Art’s Swindle

W. G. Sebald and History After Trauma

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DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198824459.003.0004

Abstract and Keywords

In a 1992 interview W. G. Sebald remarked that ‘I myself work like a painter who has to consider how big to make the frame. The painter’s craft has always fascinated me’. This chapter traces what Sebald understood by working like a painter in fiction, arguing that he used painting as a counterpoint to explore the limitations of the photographs used throughout what he called his ‘semi-documentary prose fictions’—and the limitations of photography as a model of historical memory. It moves from a discussion of visual aesthetics in Sebald’s unpublished PhD on Döblin and his often overlooked art criticism to argue that Sebald conceptualized the photograph as a visual readymade, and that this modernist approach to photography informs the treatment of historical memory in The Emigrants and Austerlitz.

Keywords: W. G. Sebald, trauma theory, Holocaust fiction, photography, The Emigrants, Austerlitz
In a 1992 interview W. G. Sebald declared: ‘I myself work like a painter who has to consider how big to make the frame. The painter’s craft has always fascinated me. I envy painters because of the craftsmanship that is involved in their art’. By this point in his writing career Sebald had published *After Nature* (1988), *Vertigo* (1990), and *The Emigrants* (1992), and so his claim to work like a painter followed a sequence of works preoccupied with artists like Grünewald, Pisanello, and Frank Auerbach, as well as photography, botanical illustration, and what the narrator of *Vertigo* calls the ‘sense of vision’. According to Sebald, the painter’s craft produces art from ‘whence time has disappeared ... That is what grabs us when we visit a museum and see a painting from the seventeenth century. That is a snapshot for all eternity’. This is envy of a carefully chosen genre of painting: seventeenth-century still-life, whose realist images provide ‘a reflection on eternity’.

But the images outside of time produced by these paintings are compared to the photographic ‘snapshot’ in a way that calls into question their respective claims to realism. A photograph appears as composed as a painting, and a painting is seen with what Sebald elsewhere called ‘the artificial eyes technology has given us’ (‘der künstlichen Augen ... welche die Technologie uns beigestellt hat’). By ascribing to the ‘plastic arts’ the ability to produce representations of timelessness by depicting single moments rather than temporialized narratives —following in a tradition that goes back through modernism to G. E. Lessing—Sebald casts doubt on his writing’s ‘attempt to create tiny pools of timelessness’. For as he admitted in a 1997 interview, if when looking at a painting ‘[y]ou are taken out of time, and that is in a sense a form of redemption’, in contrast, ‘[f]iction is an art form that moves in time, that is inclined towards the end, that works on a negative gradient, and it is very, very difficult in that particular form in the narrative to arrest the passage of time’. Painting and photography are brought together to define fiction negatively: as that which can only fail to arrest time. In the same way that Sebald also described each of his works as a ‘death mask’ (‘Totenmaske’) of a lost moment of conception, so too they might be understood as forms defined by their failure to achieve the timelessness they desire.
For a writer who has been extensively discussed in relationship to photography, and whose incorporation of reproductions of photographs into what he called his ‘semi-documentary prose fiction’ is one of the most original features of his work, this claim to ‘work like a painter’ opens up a different aspect of Sebald’s relationship to visual art. This does not mean that Sebald’s claim to work like a painter ought to be opposed to his actual work with photographs, setting up a simplistic binary between the two media. Rather, unpicking the implications of this claim brings aspects of Sebald’s use of photography into sharper relief: his investment in photography as a form of anti-art that places him within a lineage of avant-garde practices in which photographs were the visual equivalent of the readymade; his antagonism towards what he called photography’s destruction of reality; and his investigation of how photography engenders a mode of remembrance that his fiction both draws on and contests. Instead of crude opposition, Sebald’s work repeatedly uses explorations of the relationship between painting and photography to provide a language for describing narrative form and to pose questions about the possibility of the aesthetic as a distinct mode of experience. The way art highlights the unavoidably temporal nature of fiction, and its thus different modes of remembrance, shapes what Adriana Cavarero identifies as the ‘central core of Sebald’s poetics’: ‘the problem, already announced by Adorno of writing “after Auschwitz” and, speaking more broadly, after the main chapter of the history of destruction, of which Auschwitz is the symbol’. Because of the central role played by the visual in Sebald’s answer to this problem, his work is both more and less than what Lynn L. Wolff has called a new form of ‘literary historiography’, a concept which risks demoting Sebald’s use of images to mere additions to an essentially linguistic project. As with Berger, Gaddis, and Beckett—the latter of whom Sebald called one of the ‘exemplary modern authors’ (‘exemplarisch moderner Autoren’) for his refusal to let history regress into myth after the Holocaust—Sebald’s attempt to rethink the relationship between fiction and history is inseparable from his engagement with visual art and photography.
Particularly in his final book, *Austerlitz* (2001), Sebald’s engagement with photography is used to show the limitations of conceiving of history, and consequently fiction’s representation of that history, as a form of trauma. According to a paradigm which dominated fiction during the 1980s and 1990s, the traumatic nature of certain historical experiences meant that the novel’s role was to figure the inexpressibility of what Amy J. Elias calls the ‘historical sublime’. However, as Dominic LaCapra has observed, works of art which adopt this task rely upon a questionable model of “‘tragic’ identification or rather uncontrolled transferential relation’, where the reader’s aesthetic experience becomes the equivalent repetition of the traumatic experience of the victim. For Sebald, writing about the postwar German novel, this ethical violation of ‘identifying with the real victims’ was enabled by ‘traditional narrative forms’. The dubious identification and transference that compromise fiction’s engagement with the traumatic experience of others, this implies, are first and foremost a question of form. Trauma as a theorization of memory transforms the passage of time into endless repetition: the past is always present, the future will only be the repetition of the past. Yet for Sebald repetition was a sign of the regression of history into myth, and fiction’s inability to create pools of timelessness makes it a testament to the inescapable passing of time. Fiction’s failure to stop time is a reminder that the remembrance demanded by the victims of history never comes to an end.
In the 1980s, Kerwin Lee Klein has written, memory rather than nature, language, or culture emerged as the ‘antonym’ in historiography against which history was understood. Critics have long noted that Sebald’s work is preoccupied with the relationship between history and memory, and that this preoccupation shares many of the concerns of these recent historiographical debates: the singular status of the Holocaust, the role of *lieux de mémoire*, the impact of visual images, or the function of affects such as melancholy in forming collective memory. It is in the context of these debates that Sebald’s exploration of the limitations of traumatic memory stakes a claim on literature’s relationship to history. In the same way that for Pierre Nora, memory came to stand as everything valuable that history should be condemned for ignoring, so too has traumatic memory as privileged access to the real come to acquire a certain normative status as an aesthetic form in debates about fiction’s representation of history. As Amy Hungerford has written, trauma theory became ‘a kind of formal handbook’ for fiction about the Holocaust and its legacy during the 1990s; yet it also became an evaluative handbook for critical appraisals of a much wider range of historical fiction. In bringing photography, painting, and fiction together to theorize art as an inherently compromised swindle that nevertheless provides the distanced and ironized modes of narration and remembrance necessary to recount the workings of trauma in history, rather than as history, Sebald provided fiction with a new relationship to memory after what Roger Luckhurst has called the late twentieth-century ‘trauma paradigm’, and therefore a new relationship to history.
The centrality of memory, history, and trauma to Anglophone fiction in the 1990s, and their close relationship to questions of life-writing, provided one reason for the difference in Sebald’s reception in the English- and German-speaking world; as a number of German critics have observed, the success of Sebald’s career was as much if not more a product of the state of the Anglophone literary field than of that of his long-departed Germany. Revealingly, of the fifty or so interviews Sebald gave in his career as a literary author, more than half were in English, and he was far more forthcoming to Amazon.co.uk than to the Süddeutsche Zeitung. Sebald’s debts to German literary history are so obvious as to be undeniable, but equally undeniable, Peter Boxall has written, has been Sebald’s influence on late twentieth-century Anglophone literature and its theorizations of a ‘world community of writers’. Similarly, while it is obviously necessary to engage with the original German texts of Sebald’s prose, it is also important to attend to his claims that he ‘intervened massively’ and ‘literally rewrote’ the drafts provided by his English translators, to the point where reworking The Emigrants involved ‘writing a fairly large amount of English for the first time, although starting out from an already existing English text’ (‘zum ersten Mal ziemlich viel English schreiben, allerdings ausgehend von einem bereits existierenden englischen Text’). Although Sebald stopped short of comparing himself to Beckett’s practice of self-translation, research on his translation manuscripts, as Lynn L. Wolff has written in relation to Vertigo, shows ‘that it is less a question of Sebald “correcting” Hulse’s translations and more a question of Sebald rewriting his own, original German text because, as he sometimes admits in letters to Hulse, of the stylistic problems which he claimed to perceive there’. Conceptualizing Sebald’s involvement in his translations from German to English as a form of revision brings to light his important yet shifting engagement with Roland Barthes, who provided a theory of photography against which Sebald’s own comparison of painting and photography in his writing could be defined. But in order to understand the ways in which this comparison would become central to the work of Sebald the writer, it is first necessary to turn to look at the place of art in the thinking of Sebald the critic.

Myth, History, and Negative Truths: Sebald’s Early Criticism
In his account of Sebald’s early academic career, his former colleague Richard Sheppard wryly reflects he cannot ‘help wondering how many of Max’s [Sebald’s] Anglophone admirers understand that a straight, albeit subterranean line runs from his early saturation in revisionist Marxism to the (p. 134) nostalgia-laden critique of the postmodern, “hamburgerized world” (Max’s phrase) that informs his literary work of the 1990s’. A number of other subterranean lines run from Sebald’s academic criticism into his later works. His conceptualization of the narrative techniques of modernists like Beckett and Kafka in terms of visual metaphors anticipates his later descriptions of what he called his own periscopic technique. His reading of the revisionist Marxism of Benjamin and Adorno resulted in his art criticism theorizing the aesthetic as a form of negation, and the relationship between painting and photography as a negative dialectic which, in Lambert Zuidervaart’s definition, ‘refuses to affirm an underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites’. His readings of the photography theories of Berger, Barthes, and Sontag, three writers with whom he felt a ‘direct rapport’, informed his view of photography as a tautologous form of representation, and his treatment of photographs as visual readymades in the tradition of avant-garde artistic practices such as Dada or Surrealism. But there are also important differences between his early criticism and later work, the most significant of which is a transformation in the way in which literature relates to history in the writings of Sebald the critic, and in the hybrid visual and verbal works of Sebald the writer.

