Confessional Melancholy: W.G. Sebald's Aesthetic Solution to the Inadequacy of Representation

Theo Koskoff
Sarah Lawrence College, tkoskoff@gm.slc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/undergrad_selectedworks

Part of the German Language and Literature Commons, Modern Literature Commons, Other Philosophy Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/undergrad_selectedworks/4

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship and Creative Works at DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Undergraduate Works by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. For more information, please contact alester@sarahlawrence.edu.
Confessional Melancholy

W.G. Sebald’s Aesthetic Solution to the Inadequacy of Representation

Theo Koskoff

German Cultural Studies 1871—Present

May 4, 2020
Introduction

Since W.G. Sebald’s premature death at the height of his popularity in 2001—just months after the English-language publication of what many consider to be his masterpiece, *Austerlitz*—his literary texts, all published in the English-speaking world within the last ten years of his life, have frequently been cited as some of the finest works of contemporary literature. Due in part to the genre-bending nature of his writing, marked by fluid and often imperceptible transitions between fiction, history, biography, literary criticism, travelogue, and photography, scholarship on his works has flourished tremendously in the past twenty years or so. Though the secondary literature on Sebald’s writing appropriately discusses the limits of representation, which Sebald explores frequently, much of it ignores the central position that melancholy plays in relation to this theme.

In this paper, I will argue that Sebald’s focus is on the limitation of representation, both cognitive and artistic. I will show that Sebald works in a long tradition of melancholy artists who give voice to the anguish that emerges from a confrontation with that which has been lost or destroyed. I will show that Sebald’s melancholic expression is confessional in that it aims to expose its own inadequacy in its attempt to represent its subjects. I will argue that this confessional melancholy is ethically imperative to Sebald’s understanding of the function of representation in a society that hurtles itself toward destruction. I will then explore the implications of this concern for the nature of identity in Sebald’s literature, as identity itself is an inadequate representation of its subject. After laying out my argument, I will move on to a formal analysis of Sebald’s literature, showing that the innovative aesthetic techniques that have come to be called Sebaldian—particularly the incorporation of photography into his texts and the use of
narrative collages—primarily function as confessions of the inadequacy of literary representation. I will limit my analysis primarily to Sebald’s final three literary texts: The Emigrants (1996), The Rings of Saturn (1998), and Austerlitz (2001).

Confessional Melancholy and the Limits of Representation

Due in part to Sebald’s refusal to work within the boundary of a single genre, there has been much resistance to any attempt to pin down a unifying theme in his literature: initial efforts to classify the author as one whose primary concern is to give voice to that which is unspeakable in the wake of the Holocaust have since been appropriately rejected as reductive. Yet, as I will show, Sebald’s work can be said to have a unifying theme: the inadequacy of all cognitive and artistic attempts to represent the history of destruction. In this sense, Sebald follows in the long tradition of melancholy artists; for the purposes of this paper, a melancholy artist is defined as one who expresses anguish at the attempt to represent that which has been lost or destroyed. More specifically, I will argue that Sebald’s brand of melancholic representation is confessional, as his expression of anguish takes the form of admitting that his own representation is an inadequate reduction of the subjects he is attempting to represent. I will then show that this confessional quality to his melancholic expression is imperative to the ethics of Sebaldian representation, as representations that lack a confession of inadequacy become inextricably linked to the natural history of material destruction. Finally, I will consider the implications of

1 The dates listed here refer to the English-language publications of Sebald’s works. Their years of publication in Germany were, respectively, 1992, 1995, and 2001.

2 For one of the better analyses of Sebald’s work from a Holocaust-centric perspective, see Schlant.

3 See, as two examples, Long and Anderson.
Sebald’s particular form of representation on the nature of identity, using Theodor Adorno’s philosophy as a theoretical framework.

Sebald’s foundational concern with finding an appropriate representation for the history of destruction seeps through nearly every one of his texts, whether literary or critical in form. Although *Austerlitz* primarily refers to the last name of the main character, Jaxques Austerlitz, the title of his final novel also shares a name with a battle fought between France, Russia, and the Holy Roman Empire on December 2, 1805, during the Napoleonic Wars. It is this battle which Jacques Austerlitz recalls his teacher from boarding school, Hilary, describe at length. According to Austerlitz, after nearly re-enacting the battle in his meticulous description of it, Hilary himself notes the impossibility of ever speaking about history with complete accuracy:

> All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us (A 71).

Here, Hilary confesses to the inevitable inadequacy of his own attempt at representing the history of destruction with a sense of defeat: no matter what he says, he will reduce the subjectivity of those who experienced this history—and who cannot represent themselves—to a mere cliché.

