to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, photography “preserves the living person whose death is captured in the future anterior, the will-have-been of the photograph. If photographs entomb the living, then, they also bring the dead to life” (2009, 197). This leap between different temporal instances is the characteristic that might have attracted the main characters of the three books and that moved their recollections of memories, which are, for the narrator of *Non ora, non qui*, “continually juxtaposed by metadiegetic

²⁰ “So che mi sta accadendo di morire. Altri prima di me videro la loro madre venire senza riconoscerli, la chiamarono per nome, ma forse c’era un vetro. [...] Mi avvisi di questo: verrai verso di me, come venivi verso il lettino a spegnermi la luce”.

²¹ This same idea has been well explained by Walter Benjamin by employing the image by Paul Klee of the *Angelus Novus* “who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. [...] His face is turned towards the past. He sees one single catastrophe, [...] but a storm [...] drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned” (1999, 257-258).

passages in present and even future tense, introducing a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards. In these moments the narrator returns to the initial time, [...] which allows him to ‘see’ the past”, and finally to address his mother” (Spunta 2001, 388).

The time deferral is the common starting point in the three books, but the way the encounters have been depicted and accomplished is different. While in De Luca the photograph is very well detailed, in Barthes it is only rapidly alluded to, and in Sebald it is not described at all, as claimed by Masschelein: *Austerlitz* “reveals the mother in a kind of ghostlike *clair-obscur*” (2007, 377). Hence, in the last two cases, the readers are not able to mentally envision the photograph that both have found; however, while Sebald inserted the image of the mother, Barthes does not allow the readers to materially see it, as the French writer decided not to embed it in the text. Whereas in *Camera Lucida* and *Non ora, non qui* the encounter is represented as an epiphany, in *Austerlitz* the climax that precedes the encounter does not find actualization, as Austerlitz does not focus his attention on the photograph and immediately moves away in search of his father’s past. The family albums where the protagonists find the photograph of their mothers (excluding *Austerlitz*), which are proof of closeness, and the power position of the age of the protagonists (as the mothers are always younger than the sons) can be seen as advantages. However, I would argue that the maternal encounters and, consequently, the recovery of the past, despite the protagonists’ burgeoning intentions, failed to be attained. By following this argument, I would support the idea of looking at these encounters as a confrontation with the self instead of son-mother’s (Hirsch 1997, 172). What is the object of these encounters, the mother or perhaps the son himself? The exact idea of recovering photographs of their mothers when they were young and not yet ‘mothers,’ thus, when recognizing them would not have been very feasible, also reveals a suspicion of a failure.

As photography is the tool that these authors use to recreate the mother-son relationship, it is necessary to scrutinize it: photography is probably the medium that puts us in contact with the past the most, and this is surely the reason why it was adopted by the three writers as a device for the mother-son encounters. For instance, “for Barthes the photograph exists only as a way to think about his mother; and, by extension, in Barthes’s account photographs are opportunities to meditate on such things as the passage of time and the modulations of memory, loss, and pain” (Elkins 2009, 175). Yet can we really lean on photographs? They slip away, and they are both “a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 1977, 16). When looking back at the encounters analyzed in this paper and at the dubious visibility of the mothers, it seems we cannot.

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