

“Frozen in the Past”: Photography, Memory and the “Real” in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*



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Abstract

W.G. Sebald’s 1992 novel, *Die Ausgewanderten*, known in English translation as *The Emigrants*, recounts the stories of four German citizens whose experiences following from World War II trace similar patterns of displacement and longing. A key aspect of Sebald’s work is his inclusion of images which are embedded in the text. This article examines the role of photography in *The Emigrants* as a metaphor for cultural and transnational memory in light of the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin by drawing attention to the function of trauma, nostalgia, and geography in the text. Specifically, it argues that through a reading these two theorists in conjunction with Sebald’s novel, we can begin to understand how literary depictions of trauma, memory, and nostalgia highlight simulacra, as Baudrillard understands it, while disrupting the foundational underpinnings of what constitutes ‘aura’ for Benjamin. I argue that the simultaneous need for and lack of an ‘original’ to return to in the novel is the cause of these characters’ emotional and psychological pain in *The Emigrants* and further suggest that the images come to stand metaphorically for the function of memory within the novel. The inability to return to a pre-war Germany following its violent dissolution, as depicted in photographs underscores this point throughout the text.

Keywords: *W.G. Sebald, Photography, Memory, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard*

Main Text

“What is surreal is the distance imposed and bridged between the photograph: the social distance and distance in time.”

-Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 58.

W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* recounts the stories of four German citizens whose experiences following from World War II trace similar patterns of displacement and longing. A key aspect of Sebald’s work is his inclusion of images which are embedded in the text. These embedded images are referenced by the narrator whose relationship to the characters in the stories are reinforced as the narratives unfold. In this way, Sebald’s narrator’s access to these

photographs underscores an intimate connection to the lives of the characters as many of these images originate from private family albums. *The Emigrants* calls attention to the complex relationship between photography and memory. Indeed, as J.J. Long (2007) notes, speaking directly to the inclusion of familial images in the text the “psychic processes by which the past is remembered can thus be seen as duplicating the process of photography, which entails a necessary delay between light hitting the plate and the emergence of the recognizable image” (p. 114). In light of Long’s observation, the inclusion of images in *The Emigrants* is more than a stylistic choice on the part of Sebald as they become essential elements of storytelling and serve as metaphors for the formation of memory, and the ways in which memories are formed and stored by the characters in the story. Furthermore, these images have the effect of lending a degree of credibility to the narrator’s account of the lives of these people through the intimacy that these images imply. Photographs not only carry forward individual memory, but as Anna Fuchs (2003) notes of Sebald’s work, in relation to that of Walter Benjamin (1968/2019), “the Aura makes an object a carrier of cultural memory. However, in order to bring cultural memory to life, a particular aesthetic sensibility is required which engages with the hidden correspondences between such objects” (p. 171). Eric Santner (2006), too, has recognized the thematic and theoretical association between Sebald and Benjamin, however he recognizes that “few have done more than make a passing reference to a vague sort of ‘Benjaminian’ quality of the work” (p. 54). In *The Emigrants*, there is a constant tension between the veracity of the history that the narrator depicts and the role of the images in supporting that history. Each character mediates their singular relationship to their native Germany through the lens of a wider cultural, national, and, due to their

physical and psychological displacement, transnational history, leaving them attached to a version of their homeland which no longer exists.

In this essay, I will examine the role of photography in *The Emigrants* as a metaphor for cultural and transnational memory in light of the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin. Furthermore, I focus my discussion on the function of memory, nostalgia and geography in Sebald’s novel. Specifically, I argue that in reading these two theorists in conjunction with Sebald’s novel, we can begin to understand how literary depictions of memory, and nostalgia highlight simulacra, as Baudrillard understands it, while disrupting the foundational underpinnings of what constitutes ‘aura’ for Benjamin. I argue that the simultaneous need for and lack of an ‘original’ to return to in the novel is the cause of these characters’ emotional and psychological pain in *The Emigrants* and further suggest that the images come to stand metaphorically for the function of memory within the novel. The violent dissolution and inability to return to a pre-war Germany underscores this point throughout the text. By suggesting that Sebald’s embedded images highlight the complex relationships that exists, both literally and metaphorically, between photography and memory which permeate the text, I am also concerned with questions of what Freud has termed the ‘uncanny’ elements of memory in relation to photography. As Sebald’s characters battle both internal and external shifts in space, their reality is consistently shaken, drawing into question the reliability of language and photography as the reader experiences the subjective interpretations of the narrator as they might from behind a camera’s lens.

