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Lacunary Unity: Family Albums in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

Unité lacunaire : des albums photos dans *The Robber Bride* de Margaret Atwood

Katinka Krausz

Abstract

Ever since their first appearance, family photograph albums have been created to follow the strict social conventions surrounding the institution of the family, with photographs as the representations of these. The creators of family albums sought to produce a contiguous narrative that, by focusing on significant events (births, weddings, etc.), left out everyday life almost completely. As well, attempts to conform to social conventions often resulted in a contradiction between what was represented in the album and the experiences that the subjects recalled. Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* presents two mothers, both of whom are building the family narrative in photo albums, but both narratives are in contrast with their lived realities. The novel also shows the daughter of one of the mothers and how she is affected by encountering the pictures her mother took when she was a baby. My paper investigates the effects of the contradiction between the albums and the characters' experiences using, among others, works by Marianne Hirsch and Pierre Bourdieu as a critical framework.

Keywords: Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, photographs in literature, family albums

Résumé

Dès leur première apparition, des albums de photographies de famille ont été créés pour suivre les conventions sociales strictes qui entourent l'institution de la famille, et les photographies comme leur représentations. Les créateurs d'albums de famille ont cherché à produire un récit qui a été considéré comme contigu, bien qu'il soit passé d'un événement significatif (naissances, mariages, etc.) à l'autre, en laissant presque complètement à côté la vie quotidienne. Malgré tout ça, les tentatives de se conformer aux conventions sociales ont souvent produit une contradiction entre ce qui est représenté dans l'album et ce que les sujets ont rappelé comme ayant vécu. *The Robber Bride* de Margaret Atwood présente deux mères qui construisent toutes les deux le récit familial dans des albums photo, mais les deux récits se contrastent avec leur réalité vécue. Le roman parle aussi de la fille de l'une des mères et de comment elle est affectée par les photos que sa mère a prises lorsqu'elle était une enfant. Mon article explore les effets de la contradiction entre les albums et les expériences des personnages en utilisant les œuvres de Marianne Hirsch et de Pierre Bourdieu comme cadre critique, parmi des autres.

Mots-clés : littérature canadienne, Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, photographies littéraires, albums de famille



“Family photography is not just about how the family looks in the pictures, it’s also about how the pictures look in the family.” (Gallop 82)

“[The family] draws confirmation of its present unity from its past: this is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring and edifying than a family album; all the unique experiences that give the individual memory the particularity of a secret are banished from it, and the common past, or, perhaps, the highest common denominator of the past, has all the clarity of a faithfully visited gravestone. Because, while seeming to evoke the past, photography actually exorcizes it by recalling it as such, it fulfils the normalizing function that society confers on funeral rites, namely at once recalling the memory of the departed and the memory of their passing, recalling that they lived, that they are dead and buried and that they continue on in the living.” (Bourdieu 31)

Representation has been a key question and problem of photography and its critique since the invention of the camera. By the turn of the 21st century, most philosophers and scholars dealing with photographs had reached the consensus that photographs have little to do with the representation of reality. Nonetheless, as Bourdieu’s passage quoted above reflects, in its domestic use photography still serves the demand for representation. However, the relation of representation to reality is doubtful, for there are a number of conventions and norms surrounding the institution of the family that the family wishes to conform to and to which it arranges its portrayals accordingly, often setting individual features aside. Although in the digital age album-making has left the physical space to enter the virtual, it has remained an expectation for family photographs to show the family in an orderly manner. At the same time, there is often a contradiction between what is represented in family photographs and albums, and the experiences that the subjects remember. This tension, if not contradiction, may make it problematic for subjects to look at the photographs, and if they are both the subjects and creators of the pictures – as they have often been since picture-taking entered the public domain and was not only practiced by professionals – it may be even more problematic. The conflict it may bring to the creators is not often addressed in photography criticism, but certain parts of Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride* can be read as an example. The novel presents two mothers, who are both the subjects and the creators of their family albums, through which they try to conform to the norms surrounding them; also, it presents one of the mother’s daughters as well, who suffers from the same incongruity that stretches between reality and the ideal that is depicted. This contradiction and its effects are the focus of my article.

