Olga Sudlenkova
Minsk State Linguistic University

The Role of Photographic Images in Contemporary Novels

В статье рассматривается явление, получившее распространение в английской литературе последних десятилетий, – использование фотографий в качестве сюжетообразующего элемента. Статья затрагивает проблему экфрасиса – соотношения зрительного и словесного образов. В романах Берил Бейнбридж «Мастер Джорджи» и Джонатана Коу «Пока не выпал дождь» повествование строится вокруг серии фотографий. В основе сюжета романа Грэма Свифта «Вне мира сего» лежит жизненная история и семейные коллизии профессионального фотографа. Рассказы героев, базирующиеся на фотографических снимках, становятся способом их самораскрытия. Фотографии играют важную роль в жизни персонажей трех новелл, составляющих роман Рэйчел Сейферт, являясь при этом опорными точками сюжета.

The present-day tendency to syncretism of various art forms which results in "coexistence without any domination of visual arts and music, theatre and literature, conventional arts and authentic mass media material" [Усовская 2006: 197] is manifest in the works of many contemporary English writers. Suffice it to recall Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton (1987)* or Michael Frayn's *Headlong (1999)* whose plots are centred round real or fictitious pictures, *What a Carve Up! (1994)* by Jonathan Coe which parodies a 1960s film of the same name and includes a number of so-called ready-made materials – diary entries, minutes, authentic political speeches, etc, or Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector (1997)* narrated by an ancient vase, numerous allusions to musical pieces in Martin Amis novels to see the truthfulness of this assertion.

Another manifestation of the phenomenon is the incorporation of photography into literary works which can be observed in a number of recent novels. *Out of this World* (1988) by Graham Swift, *Master Georgie* (1998) by Beryl Bainbridge, *The Dark Room* by Rachel

Seiffert 2001, *The Rain before It Falls* (2007) by Jonathan Coe, *The Photograph* (2003) by Penelope Lively show that this kind of art allows writers to use new means of organising fictional texts, to employ non-conventional devices of structuring a plot and portraying characters as well as posing the problems of correlation of visual and verbal forms, of veracity and verisimilitude, subjectivity and objectivity in literary woks. One of the key ideas of Swift's *Out of This World* "Every picture tells a story" is true of all the above mentioned novels as each of them is centred round some photographs. All these novels narrate of the past, are associated with some real events, though instead of deriving "authority from documentary data" they offer fictitious "extra-textual documents as traces of the past" [Hutcheon 1995: 156]. And they demonstrate that "considerable turn to the reality of personal experience" which, according to O. Jumailo, has revealed itself in English literature since the 1980s [Джумайло 2007: 14].

In *Master Georgie*, *The Rain Before It Falls* and *The Photograph* photos have a plot structuring function. Bainbridge's novel, related to the events of the Crimean War (1853-1856), consists of six chapters called 'plates' which look like monologues of the three principal personages. Each of the monologues adds something to the portarayal of the main character – a doctor and amateur photographer George Hardy. The chapters' titles are defined by the nature of the photos which form the key moments of each plate. Irrespective of the place of the photo in the chapter – its beginning, middle or end – it is explicitly or implicitly connected with every detail of the story. Thus, the first plate dated by 1846 is called 'Girl in the Presence of Death' and is framed by the scene of taking a picture of the dead body of George's father while the main part of the story contains the events prior to it. The final chapter dated by 1854 and ironically entitled 'Smile Boys, Smile' carries several pictures. Its narrator Pompey Jone, a photographer's apprentice, proudly surveys the photos he made in the Crimea. "The first was a study of a heap of amputated limbs; arrayed against a white background, they had the gravity of a still life. I was pleased with the tuft of grass spraying up from a clenched fist.

The second was of the funeral ceremony held in the region we had recently quitted" [Bainbridge 2001: 199]. Pompey's cold-blooded and cynical commentaries can be accounted for by his orphaned childhood devoid of any human warmth and of the months of his sordid war experience.

The novel *The Rain before It Falls* by Jonathan Coe spans about fifty years and treats of the life of four generations of women. Before her death a 73-year-old Rosamund picks twenty photos out of her album and bequeaths them to her young remote relative Imogen. As the latter was brought up by foster parents who have done their best to make the girl forget her past Rosamund accompanies the photos with taped stories in the hope of letting Imogen know her roots. Rosamund's narration is an attempt to overcome time limits, to go beyond the concrete, to reveal the implication of each recorded scene and, eventually, to bring sense and order into the entangled life stories. While meditating upon the possibilities of photographic art, upon the correlation of visual and verbal record she admits that sometimes a photo fails to register and convey the brightness of the images preserved by human memory but it triggers memories which turn into stories even when they are not spoken out. At times, however, she is distressed at the imperfection of her narration and has to confess that a photograph is more expressive than words. She arranges the photos in a chronological order to grasp and to convey to her addressee the logic of life. Yet, eventually, she realizes that it is an illusion, a dream which will never come true, like the rain before it falls. The colour scheme of the photos reflects her changing perception of the world – the white and black colour of the early pictures corresponds to her youthful idea of reality as a contrast between good and evil while the polychrome range of the more recent ones coincides with her realization that life is not a mere opposition of those two but is much more complex.

For Rosamund photography is a way to prove the veracity of her stories of the past. This idea is shared by Swift's hero Harry Beech from *Out of This World*: "Without the camera the world might start to disbelieve" [Swift 1988: 107] Harry is a professional photo

correspondent who took pictures of the most significant events of the second half of the 20th century – the bombing of German cities during World War II, the Nuremberg trial, the Vietnamese war. He declines the position of a non-committal observer imposed on him by his employers and defends his right to a subjective interpretation of events and to recording the grimmest scenes of life avoiding, at that, their naturalistic savouring. What shocks Harry during his work is that the most violent crimes can be committed by very ordinary people and that war can be perceived as a normal state of affairs.