If like many students in the 1960s Sebald learned his revisionist Marxism from the Frankfurt School, unlike many he was bold enough to write to Adorno in person to criticize him for failing to be revisionist enough in his dismissal of the Expressionist playwright Carl Sternheim, who was the subject of Sebald’s undergraduate and MA theses at the Universities of Fribourg and Manchester. Every author, Sebald declared to Adorno, should be understood as a ‘symptom of his time’ (‘Symptom seiner Zeit’). His earliest academic criticism and PhD dissertation on Döblin, written at the University of East Anglia between 1970 and 1974, put this symptomatic reading into practice. Döblin’s belief that only a messiah could redeem a bankrupt modernity is treated as a ‘pathological case’ (‘pathologisches Falles’) produced by the
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contradictions of German society diagnosed by Frankfurt School criticism. Indeed, few things are more certain in this early criticism than literature’s symptomatic expressions of the terminal (p.135) contradictions of the ‘late bourgeois era’ (‘spätbürgerlichen Zeit’). Although this commitment to symptomatic reading was formed by the specific intellectual and institutional contexts of 1960s Germany, by the 1970s it was also becoming a dominant critical mode in the British academic world in which Sebald worked for his entire career, and was being theorized in France by Paul Ricoeur and Louis Althusser. More recent Anglo-American debates about these diverse traditions of symptomatic reading have pointed out that ‘history’ is frequently the unconscious of which literature is the symptom, and this is the kind of critic Sebald declares himself in his PhD on Döblin. ‘The aesthetic, social, or erotic value which, for example, the image of the forest may have in a given context becomes a symptom through the sheer frequency with which it occurs’ in Döblin’s work; ‘the task of criticism, however, is the analysis of dreams, the reconstruction of the problem which the dream tried to solve’. That problem is the descent of bourgeois German society into fascism, and what Sebald’s calls the Traumarbeit of Döblin’s work is its use of art to transform history into myth: ‘much in Döblin’s novels represents the yearning of creativity—as understandable as it is terrifying—to abjure itself, to surrender from reality and relapse into the twilight zone of myth from which art once happily escaped’. The task of the symptomatic critic is to turn myth back into history, yet art itself is treated as a historical product, its historicity marked by its failure to achieve what its emancipation from myth promised. Of these two quite different theorizations of the relationship between art and history, Sebald’s criticism would soon replace the routine demystifications of the former with attention to the consequences for art in modernity implied by the latter.

Sebald’s thesis on Döblin, which was translated, revised, and published in German in 1980, does not limit itself to historical diagnosis and political judgement—although it hardly lacks either in its declaration of Döblin’s style as ‘totalitarian’ in so far as through it ‘something that is essentially relative’—a contingent historical condition—‘is reified, hypostasized and (p.136) deprived of further development’. It also shows instances of attention to fiction’s relationship to visual art and
to the ethics of narrative form that would become important to Sebald’s later writing. Döblin’s tendency towards mystification is shown in the smallest details of his prose, where concrete objects are transformed into symbolic manifestations of feelings and ‘abstract processes’ (‘abstrakte Vorgänge’), in order to elicit the reader’s empathy. Yet this is a problem, Sebald writes, because unlike in Expressionist painting, which can represent these symbolic objects in a single spatial relationship in two dimensions (‘in die Zweidimensionalität einordnen und zumindest in einem räumlichen Bezug setzen kann’), narrative fiction is bound to temporal discursivity (‘Diskursivität’). Döblin’s style is criticized for transgressing medium specificity, for attempting to convey the simultaneity of various times and affects in the essentially temporal medium of prose fiction. Inadvertently, Döblin’s limitations show that the actual correlation of modern alienation and style is shown by ‘the exemplary modern authors’ (‘exemplarisch moderner Autoren’), Kafka and Beckett, ‘through a high degree of linguistic and syntactic logic, and by an extreme poverty of metaphor’ (‘durch ein hohes Maß an sprachlicher und syntaktischer Logik und durch eine ausgesprochene Metaphernarmut’). Describing Molloy’s fantasies of regression and death as instances of the mimetic impulse that seeks to dissolve culture back into nature, Sebald writes that more than any other author, ‘Beckett watches for the moment when fiction seeks to be hypostatized into myth, and makes that the target of his irony. That is the critical strategy of his art’. He achieves this through his narrative style, through ‘the irony of the reporting voice, the irony of the author who greets the daydreams of his authors with covert scepticism’ (‘die Ironie der berichtenden Instanz, als die Ironie des Autors, der den Wunschträumen seiner Kreaturen mit Skepsis begegnet’). Buried in Sebald’s doctorate is a narratological distinction that would come to acquire important weight in his later work: the desires of first-person character narrators, like Molloy, come to us through an externally focalized narration that can treat them ironically, and it is this critical distance that resists the transformation of history, or rather the desire to escape history, into timeless myth.
Two other early essays compare Kafka with Beckett as part of their investigation of modernist narrative technique. According to Sebald, the (p.137) possibility that K in *The Castle* can be read as the Messiah is an effect of the text’s shifting focalizations. ‘Like K, about whose looks and origin we never learn anything conclusive, the messiah is of uncertain provenance and his physiognomy is indistinct’; the inconclusiveness of K’s appearance is a consequence of him being described by an externally focused narrator. Such passages alternate with others focalized through K, as when Barnabas appears in an ‘epiphany’ that for a brief moment ‘encourages the hope that there may be a connection between the sordid real world and his better vision’. Later, however, ‘the hopeful manifestation at the beginning of the novel dissolves as Barnabas strips off his messenger’s garb’ as he is more and more described by externally focalized narration.41 ‘Beckett’s *Molloy*, Sebald concludes, ‘contains a similar constellation of “agent” and “messenger”, of the narrator of the story and a certain Gaber whose memory is as rudimentary as that of Barnabas is phenomenal. The analogy, significant in many respects, cannot be pursued here’.42 It never was pursued, perhaps because the novels are quite different, narratologically speaking; but the analogy in which Moran is the agent, the figure corresponding to K, seems to claim that the possibility of interpreting Gaber as a religious figure, as with K and Barnabas in *The Castle*, is a narratological effect opened up by the difference between what Molloy and Moran recount. Imprecise as this analysis is—Sebald made a poor academic narratologist—attention to how limited first-person narratives can be ironically treated, and the description of these limitations in visual terms, anticipates Sebald’s later descriptions of what he called his ‘periscopic’ narrative technique, where ‘everything that the narrator relates is mediated through sometimes one or two stages, which makes for quite complicated syntactical labyrinthine structures and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends that he knows more than is actually possible’.43 These early essays locate in modernist fiction a treatment of narrative perspective as a form of vision where aesthetics, ethics, and politics cannot be separated.

For Sebald, then, the value of modernist fiction lay in the way its narrative techniques alienated and ironized the regression of history into myth. Such a regression, which is first and
foremost a matter of form rather than political commitment, lay behind Sebald’s controversial critique of how German writers represented the Allied bombings of the Second World War. But as J. M. Coetzee perceptively noted, Sebald is concerned with (p.138) more than the historical events of the Holocaust and the Second World War; his scope extending to the ‘triumph of Enlightenment reason and the enthronement of the idea of progress’. Ben Hutchinson similarly argues that the pivotal moment in Sebald’s understanding of history was not the Holocaust or the bombing of Germany except insofar as they were the outcome of the modernity theorized by the Frankfurt School; he goes so far as to state that Sebald’s work is an ‘ästhetische Fortsetzung’ (‘aesthetic continuation’) of the critique of progress outlined in Dialectic of Enlightenment. In his copy of the German edition of that text, Sebald noted that: ‘The great artists were ... those who adopted style as a rigor to set against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth’ (‘Die großen Künstler... sind jene, die den Stil als Härte gegen den chaotischen Ausdruck von Leiden, als negative Wahrheit, in ihr Werk aufnahmen’). As Sebald also underlined, art offers a negative truth about reality when its style fails: ‘The moment in the work of art by which it transcends reality cannot, indeed, be severed from style; that moment, however, does not consist in achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society, but in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity’ (‘Das Moment am Kunstwerk, durch das es über die Wirklichkeit hinausgeht, ist in der Tat vom Stil nicht abzulösen; doch es besteht nicht in der geleisteten Harmonie, der fragwürdige Einheit vom Form und Inhalt, Innen und Außen, Individuum und Gesellschaft, sondern in jenen Zügen, in denen die Diskrepanz erscheint, im notwendigen Scheitern der leidenschaftlichen Anstrengungen zur Identität’). It is in the ‘failure’ (‘Scheitern’) of its style that ‘the great works of art have always negated themselves’ (‘in dem der Stil des großen Kunstwerks seit je sich negierte’). These passages noted by Sebald are a distillation of Adorno’s later theory of modernist art as negation, developed in his posthumous Aesthetic Theory (1970). In modernity ‘[a]rt must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fibre’. Yet at the same time, whether it is an outdated genre, form, or object of representation, whatever ‘is excluded is maintained...
in them through its negation; the state of affairs is constitutive of the modern’. As with (p.139) Beckett’s critical strategy of incorporating and ironizing the hypostatization of myth, Sebald’s doctorate and notetaking, at least, saw art as condemned and tasked to ironize that which threatened to negate it.