Baudrillard’s (1996) elaborations on simulacra in his essay “The Precession of Simulacra” suggest reproduction without an

original. He notes that there is “no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody” in the production of simulacra, but rather insists that it is “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double” (p. 390). Baudrillard’s theory contrasts with Benjamin’s work on Art and his interest in what he calls the ‘aura’ of the art object. In reading Benjamin, we understand that originality, or authenticity, is central to his theory of ‘aura’. Perhaps the clearest definition of what Benjamin means by aura comes in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in which he writes that “one might subsume the eliminated element [in a reproduced work of art] in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (1968/2019, p. 171). Beyond this, Benjamin is concerned primarily with the concept of originality and authenticity in a work of art, the experience of viewing a work of art, and by extension, art’s ability to be taken for reality itself. He writes that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity... The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility” (p. 170). For Benjamin, then, the reality, or the concept of reality that one encounters in a work of fiction can, and indeed should, be separated from the world which we inhabit.

Sebald’s writing complicates this relationship between fictional and real-world experience through his inclusion of documentary evidence in the form of photographs. *The Emigrants*, due in part to its first-person narrative view and the subject matter involved, draws attention to the construction and re-construction of personal narrative and history. The reader is constantly faced with the narrator’s subjective experiences of re-creating the lives of the

four men, whether through explorations of archival material or through conversations with individuals who knew the subjects personally during their lifetime. The reality which the narrator is invested in re-creating is primarily one which they are seeking to re-create for themselves. Because of this, the reader’s position is always voyeuristic; we come to an understanding of aspects of this historical reality through the inclusion of photographs in the text alongside the narrator’s often direct invitation to study the images and to experience the photographic record for ourselves.

The direct address employed by Sebald throughout *The Emigrants* underscores the fact that the novel occupies a unique position in relation to genre. Long (2003) notes that it is a work which exists “at the intersection of biography and autobiography, history and fiction, travel writing and memoir.” He continues, writing that “the narrative works of W.G. Sebald resist traditional genre boundaries” (p. 117). Such blurring of the lines between these categories of genre is typical of postmodernism in literature. Eminent Canadian literary theorist, Linda Hutcheon writes that postmodern novels

ask us to re-think...conventions, this time *as conventions*, [and] as ideological strategies. Such novels destabilize things we used to take for granted when we read novels: narrative unity, reliable point of view, coherent character presentation. The once ‘transparent’ has now been made ‘opaque’. Postmodernism...suggests a re-thinking of realism, and therefore we find a situation in which realism is both challenged and taken seriously (1988, p. 21).

Sebald’s text announces itself, both in terms of form and content, as a work which draws attention to the arbitrary boundaries between

genre, specifically in its appeal to realism which is simultaneously and consciously undermined through the subjective first-person narrative voice.

Sebald draws attention to the constructed nature of his narrative at various times throughout the text. In Paul Bereyter's story, the reader gets the narrator's reflection on the power of the photographs in a photo album which an acquaintance of the late Bereyter, Mme Landau, lends him. The narrator relates that by "looking at the pictures in [the album], it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them" (Sebald, 1996, p. 46). Another similar break occurs later in the text during the story of the painter, Max Ferber, where the narrator tells of the "arduous task" of writing the life of Ferber stating that he "could not get on for hours or days at a time" and that he was "continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and paralyzing [him]" (p. 230). While the first sequence focuses our attention on the ways in which photographs illuminate the narrator's understanding of the lives of the people depicted in them, the second is a reflection on the limits of language to encapsulate the complexities of life and render it into a coherent narrative. While photographs carry us back into the history which they capture, our writing always remains fixed in the present.

