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Tilt-shift photography: motherhood portrayed in Anne Enright's *Taking pictures*[*]

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Abstract

"Tilt-shift photography" is used when referring to camera movements: when this artifact is used, the photographer is able to change the tilt and redefine the picture focus. Considering this technical characteristic of photography, it aims to analyze the collection Taking Pictures *by the Booker Prize Winner's Anne Enright. Born in Ireland, Enright portrays many of the tensions women face regarding motherhood taking into account the perfection attributed to the Irish mother figure in social and cultural history. The analysis aims to introduce the authoress, contextualize her works and verify the role of the mother in contemporary Irish society through her short stories. In what follows, I read the contemporary Irish writer Anne Enright as a photographer and the pictures are the short stories.*

Keywords

Woman; Motherhood; Postmodernism; Perspective.

Resumo

O termo "Tilt-shift" é usado na Fotografia quando nos referimos a movimentos de câmera: quando esse artefato é usado, o fotógrafo pode mudar o ângulo e redefinir o foco da fotografia. Tendo como princípio essa característica técnica da fotografia, busca-se analisar a coleção de contos Taking Pictures *da escritora premiada pelo Man Booker Prize, Anne Enright. Nascida na Irlanda, Enright retrata as tensões enfrentadas pelas mulheres em relação a maternidade considerando a perfeição atribuída a figura da mãe irlandesa na conjuntura social e cultural de seu país. A análise visa introduzir a autora, contextualizar sua obra e verificar o papel da mãe na sociedade irlandesa contemporânea através de seus contos. A seguir, leio a escritora irlandesa contemporânea, Anne Enright, como uma fotógrafa e seus contos como fotos.*

Palavras-chave

Mulher; maternidade; pós-modernismo; perspectiva.

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You cannot claim to have really seen something
until you have photographed it.
Émile Zola

PHOTOGRAPHY CAN BE CONCEIVED IN TWO DIFFERENT WAYS in relation to its social construction. The above quotation is credited to Émile Zola, one of the most prominent French writers of literary realism as well as enthusiastic photographer. However, this point of view can be questionable as:

> a photo is an objective guarantor of appearances, the undeniable testimony to factuality that makes a momentary visual appearance eternal. However,from this perspective the photographer is presumed to be unimportant, and the camera is assumed simply to replicate the human act of seeing, although unconstrained by the limited degree and span of attention available to humans (KERSHNER,1999, p. 266).

In this way, on the one hand according to Zola a picture illuminates ones point of view because it demonstrates a perspective through a concrete visual image; on the other hand the photographer's role cannot be ignored during this process and a photography can also be considered subjective because it portrays the point of view of the photographer making his or her personal momentary visual image eternal.

Born in Dublin in 1962, the Irish writer Anne Enright is considered by many critics as one of the most thrillingly gifted writers. Her works cover a wide variety of genres: she has published five novels (The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?, The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch, The Gathering and the just published The Forgotten Waltz); a non-fictional book (Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood); and two collections of short stories (The Portable Virgin and Taking Pictures).

Taking into account Zola's quote about photography, it can be said that her last collection of short stories, *Taking Pictures,* published in 2008, does not aim to bring objectivity to the point of view of Enright's female protagonists. It does not claim to be a "testimony of factuality". It is rather a demonstration of the characters' truth, their reality framed inside their own thoughts.

Enright's short stories are constructed through the consciousness of the protagonists whose feelings, hopes and memories constitute the main interest of the story. Thus, the innovative feature of her works is the difference between the reality proposed by her protagonists, especially in *Taking Pictures,* and the image an ideal mother/daughter/wife/worker woman presents in many current discourses in Irish society.

The perfection attributed to the Mother Figure in social and cultural Irish history is, according to her, one of the myths that helped to constitute the Irish national identity. Enright believes that this gap between the reality of Irish motherhood and the image of perfection has to do with the lack of discussions concerning this subject in current discourses. About that, she says "They [mothers] are very often dead, or left out of the narrative. The mother gets half a sentence and there is an awful lot about fathers. The mother is the unspeakable phantom, the gap enclaved within the novel's genealogy" (BRACKEN AND CAHILL, 2011, p.68-9). Enright demonstrates in her works her own deep concern about how womanhood is represented in contemporary Irish literature and she aims to dismantle the ideal of a perfect, virgin and pure Irish woman.