A 1993 essay on the work of his friend, the painter Jan Peter Tripp, provides an account of how this process of incorporation and negation could be manifested in painting’s encounter with photography. Yet this essay is also an act of critical ventriloquism; as Mary Jacobus has written, here ‘Sebald could be writing of his own work, with its melancholy accumulation of detail and its memorial testimony of crystallized things’. Sebald denies that Tripp’s work is a form of photorealism, a style which shares the ‘tendency to reification implicit in its naturalist mode of depiction’, yet admits that in his copying of photographs where ‘the exact reproduction of reality achieves an almost unimaginable degree of precision, it is impossible to avoid the tiresome question of realism’. On the one hand, Sebald rejects the assumptions of ‘those critics schooled in the traditions of modernism’ for whom the possibility that ‘radically exposed artistic positions might nowadays be arrived at just as readily through representational as non-representational art, is … virtually inconceivable’. On the other, Tripp’s work intentionally engages with ‘the whiff of trickery and inconsequentiality, which … at least since the dawn of photography and the beginnings of the modernist era which it ushers in, came to be extended to representational painting as a whole’. The significance of Tripp’s work ‘lies not in what one might assume to be the purely objective and affirmatory quality of its identical reproduction of reality (or the latter’s photographic image) … but rather in the far more subtle ways in which it deviates and differs from it’. Drawing on his reading of Sontag and Barthes, Sebald states that on its own, ‘the photographic image makes a tautology of reality’, merely affirming that which is the case. However,
[w]hat may be true of photography though, is not necessarily applicable to art. The latter depends on ambiguity, polyvalence, resonance, obfuscation and illumination, in short, the transcending of that which, according to an ineluctable law, has necessarily to be the case ... Art deploys the deconstruction of outward appearances as a means of countering the obliteration, in an endless series of reproductions, of the visible world.\(^{55}\)

**Photography’s reproduction of reality as that which appears necessarily to be the case is precisely the tautology that Tripp’s paintings expose by presenting almost exact copies which upon closer inspection reveal themselves to be illusions: a photograph under a pane of glass, for example. Yet this reduction of painting to merely a critique of photography only contributes to the sense of the inconsequentiality of painting—and art as a whole—in technological modernity.**

Tripp’s work thus belongs to a different tradition of painting than the abstraction that ‘critics schooled in the traditions of modernism’, such as Greenberg (and indeed Beckett), saw as painting’s only justifiable response to photography. ‘The pictures from the first three or four years of Tripp’s career’, Sebald writes, ‘still clearly show the influence of surrealism, of the Vienna school of fantastic realism, and of photorealism, still embedded in the polemical strategies of 1968’.\(^{56}\) Michel Foucault described these polemical strategies, represented by the narrative figuration of Gerard Fromanger, as one of defamiliarization in order to show the workings of mass imagery, revealing ‘the autonomous migration of the image’ across different media platforms.\(^{57}\) Similarly, Hal Foster has argued that in the work of painters working with photographic images like Richard Hamilton and Gerhard Richter, painting returns ‘almost as a meta-art, able to assimilate some media effects and to reflect on others precisely because of its relative distance from them’.\(^{58}\) Writing of this return to ‘painting after painting’, Griselda Pollock has argued that ‘the possibility of painting as the aesthetic mode of thought’ is a fundamental premise of such strategies.\(^{59}\) Sebald encountered a similar argument, albeit proceeding from more conservative premises, in the work of Anita Albus, who saw painting as the ‘art of arts’ able to explore the ways of seeing of science, art, and natural history.\(^{60}\) In a 1990 exhibition catalogue essay, as of yet not translated from German, Sebald argued that Albus’s
detailed copying of photographic conventions of representation offered the ‘reflection of redemption’ (‘Abglanz der Erlösung’) from within the condition of seeing with ‘the artificial eyes which technology has made available to us’ (‘der künstlichen Augen bedienen, welche die Technologie uns beigestellt hat’). In the photographic reproduction of reality there is ‘a direct correlation between the realisation of an image and the de-realisation (p.141) of reality and between the de-realisation of reality and its destruction. The world has shifted into a simulacrum to the extent that—as today is clearly traceable—the image takes on the aura of the natural model and this assumes the aura of an artefact’ (‘eine direkte Korrelation zwischen der Realisierung eines Bildes und der De-realisierung der Wirklichkeit und zwischen der De-realisierung der Wirklichkeit und ihrer Zerstörung. Ist die Verschiebung der Welt ins Simulacrum einmal soweit fortgeschritten, dass—wie heute schon deutlich spürbar—das Bild die Aura des natürlichen Vorbilds und dieses die Aura eines Artefakts annimmt’). This process is part of the dialectic of Enlightenment: ‘so-called reason’ (‘die sogenannte Vernunft’) is a product of the human species’ unique ‘ability of apperception’ (‘Apperzeptionsfähigkeit’) extended into ways of seeing; yet technological images have alienated us from reality because their way of seeing has come to be seen as natural.61 The painting of artists like Albus on Tripp cannot overcome this: instead their records of attentive investigations of the photographic way of seeing provide a negative image of the reconciliation of art and technology, painting and photography, nature and culture.

The diversity of the ways in which Sebald uses photographs in his books has been matched by the theoretical approaches critics have used to interpret and historicize his practice: Surrealism, Foucault’s account of modernity, but most frequently the association between photography and trauma.62 These essays, however, suggest a different view of photography: as a technology that transforms the meaning of art through its negation of it. Sebald emphasized the anti-aesthetic quality of the photographs he used:
I use the camera as a kind of shorthand or aide mémoire. I don’t tie this to any artistic ambitions at all. Most of the time my camera is something cheap … I don’t want to integrate images of high photographic quality into my texts; they are rather documents of finding, something secondary. It is actually quite nice when this indistinctness somehow finds its way into the images.\textsuperscript{63}

The secondary status of the photographs he used came from his practice of finding them by ‘chance’, and ‘collecting them not systematically but \textsuperscript{64} randomly’. The seemingly aimless journeys that structure his narratives replicated this process of random discovery: ‘Sometimes, when you are on a journey … the material just comes to you, and then chance plays a role in dealing the hand’ (‘Wenn man mal auf dem Weg ist … fällt einem das Material zu, dann spielt einem der Zufall das in die Hände’).\textsuperscript{65} He described this as working in accord with Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage as a form ‘of savage work, of pre-rational thinking, where one roots around in randomly accumulated finds until they somehow come together’, and he noted in his own copy of The Savage Mind the definition of bricolage as ‘an effect which the Surrealists called “objective chance”’.\textsuperscript{66} In these interviews, photography’s claim to art stems not from what Andre Bazin saw as its ontological claim to ‘lay bare the realities’, or from its duplication of traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{67} Instead, self-consciously placing himself in a lineage stemming from the modernist avant-garde, photographs are secondary documents of prior moments of chance, automatic procedures, and abdications of authorial intent.
The idea that photography redefines the meaning of art precisely because it is not an art form in itself might seem paradoxical, but as Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iverson have written, it is one which has a long tradition within avant-garde practice and theory. In an account developed by critics like Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Jeff Wall, photography ‘entered the mainstream fine-art canon when artists turned to the medium to exploit those very features of its process that appear, from a philosophical point of view, to be in tension with its status as art ... [t]hat is, many artists valued photography in all the respects in which it seemed to evade, rather than mimic, art with a capital A—hence photography’s standing as the pictorial equivalent of the readymade’. A photograph’s status as the visual readymade was bound up with its questioning of agency and intentionality, both as a technology which automatically copies the world, and as an object to be encountered by chance. From Mallarmé and Breton to Bernd and Hilla Becher, artists and writers have ‘valued photography insofar as it might be thought to bracket, rather than exert, artistic agency and authorial control. (p. 143) This is manifested in these artists’ preference for unpretentious snapshot effects, documentary value, and deadpan antiaesthetic qualities, as well as in their use of photography for appropriating and recycling existing imagery’. Painters like Gerhard Richter have explained their turn to working with photographs as the use of an ‘image which, deprived of all of the conventional criteria which I had till then associated with art, provided me with a new way of seeing’. Jeff Wall has written that such use of the photograph as an ‘anaesthetic’ readymade has been one of the predominant strategies through which artists since the 1960s renegotiated photography’s relationship to art in a negatively dialectical relationship with earlier photographic traditions like Pictorialism with its stress on composition, skill, and authorial intention. This has also been the means by which painters such as Richter and Hamilton—and arguably Tripp and Albus—have negotiated photography’s relationship to painting. Painting’s transformation into a meta-art relies upon photography’s demotion to the visual readymade.
Other than the works of the Surrealists and Walter Benjamin, Sebald showed little awareness of these later practices in which photography was treated as the anti-art. In a well-worn avant-garde move, by negating all previous assumptions about art, photography transforms our understanding of what art is. As Sebald declared: ‘The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn’t anything like, has transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful’.\footnote{72} However, his explanations of his use of photographs as non-aesthetic objects, his often strikingly negative judgement on photography’s ‘de-realisation’ and ‘destruction’ of experience, his interest in forms of contemporary painting which investigate photographic ways of seeing, and his situating of photography’s questioning of art within a theory of modernism that saw it defined as the incorporation of that which threatened to negate it all bear comparison with this tradition of twentieth-century thought on photography. This enables Sebald’s exploration of the relationship between photography and painting to be framed as a specifically aesthetic question, rather than one of memory, trauma, or cultural value. These interviews and critical essays were largely published after his first three works—\textit{After Nature}, \textit{Vertigo}, and \textit{The Emigrants}—\footnote{144} and provide a means to interpret how those works present the relationship between painting and photography, and how their comparison reveals the historicity of the ways of seeing embodied in each medium.