This tension that photography creates between our fixed temporal reality and our ability to interpret the past is crucial to approaching Sebald's literary project as evidence in *The Emigrants* as well as to draw our attention to the ways in which personal memory is inflected and represented in fiction. In line with recognizing the historic and political implications of the postmodern era which Sebald is writing in, Long (2003) has suggested that "one of the defining

features of modernity is a crisis of memory, one symptom of which is the sense that memory ceases to be a pure matter of consciousness, and come to reside instead in the materiality of our social or psychic life" (p. 113). This crisis of memory, or the inability to rely upon it for our sense of self or others in relation to our environment permeates Sebald's text. Sebald's use of images which are ambiguously sourced and to which *The Emigrants'* narrator makes only passing gestures towards in the text, reveal to his readers the hyperreality of his text while simultaneously working to undermine the pictures' authority as documentary objects. Imagined, or remembered spaces, including deviant psychological states, are featured prominently in Sebald's text, leading us to question exactly what that relationship might be between the 'real' as Baudrillard might define it, and the recreated, nostalgic, geographies that permeate Sebald's text.

The breakdown of boundaries is recalled throughout the text as well in the form of deteriorating buildings and the indifference characters and the narrator feel towards the presence of such decay. In the account of Paul Bereyter, the narrator reflects that:

It was, I thought, particularly auspicious that the rows of houses were interrupted here and there by patches of waste land on which stood ruined buildings, for ever since I had once visited Munich I had felt nothing so ambiguously linked to the word city as the presence of heaps of rubble, fire scorched walls, and the gaps of windows through which one could see the vacant air (Sebald, 1996, p. 30).

At another key point in the text, the narrator encounters Dr Abrahmsky, the man who inherited the psychiatric hospital in which

Ambros Adelwarth spent his final years. Abrahmsky tells the narrator that he does not “expect anyone can really imagine the pain and wretchedness once stored up in this extravagant timber palace” and relates his hopes that “all this misfortune will gradually melt away now as [the hospital] falls apart” (p. 110). The way in which Sebald writes of these spaces, whether nations, cities, or buildings, constantly recalls decay. Space in the novel is consistently defined through the characters’ inability to comprehend or bear witness to the destruction in any meaningful way. Abrahmsky elaborates on his relation to the hospital, telling the narrator that “Since mid May 1969 – I shall soon have been retired for fifteen years – I have spent my life out of doors here, in the boathouse or the apiary, depending on the weather, and I no longer concern myself with what goes on in the so-called real world” (p. 110). His disinterest in what he refers to as the ‘real’ world is significant, especially in relation to his personal investment in the continued disintegration of the hospital. Long (2003) characterizes these “visions of entropy” as “a literal counterpart to the metaphorical entropy inherent in human relationships and societies” and directly related to the physical and psychological dislocation experienced by all four characters (p. 121-122). Further to this point, R.J.A. Kilbourn (2006) writes, *The Emigrants*’ “cultural-historical perspective on the reality of a state of exile and emigration which may or may not be one of ‘homelessness’” is central to the text. Kilbourn further suggests that the crux of the novel resides in “Sebald’s oblique juxtaposing of his various emigrant characters’ states of dispossession with Nabokov’s permanent link to a ‘home’ that exists only in his memory, yet which in its artistic... translation constitutes for him not simply a powerful antidote to the unstructured messiness of life but a means of imparting that mess with meaning it otherwise lacks” (p. 39). Textual

representations of space in *The Emigrants* are therefore no more ‘real’ than the spaces themselves are to the characters.

Baudrillard’s suggestion that “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance,” but rather “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (p. 389).

Baudrillard’s understanding of the real or hyperreal becomes fundamental to understanding the way in which space operates within Sebald’s novel.

The terms real or, indeed, hyperreal, relate to Susan Sontag’s (1977) famous discussion of surrealism in relation to photography in her seminal book *On Photography*. Sontag argues that the medium’s mimetic qualities imbue photographs with surrealist charm and goes on to state that photography is the most surreal art form, echoing Benjamin, by asking, “What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself and with a minimum of effort” (Sontag, 1977, p. 52)? Photography is therefore laden with various meanings and functions throughout the text. A primary concern of Long’s (2003; 2006) work on the relationships which exist between history, narrative, and photography which rests on a series of questions regarding exactly how photographs “correspond” to the text in Sebald’s work. Long’s overarching suggestion that all questions surrounding this debate “lead to a consideration of the role of language in determining the ‘meaning of photographs’” remind readers to interrogate how the image relates to the text in *The Emigrants*, and how the text “both frames and is framed by” the inclusion of photographs (Long, 2003, p. 118).