In a patriarchal society, women are generally conceived either as an ideal virgin or, on the opposite side, as a whore. That occurs because patriarchy, in its attempt to preserve the contradictory role of the mother (as both pure and the seducer), removes this contradiction by projecting its features on to two different types of women: either virgin or whore, subject or object, asexual or only sexual, with no possible mediation.

Transformations in social relations concerning the process of reproduction are addressed in the work of Anne Enright. In *Taking Pictures*, Enright is constantly focused on the issues of pregnancy and motherhood, challenging the conventional images promoted by the male supremacy in Irish culture and performing a conscious filling in of the gap between the image of the perfect woman/mother/wife and the reality within Irish tradition as "In place of the real mother, Enright had observed that Irish Writing has traditionally either appointed 'the iconised mother figure', or posited an absence" (MULHALL, 2011, p.69).

In her non-fictional book, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, Enright details the embodied experience of pregnancy and motherhood. It is a very funny record of the journey from early pregnancy to when her kids reach the age of two. Here, "she tries to move from the reality that is informed by the patriarchal dictating paradigm to one that is inspired by a more feminine, interactional approach to things" (SCHWALL, 2011. p. 211).

Enright's first collection of short stories, *The Portable Virgin,* was published in 1991. Her second collection, *Taking Pictures*, which is being analyzed here, was published seventeen years later in 2008. Besides dealing with a wide range of themes and interests, the female point of view is a constant in both collections and motherhood

is frequently focused upon. Although desire is certainly not absent in *Taking Pictures*, more than sex and men, the female protagonists in this second collection want love, happiness and children. These objects are always portrayed in a non-perfect image of motherhood as her female protagonists are usually well traveled, sexually active and problematic. In this way, one of the aims of Enright's works is to change the image of a desexualized and idealized Irish Mother.

The term 'the submerged population group' is used to characterize those individuals who, for whatever reason, are left on the margins of society and this would be the most remarkable feature of the short story genre (O'CONNOR, 1962). The stories of Enright's under discussion here also give voice to a submerged population group namely mothers. According to her, this group is misrepresented in Irish literary tradition because it is connected to the idea of perfection. She demonstrates how she is concerned with the huge influx of women's bodily changes in the mind of a pregnant woman and of a newborn's mother when she comments that: "Motherhood happens in the body, as much as in the mind. I thought childbirth was a sort of journey that you send dispatches home from, but of course it is not – it is home. Everywhere else now, is abroad" (ENRIGHT, 2000, p. 34-35).

The main deconstruction of traditional patriarchal hierarchies happens in Enright's privileging of the body rather than the mind in her literary works. In one of her novels, *The Gathering*, Enright's protagonist, Veronica Hogarty, demonstrates an awareness of the relationship between the body, mind and history: "History is only biological – that's what I think. We pick and choose the facts about ourselves – where we came from and what it means. What is written for the future is written in the body, the rest is only spoor" (ENRIGHT, 2007, p.162).

In this passage, Enright's protagonist displays a discussion around the importance of the body when talking about history. Veronica denies the veracity of a verbal history because she says that "We pick and choose the facts about ourselves", whereas bodily history cannot be erased or changed, it is eternal and true. Pregnancy is one of the most remarkable and visible bodily changes in a woman's life (and its lack is also meaningful culturally speaking). Hence, discussing it in the work of this contemporary female Irish writer is key to our understanding of the history and the whole of women at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In *Taking Pictures*, several stories are based on a central event or crucial moment which the story either leads up to or circles around. Besides pregnancy and motherhood, there is another recurring theme in Enright's short stories: the protagonists' willingness to make connections (and their failures to connect).

Enright argues in favour of the short story form saying that "The short story is, for me, a natural form, as difficult and as easy to talk about as, say, walking. Do we need a theory about going for a walk? About one foot, in front of the other? Probably, yes. It is the simple things that are the most mysterious" (ENRIGHT, 2010, p. 9).