The ‘History of Looking’ and Looking at History
In a 1985 essay on Peter Weiss, Sebald compared a 1946 ‘anatomical’ painting by Weiss of a dissected body to Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* (1632). In both paintings, Sebald wrote, a body is being dissected ‘not in the service of vengeful jurisdiction but of some other idea, some neutral principle of knowledge’. Yet in both the dissected body is surrounded by onlookers who do not look at it: Weiss’s surgeons show ‘blind indifference’, Rembrandt’s doctors from the ‘early bourgeois era’ are ‘bent on the open textbook of anatomy, lest they be overwhelmed by the fascination of the business’. When Sebald returned to *The Anatomy Lesson* in *The Rings of Saturn* (1996), he connected this disjunction between the surgeons’ ‘gaze’ focusing not on the dissected body but the anatomical atlas with the fact that the ‘much-admired verisimilitude of Rembrandt’s picture proves on closer examination to be more apparent than real’. This blind gaze was shared by Descartes, who ‘teaches that one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can be fully understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, be either repaired or discarded’. Weiss’s style is more ‘primitive’, verisimilitude giving over to a certain monumentalism, and his dissected bodies derive ‘from inspiration of a more recent kind which, in a spirit of the general maintenance of order, aims for the fullest possible identification and labelling of all the separate parts of a corporeality increasingly seen as subversive’. The early bourgeois era of Rembrandt’s doctors and the National Socialism that persecuted Weiss’s Jewish family are linked by a certain way of seeing, a rationality that turns the body into a machine, enabled by a verisimilitude that in doing so mistakes what is apparent for what is real.
Underpinning this sweeping comparison between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust is the assumption that there is a historicity to vision, and that these changes in how we see are manifested in the history of visual style. As in Sebald’s art criticism, art and technology, and painting and (p.145) photography, are related in a negatively dialectical manner: the comparison between painterly verisimilitude and the technological machine works to undermine the self-sufficiency of both concepts without suggest an underlying resolution. Across Sebald’s early works—After Nature, Vertigo, and The Emigrants—painting and photography are compared and contrasted as part of a broader exposition of the historicity of sight and how this affects the work of memory, an exposition that works against the regression of these changes in how we see into myths of the naturalness of either pre- or post-photographic vision or remembrance. Technologically reproduced images come to shape memory, and thus understandings of history, in ways ambivalently contested and copied by the form and techniques of Sebald’s literary narratives. These books offer one aspect of the ‘History of Looking’ that Sebald noted Barthes called for in his copy of Camera Lucida. We can take them as tracing what Berger called, in another book Sebald owned and annotated, the historically changing ‘ways of seeing’ embodied in each image. Informed by Barthes and Berger, Sebald’s sensitivity to the historicity of sight enabled him to expose some of the myths about seeing in our present. His practice of falsifying source images to produce the reproductions used in his books uses the illusory swindle that is art as a means to reveal the illusions of photographic indexicality, the basis for photography’s record of the past as being categorically different to that of fiction. The awareness that there is a history of looking informed Sebald’s manipulation of reproductions and use of the photograph as a visual readymade in service of what he called the aesthetic ‘swindle’ at the heart of his work: ‘the arrival at the truth on a crooked route’. Whether the incorporations of these manipulated images into his fiction meant that fiction could provide its own truths by looking at history via this crooked route is, however, a question these books pose rather than answer.
After Nature, Sebald’s first published literary work, introduces many of the themes that occupy his later prose fictions: the bombing of Germany during the Second World War, his childhood spent ‘on the northern edge of the Alps ... without any idea of destruction’, the truths and lies offered by family photographs, the Enlightenment’s visual classification of nature. Different timescales for historicizing these themes course throughout the poem: the passage of glaciers, the formation of valleys, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the biography of his grandparents. In the first section of the poem, these historical changes are manifested in the style of Matthias Grünewald’s painting, the description of which gives the poem its title. His Isenheim Altar ‘was so fashioned that / real life could scarce have done other’ (10), his realism attempted to capture ‘the last trace of light / flickering from beyond, after nature’ (30). Painting ‘after nature’ is bound up with the onset of technological modernity: his realism reveals our bodies to be blind ‘experiment[s]’ of nature, which leads to ‘the machines sprung from our heads’ (27). In the section about Steller, the ability to visually replicate flora and fauna ‘after nature’ in Enlightenment taxonomy takes place in service of military power and the oppression of the indigenous inhabitants of Siberia; it is what enables Steller to grasp ‘the difference between nature and society’ (75). Written around the same time as Sebald’s essay on Weiss and Rembrandt, After Nature goes back to the onset of naturalism in early modern painting—which Vera Olejniczak Lobsien points out dominates Sebald’s reflections on art—to connect the production of images ‘after nature’ with a way of seeing that sees the body as a mere technology to be dissected and destroyed.
Vertigo opens with an account of a different consequence of the transformation in the ways we see wrought by technically reproduced images. When the fifty-three-year-old Marie-Henri Beyle, or Stendhal, tried to remember crossing the Alps, he noticed that ‘even when the images supplied by memory are true to life one can place little confidence in them’; as he discovers, what he thought was a memory of his own view of the St Bernard Valley is in fact the memory of an engraving.81 ‘This being so’, the text continues ‘Beyle’s advice is not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one’s travels, since before long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them’ (8). In a book structured around the co-incidence of dates such as 1913, it is significant that Beyle’s observation is written in 1836: the year when Daguerre and Fox Talbot were consolidating Niépce’s invention of photography. Following Benjamin’s argument, the engraving anticipates the effects of photography on memory, making the significant process less photography itself than its qualities of reproducibility.82 This process of mediation and memory is manifested in the language’s syntax, grammar, and style. As Mark McCulloh has observed, Sebald’s English translations lack the uncertainty created by the reporting of these views in German as indirect speech in the subjunctive mood.83 In this case, ‘Es sei’ becomes: ‘This was’; ‘Man sollte darum, so rät Beyle’ becomes: ‘This being so, Beyle’s advice is’ (8), and so on. If this loses the manifestation, at the level of style, of the displacement of Stendhal’s views by Vertigo’s shadowy narrator, reading the versions in English and German reminds us that the German original is a translation of Stendhal’s French, and the translation, and medium of the printed book itself, is also a technology of transmission that threatens to destroy our memory through mediation.
Later in the narrative, photography’s successor in the history of technically reproduced images, cinema, transforms the narrator’s access to the past. Arriving in Verona and pretending to be a real-life ‘historian’, Jakob Phillip Fallmerayer (117), the narrator goes to the Biblioteca Civica to research newspapers from August and September 1913. Inexplicably, we are told that ‘[a]ll manner of silent movie scenes began to be enacted before my eyes’ (118). It is not clear what these describe, but the reproductions of newspaper advertisements imply they are scenes of daily life from the past. In the next section, the reason for this research is revealed: the narrator wanted to know what ‘Dr K’, an alias for Kafka, viewed in the cinema on 20 September 1913 during a visit to Verona (150). But if in that section the narrator imagines the films he might have seen, such as *The Student of Prague* (1913), in the first visit to the archive the historical past itself appears as a sequence of silent films, a representation of the past accessed in the visual technologies of that past. This transformation of history into a silent film shapes the living memory of Kafka and the historical imagination of the narrator, who himself is also a writer. The narrator’s recovery of memory in ‘All’estero’ and ‘Il ritorno in patria’ is preceded by two accounts of writers, Stendhal and Kafka, for whom the memory of historical events was replaced by memories of technical images. What then of the memories the narrator presents himself as writing about? When looking down the Danube, he admits his memory of the view from Burg Griesenstein will be replaced by the current sight of a dam. The inclusion of a photograph of the dam at the moment when the text states that ‘the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was’ (42) suggests it could be either the actual sight, or the photographic ‘sight’. Or rather, the ambiguity introduced by the interaction of text and photography means that the impact of technical images is to render that question unanswerable.