Although the institution of the family and the practices of image-making have both gone through significant changes since the 1850s, the conventions which affect the



way the family is represented have remained considerably similar in Western society (M. Hirsch xvi). According to Julia Hirsch, family “images are three ancient metaphors of the family itself ...; the family as a state whose ties are rooted in property; the family as a spiritual assembly which is based on moral values; and the family as a bond of feeling which stems from instinct and passion” (15). Out of these three, the first metaphor is the reason why conventional family photographs tend to be rather formal. In addition, the solemnity of family portraits originates from a long tradition of portrait making and draws on the aesthetic traditions of Renaissance portraiture (J. Hirsch 21).

As for their audience, family photographs are usually created not only for the use of their immediate subjects; they are, in addition, aimed at the social circle surrounding the family. This social circle is the wider family, whose members are spatially distant, or future generations, whose members are temporally distant, or non-family members, whose social group surrounds the family they wish to join. For this reason, the conventional family portrait seeks to perpetuate the social norms that are accepted in the given social group. As has been argued by many, photography in itself can be considered an act of integration – if picture-taking at certain occasions is the norm in the given social group – and photographs themselves can perform and communicate the integrity of the subject group, or groups. An evident example is the wedding photograph, which joins two families that were previously separate (Bourdieu 19). Therefore, conventional family photographs have a number of formal characteristics that follow societal norms, including the tone of the image, the subjects present, the way they present themselves and the way they are positioned, and the events recorded. As for the tone of the image, it aims to represent the family as being content. This, again, is an intention to represent a family idyll, in Nancy K. Miller’s words, a “domestic pastoral” (51).

In maintaining the positive character of the image, the conventional family photograph intends to show the family as wholly as possible, with the members sustaining the traditional gender roles (Gallop 76). Originating from its roots in painting traditions, there were a number of customs, if not rules, regarding the positioning of subjects in a group photograph, defined by their relation to one another, allowing a trained eye to interpret the familial relations, even if the people in the photograph were unknown (Kunt 35). These rules are still, often unconsciously, taken into account when group photographs are taken.¹ Nonetheless, I find it rather interesting that the invention of the Kodak camera altered what is regarded as the “whole group” in a family photograph. After obtaining a camera that was easy to use,

1) It would be worth investigating how (and if) the spread of selfies has affected these conventions, owing to the informality of the selfie, and from the fact that there is not enough space to organize the group in front of the camera, when one member of the group is taking the photograph while trying to stay in the frame.



there was not necessarily a need for the participation of a professional: the father took over the position of the photographer on the other side of the camera, and thus left the picture to photograph his family. Bourdieu argues that this also produced a separation of two kinds of family photographs: a more private one, which is taken by an “insider,” and a more public and formal one, usually when “the social person ... is to be captured” (29), taken by a professional. Furthermore, this brought about an increase in the number of photographs, especially those depicting more informal situations (Bourdieu 29).

Nonetheless, although it is usually the father who takes the photograph (Gallop 75) when the situation does not call for a professional, and therefore his body is visually absent from the picture, he is no less present in the resulting image. The framing, the positioning of the subjects, and often the choice of occasions to take the photograph is his; therefore, he is “[the photograph’s] master: the father-photographer directs the family picture, framing and composing the mother and children” (Gallop 76). Atwood often subverts this convention in her novels by giving the role of the photographer to mothers, as she does in *The Robber Bride*, in *Lady Oracle*, and in *Surfacing*. I will discuss the results of this alteration later in the article.

A notable feature of family photographs is that in their endeavor to conform to the norms of representation, they eventually lose their individual characteristics, creating a mass of virtually interchangeable pictures.² The loss of individual characteristics may appear on different levels: on the level of individual portraits; on a group level, in individual family portraits, where the posture and the context is similar; and on the level of the family narrative, in albums that strive to contain the same narrative as every other family’s in the wider social group. An example for individual photographs is from the beginning of the 20th century, from Ernő Kunt’s research on the use of photography by the Hungarian peasantry. Kunt remarked that the retouching of the face in photographs was conventional among the members of this group, and they commissioned their portraits to be retouched, even if it resulted in the loss of individual characteristics. “The dress, the posture was more important for them than the ... individual features represented”³ (Kunt 35). Retouching was a sign for them of belonging to the community, which emphasized elements that were standard, as opposed to characteristics that would make the individual stand out (Kunt 35). Conventional family portraits throughout the Western world tend to follow the same attitude. Even today, make-up and neat hair for women, appropriate clothing, and other (re)presentable features in the case of every subject are requirements of photographs intended for public use; not to mention available smart phone applications and filters

2) On the interchangeability of family photographs see for example, Lorie Novak’s “Collected Visions,” 14–31.