When comparing aesthetic to cultural and social Irish context, O'Connor concludes that there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we don't often find in the novel, an intense awareness of human loneliness. Hence, according to him, the success attributed to Irish writers regarding this form is due to Ireland being not "a normal society" in comparison with England. As the short story remains by its nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic and intransigent, it would be the perfect form to portray an uncommon Ireland. Enright disagrees saying that:

> Are all short stories about loneliness? I am not sure. This may be part of writers' nonsense about themselves, or O'Connor's nonsense about being Irish, or it may just be the general nonsense of being alive. Connection and the lack of it are one of the great themes of the short story, but social factors change, ideas of the romantic change (…) the most I have ever managed to say about the short story is that it is about a change. Something has changed. Something is known at the end of a story that was not known before (ENRIGHT, 2010, p.16).

In this way the stories in *Taking Pictures* regarding pregnancy and motherhood are examples of women who not only struggle to make connections but also women who face changes in their bodies as much as in their minds. The innovative perspective attributed to Enright's characters throughout this collection demonstrates that her pictures are not simply a replica of the human act of seeing as proposed by Émile Zola. The proposal made by Enright in *Taking Pictures* leads us in the opposite direction as it suggests out-of-the-norm perspectives. The analysis of "Yesterday's Weather" is permeated by one crucial question: after all, when "taking pictures" of women facing motherhood, what can we see?

Regarding the nation-building process it can be said that "The hegemonic process of constructing a nationalist ideology depends upon distinguishing between self and other, us and them, in the creation of a common (shared) identity; women as symbol, men as agents of the nation, colonized space as feminine, colonial power as

masculine" (HROCH, 1996, p.15). In this way, in order to construct a homogeneous national identity it is necessary to create a male public sphere and a private female one. In Ireland, the fact that women should be confined to the private realm was not only established constitutionally but also stated in a religious sphere. The important role of the Catholic Church in the formation of Irish citizens is here highlighted:

> The specific role of the Irish Catholic Church in this maelstrom of economic, political, social and psychological forces is rather more than one among a number of regulatory institutions. It is after all sometimes very difficult to ascertain where church began and state ended in regard to the institutionalization of individuals, public health and education, for example (MEANEY, 2010, p. 5).

Therefore the Irish Catholic Church was probably the main regulatory institution regarding the construction of a nationalist ideology in Ireland. Consequently, it was also responsible for the promulgation of a patriarchal model of society and the idealization of women as purely mothers who should be kept to the private realm.

In order to perform this idealization, the image of Irish women was then compared by the Catholic Church with the image of the Virgin Mary and thus "…the chaste, modest and humble virtues of Irish women and mothers grew apace with their penitential devotion to Our Lady, an ideal-type figure that was fecund and female and yet remained virgin and pure" (NOVATI, 2009, p.182).

Amanda Coogan is one of Ireland's most exciting contemporary performers. In her performance art, Coogan confronts the issue concerning the idealized Irish woman and repudiates the perfection attributed to the Mother Figure in social and cultural Irish history. For her art, Coogan uses her body as her communication tool: the body of the performer is used to expose the tensions between perfection and motherhood. Anne Enright resembles Coogan in the way in which she dismantles patriarchal hierarchies when privileging body rather than mind in her literary works. Therefore, Enright and Coogan share the same aim in their works, the difference is that while the first one operates through a verbal approach, the other uses her own body to display the tensions in relation to women's role in a patriarchal society. Amanda Coogan challenges conventions and dogmas when reimagining some established figures from the history of Western Culture. One of her works, *Madonna in Blue*, was performed in 2001 and it is part of a sequence of works named *Madonna series*.

Wearing an unbuttoned blue silk shirt and cupping her exposed right breast, Coogan doesn't look directly to the audience. In this way, at the same time she seems to be absent (pure, naïve, virgin), she is being inviting when offering her right breast

(profane, whore). Therefore, Coogan displays in her performance in *Madonna in Blue* a sophisticated critique about the virgin/whore dichotomy existing around the figure of the mother in a patriarchal society.