In each of the three novels there is a thought that photography may be not only a means of revealing truth but it can also serve the opposite purpose of concealing it. Commenting on one of the photos Coe's heroine remarks that it may misrepresent the truth of the recorded scene to an outside observer as its true meaning is known only to its participants. While in Coe's novel the discrepancy between the truth and its possibly erroneous interpretation of a photo record is seen as unintentional, Beryl Bainbridge exposes a trick of deliberate distortion of reality by means of photography. It is common knowledge that it was during the Crimean War that pictures became not only a means of recording events but also a form of public influence, of war propaganda, in the first turn. Bainbridge illustrates it in the final plate of her novel called 'Smile, Boys, smile'. The absurdity and falsehood of the official propaganda is exposed in the cynical photo of "a posed group of survivors to show the folks back home" [Bainbridge 2001: 211] taken by a professional photographer. To make the picture more complete he had the dead body of George propped among live soldiers and urged them to smile. Ordinariness of the unordinary is the leitmotif of Bainbridge's antiwar novel.

A similar scene can be found in Swift's novel. Harry Beech recalls his series of pictures about a US mariner taken during the Vietnam war. In the first one the soldier is portrayed as a symbol of USA's valour. "His right arm is stretched back, his whole body flexed, beneath the helmet you can see the profile of a handsome face. It's a pure Greek statue, pure Hollywood, pure charisma. And it's how it was. It must have been. Because the camera showed it" [Swift 1988:

120-121]. A second later the mariner was shot dead by a Vietnamese and Harry recorded it too in several pictures. Yet his newspaper published only the first photo and it was reproduced by many other mass media, was used for posters, T-shirt prints, etc., in a word, it was turned into a brain-washing tool.

In spite of the deliberate fragmentation of the narration and emphasized detachment of the photos round which Bainbridge, Swift and Coe weave their stories their novels can be seen as family sagas full of concealment and revelations, love and hatred, guilt and confession, betrayal and repentance. Their confessional nature combined with multiple narration (especially in *Master Georgie* and *Out of This World*) stresses ethic relativity of truth.

The novel *The Dark Room* by Rachel Seiffert differs from the above ones by its structure and manner of narration (unlike the previous three it is presented as a 3rd person narrative) as well as by the function photography plays in it. The novel consists of three detached novellas called after their main characters – common Germans whose lives are linked with the events of WWII. The three parts differ by their setting and genre properties. The first one, set in the pre-war and wartime Berlin, can be viewed as a kind of Bilddungsroman. The second one which treats of wanderings of three children about the ruined post-war Germany looks like a picaresque novel, while the third one which starts as a family story turns into a profound ethic and psychological investigation.

The eponymous image of a dark room, which initially means a room for developing a film, acquires various symbolic connotations in the three novellas. Helmut, the principal character of the first one, makes a professional photographer and, since he is an invalid, is denied the chance to volunteer for the Nazi army, stays in Berlin and registers both the Third Reich's triumph and its fall. He is unable to grasp the essence of the events, his professional zeal screens from him a clear view of the developments. He remains forever in the dark room of his ultrapatriotic delusions. The second novella, on the contrary, traces the process of insight and perception of truth of the war by the German nation itself. The sun lighting the commonly darkened room

of the children's grandparents' house is a symbol of the revelation.

The hero of the third novella is our contemporary who undertakes what turns out to be a complicated and painful search of the truth about his grandfather's involvement in the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union. He fails to find any concrete proofs of his relative's crimes but after visiting the sites of his military service and meeting the native people who tell of the war time he comes to understand the sordid secrets of his family history thus leaving the dark room of his doubts and torments.

Thus, in spite of the different manner in which the four above authors use photography there is some similarity in its function within the framework of their novels. Firstly, photos are part of an experiment with narrative techniques which is felt in all the four novels. In *Master Georgie* and *The Rain Before It Falls*, where the pictures throw light on the most significant episodes in the characters' lives their use leads to fragmentation of the narration which accounts for the difficulty of ascertaining the cause-and-effect links within the stories. In Bainbridge's and Swift's novels they are part of the multiple narration technique and the family stories presented through them are, especially in *Out of This World*, fragmentary and chronologically inconsistent. At that, commenting on the photos becomes a kind of the characters' self-exposure. Besides their plot structuring function in Seiffert's novel, pictures also acquire a genre-defining role. All the four novels in one way or another touch on the problem of ekphrasis, i.e. correlation of visual and verbal presentation in a literary work. .

However personal or intimate are the stories centred round the photos they all stress the close ties between individual destinies and world developments.

References

1. Джумайло О. За границами игры: английский постмодернистский роман. 1980-2000 // Вопросы литературы. 2007. №5. – С. 7- 45.
2. Усовская Э.А. Постмодернизм. Учебное пособие. Минск, 2006. – 252 с.
3. Bainbridge, Beryl. Master Georgie. L, 2001. – 212 p.
4. Coe, Jonathan. The Rain Before It Falls. L., 2007. – 240 p.
4. Hutcheon, Linda. A Poetics of Postmodernism. N.Y., 1995. – 268 p.
5.Swift, Graham. Out of This World. L., 1988. – 208 p.
6. Seiffert, Rachel. The Dark Room. L., 2001. – 391 p.