As Long prioritizes the function of language in relation to the image and the possible narratological implications the use of images has on Sebald’s work in recounting and emphasising the constructed and

fragmentary nature of the historical narrative itself, so too does Fuchs (2003) consistently draw attention to the function of the art object in *The Emigrants*. For Fuchs the inclusion of images hints at “the recuperation of historical suffering in the individual’s life” which, she goes on to write, “must be the purpose of all true art” for Sebald in his work. The use of image alongside the text

proposes an aesthetic of remembering which embraces the principles of partisanship for the victims of history’s accumulating catastrophes. [Sebald’s] works attempts to voice the experience of history as a violation by tracing not only what happened, the *res gestae* of history, but also the painful memory work that underpins the reconstruction of the past in the *historia rerum gestarum* (Fuchs, 2003, p. 169).

Fuchs’ analysis is therefore rooted in a concern for *how* history is interpreted by Sebald in the interplay between image and text. Indeed, photographs imply a process of looking backwards at the historical record, further forcing the viewer to imagine the historical record based on an assumed connection the photographs and the written record. Benjamin’s conception of the angel of history in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as a figure whose “face is turned towards the past” aptly conceptualizes the position of the viewer of photographs (1968/2019, p. 201). Speaking of the Paul Klee painting “Angelus Novus” Benjamin notes that the subject looks “as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating” recalling again the relationship between the reader of a text and the viewer of an image (p. 201). If we accept Benjamin’s conception of time as a storm which sweeps us towards the future away from an unstable past, then we must move towards an understanding of photographs as

imperfect testaments to this past just as memory remains imperfect and incomplete.

This particular understanding of the role of photography, informed by Benjamin’s angel of history also demands that we consider the nature of photographs as objects in themselves. The aesthetic qualities of photography go beyond what they display in that, as Sontag (1977) reminds us, “the image is also an object” (p. 3). Even an image reproduced in a book, “the image of an image,” (p. 5) calls attention to the tactile realities of photography as an art form which carries its meaning both in its existence as a historical document, a thing which testifies to an unreachable past, and an artifact which connects us to it. Of course, attention must also be paid to the way in which photography is produced, namely with the aide of a camera which is external to the photographer’s body. Thus, the camera acts as “the device that makes real what one is experiencing” while simultaneously allowing for future viewers to look upon and interpret that same experience (Sontag, 1977, p. 9). Photographs are therefore testaments to the real and creators of a new reality which could and would not exist without their testament to events of the past. Photographs, in their dual role as artifact and representative object, allow for the past to be re-interpreted in the present in ways that other documents cannot achieve.

The inclusion of photographs and the separate realities that they represent in a text like *The Emigrants* therefore becomes a metaphor for the fragmentary and in many ways ‘uncanny’ aspects of memory. In his essay on the subject of uncanny, Freud (1958) suggests that the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (p. 148). The concept of repressed memory in the novel is central to understanding the role

that photographs play in Sebald's literary project. As has been suggested above, photographs act as a stand-in for memory in complicated and at times contradictory ways. Long's insistence that the processes of photography reflect that of memory acts as a starting point from which to examine this relationship, which, I have previously suggested, is key to recognizing the implicit function of images in contemporary literature as a metaphor for how memory functions. A literal manifestation of this arises in what Eric Santner refers to as Sebald's "spectral materialism" and finds its full expression in the story that Max Ferber relates of a photographic lab assistant whose body accumulates so much silver that his skin "develops" in strong light (Santner, 2006, p. 52; Sebald, 1996, p. 165). This embodiment of the photographic process in the novel "serves to register and archive a certain *real* whose status is, paradoxically, *virtual*" according to Santner (p. 52). Concerning Sebald's 2001 novel *Austerlitz*, Santner highlights the function of repression in the life of its main character specifically regarding "the political violence that would destroy his sense of home" (p. 54). This is a theme which permeates the lives of the characters of *The Emigrants* and accentuates the already palpable relationships that exist between memory and violence in literature. When asked about his feelings towards re-telling and re-associating personal experience as a means of healing in a 1998 interview with Sarah Kafatou, Sebald was dismissive of "psychoanalysis and similar talking cures." He went on to say that "we think that by dwelling in or going over the past we can make things better, whereas we generally make them worse" (p. 32). Ironically, what

Sebald's hesitant attitude towards psychoanalysis reveals is important more for what it denies than what it affirms. The characters of *The Emigrants* are invariably tragic figures whose lives end unflinchingly in suicide brought about either actively by their own hand, as is the case of Dr Henry Selwyn and Paul Bereyter, or by passively submitting to circumstance as in Abros Adelwarth and Max Ferber.