In *Madonna in Blue*, Coogan demonstrates being a talented performer when exposing, at the same time, the image of the sacred and pure mother (related to the Madonna religious image and her absent gaze) and the image of the profane woman who exposes her breast and offers it to an audience. In an interview, Coogan explains where the inspirations for this performance and its dichotomous message come from:

> The core image of this piece is on the one hand the physical reproduction of a sacred painting exhibited in the National Gallery of Ireland, and on the other hand one of the many nameless girls who advertise their body for sex through their pictures in the telephone booths and magazines (NOVATI, 2009, p. 186).

In *Madonna in Blue*, Coogan combines elements of high art and popular culture filling the gap between the representation of the pure/virgin mother and the 'Real' one.

Julia Kristeva also addresses the cult of the Virgin Mary and its implications for the Catholic understanding of motherhood and femininity. She points to the need for "a new understanding of the mother's body; the physical and psychological suffering of childbirth and of the need to raise the child in accordance with the Law; the mother-daughter relationships; and finally, the female foreclosure of masculinity" (KRISTEVA, 1995, p. 161).

Taking into account Kristeva'a assertion it can be said that Anne Enright is a step out of the norm when referring to an ideal Irish Catholic mother. She has been considered as 'an iconoclastic artist' due to the destruction of religious icons and many other established symbols in Western Culture promoted by her female protagonists in her works.

> In her work, Enright overthrows the (Irish) Catholic paradigm, as her well-travelled, sexually active female protagonists debunk the image of the sorrowful, desexualized and idealized Irish mother. Anne Enright says of her own books that, 'They dealt with ideas of purity because the chastity of Irish women was one of the founding myths of the Nation State' (SCHWALL, 2010, p. 205).

Idealizing the Irish Mother was in fact a relevant feature that helped in the composition of the National State. This idealization was then constructed by the Catholic Church through the analogy between the Irish Mother and the Virgin Mary. As "Marianism was a badge of national identity sponsored by the post-independence southern state as well as the Catholic Church" (MEANEY, 2010, p. 7). In this way, both

the State and the Church were responsible for the construction of the symbol of sacred motherhood in Ireland. Meaney continues this equivalence attributed to the Irish Mother in relation to the Virgin Mary where she argues:

> A highly racialized discourse of nationality was prevalent in popular Catholic devotional literature in twentieth-century Ireland that promulgated the idea of a special link between Ireland and the Virgin Mother. (…) The images that appear to have been most popular were in statue form, Mary as apparition, with raised hands, sometimes standing on the stars, sometimes crushing the serpent and, particularly, the picture of the Immaculate Heart of Mary juxtaposed with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The refusal to countenance any representation of the mother's body as origin of life was paralleled by the predominance of images of the Virgin Mary as mother of an adult son, usually Jesus in the mode of the Sacred Heart, and in general in visions, icons and statues that represented her after her assumption, after her disembodiment (MEANEY, 2011, p. 13).

As was stated earlier, the analogy between the Irish woman and the image of the Virgin Mary was for long promoted by the Catholic Church in Irish social and cultural history and, in this way, this image deeply penetrated the imagery of Irish families and "Our Lady" came to be a constant presence in the private realm of Irish life. However, the representation of the Virgin Mary was never associated with the origin of life and her image was often exposed after her assumption, her disembodiment. In this way, women were never given relevance and female representation was always subjected to the masculine figure of Jesus. Enright synthesizes this image of the Virgin and the act of breast-feeding:

> The country was awash with milk. Kitchens and bedrooms were hung with pictures of the Madonna and child. Still, though general all over Ireland, breast-feeding was absolutely hidden. The closest the culture came to an image of actual nursing was in the icon of the Sacred Heart, endlessly offering his male breast, open and glowing, and crowned with thorns (ENRIGHT, 2005, p. 43).

According to Enright, although the image of the Madonna and child was present in Irish houses, the act of breast-feeding and the female body in daily routine were hidden. Coogan's performance in *Madonna in Blue* is also relevant here because in cupping her exposed right breast, she proposes a public act of breast-feeding challenging the hidden ideals embodied in the Irish patriarchal society.