In *Vertigo*, technically reproduced images are inescapable mediations between individual memory and the public archives through which the writer imagines history. There can be no fiction about history that is not (p.148) fiction about photography. Photography also screens the narrator’s views of past paintings, which, of course, appear in *Vertigo* in highly cropped photographic reproductions. Recounting his visit to the Pellegrini chapel as part of his ‘study of Pisanello, on
whose account I had in fact decided to travel to Verona’, whose paintings ‘instilled in me the desire to forfeit everything except my sense of vision’, the narrator states that ‘[w]hat appealed to me was not only the highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting a depth dimension, upon an essentially flat surface’ (72–3). This encounter and description of Pisanello’s realism are mediated through two other figures. First, despite the narrator’s claim that Pisanello was the motivation for his trip to Verona, he subsequently mentions that ‘Dr K’ also went to the Pellegrini chapel, and that, in a loaded use of the subjective mood: ‘It might be shown, though, that when Dr K stood in the porch once again’ he would view the frescos not as realism but as a ‘mirroring effect he was familiar with from his dreams’ (149). Second, the 1998 English translation Sebald undertook in collaboration with Michael Hulse expands the 1990 German text’s neutral description of Pisanello’s ‘realistischen Malweise’ (‘realistic painting style’) to a description of how he ‘succeeded in creating the effect of the real’ (73). Between 1990 and 1998, Sebald had used the phrase ‘the so-called effet du réel’ to describe Tripp’s work, and his own practice of embellishing historical events with invented ‘minor detail most of the time, to provide l’effet du réel’. Although Sebald seems to have confused l’effet de réel (‘reality effect’) and l’effet du réel (‘the effect of the real’), the allusion added to the English text is clearly to Barthes’s 1968 essay ‘L’effet de réel’. The retrospective recasting of a view of early modern realism as Kafka’s dreams within the text, so that according to the narrative logic of Nachträglichkeit the former becomes an anticipation of the latter, is doubled by the text’s translation, where the narrator’s own desire for painterly realism is retrospectively rewritten and ironized as a desire for a ‘reality effect’. The complex ways in which we retrospectively realize that our encounter with the ways of seeing of the past is filtered by the ways of seeing of our present are enacted in the linguistic registers, narrative prolepsis, and revised translations of the text itself. And this retrospective comparison of the reality effect of painting presented to the reader through the reality effect of a photographic reproduction serves to defamiliarize (p.149) that effect—it appears independent of either physical medium—and to undermine the identity of both forms without gesturing towards some underlying realistic ‘way of seeing’.
This retrospective revaluation of the past’s ways of seeing, coupled with the sense that those ways of seeing embody some of the deepest truths about that past, also takes place when the narrator returns to his native village, ‘W’. Staying in the Engelwirt inn, he sees one of the many paintings by the artist Hengge, ‘whose fame reached its peak in the 1930s’ (205), and whose paintings, ‘apart from the frescoes in the parish church, were pretty much the only pictures I had seen until I was seven or eight years old’ (208). Paintings by Josef Hengge—the name of the actual artist—are shown in reproductions, depicting woodcutters, peasants, and archaizing ‘allegorical representation[s]’ (206) of the taming of water or the harvest, which after the war were ‘for a variety of reasons … no longer much in demand’ (208). For the narrator there was always something ‘unsettling’ (206) about Hengge’s paintings, but it is only with his return as an adult that ‘now I have the feeling that these woodcutters and the crucifixions … made a devastating impression on me’ (208). What remains unsaid is that Hengge’s allegories, rendered in a mimetic style, were the visual embodiment of National Socialism, and that the narrator only belatedly has come to realize—in a narrative move encapsulating the narrative as a whole—the impact National Socialism had on the rest of his life, forever shadowed by the melancholy that initiates the journey that begins the text. Seeing them again, he says that ‘I cannot say that their effect on me on re-acquaintance was any less devastating, rather the contrary’ (208). This is not because viewing them again triggers the child’s primal trauma. The revelation enabled by the adult’s knowledge of history is of the falsity of individual memory, one which extends to his entire childhood, to ‘the paths that I had walked in my childhood at my grandfather’s side and which had meant so much to me in my memory, but, as I came to realise, meant nothing to me now’ (210). His return to his village underlines the difference between memory and history, the difficulties of which have been precisely those he has been avoiding, up until now. As the narrator turns to write the notes that may or may not be those of the text we are reading, ‘the example of Hengge the artist, and the questionable nature of painting as an enterprise in general, remained before me as a warning’ (210).
Neither the process of memory as the recovery of lost time, which will only be the recovery of lost photographs and films, nor the retrospective reassessment of the ways of seeing of the past provide in *Vertigo* an unquestioned analogue for fiction’s exploration of the relationship between history and memory. This scepticism towards the ways of seeing embodied in painting and photography, one prompted by their comparison and (p.150) contrast, is turned back on our present in *The Emigrants*. Narratologically *The Emigrants* is very different from *Vertigo*: ‘Everything is related round various corners in a periscopic sort of way. In that sense it doesn’t conform to the patterns that standard fiction has established’.87 ‘Periscopic’ is Sebald’s own description of the frame narratives that structure *The Emigrants*. The narrator recounts Selywn’s telling of his life story; the narrator relates what Lucy Landau tells him about Paul Bereyer; the narrator recounts what he has heard from Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir about great Uncle Ambros; this story frames the account of Ambros’s travels; and the final story frames another life story found in a diary, that of Ferber’s mother Luisa Lanzberg. These in turn are framed within the narrator’s account of his own life and his decision to live in England, the *discours* ending when it began in September 1970. This technique of periscopic framing has been central to debates about the ethics of Sebald’s style, in particular his retelling of Jewish lives by a non-Jewish German narrator.88 The visual metaphor offered for this technique in *The Emigrants* by the ‘salt-frames’ (227) at Bad Kissingen, which enable the production of crystalized twigs, suggests a broader history of aesthetics behind this ethical position. Crystallized twigs first appear in *Vertigo* to Stendhal as ‘an allegory for the growth of love in the salt mines of the soul’ (26). This process of crystallization was an allegory for literary creation; according to Sebald, in the salt works

[w]hat takes place is a kind of metamorphosis: something living becomes dead or nearly dead, as Rousseau explains in a curious passage of his on vitrification. This is indeed analogous to what happens in writing: as you become imbued in your subject you become less alive. Works of literature, like the crystallized twigs, are the hardened remains of former lives.89
The life that becomes crystallized into literature is not that of the Jewish emigrants: it is the life of the writer. This is not the ‘death’ of the author theorized by Blanchot and Barthes, where the self dies in the encounter of the impersonality of language itself. The life crystallized into literature through the technique of frame narration is always something secondary and incomplete, the text being a version of the romantic fragment or death mask. This incompleteness is emphasized by the need to turn to a visual allegory to define the literary, allegory being a form predicated on a text’s requirement of a supplement to elucidate its meaning. Nevertheless, the (p.151) writing subject does not escape into the timelessness of death, but at the cost of crystallizing itself it preserves the stories of others for the future.
The description of *The Emigrants'* narrative form as ‘periscopic’—a specifically visual metaphor—relates the text’s narrative technique to the reproduced images that appear within it. This form was an aesthetics and an ethics: ‘complicated syntactical labyrinthine structures ... in one sense exonerat[e] the narrator, because he never pretends that he knows more than is actually possible’. Yet this is only in one sense, because as Sebald noted about *Molloy*, first-person narrations can always be sceptically ironized. In a ‘periscopic’ view, mediation of multiple lenses provides access to otherwise impossible sights. Access is bought at the price of mediation, whether syntactical or optical, and a narrator is only ‘exonerated’ to the extent they are aware of this mediation. The photographic reproductions present in the book appear less as visual historical ‘evidence’ than they are referred to in order to acknowledge this mediation, such as when Aunt Fini is described as leafing through a photo album and the narrator states: ‘This is a photograph taken at that time’ (75). But photographs are equally, even increasingly, revealed to be compromised even as documents of the process of historical mediation. In the final story Max Ferber remembers a photograph shown to him by his Uncle Leo, ostensibly depicting a book burning that took place on 10 May 1933. But this photograph, Leo reveals, was a ‘forgery’, since the burning took place in the evening: the photograph was of a different crowd, onto which a plume of smoke and dark sky had been copied and pasted (183): ‘And just as that document was a fake, said uncle, as if his discovery were the one vital proof, so too everything else has been a fake, right from the start’ (183). Sebald stated of this image: ‘I thought very consciously that this is the place to make a declaration. It couldn’t be more explicit. It acts as a paradigm for the whole enterprise’. The paradigm here is not only that, as *Vertigo* established, since memory and history have become records of technical images, the ways such images can be so easily doctored makes them a threat to remembrance and historical knowledge. The paradigm is also that this threat can be countered through the practice of framed periscopic storytelling: one form of mediation exposes the manipulations of another.
A less apparent but more profound ‘forgery’ in *The Emigrants* is the ‘agenda book’ (126) presented as the source of the information about Uncle’s Ambros’s travels, and implicitly about his homoerotic relationship with Cosmo. The text claims to be a transcription of the diary, reproductions of which are presented as proof. Yet as attentive viewers who knew Sebald (p.152) have pointed out, the handwriting in the diary is Sebald’s own. Even more attentive viewers have pointed out that that transcription is not complete: that when it breaks into an ellipsis it omits a word written in the diary, ‘Schwindelgefühle’: *Schwindel. Gefühle* being the original name of Sebald’s first book (131). That this was a conscious allusion is confirmed by the first draft of this section in the manuscript, which contains the abbreviation ‘Schgefühle [sic]’ as an insertion at the end of the sentence leading into the ellipses in the published text. A viewer whose attentiveness extends to inspecting the diary preserved in Sebald’s archive would be likely to suffer their own ‘Schwindelgefühle’, feeling both dizzy and swindled, when they find the relevant pages in the diary are empty, and that the dates of the diary as represented in *The Emigrants*—‘23 Martedi’ and ‘24 Mercoledi’—have been cut out and pasted over the original dates, ‘27 Martedi’ and ‘28 Mercoledi’. The diary in Sebald’s archive is not from 1913, but from 1927, and belonged to a man named Alberto Beck, a German living in Milan. In order to transform pages from a 1927 diary into those from a 1913 diary, Sebald cut and pasted the numbers to produce the correct correspondences of dates and days. To produce the images used in *The Emigrants*, he then photocopied these blank doctored pages, wrote in black pen on these copies, and then copied them again to produce the pictures included in the proofs sent to the printers.
Sebald therefore did not reveal the full extent of his deception in an interview when he admitted that the diary ‘is a falsification’ and that he ‘wrote it’ in order to provide ‘l’effet du réel’. The images that appear in The Emigrants are in a certain sense not images of an agenda book: they are photocopies of pages onto which Sebald has written, themselves photocopies of a diary which has been physically tampered with to become a fake 1913 diary. These images erase the indexical relationship a photograph has to its referent that Barthes in Camera Lucida influentially theorized as the ‘essence’ of the photographic image. If the compositional practice of these images in The Emigrants takes both a material and photographic readymade and manipulates it to produce an aesthetic ‘swindle’, allusions to Camera Lucida at the end of Ambros’s story suggest this is being done with and against Barthes. Ambros’s journey ends in Jerusalem, where he writes in his diary that memory ‘makes one’s head heavy and giddy’ (145)—the English translation of giddy here erasing here the revealing use of ‘schwindel’ in the original: ‘macht einen schweren, schwindligen Kopf’. If this sees Ambros as ironically stating that memory induces the sense of ‘schwindel’ or vertigo that the ‘agenda book’ reveals itself to be, it also alludes to Barthes’s theory of the photographic index. In his copy of Camera Lucida, Sebald noted the distinct punctum indexicality gives to historical photographs: ‘there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die’, with Barthes offering as an example of a 1850 photograph of the road to Jerusalem by August Salzman. As Barthes states, and Sebald underlined: ‘At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated’. For Barthes, this vertigo is triggered by the fact that the photograph is an ‘instance of “reality”‘, in contrast to ‘the elaborations of the text, whether fictional or poetic, which itself is never credible down to the root [italics original]’. However, for Sebald—yet not for Ambros—the swindle at the heart of fiction extends to his creation of non-indexical images which on the one hand deceive the reader in potentially quite problematic ways, yet on the other, because they provide just enough clues revealing the failure of their deception, use illusion to expose the illusory beliefs at the heart of our belief in photography.
Rather than photographs acting as a paradigm for Sebald’s writing of fiction, we might say that the writing of fiction acted as a paradigm for Sebald’s use of photography. All fiction for Sebald was a kind of aesthetic swindle:

[Photographs] act as a token of authenticity—but they can be deduced, forged or purloined. And of course that in turn throws up one of the central problems of fiction writing, which is that of legitimacy and the arrival at the truth on a crooked route. This is why ‘vertigo’ in German has a double meaning—Schwindel in German means ‘swindle’. What right do you have to write about any of these things? Have you been there, and felt these things for yourself?97

The double meaning of ‘ein Schwindel’—an act of conscious deception, and the affective state this produces in the deceived—is how Sebald connects his use of photographs to the broader question of the relationship between his fiction and history. This has often been interpreted in terms of its ability to bear witness, or for its figuration of the hermeneutic problem of the historical sublime, as when Eric Santner writes that ‘what is at issue in the interplay of image and text in these writings is the task of bearing witness to what exceeds our hermeneutic grasp of historical experience’.98 Sebald’s own practice and comments instead reveal that what is at issue, in the case of this diary at least, is the ability of art and aesthetic experience to go beyond this familiar deconstructive crux of historical hermeneutics. Indeed Sebald reverses the terms: through the aesthetic swindle, art has the capacity to create the conditions for historical experience in the present, rather than halting at the limit of the ethical demand to bear witness to the past. The photographic indexicality undermined by Sebald’s manipulations is what makes photography a tautology: it cannot do other than show that ‘which necessarily is the case’. But as Sebald claimed, art is precisely what uses ‘ambiguity, polyvalence, resonance, obfuscation and illumination’—the aesthetic ‘Schwindel’—‘the transcending of that which, according to an ineluctable law, has necessarily to be the case’. This is a problem, however, not a solution, since it makes the aesthetic as a mode of making and experience the mere negation of the photographic, making whatever images it provides of history just as provisional as those provided by photography.
The very different provisionality of painting as a mode of remembrance and a model for fiction is raised in the final narrative of *The Emigrants*. The painter in this story was called Max Aurach in the German edition, based in part on the life of Frank Auerbach, and it included a reproduction of a drawing by Auerbach, and a close-up of Auerbach’s eye, that was removed from the English edition at Auerbach’s request, and the character was renamed Max Ferber. Even without the retrospective revision, Aurach/Ferber is the book’s figure of fictionality. A reader who recognizes that the drawings reproduced are by Frank Auerbach would also recognize that the photograph of Aurach/Ferber skiing is not of the author of the drawing (it is in fact of Sebald’s landlord). The ‘significant and improbable’ title of the painting by Ferber that the narrator encounters in the Tate Gallery in November 1989, ‘G.I. on her Blue Candlewick Cover’ (177), is significant and improbable because it echoes the name of the narrator’s Manchester landlady, ‘Gracie Irlam’ and her ‘pink dressing gown’ made of ‘candlewick’ (152). Ferber has also painted a ‘faceless portrait’ called ‘Man With a Butterfly Net’ that ‘had taken more out of him than any previous painting, for when he started on it, after countless preliminary studies, he not only overlaid it time and again but also, whenever the canvas could no longer withstand the continual scratching-off and reapplication of paint, he destroyed it and burnt it several times’ (174). The subject depicted has already appeared three times in the text: Vladimir Nabokov. Sebald claimed that the idea to place Nabokov in all four stories ‘came to me when I was thinking of writing the story of that painter’, and that as a symbol, he is ‘there to give you a sense that there must be something of significance here at that point, but what that is and what the significance is, is entirely a different matter’. Nabokov appears in all four stories as a signifier of Sebald’s own understanding of literature: ‘a figure that has a certain, albeit incomprehensible function’ (‘eine bestimmte, nicht ganz zu durchschauende Funktion haben’), a purposiveness without purpose marking his text’s departure from claims to realism. Ferber’s first realization of ‘what a true work of art looks like’ occurs in a dream where after passing through a trompe l’oeil painted door, he views a miniature model of the Temple of Solomon made of ‘pinewood, papier-mâché, and gold paint’ (176). If the destruction of the Temple leads to the demand for collective historical remembrance that in the Torah defines the Jewish people,
precisely the collective history Ferber now lacks, its appearance in his dream as an almost kitsch work of art casts doubt on the ability, or even suitability, of art as a form of trickery to contribute to this process of historical memory.

At the book’s conclusion, Ferber’s painting becomes a model for the narrator’s writing. On a visit to his studio, the narrator observes Ferber’s method of working:

Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust ... He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.

(161–2)
This description of ‘ghostly presences’ evokes the process of the emergence of the indexical photographic image, again comparing painting ‘after nature’ to photography. Yet at the same time this method is radically different, since while the index only fixes one presence, Ferber’s method fixes many moments which collectively combine to make each painting an index or record of its own process of composition. When the narrator later describes ‘working on the account of Max Ferber given above’, in a paragraph beginning just below an image of a crystallized twig, he calls it ‘an arduous task’ haunted by the ‘entire questionable business of writing’—the phrase used to describe painting in Vertigo. Of the ‘hundreds of pages’ covered with scribbles in pencil and ballpoint, ‘[b]y far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, obliterated by additions’ so that ‘what I ultimately salvaged as a “final” version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched’ (230–1). The moment when the narrator (p. 156) describes his text crystallizing into its fragments is the moment when this narrator follows Ferber in his description of what it means for a writer to ‘work like a painter’. Working with and against the way a photograph preserves indexical traces of the past, offering access to past moments of time and space whilst disguising its mediations, painting and writing are processes through which the past emerges gradually, through layers which express the process of mediation. The work is not a recovered memory or historical account; the work is the record of a failed search, whose failure lies in its form: it is a thing of ‘shreds and patches’. The book’s claim to be a work of art consists in this failure of form.

Austerlitz Against Trauma
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_Austerlitz_ (2001) marked a break with Sebald’s previous work in ways that can be easily overlooked in synoptic accounts of his _oeuvre_. After completing _Rings of Saturn_ (1996) Sebald went partially blind for a number of months, the realization of a fear he had previously expressed in an interview: ‘Yes, the eyes are the most vulnerable part of a person or of an animal ... I cannot even think about having a cataract operation. That feeling of _Blendung_ [blinding], the fear of no longer being able to see, probably has something to do with the fear of castration’. In _Austerlitz_, the narrator goes temporarily blind in 1996, and undergoes a cataract operation. In a 1997 speech given in Darmstadt, individual blindness became a metaphor for the wider blindness of Germany in the 1960s towards the legacy of the Holocaust, a blindness which Sebald claimed was the reason he permanently left Germany for England. Without eliding the difference between Sebald and _Austerlitz_’s narrator, it does seem this episode brought an association between blindness, history, and the Holocaust to the fore of his attention in a way that bears obvious import to _Austerlitz_. Formally _Austerlitz_ is a departure from his previous ‘semi-documentary prose fiction’. While it retains the use of periscopic narration, here it is simpler and generally at no more than one or two removes; as a consequence, against Sebald’s own protestations to the contrary, this has led critics like Andreas Huyssen to call _Austerlitz_ Sebald’s ‘first “real” novel’. The status of the photographs in _Austerlitz_ differs in kind from the three previous works. As John Zilcosky argues, because Austerlitz is a photographer himself, with the implied author of many of the reproduced images being a character in the narrative, most of the photographs are less disruptive to the flow of the narrative than those of the other books. As a result of this increased attention to photography, painting is for the first time absent in Sebald’s work as a significant counterpoint to photography as a way of seeing.
This does not result in photography becoming the model for the writing of memory. Ferber’s painting becomes in *The Emigrants*: in fact, the opposite is true. In *Austerlitz*, as Carolin Duttlinger has observed, Austerlitz himself conceives of photography as an analogue for the workings of traumatic memory and forgetting, as when he describes ‘the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night’ (109). Yet ‘both photography and film’, she argues, ‘remain ambiguous as testimonies, not least because Sebald associates both media with strategies of concealment, staging, and masquerade’. Indeed, the novel as a whole is not uncritical in its presentation of Austerlitz’s identification of traumatic memory with photography. In ways that counter the most significant criticism of the novel—that its use of indirect speech and periscopic narration risks the identification of the non-Jewish German narrator with the Jewish victim of Nazi persecution—*Austerlitz*’s allusions to *Camera Lucida*, its manipulation of the photographic sources for reproductions that are not photographs, and the novel’s conclusion all present the repetition and erasure of time that structure both trauma and photography as fundamentally different from the ways in which fiction, the ‘art form that moves in time’, represents and mediates the individual narratives which constitute historical knowledge.