It becomes clear that Hilary is speaking for Sebald himself when this passage is compared with another one from the author’s essay “Air War and Literature”. In that work, Sebald laments the failure of literature to represent the destruction that characterized the air raids on Germany in World War II. “The rather unreal effect of the eyewitness reports also derives

---

4 Quotations taken from *Austerlitz* will be cited with the letter A followed by a page number.

5 Quotations taken from “Air War and Literature” will be cited with the abbreviation AWL followed by a page number.
from the clichés to which they often resorted,” Sebald writes, “their function is to cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend” (AWL 24-5). Here, Sebald takes up as his subject the ethics of representation: the fact that these eyewitness reports are inadequate in portraying experiences beyond comprehension leads to his criticism of representation as such: if these experiences are truly beyond comprehension, than how can any representation serve to illuminate them? Sebald’s solution to this ethical condundrum is to admit to his own representation’s inadequacy; later in the essay, he writes, “I am well aware that my unsystematic notes do not do justice to the complexity of the subject” (AWL 78-9). Like Hilary’s, the form of Sebald’s anguish over the effort to represent a history of destruction is confessional; this is what makes his melancholic representation ethical. In order to clarify further the contrasting ethical implications of confessional and non-confessional representation, I will turn to Sebald’s third literary work, *The Rings of Saturn*.6

In the opening chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald introduces us to his friend Janine, who is enamored with the literature of Gustave Flaubert. Sebald presents Flaubert as an obsessive realist who was tortured by the fear that his representation of his surroundings would be inadequate or incomplete; however, there is no indication that Sebald notes a confessional streak in Flaubert’s strategy of representation. Similarly, Janine’s fascination with Flaubert has a non-confessional obsessive quality to it, as indicated by the state of her office, which is claustrophobically filled with collapsing towers of unorganized lecture notes on Flaubert and literature. Upon seeing this, Sebald compares his friend to the angel in Albrecht Dürer’s etching “Melancholia”, who sits “steadfast among the instruments of destruction” (RoS 9). Here, Sebald

6 Quotations taken from *The Rings of Saturn* will be cited with the abbreviation RoS followed by a page number.
not only alludes to Dürer’s famous etching, but also to Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, which was made famous by Walter Benjamin in his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History”.

There, Benjamin describes the angel as depicted in Klee’s painting as one who perceives the natural history of destruction: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin 257).

In response to Sebald’s allusions to Dürer and Benjamin, his friend Janine replies that “the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended toward perfection” (RoS 9). This brief exchange is essential for Sebald’s characterization of melancholy, for—in constrasting confessional and non-confessional forms of representation—it clarifies the ethical imperative behind Sebald’s own confessional approach to melancholic representation. From Janine’s perspective, the obsessive documentation of her work amounts to a tendency toward a perfect representation of her subject. Like Flaubert, she does not concern herself with exposing her documentation as inadequate: her view is that, through a meticulous and realist approach to representation, a perfect, totalizing conceptualization of the world is possible, even if the road leading toward it may be paved with expressions of anguish. Sebald, however, disputes this: when he looks at the mountain of documentation that claims to encapsulate the total conceptualization of reality, he sees a mountain of destruction. It is
therefore precisely the attempt to document and conceptualize reality that eventually leads to material destruction: because of the inevitable failure of any representation—whether linguistic, cognitive, or philosophical in nature—aspects of experience are inevitably left out of the representation. Assuming that these representations then influence the societal conceptualization of reality, that which is left out of the representation often becomes destroyed when society then structures itself around such a conceptualization, as though using it as a blueprint. To explain this process in further detail, I will discuss the philosophical work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, contemporaries of Benjamin and fellow members of the Frankfurt School of philosophy.

Horkheimer and Adorno, in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (first published in 1947), write that “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (3). The Enlightenment’s approach to the representation of reality—like Janine’s and Flaubert’s—takes it for granted that human minds can perfectly conceptualize their surroundings. In this sense, and unlike Sebald, the Enlightenment lacks the confession of inadequacy: as Horkheimer and Adorno maintain, “the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive” (4).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the process of Enlightenment’s self-destruction works as follows: first, representations of given subjects claim that they are total in their conceptualization of their respective subjects, despite the fact that—being mere representations—they are inevitably incomplete; second, society structures itself around the conceptualization of reality that results from these inadequate representations, thus physically destroying all that exists within the subjects of representation but is lost in the process of representing them. It is therefore precisely this lack of self-consciousness concerning the inadequacy of the Enlightenment’s
attempt at total conceptualization that breeds destruction. A representation that is conscious of its own shortcomings, on the other hand, would either be rejected as a conceptual blueprint for the construction of society or else employed by society as a conceptual blueprint with the understanding that it is incomplete. Either way, the self-consciously inadequate representation manages to remove itself from the process of historical destruction as it is described by the Frankfurt School philosophers.