3) The translation is mine, from the Hungarian: “A ruha, a tartás fontosabb volt számukra, s értelmezésükben, mint az arc egyedi ... jellegetességét is visszaadó énébrázolás.”



that instantly smoothen the skin and adjust facial characteristics in photographs to the current beauty norms.

Family albums, as was suggested before, regularly follow a conventional narrative, which tells the family's story in a linear fashion. Since each photograph aims to represent the family as a whole, the album also tries to achieve the impression of completeness. This certainly is an impossible attempt, because no narrative is temporally complete, as there will almost always be further generations; also, there is no narrative without gaps, since although the photographs are presented as successive episodes of a story, a significant number of everyday events are not pictured, as Bourdieu states in the passage I quoted at the beginning of the paper. Nonetheless, those episodes that are portrayed are included among the materialized memories of the family; therefore, the album controls what the family remembers, and also makes the official familiar narrative presentable to the outside world. A notable custom, which is no longer part of Western culture but was at the beginning of the 20th century, is the photographing of the dead, especially dead children. to maintain “the cultural ideal of the nuclear, conjugal family as corporate entity, as autonomous unit, together and whole” (McDowell 156). Therefore, the family did not only include in its visual history memories that were regarded as positive per se: the focus was on integrity and integration.

The building of a narrative in the album presupposes a conscious and thorough selection. In the first decades of photography it meant a sorting among the occasions which were to be portrayed, then, as the practice become a more integral part of family life, among the photographs that were taken. As was mentioned before, photographers tended to be male, but remarkably, album makers tended to be female. The reason for this might be that the organization of domestic life was deemed a female job, whereas the controlling of it, which is analogous to picture-taking, was regarded as male territory. Thus, usually the albums resulting from the work of selection and organization preserve the father's gaze but are arranged into a narrative by the mother. Even if there exist snapshots that do not fit the conventions listed before, predominantly the most conventional ones are selected to be preserved in the family album and thus to become the building blocks of the visual history of the family. And since the conventional family photograph does not necessarily strive for individual representation (as in showing a “true” photograph), the resulting narrative also leaves out individual elements, eventually becoming one the subject does not necessarily recognize as their own and so feels the need to complement the lacunae with anecdotes. In Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* the gap between what is presented in the family album and what is experienced by the creator and the album's subjects is so incongruous that it creates a conflict.



The novel is set in Toronto in the 1990s, centering on three women – Charis or Karen, Roz or Rosalind, and Tony or Antonia – connected through a fourth woman, Zenia, who is, albeit indirectly, the central character of the novel. Tony is a historian who was abandoned by her mother, Anthea, when she was still a child in the late 1950s. What is most interesting from the point of view of my analysis is that after her mother leaves, Tony is left with a family photo album created by Anthea that is unconventional because it is incomplete. I say unconventional, but not unusual, because there are a number of factors that may lead to the fragmentation of a family album. It might have been complete once but certain pictures were taken out for a specific reason; or parts of pictures were cut out, usually as part of a wish to erase the particular event or person from the memory of the family; or, as in the case of Anthea's photo album, it was never completed. On the one hand, the album can be read as an analogue to Anthea's attempts to perform the necessary rites that are socially assigned to the role of the mother, and her failure to integrate them; on the other hand, it reflects Tony's experiences and conflicts as a child.