In doing so, *Austerlitz* goes against the grain of many critics and novelists of recent decades, for whom the unrepresentability of individual traumatic memory became an aesthetic norm for literary representations of historical events and experience. According to Anne Whitehead, ‘[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection’. Toni Morrison, whose writing has been particularly influential on critical debates about the relationship between trauma, fiction, and history, has claimed that in the representation of the African-American past there should be an exact homology between literary style and ‘the shattered, fractured perception resulting from a shattered, splintered life ... The form becomes the exact interpretation of the idea the story is meant to express’. This literal notion of mimesis, where the experience of ‘splintered’ subjectivity is replicated
by that provided by literary form, and thus experienced by the reader, is how Morrison’s work is ‘functional to the group’: ‘it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out’. The ways in which trauma theory posits a similar identity between the experience of trauma and the experience of reading, and the ways in which such claims rely upon tendentious readings of medical evidence, have been forensically analysed by Ruth Leys in relation to the work of Cathy Caruth, who has argued for the entirety of ‘history to be the history of a trauma’. This is because what seems a historiographical issue becomes for Caruth one of literary form. For Caruth, the ‘literary’ as a mode of language that ‘defies, even as it claims, our understanding’ replicates in the reader’s experience the simultaneous literal impact and impossible understanding of trauma experienced by a victim. As for Morrison, the identification of aesthetic experience with trauma makes traumatic experience transmissible and therefore collective. Or as Dori Laub argues in a line of argument replicated in Marianne Hirsch’s speculative concept of ‘post-memory’, we become ‘co-owners’ of a traumatic event. This position is aesthetically normative in that it assumes that the victim’s experience should be replicated in literary form and then relived by the reader or viewer who was not a victim. The troubling assumption underlying much of the use of trauma theory as a norm for literary form is that we can only understand the suffering of others by identifying with them as victims, erasing the difference that was the very reason for their suffering.
If in these accounts the transmission of traumatic experience takes place through distinctively ‘literary’ language, trauma theorists like Caruth, as Leys points out, theorize memory ‘as above all visual’. Drawing on the analogy between memory and photographic indexicality already present in Freud, critics such as Ulrich Bauer have argued for ‘a striking parallel (p. 159) between the working of the camera and the structure of traumatic memory’, to the point that this becomes an ontological claim for photography as trauma, and *vice versa*. Austerlitz the character, to be sure, comes to describe his own life as structured around a repressed traumatic memory: he realizes ‘how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past’ (197). But as Mary Jacobus has emphasized, Sebald does not assume but ‘interrogates the role of photography both as a form of forgetting and repression and as a recurrent haunting by historical trauma’. *Austerlitz* the novel does not identify this psychic mechanism with either knowledge of history or with its own fictional form, and nor does it therefore present the novel as a device for facilitating identification between Austerlitz and the narrator, let alone Austerlitz and the reader. Sebald’s own denunciations of such identifications would not be necessary to underline what is so suspect about this use of literature to identify the traumatic experience of others with our own aesthetic enjoyment.
One source for Sebald’s awareness of the analogy between photography and traumatic memory came from his reading of Barthes. Sebald began writing Austerlitz no earlier than January 1996, the date of a letter in Sebald’s archive whose reverse contains the first sketches of the chronology of Austerlitz’s life. Although Sebald first read Barthes before the writing of The Emigrants, in 1999 he also noted Barthes’s claim in ‘The Photographic Message’ (1961) that: ‘trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning ... Truly traumatic photographs are rare, for in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene “really” happened: the photographer had to be there (the mythical definition of denotation) [italics original]’. In Camera Lucida, this mythical definition of denotation becomes the essence of photography, whose traumatic relationship to the real is revealed in the punctum, a term derived from the Greek word for trauma, meaning that detail of a photograph that ‘wounds’ or ‘bruises’ a viewer. In a 1997 interview Sebald mentioned that he had once again been reading ‘La chambre claire, the wonderful text by Barthes’, mentioning ‘a photograph of a little boy who had stepped out from behind his school desk into the walkway’. ‘I can’t remember exactly how Barthes comments on this image’, Sebald continued, ‘but he asks questions about what might later have happened to this boy named Ernest ... One can imagine the life-trajectories that emanate from these photographs in a much, much clearer way than from out of a painting’. He also mentioned another photograph he had been hoarding showing ‘two people standing on a stage’ that he ‘would like to do something with’. At the time of reading, Sebald had in fact noted Barthes’s question about the photograph of the school boy in his copy of Camera Lucida, side-lining: ‘it is possible that Ernest, a schoolboy photographed in 1931 by Kertész, is still alive today (but where? how? What a novel!)’. At the end of this page in his copy of Camera Lucida, Sebald wrote: ‘Je suis le colonel Chabert—celui qui est mort á Eylau’. This comparison between Barthes’s desire to write a novel based on imagining the life of a young boy out of a photograph, and Balzac’s story of a soldier who returns from the dead from the Napoleonic wars, would also shape Sebald’s account of the life of a boy named after a different Napoleonic war: Austerlitz.
The use of the photograph of the Rose Queen’s page that Vera gives to Austerlitz as the cover photograph for both German and English editions of *Austerlitz* might suggest that this photograph was to Sebald what the photograph of Ernest was to Barthes. However, when reading Clive Scott’s *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* in 1999, beside Scott’s discussion of how people look upon their photographs as ‘evidence, as the sources of their narrative (photobiography)’, Sebald wrote: ‘Aber von Aust.[erlitz] gibt es keine Bilder’ (‘But there are no photographs of Aust.[erlitz]’). Scott himself has noted how puzzling this statement seems, given that there are three putative photographs of Austerlitz: in the Stower Grange rugby team, as the Rose Queen’s page boy, and in front of the Antikos Bazar in Terezín. Therefore, Scott argues, these photographs work not in the service of testimony, but rather to explore how these photographs simultaneously work in the ‘facilitation of the transfer of subjectivity and narratorial position’, and to complicate the identification at work in this transference, ‘preventing anyone laying hands on Austerlitz in the belief that they can take a quick route to knowledge, to transform (p.161) the proper difficulties of memory into easy visual appropriation’. However, he fails to notice that the photograph in Terezín, which in the text Austerlitz claims shows ‘my own faint shadow image’, is in fact of Sebald himself: a visual version of the falsified composition of Ambros’s diary (277). The photograph of the rugby team was taken from an anonymous photo album retained in Sebald’s archive, of a young British man, dated from the late 1940s. The Rose Queen image is a copy of a postcard also preserved in Sebald’s archive, and as Margaret Olin has pointed out, it is a visual allusion to the character of Oktavian in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s libretto *Rosenkavalier*, with Austerlitz becoming the *Kinderkavalier* to his mother the Rose Queen, this in turn linking to another moment where Austerlitz’s memory of his mother’s ‘sky blue shoe embroidered with tinsel’ is in fact a memory belonging to the titular character of Hofmannsthal’s *Andreas*. So while there are indeed no photographs of Austerlitz, each manipulation of a photographic readymade solicits and negates a different kind of identification: between character and author, between character and a historical person, and between character and another fictional character. If Austerlitz the character searches for photographs of himself to confirm his identity, the visual
The poetics of *Austerlitz* the novel show this to be a confirmation of Austerlitz’s fictionality.

The plot of *Austerlitz*, however, does not hinge around Austerlitz’s search for an image of himself—indeed he either fails to recognize himself, as in the photograph of the page boy, or they are presented without comment—but for an image of his mother. As numerous readers have noted, this mirrors the plot of *Camera Lucida*, with Brian Dillon writing that Austerlitz’s ‘search for an image of his lost mother is clearly modelled on Barthes’s desire for a glimpse of the unique being’. The genesis of *Austerlitz* suggests this was both an intentional imitation and a revision of *Camera Lucida*’s discovery of the truth of photographic indexicality in the image of the mother. In the first draft of the scene where Austerlitz visits Vera, he receives three photographs hidden in a copy of *Le Peau du Chagrin*: one which almost shows his father in a factory, the photograph of the couple on stage, and that of the Rose Queen’s page, only the latter two appearing in the published text. This was part of a draft which ended at the moment with Austerlitz viewing the film of Thereisenstadt, concluding: ‘und die Hundertstelsekunden, die sich davon drehen, so geschwind, daß man sie nicht entziffern und festhalten kann’ (‘while the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read or capture them’) (351). After completing this draft Sebald wrote the novel’s conclusion, the section opening after Austerlitz views the film of his mother starting: ‘At the beginning of this year’ (351), in which Austerlitz discovers the photograph of his mother in the Prague theatrical archives, and begins a search for traces of his father. He then revised the scene with Vera so that only two photographs are discovered in her copy of *Colonel Chabert*: that of the couple on stage, and that of the Rose Queen’s page. The aesthetic logic here is easy to see: once the narrative climax became the discovery of a photograph of his mother, and the turn to search for his father a coda, removing the allusion to his father sharpened the clarity of this structure.
A more subtle aesthetic logic is to make Austerlitz a subtle rewriting of Camera Lucida. For Barthes, the Winter Garden photograph of his mother (which his posthumous diaries show really did exist) reveals the ‘essence of the Photograph’: the certification of ‘that-has-been’.¹²７ Yet the Winter Garden photograph also reveals another punctum latent in every photograph, that of ‘Time, the lacerating emphasis of the noeme (“that-has-been”), its pure representation’. Photography represents the possibility of ‘Time’s immobilization’ (91): by collapsing together ‘This will be and this has been’, every photograph is a ‘defeat of Time’ (96). In showing the possibility of time’s immobilization, a ‘motionless’ state which spreads from a photograph to the viewer, a photograph prevents the transformation of ‘grief into mourning’ (90). This ‘vertigo of time defeated’ experienced in a photograph’s immobilization of time is the experience of the viewer’s own death (97). In contrast to Barthes’s account, Austerlitz is strikingly unaffected by the discovery of his mother’s photograph, or rather by Vera’s confirmation that it is a picture of Agata ‘as she had been then’ (354). Although the discovery happened at the beginning of the year in which Austerlitz tells this story to the narrator, in the narrative discourse the account of the discovery of Agata’s photograph is immediately followed by Austerlitz giving the photograph away to the narrator to begin a search for his father in Paris. Filling the quest for an image of his mother confirms nothing: Austerlitz begins another search for ‘any traces of my father’ in Paris (393). (p.163) re-enacting the moment when the photographs of his mother were discovered in Vera’s copy of Balzac by reading the story of Colonel Chabert, and recounting to the reader the lines ‘Je suis le colonel Chabert—celui qui est mort à Eylau’ (394). Through an act of repetition —repeating Vera’s reading of Balzac, repeating the quest for a photograph of a parent—Austerlitz comes to be a revenant returned from the dead, a figure Sebald identified in his reading of Barthes as the boy imagined returned from a photograph by Kertész. This association between repetition, living death, and photography’s immobilization of time is emphasized by Austerlitz’s final act: he gives the narrator the key to his house in Alderney Street so he can ‘study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life’ (408). At the end of the novel, Austerlitz sees photographs as being the only remnant of his life, attaching no importance to the story he has passed on to the narrator.
The repetitions that mark the end of Austerlitz’s life, and his giving away of the image of his mother, suggest the novel presents him not as completing the work of mourning that takes place in *Camera Lucida*, but remaining instead in a state of melancholia. According to Freud, in melancholia the object is not given up but partially identified with, with this identification the sign of a fundamental ambivalence towards the lost object; perversely, the lost object needs to be treated with a certain hostility—to be given away as in the game of *fort/da*—so that it will continue to cast its ‘shadow’ over the ego. The ambivalence at the heart of melancholic identification results in the repetition compulsion of ‘act[ing] it out’, where the person repeatedly acts out a loss ‘without knowing he is repeating it’. Through this acting out, ‘repetition replace[s] remembering’. This is in contrast to the work of mourning where, as Barthes puts it, ‘Time eliminates the emotion of loss’. The parallels between the journeys of Austerlitz and Odysseus that a number of critics have pointed out run throughout the novel suggest what is at stake for the novel’s treatment of history in its concluding presentation of Austerlitz’s melancholic repetitions. On his long journey home, Odysseus descends to the underworld and recognizes his mother’s ghost whilst failing to embrace her and bring her back from the dead; (p.164) Austerlitz descends to the underworld of the concentration camps yet fails to find an image of the mother he recognizes. In his copy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Sebald noted Horkheimer and Adorno’s definition of the mythical figure (one which bears comparison with Freud’s melancholic): ‘Every mythical figure is compelled to do the same thing over and over again. Each of them is constituted by repetition: its failure would mean their end … They are figures of compulsion: the horrors they commit are the curse which has fallen upon them … Against this Odysseus fights’. He does so when encountering the ‘image of the mother’, the figure of ‘mythic muteness’, and by recognizing that ‘[t]he Promised Land for Odysseus is not the archaic realm of images. Finally all the images reveal their true essences as shades in the world of the dead, an illusion’. History in the form of Odysseus’s own narrative begins with the acceptance of severance from the past. ‘Only when subjectivity masters itself by recognizing the nullity of images does it begin to share the hope which images vainly promise.’ These allusions to *The Odyssey* have a more complex and specific purpose than simply to suggest Austerlitz
restages a mythical journey home. They set up a parallel between Austerlitz and the mythical figure whose story marked the first transition from mythical repetition to historical narrative, and who did so by a rejection of the mythic timelessness promised by the image of the mother as the source of the image’s defeat of time.