This is precisely the ethical reasoning for Sebald’s use of confessional melancholy as a method of self-consciously inadequate representation. Sebald, like Benjamin’s angel of history, sees that “the storm […] we call progress” (Benjamin 258) is merely an accumulation of physical destruction. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, meanwhile, he ties this accumulation of physical destruction to representations that lack self-consciousness concerning their own inadequacy. When constructing his own representations, therefore, he ensures that his work will not lack self-consciousness. In order to ensure this, he employs a two-fold strategy: first, he turns to an expression of anguish over the effort to portray his surroundings with accuracy—this is what makes his representation melancholic; second, the expression of his anguish takes the form of admitting that his representation will inevitably be incomplete—this is what makes his representation confessional. In other words, by confessing that certain aspects of reality are lost in his attempt to portray them in linguistic form, Sebald hopes to prevent his representation from being taken as complete; this way, he can ensure that, in the natural course of destruction that society takes, none of the destruction that occurs can be traced back to an absence in his own literature.
This inevitable inadequacy of representation, to which Sebald confesses time and time again in his literature, also has implications on the nature of identity—itself an inadequate representation of its subject—in Sebald’s work. To address this, I will analyze two connecting passages from *Austerlitz* and read them in light of Adorno’s philosophical commentary on the nature of identity. *Austerlitz* tells the story of Jacques Austerlitz, who—after escaping from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia at the age of four via the Kindertransport program—is given a new home, a new family, and a new name. Though Austerlitz represses the trauma of his childhood displacement for decades, he ultimately investigates his history through archival research and conversations with the close friend of his parents, Vera. Through these secondary sources, he attempts to piece together his own identity, as well as the identity of his mother.

Immediately upon his arrival in England, a new identity is thrust upon Austerlitz in the form of a new name, Daffyd Elias; as a young boy, however, he is already told by the headmaster of his boarding school that this name is a false one given to him by his foster parents. At this point, the headmaster hands him a slip of paper informing him of his real name. When Austerlitz recalls the experience of coming across his name on paper for the first time, he notes, “what disconcerted me most was that I could connect no ideas at all with the word *Austerlitz*. […] I had never heard of an Austerlitz before, and from the first I was convinced that no one else bore that name” (A 67). Upon being presented with an objective representation of himself in the form of a name, Austerlitz immediately feels a disjunction between his subjective experience and the objectifying representation of his identity. Although Austerlitz feels no connection to the identity being imposed upon him, he adopts his long-lost name as though he did. Here, as always, the line between an imposed identity and the self-expression of identity is blurred: if all self-expressions
of identity depend on various inadequate mediums of conceptualization—for example, language—that are in fact imposed upon the subject, then even the self-expression of identity is at some level imposed.

This sense of being a subject that does not correspond with the objective representation of oneself is perhaps a fundamental characteristic of any emigrant, and it haunts Austerlitz for decades: in the seventies, he becomes involved in a romantic relationship with a woman named Marie. One night, as Austerlitz is falling asleep with Marie by his side, he is overcome by the sense that his mind is “gradually submerged” into his surroundings, allowing “the belief [to] rise within me that I had found release at last” (A 211). This term “submergence” indicates an experience of non-differentiation with one’s surroundings that is fundamentally opposed to the notion of individuality suggested by the imposition or self-expression of identity. Austerlitz’s feeling of release at experiencing this submergence implies a sense of freedom in eschewing identity and its limited representation altogether. As Austerlitz sleeps, however, he dreams of a newspaper consisting “almost entirely of death announcements the size of postage stamps, in tiny print which I could decipher only with great difficulty” (A 211-2). This moment recalls the failure of his attempt to see his own subjectivity represented on a piece of paper containing his name; it is as though the death announcements meant to represent their subjects in totality is irreconcilable with the subjective experience of the subjects’ spiritual essence, which—as Austerlitz’s brief moment of release reveals—is not one of unity and individuality that can be contained in a space the size of a postage stamp, but rather one of non-differentiation with and submergence into one’s surroundings. As a result of this disjunction between spiritual essence and the representation of oneself in one’s identity, Austerlitz feels that his subjectivity is
destroyed, and that he has become merely the empty shell of his objective representation in the form of an inadequate, conceptualized identity; all that remains of the experience of his spiritual essence in the submergence with his surroundings is a memory. The next day, when walking alongside Marie through Marienbad, Austerlitz feels that “the decrepit state of these once magnificent buildings [surrounding them] precisely reflected my own state of mind” (A 212). Here, Austerlitz compares the erasure of his subjectivity in the process of identification with the history of architectural ruin; once again, Sebald establishes a link between the inadequacy of representation and the accumulation of material destruction over time. Importantly, although the buildings have entered their process of decay, that very decay contains the memory of the magnificence that once characterized them; likewise, though Austerlitz has been emptied of subjectivity by the process of identification, he manages to maintain the memory of his fleeting moment of spiritual essence.