The album is introduced from Tony's point of view in the novel and is described very briefly, as follows:

This nickname [Guppy] – enclosed in quotation marks – is penciled in below Tony's baby pictures, in Anthea's white leather *My Baby* photo album: "'Guppy,' 18 months"; "'Guppy' and Me"; "'Guppy' and her Dad." After a while Anthea must have stopped taking these pictures, or stopped sticking them in, because there are just blank pages. (Atwood 141)

The fragmentation of the family caused by the leaving of the mother is reflected through the incompleteness of the album, but it also reflects Anthea's inability to conform to the societal norms that surround her. As pointed out by Bourdieu, picture-taking after the arrival of a child is essential in the family group in order to perform and present the integration of the "newcomer" to the family (26). Besides, the title of the album, *My Baby* – most probably printed on the cover by the producing company – indicates to young mothers what is expected of them: they should show their happiness over the arrival of their child by organizing their photographs into an album, and in showing their loving care they should keep documenting their growth by feeding the album with more photos. Anthea tries to live up to this expectation, and tries to present the family that matches the ideal, labelling and appointing her husband as a "Dad," whereas in Tony's perception "Griff is not her Dad, though: Griff is not a Dad" (Atwood 144).

It is clear from *The Robber Bride* that, as a result of the traumas Anthea suffered during the Second World War, she is mentally unstable and detached. It is mentioned numerous times that she does not like to spend time with Tony, constantly occupies



her with tasks because she wants her “somewhere out of the way” (Atwood 140), and hardly ever touches Tony aside from the goodnight kisses she finds compulsory – yet another action that “good” mothers perform. The day before she leaves the family, she arrives home slightly drunk and tries to show affection towards Tony by hugging her, but she keeps her veiled hat and gloves on to remain as barriers between her and Tony. She keeps her distance from Tony and from her own role as a mother in her language, too, saying, “I want you to know... that Mother truly, truly loves you,” of which Tony remarks in her thoughts that “she never says ‘I truly, truly love you;’ it’s always Mother, as if Mother is someone else” (Atwood 140). Eventually Anthea admits that she is unable to become one with “Mother” or to maintain the image of making an effort, and leaves the family, leaving the photo album unfinished.

Remarkably, her narrative continues outside the album with the photographs she sends home addressed to Tony.

She sent snapshots taken always, it seemed, in full sunlight; snapshots of herself wearing white, in which she looked fatter than Tony remembered, her face tanned and shining as if oiled, with a little moustache of shadow cast by her nose. In some of these, runaway, culpable Perry stood beside her with his arm around her waist Then after a while Perry was no longer in the pictures, and another man was; and after a while, yet another. The shoulders on Tony’s mother’s dresses shrank, the skirts grew longer and fuller, the necklines scooped themselves out; Spanish-dancer ruffles appeared on the sleeves. There was talk of Tony visiting, during Easter holidays, during summer holidays, but nothing ever came of it. (Atwood 154–155)

On the one hand, Anthea’s routine of sending letters home reflects her conforming to her gender role “of maintaining relations with the members of the [family] who live a long way away” (Bourdieu 22), on the other, with regard to the fact that Tony stays with her father, it is open to question whether the photographs are addressed to Tony at all. Bourdieu states that “the photograph sent by the daughter who has moved away is not the picture of her husband, but rather the symbol of her social success” (24). In this light the photographs might be sent to prove that after her dissatisfaction with(in) her marriage, Anthea has moved on, even if the success of her new relationships is questionable.

Aside from showing Anthea’s inability to conform to society’s expectations of her as a mother, the fragmented album is important in its effects on Tony and her perception of her relationship to her mother. She is in her early teens when Anthea abandons the family, and the quotation above is from shortly before it happens. In the novel the quotation continues as follows:



Tony feels a rush of longing for whatever it was that existed once between herself and her mother, in the photo album; but she feels annoyance as well, because the name itself is a trick. She used to think a guppy was something warm and soft, like a puppy, and she was hurt and insulted when she discovered it was a fish. (Atwood 141)

Tony is aware of the dysfunctionality of her relationship with her mother, and expresses it too, by always referring to her as “Anthea” instead of calling her “Mother” whereas she never refers to her father by his first name: “Her father’s name is Griff, but she doesn’t think of him as Griff the way she thinks of her mother as Anthea. He’s somewhat more like the other fathers, whereas Anthea isn’t very much like the other mothers, although occasionally she tries to be” (Atwood 143–144). Nonetheless, the idyll of “trying to be” that is depicted in the photographs evokes a feeling of nostalgia in her. This means that she decodes the pictures as representing reality, picturing something that once existed but has disappeared since then. It has to be noted that in defining nostalgia Svetlana Boym argues it is akin to “a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame and burns the surface” (xiv). Similarly, as the disappointment in the discovery of the real meaning of the nickname “Guppy” suggests, much the same disappointment underlies the photographs. What the photographs depict has never existed; in fact, it was merely a pose in front of the camera.