How the violent upheaval each of these characters have face in their lives impacts upon memory is central to a discussion of *The Emigrants*. On this topic, Anne Whitehead (2004) reflects that "If the novels explore the themes of time, memory, art and loss, their main subjects are nevertheless the tragedy of the Jews of Europe, and the unending consequences of the Holocaust both for those who escaped death and for the generations after." She understands Sebald's characters to be "traumatized individuals, living in the shadow of the Holocaust and subject to the contingencies of exile and displacement" (Whitehead, 2004, pp. 118-119). The trauma¹ that the characters embody is a by-product of their displacement, both physically and psychologically, from their homeland and is most apparent in either a constant longing for a homeland or their rejection of the possibility of return. Max Ferber's association with his homeland is a negative one in which he claims "Germany is a country frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful" (Sebald, 1996, p. 181). Whereas Paul Bereyter is understood by a character named Mme Landau to be utterly connected

¹ It is outside the purview of this paper to discuss the various ways in which theories of trauma enter into Sebald's text. As such, my use of the word trauma in this paper is specifically in relation to how Whitehead has employed the term, namely as a means of

characterizing the characters' reactions to the ways in which their experience of violence, displacement, and exile from their home has impacted upon their ability to bear witness to history.

to his native German as she states that “what moved and perhaps even forced Paul to return, in 1939 and in 1945, was the fact that he was German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land in the foothills of the alps” (p. 57). Both cases highlight the degree to which the characters respective associations with their homelands is the root of their ultimately tragic, lives. However, while these two men’s relationship to an imagined national belonging are contradictory on the surface, they both underline the degree to which that belonging is constructed by memory and further how the construction of memory has palpable impacts upon the history and stories they are able to tell. In each case, memory becomes the ‘real’ for both characters and their actions in life are determined based upon their relationship to this remembered reality.

Santner’s association of Sebald with the work of Benjamin in relation to melancholic repression and the uncanny effects of memory also recalls Baudrillard’s suggestion of the relationship between the ‘real’ and nostalgia. As he writes in “The Precession of Simulacra”:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence (p. 393).

The Emigrants by itself is a representation of exactly that panicked association that individuals and societies feel towards a recognition of the ways in which what has previously been viewed as a stable referent, in the form of memory, finally comes to be understood as simulacra, or a reproduction without referent. The characters of *The Emigrants* each attempt to ward off this realization through a painful process of denial which causes their emotional and existential pain and brings about their tragic ends. The real in the novel appears only as it is constructed through the various photographic documents and oral histories which are processed and related to us by the narrator. The strategy of these characters becomes not one of deterrence *per se*, but rather of repression of the lived experience which is consistently both reinforced and undermined by the existence of the uncanny referent of the photographs in the text.

The theories of Baudrillard, Benjamin, and Freud illuminate many aspects of the purposeful use of photography in Sebald’s work. The work of scholars such as J.J. Long (2003; 2006) and Anne Fuchs (2003) have suggested that the relationships between Sebald and Benjamin, especially, are important avenues by which to explore the many ways in which the literary text is enhanced and complicated through the use of photographs. In bringing in Baudrillard’s discussion of simulacra and his concept of ‘the real’ to bear on *The Emigrants*, we have seen that photography can both enhance and distract from the representational capacity of language. By looking to the form and content of the novel it is clear that Sebald’s novel highlights the complex, and at times, contradictory nature of photography in relation to text. Furthermore, while photographs are consistently looked upon as documents which provide a vantage into the past, as objects they also act to obscure our interpretations. The ‘reality’ which

photographs, and the photographic process depict is metaphorically linked to memory in Sebald's text and provide the context for the psychological dislocation that the characters feel in relation to their homeland. As I have argued, this results in the invariably tragic ends of the characters and functions to reinforce the untenability of memory in the relation of historiography.

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