

# RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST- LINDSAY SEERS PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

Novel Editor Lee Halpin reports on Lindsay Seers' latest exhibition at the Baltic

It has to be this way<sup>2</sup> is Lindsay Seers' latest exhibition, currently showing at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary art. This exhibition is a continuation of Seers' previous work and develops themes that are, by now, signatory to the artist: Seers takes us on a filmic, photographic, novelistic, psycho-geographic journey in order to tell us the mystifying story of a missing step-sister, a mute child who develops a special relationship with photography, a diamond smuggler and a neglectful Mother. This narrative, multi-media exhibition examines the complexities, uncertainties, subjectivity and unreliability of human memory and raises questions about our ability, or inability, to interpret the past. More questions are raised, via allusions to philosophical and photographic theory, regarding the objectivity of the camera and the lens and the relationship between image and body. Like many postmodernists

before her in literature, philosophy and art, Seers challenges the separation of those once diametric discourses, History and Literature, and, even more so, their binary connotations, fact and fiction. This is a story with no beginning, middle or end and entirely without denouement. All in all this is an exhibition, like much contemporary art, that raises far more questions than it answers.

In 1996, whilst in Rome researching her thesis on Queen Christina, Christine Parkes, Seers' stepsister, was involved in a motor cycle accident which resulted in severe memory loss. Attempts were made to recover her memory with the use of photography taken from an archive documenting her travels in the West coast of Africa. Seers has constructed a narrative of these events using randomly selected photographs from the same archive. Following in

her sisters footsteps, Seers travelled to Africa in a colonial guise with a camera concealed in her hat. It has to be this way<sup>2</sup> charts the events and the decisions that lead Seers on this journey.

Within the main installation you are invited to view two documentary-style films. These 'documentaries' are not necessarily to be taken at face value and are perhaps better described as docudramas or neo-narratives. Such narratives involve blurring the distinctions between fiction and reality, often achieved through the use of formats associated with the distribution of knowledge and information.

The first film is shown in a small room on a 1990's style TV set with two pairs of headphones protruding from its sides. The second film is shown inside a mock slave fortress, modelled on the fortresses of the West African Gold-coast. Looking down from the balcony inside the fortress at a circular screen, ocular in view, is a bit like being inside a giant Victorian camera and invites you into the act of photography.

Neither of the films is structurally linear, there is no narrative thread to follow and the footage is frequently disorientating. This effect is enhanced by the lethargic, gravelly voice of Seers mother, the narrator, apparently under hypnosis during recording. Fact is difficult to separate from fiction as random images are juxtaposed next to interview footage. The randomness of these images in the footage is compounded by the haphazard manner in which they were selected in the first place. This disorienting blend of fact and fiction is, in part, an attempt to reproduce, in film, the processes of memory and the manner in which we mentally stumble through past events, grasping at elusive accuracies, interrupted by tenuous and irrelevant material. Moreover it is an insight into the artist's creative processes and her more implicit intentions. Ole Hagen agrees that what constitutes Seers creative practice is not just story-telling:

'[It is] a matrix where there is no formal separation between the conceptual investigation of the act of photography, the camera as apparatus, the common desire for film and photography to act as evidence of events, and the complex historical and personal synchronicities of events themselves. What we are witnessing in this work is not so much a detached systematic outline of these relationships, but the actual unfolding of a creative process, where the act of observation and understanding influences the outcome of events. Through Seers' photographic explorations the past is constantly reconfigured, as if it contains an infinite virtual potential for different outcomes, which are all already embedded in one another.'

Seers has made no secret of the fact that her work is heavily influenced by Henri Bergson's 1896 text *Matter and Memory*. Hagen's assertion that through Seers' photography the past can be 'constantly reconfigured, as if it contains an infinite virtual potential for different outcomes' is strengthened by this extract from Bergson:







unique  
approach to  
narrative

'Here is a system of images which I term my perception of the universe and which may be entirely altered by a very slight change in a certain privileged position - my body. This image occupies the centre; by it all the others are conditioned; at each of its movements everything changes, as though by turn of a kaleidoscope.'

The metaphor of a kaleidoscope is elucidating and Seers has used it in her film juxtaposed with footage zooming through space-like blackness, possibly in a direct reference to Bergson. Acknowledging her allusion to Bergson makes clearer her intentions in creating a narrative with no conclusion or denouement. If the perception of images, as Bergson asserts, alters constantly and is dependent upon the ever-changing position of the body, then the idea that a past documented in photography can contain infinite outcomes is plausible. This in turn throws light on the films use of both factual and fictional narrative devices. Postmodern theoretician Linda Hutcheon argues that in the narratives of postmodern literature, which frequently exploits devices from factual and fictional modes of writing, 'there is rarely falseness per se, just other truths'. Seers would appear to concur.

Hutcheon's point about literature brings us nicely to the subject of the novella, which accompanies this exhibition and is available, in the small room with the 1990's style T.V set, to take away. Attitudes towards the past and narratives that blur fact and

fiction are themes taken on in a slightly different direction by the novella. Seers inclusion of a piece of literature opens the exhibition up to another mode of interpretation; that of postmodernism. The novella details the events of the story in more detail, but with no more clarity. As with the documentary footage a great deal of time and effort has been made by Seers in order to give the material the air of an objective factual account. This time instead of interviews we are presented with letters between central characters and diary entries to compound the believability of the narrative. Again there is a deliberate dilution of plausibility though, as characters describe visions, extra-sensory capabilities and supernatural occurrences. This literary blend of factual and fictional documents draws Seers work in line with many post-modern novelists, particularly John Fowles. Fowles' work has been described by Hutcheon as an example of historiographic-metafiction; a type of novel which weaves historical/factual texts into its fictional narrative. The separation of History and Literature is challenged by historiographic-metafiction, and recent critical readings of both History and Literature have focussed more on what the two modes of writing have in common than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalised in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure;

and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. This branch of theory suggests that any attempt to reconstruct the past is just that, a reconstruction. An appropriate metaphor for postmodernisms attitude to the past runs like this: past events and memories are like a smashed vase; difficult to piece back together, fragmented. Like a smashed vase they require an act of reconstruction. The resultant shape varies depending on the subjectivity of the person piecing the salvaged remnants together. No two attempts to reproduce the vase will be identical and the exact original form of the vase endlessly eludes, indeed is impossible to reproduce. End metaphor. Again this attitude opens up a universe in which there are infinite outcomes to past events where no conclusion can be arrived at, just more possibilities.

Go and see this exhibition. If you are not interested in Bergson or postmodernism then go just to witness a riveting, hugely engaging narrative which draws you in with an almost gravitational force. The story is littered with so many layers of intrigue; diamond smuggling, sibling rivalry, neglectful parenting, mistaken identities, the occult, supernatural occurrences, that it has all the appeal of a Sarah Waters novel. Please do not, though, as it tempting, leave the exhibition riled up in the debate about whether the story is true or not, for that, surely, is to have missed the point.