The “incongruity between the visible and the historical” (Spitzer 213) creates a tension, which is similar to what numerous other thinkers and scholars have expressed. In *A Very Easy Death*, Simone de Beauvoir recollects looking at her childhood photograph portraying her with her mother that “the ‘Maman darling’ of the days when I was ten can no longer be told from the inimical woman who oppressed my adolescence” (Beauvoir qtd. in Miller 54). Likewise, Nancy K. Miller meditates on a photograph with her mother:

When I study this picture, I feel both happy and sad. Happy because this picture records a mother/daughter moment of connection and pleasure, sad because no matter how hard I try, I can’t remember feeling this... I don’t remember that “me” and I do not remember this mother, the good mother. ... This picture is a precious evidence of a tenderness that vanished, I tend to think, with the birth of my sister. (Miller 60)

It is not obvious whether Tony remembers being as close to her mother as she was in the photographs stuck in her album, but it is suggested that she does not. At one point in the narrative it is stated that “Tony has no single clear image of her mother. The memory of her is composed of shiny fragments, like a vandalized mosaic, or like



something brittle that's been dropped on the floor. Every once in a while Tony takes out the pieces and arranges and rearranges them, trying to make them fit" (Atwood 135). The fragments that build up these memories and the instances she recalls are not positive. As was stated before, she feels detached and on occasions Anthea's behavior to her is openly hostile. These examples accurately show the duality of family albums, which is caused by the discrepancy between the actual memory of one of the subjects (here: the daughter), and its portrayal, which aims at a more positive depiction. The photograph serves as evidence, suggesting that the subject's memories are incorrect, which results in conflicted emotions.

Tony and Anthea are not the only characters in *The Robber Bride* whose relations to family albums are worthy of discussion. Roz is a successful businesswoman who, similarly to Anthea, is an album-maker and album-subject at the same time. However, she is conflicted in her role as a wife and not as a mother, confronting the incongruity between the ideal she tried to portray and the truths of her marriage. As opposed to Anthea, Roz has more than one album that contain photographs taken during the 1980s and early '90s, and they are complete in the conventional sense. Roz took the photographs that portray her family (her husband Mitch with their twin daughters and son, Larry), which subverts the traditional gender roles in photography practice that would place the camera in the husband's hand. In the narrative, Roz is shown consulting the albums after her divorce and her husband's death:

She pours herself another scotch and lights another cigarette, then gets down her old photo albums, those pictures she took so endlessly at backyard birthday parties, at graduations, on vacations, winters in the snow, summers on the boat, to prove herself they were all indeed a family, and sits in the kitchen going through them. Pictures of Mitch, in non-living colour: Mitch and Roz at their wedding, Mitch and Roz and Larry, Mitch and Roz and Larry and the twins. She searches his face for some clue, some foreshadowing of the catastrophe that has befallen them. She finds none. (Atwood 381)

I find the trajectory followed by Roz that is suggested by this quotation rather thought-provoking. In the narrative it is explicitly shown that Roz is aware that Mitch is having one affair after the other: "She told herself she didn't much care: she was past that. ... Some men needed their little escapades. It kept them toned up. As an addiction it was preferable to alcohol or golf, and Mitch's things – *things*, she called them, to distinguish them from people – never lasted long" (Atwood 296, italics original). However, later it becomes obvious that over the years Mitch's affairs morph into a game with its own rules that he and Roz both participate in. "Then he becomes deliberately careless Roz knows that at this point she is supposed to call him on it ... so he will be able to wriggle off the hook. ... Lately, however, Roz has been refusing



her move” (Atwood 299). Moreover, the narration suggests that Roz gradually starts to enjoy this game: “But she’s developed a knack, and therefore a taste. It’s the same as a business negotiation or a poker game. ... It’s hard not to enjoy something you’re good at” (Atwood 300).