Austerlitz seeks to reverse Odysseus’s passage from mythical timelessness into history; indeed, early in the narrative he prefigures his own conclusion:

I have always resisted the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood, keeping myself apart from so-called current events in the hope, as I now think, said Austerlitz, the time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events are waiting to do so at the moment we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish.

(144)
In spite of everything he tells the narrator, Austerlitz remains drawn to this desire to escape the power of time, to refuse the temporality demanded by the workings of fictional narrative in order that his story can be passed on to others. If photography becomes for Austerlitz the character a means to experience this melancholic refusal of time’s passing, *Austerlitz* the novel (p.165) ends with a different view of photography. In *Heshel’s Kingdom* (1998), the book given by Austerlitz to the narrator, Dan Jacobson begins his search for his grandfather’s past with a single studio photograph, but what his search uncovers, the narrator relates, is ‘the vanished past of his family and his people which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again’. As if refuting Sebald’s own previous work, Jacobson writes that ‘[t]he abyss of the past does not have to be figured for us by bottomless pits, vertiginous plunges, stones dropping forever down soundless chambers’. The past is simply a ‘darkness that gives back nothing’. For Jacobson, the act of creating narratives and passing them on in time, rather than the search for a photograph’s arresting of time, is what preserves the memory of a people who have vanished.
Austerlitz ends by manifesting the deep and unresolved tension between a number of oppositions in Sebald’s work: between myth and history; between the timeless image and the temporality of fiction; between redemption and catastrophe. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s theorization of history as a form of making, Adriana Cavarero has argued that the narration of Austerlitz’s life is the process that brings his story into the realm of history, and has insisted that the challenge of Austerlitz lies in this tension between history and traumatic memory. In Austerlitz, she writes, the traumatized life ‘call[s] into question the desire to have a narratable self and, therefore, even the legitimacy and the role of the narrator. The risk is that the reader’s appetite for stories does not correspond at all to the appetite of the story’s protagonist, that is, his lack of desire that his life be recovered and made into a narration’. Nevertheless, she continues, ‘there is an ethical and even ontological urgency in the necessity of this narration, almost as if every recounted story, snatched from oblivion, saves a possible sense of the human from its absolute negation in destruction’. If by the turn of the millennium Sebald still believed that the task of the exemplary modern writer remained to show those moments when fiction seeks to be hypostatized into the timeless repetitions of myth, the question Austerlitz asks is whether the transformation of history into trauma, and the theorizations of the visual that enable it, might be one of the myths of our own moment in history.

Notes:


(2) W. G. Sebald, Vertigo, trans. by Michael Hulse (London, 1999), 72

(3) Sebald and de Moor, ‘Echoes from the Past’, 352.

(4) W. G. Sebald, ‘Kleine Vorrede zur Salzburger Ausstellung’, in Anita Albus, ed. by Tugomir Luksic (Salzburg, 1990), 8

(6) Eleanor Wachtel and W. G. Sebald, ‘Ghost Hunter (interview)’, in The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York, 2007), 41

(7) W. G. Sebald, ‘Auf Ungeheuer Dünnem Eis’: Gespräche 1971 Bis 2001, ed. by Torsten Hoffmann (Frankfurt am Main, 2011), 205


(9) Adriana Cavarero, ‘Narrative Against Destruction’, New Literary History, 46/1 (2015), 8

(10) Lynn L. Wolff, W. G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography (Berlin, 2014)

(11) W. G. Sebald, Der Mythus Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins (Stuttgart, 1980), 139


(13) Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz (Ithaca, NY, 1998), 101


(18) Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature and Personification* (Chicago, IL; London, 2003), 100

(19) Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London, 2008), 2


(22) Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (New York, 2013), 6


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    (Eggingen, 2005), 12


(30) W. G. Sebald, ‘Mord an den Vätern: Bemerkungen zu einigen Drama der spätbürgerlichen Zeit’, Neophilologus, 60/3 (1976), 432–41


(32) Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, 1–21; Felski, The Limits of Critique.

(33) W. G. Sebald, ‘The Revival of Myth: A Study of Alfred Döblin’s Novels’ (University of East Anglia, 1973), 9; 12


(36) Sebald, Der Mythus Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins, 136

(37) Sebald, Der Mythus Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins, 136

(38) Sebald, Der Mythus Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins, 136


(40) Sebald, Der Mythus Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins, 116–17.


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(46) Ben Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald—Die Dialektische Imagination* (Berlin, 2009), 33


(49) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2; 351.

(50) Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago, IL; London, 2012), 144


(52) Sebald, ‘As Day in Night’, 160; 163.


(61) Sebald, 'Kleine Vorrede zur Salzburger Ausstellung', 8; 6. My translation.


(67) André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, *Film Quarterly*, 13/4 (1960), 8

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(71) Jeff Wall, “Marks of Indifference”: Aspects of Photography In, or As, Contemporary Art’, in Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews (New York, 2007), 143–68


(73) Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction, 182.

(74) W. G. Sebald and Michael Hulse, The Rings of Saturn (London, 2002), 16; 13

(75) Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction, 182; 181.


(77) John Berger, Ways of Seeing (Harmondsworth, 1972)


(81) Sebald, Vertigo. All further citations in the main text.


(84) W. G. Sebald, Schwindel. Gefühle (Frankfurt, 1996), 88


(86) Roland Barthes, ‘L’effet de Réel’, Communications, 11/1 (1968), 84–9

(87) Wachtel and Sebald, ‘Ghost Hunter (interview)’, 37.


(91) Lubow, ‘Crossing Boundaries’, 163.


(94) W. G. Sebald, Die Ausgewanderten: Vier Lange Erzählungen (Frankfurt, 2000), 215

(95) Barthes, Camera Lucida, 96–7.

(96) Barthes, Camera Lucida, 97.

(97) Sebald, ‘The Questionable Business of Writing [December 1999]’.

(98) Eric Santner, On Creaturely Life (Chicago, IL; London, 2009), xx

(100) Wachtel and Sebald, ‘Ghost Hunter (interview)’, 53.


(102) Sheppard, ‘“Dexter—Sinister”’, 432; Sebald and de Moor, ‘Echoes from the Past’, 351-2.


(104) Sheppard, ‘“Dexter—Sinister”’, 432.

(105) Andreas Huysen, Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Stanford, CA, 2003), 177 n. 40

(106) John Zilcosky, ‘Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald’s Austerlitz’, MLN, 121/3 (2006), 687


(108) Anne Whitehead, Trauma Fiction (Edinburgh, 2004), 3


(110) Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore, MD, 1996), 18; Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (Chicago, IL; London, 2000), 266–97.

(111) Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, 5.

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(113) Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy, 340.
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(118) Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.


(122) Scott, ‘Sebald’s Photographic Annotations’, 228.

(123) Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago, IL; London, 2012), 93–4


(127) Barthes, Camera Lucida, 73. Further citations in the main body of the text.


(130) Barthes, Camera Lucida, 75.


(132) Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, 45; Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Auflärung, 66.

(133) Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, 59.

(134) Dan Jacobson, Heshel’s Kingdom (London, 1998), 414; 207