Enright's writings as well as Coogan's art performances can be considered as a challenging point of view concerning Irish motherhood as they oppose the 'Real' mother to the idealized sacred Irish mother.

> Family matters are political matters, and they are directly linked to the dictates of a conservative Church which does not allow any questioning, dialogue or development. As we see from her political columns, Enright is clearly a political

> writer: 'The country was screaming at itself about contraception, abortion, and divorce. It was hideously misogynistic time. Not the best environment for a young woman establishing a sexual identity'. Writing offered a way out as it enabled her to create new worlds, inspired by philosophy and psychoanalysis (SCHWALL, 2011: 206).

Notwithstanding the Irish Catholic Church cannot be said to be as influential in contemporary society as it was in a recent past, it still cannot be denied the deep impression regarding morality that it has left in Irish cultural and social history. The assertion saying that "To such a devotion, Ireland would naturally lend itself, for the constant tribal scrutiny of family life encouraged the preservation of those domestic virtues which are the fundamental props of wholesome nationhood" (CASSIDY, 1933, p.13) cannot be immediately plausible for the post-modern society but that does not mean this type of discourse had been completely vanished from Irish society. On the contrary, in what follows I try to explore the marks left by the huge interference made by the Irish Catholic Church when it aimed to promote a highly racialized and rigidly gendered identity considered as true Irishness.

The analysis is based on the short story "Yesterday's Weather" extracted from Enright's collection of short stories, *Taking Pictures*. Here the protagonist is Hazel, a young married woman who has a newborn baby and, with her husband, is spending the weekend in her sister-in-law's house in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary. Throughout the story, the role of the mother in an Irish patriarchal society is exposed by Hazel's point of view.

From the very beginning of the short story, the narrator demonstrates Hazel's roles and obligations regarding her newborn as much as her dissatisfaction with the situation she is inserted in:

> Hazel didn't want to eat outside - the amount of sun cream you had to put on a baby and the way he kept shaking the little hat of his head. Also there were flies, and her sister-in-law Margaret didn't have a sterilizer – why should she? – so Hazel would be boiling bottles and cups and spoons to beat the band. Then John would mooch up to her at the cooker and tell her to calm down – so not only would she have to do all the work, she would also have to apologize for doing all the work when she should be having a good time, sitting outside and watching blue-bottles put their shitty feet on the teat of the baby's bottle while everyone else got drunk in the sun (ENRIGHT, 2008, p. 137).

All the duties regarding the newborn in his private realm are assigned to his mother; she is responsible for raising him according to the Catholic morality and the law of the State. However, the ideal of a perfect and sacred mother who gladly submits her life to raising her children is denied in "Yesterday's Weather". The narrator demonstrates the protagonist's feelings in relation to her role as a mother and her

discontent when she wants to be 'having a good time' instead of taking care of her child. The idea of caring is so intrinsically linked to motherhood that a woman's abdication of her life in favor of her children is not considered as a glorious act, but merely her obligation.

In the story, Hazel observes her husband John playing in the yard with his nephews and the narrator highlights a different feeling she had while watching that scene:

> It made Hazel panic, slightly. Though he was not like that with her. At least, not yet. And he lavished affection on his sister's three little children, he threw them up in the air, and he caught them, coming down. Still, Hazel found it hard to get her breath; she felt as though the baby was still inside her, pushing up against her lungs, making everything tight. But the baby was not inside her. The baby was in her arms (ENRIGHT, 2008, p. 138).

The connection existing between the mother-to-be and the fetus is unique. While pregnant the mother feels the changes that happen not only in her body but also in her mind; she deals with the Other, who is inside her and the contradiction regarding feelings (internal/external) is mixed until the birth. The act of 'housing a baby' is so intense that is capable of changing women's conceptions and beliefs. When the protagonist observes her husband playing with the children she panics and feels as if her baby is still inside her until she actually realizes the baby is already born. She can feel him; it is not a fetus anymore, it has become part of her reality.