At the same time, she is trying to present a positive image of her marriage to the public eye through the photographs. Therefore, at first, she creates the photographs and the albums with the intention to hide what she finds unpresentable, then years later returns to them in the hope that they will reveal the deficiencies of their marriage, only to find nothing. It does not mean that the photographs are necessarily unable to convey details that were unintentional or unknown to the photographer or the subjects – hence Walter Benjamin’s term “optical unconscious,” which originally refers to photographs’ ability to reveal fragments of motion that are too quick to process but can be used in a wider sense, too (243). What I find noteworthy is the process Roz is going through in creating, then consulting the albums. It is a process similar to living one’s life in the present and then going back to it as past, to reinterpret it, or to possibly fill in the lacunae, to find or reveal truths, which may or may not be there. The very act of *returning* to them – the desire to look back – is what speaks about the present, as well as the past.

The sentences that follow the previous passage on Roz consulting the photographs reveal another aspect of her position in connection with the family albums:

Some women in her place take their nail scissors and snip out the heads of the men in question, leaving only their bodies. Some snip out the bodies too. But Roz will not do this, because of the children. She doesn’t want them to come across a picture of the headless father, she doesn’t want to alarm them, any more than she already has. And it wouldn’t work anyway, because Mitch would still be there in the pictures, an outline, a blank shape, taking up the same amount of room, just as he does beside her in her bed. (Atwood 381)

Some of the women evoked here appear in other Atwood novels, such as Fran Delacourt, the mother of the protagonist, Joan, in *Lady Oracle*, who mutilates her family album exactly the way Roz does not want to mutilate her own.⁴ I would argue that Roz’s willingness to keep the album intact and thus maintain a positive representation reflects her willingness to create the album in the first place; and to organize it to present something other than reality. She does it for the public eye, as well as for herself, but no less for her children, too: “*Secure*, is what she wants them to feel; and they do feel secure, she’s certain of it. They know it’s a safe house, they know she is *there*, planted solidly, two feet on the ground, and Mitch is there too,

4) When Joan extracts the album, she finds that “in all the pictures of the white-flannelled man, the face had been cut out, neatly as with a razor blade. The faces of my father also were missing” (173).



more or less, in his own way” (Atwood 303, italics original). In addition to displaying Roz’s standpoint in her efforts to make her children feel secure, this passage also suggests Mitch’s position in the marriage. As was previously expressed, Roz subverts the traditional gender roles found in photography, according to which the father is supposed to be the photographer. However, this may also reflect Mitch’s partial, then total separation from the family. Since he was well aware of his own loose connections to the family – as reflected upon by Roz at other places in the narration, too: “... Mitch was never fully at ease with [Larry], or with any of them. He always had one foot out the door” (Atwood 83) – he was unable to perform an act of integration through the act of photography. It is also probable that Roz’s taking over the role of the photographer indicates that she is willing to take over the familial responsibility, too. These questions remain problematic, because there are no clear answers to them in the novel. Mitch is introduced from Roz’s point of view, and the information we learn is Roz’s perception of her own marriage.

Nevertheless, these instances in the text and the characters’ reflections on and relations to their photographs profoundly illustrate the lacunary unity of family albums, in which the albums pretend to tell a full narrative but the closer the perceiver stands to them in terms of their making, the more apparent the ellipses and misinformation become. As presented before, this misinformation is not necessarily a result of malevolent intentions, because the album creators aim to accommodate the family representations to the dominant conventions, and in their attempts to do so they often overwrite or hide particular episodes of the family history. Anthea’s struggle to create a positive narrative of her own motherhood presents the hardships of women trying to live up to the expectations of a “good mother” in late 1950s Canada, whereas Tony’s reflections of Anthea’s narrative present the conflicts of a daughter who is faced with a representation that seems unfamiliar compared to her experiences. Roz operates both within the position of the wife and the mother while creating her albums, trying to conjure up a family idyll through portraying their life as such. As a further investigation, it would be worthwhile to compare the mother, Fran Delacourt, who appears in Atwood’s earlier novel, *Lady Oracle*, to Roz and Anthea in order to observe how Fran’s album-making and later modifications of it reflect her struggles as a wife and mother in mid-century Canadian society.



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