Taking into account the discourses disseminated by the Irish State and the Catholic Church concerning motherhood it can be understood why the protagonist in "Yesterday's Weather" panics. Hazel finally realizes she is a mother; her relationship with the world has to change because now her son must be her priority. Besides that, she notices the different roles given to the parents when raising a child and she considers that being responsible for the baby while the father is 'having a good time' is not fair. Her reaction to that makes up the climax of the story:

> It seemed to Hazel that she could not hear him, even though his words were quite clear to her. Or that she could not be heard, even though she was saying nothing at all. She found herself walking down the garden, and she did not know why until she was standing in front of him, with the baby thrust out at her arms' length. 'Take him,' she said. 'What?' 'Take the baby.' 'What?' 'Take the fucking baby!' (ENRIGHT, 2008, p. 139).

The protagonist steps out of the norm of an idealized, sacred, virgin Irish mother when she leaves her baby with the father in the middle of the garden and goes back to

the house. He goes after her and, as the argument has already been started, they both decide to go back to the hotel where they are staying in town. Hazel takes her baby back and the narrator sets the scene when they arrive at the hotel room:

> 'He'll wake up in a minute,' she said. 'He needs a feed.' But he still didn't wake up: not for his feed, not when John went down to the bar for drinks. He slept through the remains of a film on the telly and another round of drinks, and he slept through the sound of his parents screaming at each other from either side of the bed where he lay' (ENRIGHT, 2008, p. 144).

The previous scene is extremely meaningful for the discussion which has been carried out. It is relevant first because, although Hazel had abandoned the child to the care of the father while they were in her sister-in-law's house, she quickly regretted her attitude and went after her baby. She felt guilty for leaving the baby as it was her obligation as a mother to look after him; the father is not expected to mind the baby. Women's subjection to men and their maintenance within the private realm are then implied here. Besides that, it is also demonstrated by the narrator that after the argument the husband, John, went to a pub while Hazel stayed in the hotel taking care of the baby. Again, John (husband, father, man) has access to the public sphere of society while Hazel (wife, mother, woman) is kept to the private one.

Returning to the plot of the story, during the night there was a heavy storm and by the end of the weekend the family is back in their house in Lucan. Hazel and John didn't have time to reconcile but when they are almost arriving home, the narrator ends by saying:

> When they pulled into the driveway, Hazel saw that her tulips had been blown down – at least the ones that had opened first. She wondered if the storm had hit there too, and how strong was that wind anyway – was it a usual sort of wind? What would she be able to grow here? She tried to think of a number she could ring, or a site online, but there was nowhere she could find out what she needed to know. It was all about tomorrow: warm fronts, cold snaps, showers expected. No one ever stopped to describe yesterday's weather (ENRIGHT, 2008, p.148).

In the short story, the couple didn't have time to discuss their relationship; they didn't need to. Hazel freaked out and abandoned the baby. John didn't like her attitude, went to a pub and drank all night long. Nothing has to be discussed; or as the narrator implies in a metaphorical way "No one ever stopped to describe yesterday's weather". After the outbreak everything comes back to the idealized place: Hazel as the perfect sacred Irish mother and John as the dominant Irish father.

The dichotomy of Virgin/Whore acquired a paranoid intensity in twentieth-century Ireland due to the urge to promote an essential Irish identity: pure, white, Catholic, patriarchal. Anne Enright's short story just discussed does not represent in an explicit way the Catholic influence in contemporary Irish families. Still it clearly demonstrates the deep marks left by these discourses concerning the nation formation and, more than that, it represents the struggles made by contemporary Irish women against these discourses.

The innovative perspective attributed to Enright's characters throughout this collection demonstrates that her pictures are not simply a replica of the human act of seeing as proposed by Émile Zola regarding photography. The proposal made by Enright in *Taking Pictures* leads us in the opposite direction as it suggests out-of-the-norm perspectives. What can you see? What can't you see? That is what *Taking Pictures* by Anne Enright is about: a picture, a glance, a portrait of a moment of someone's life revealing some facts and feelings through the characters' perspective that cannot be seen on the surface, issues regarding women that are not discussed in general discourses which, when examined and revealed, promote a questioning regarding modernity and tradition in contemporary Irish society.

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