Now that I have showed Austerlitz’s experience of disjunction between his subjectivity and the objectifying representation of identity, I will give a brief overview of Adorno’s philosophy of identity as a theoretical framework for the passage discussed at length above. In doing so, I hope to highlight the similarities between Sebald and Adorno on this subject. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion” (7). The belief expressed here is that the rationalizing conceptualization of the fundamental mystery of subjectivity dismisses that subjectivity as illusory, thus eradicating it when a society is built upon the framework of that conceptualization. This same pattern can be seen in the eradication of Austerlitz’s subjectivity upon being handed the slip of paper containing his name as a child: the
rationalizing society around Austerlitz imposes upon him an individuality that he feels is empty due to his inability to recognize it. Importantly, though, Adorno does not argue that society is thrusting rationalization onto its unwilling subjects; rather, he writes, “the structure of our consciousness obliges [us] to strive for unity” (as quoted in Dews, 14). As Austerlitz’s dream of the newspaper reveals, the struggle for objective representation that society inadequately enacts emerges from within us; as such, it is not merely the imposition of an unwilling identity that creates the sense of disjunction between subjectivity and representation, but the self-expression of identity as well.

Adorno’s aesthetic solution to the inadequacy of identity as a form of representation is not to merely attempt a reversal, whereby artistic representation attempts to forego identity in the hopes of conveying the subjectivity of spiritual essence. Because the rationalization instinct is within us, any such attempt would be self-defeating, as the representations we create with the aim of foregoing identity would inevitably become inadequate conceptualizations and dismiss the subjectivity of its subjects as illusory, thus creating the same problem that this attempt is hoping to solve. Rather, Adorno argues, we should aim to reproduce the memory of the mystery of subjectivity by exposing the tension between it and its objective representation. This is what he means when he writes, “If through the demythologization of the world consciousness freed itself from the ancient shudder, that shudder is permanently reproduced in the historical antagonism of subject and object” (Aesthetic Theory 83-84). In much the same way, when Austerlitz is confronted with the emptiness of his objectifying representation in the form of his dream of the newspaper, he maintains the memory of his fleeting moment of spiritual essence; likewise, the decay of the appearance of the decrepit buildings that Austerlitz and Marie walk
alongside reveals the memory of magnificence that once characterized these buildings. In other words, it is precisely the exposure of representation as inadequate, empty, and hollow that produces the memory of the very subjectivity that representation erases; this is why Adorno’s primary aesthetic position is to highlight representation’s inadequacy: “Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus must become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber” (Aesthetic Theory 2). As I have already shown in my analysis of the content of his literary texts, Sebald’s confessional melancholy mirrors Adorno’s ethical imperative that art must turn against itself to capture the memory of subjectivity lost in the process of representation. And yet, art’s innermost fiber, to borrow Adorno’s phrase, is not its content; it is its form. The remainder of this paper will be spent focusing on how Sebald employs the formal techniques of the incorporation of photography and narrative collage as a method of confessing to the inadequacy of his own representation.

**Formal Confessions of Inadequacy**

W.G. Sebald expresses time and time again the anguish that emerges from the attempt to represent that which history has destroyed. As I have argued, his primary mode of expressing this anguish is confessional; this is the author’s ethical response to the limits of representation in a society that employs the conceptualization resulting from inadequate representations as a blueprint for its construction, thus destroying all that is inevitably ignored by the conceptualization. And yet, an artwork’s ethical imperative is rendered meaningless if it is not reflected in its aesthetic form. What makes Sebald such a fascinating writer, then, is not confessional melancholy’s expression in the content of his works, but rather its expression in
their form. The two formal techniques I will be focusing on—though they are far from the only aesthetic inventions that make Sebald’s texts Sebaldian—are the incorporation of photography into his texts and the use of narrative collages as a method of storytelling. To begin with, I will discuss three related images from *The Rings of Saturn*.

The first photograph from *The Rings of Saturn* shows the view from the window in Sebald’s hospital room. Sebald describes that his view of the “colourless patch of sky framed by the window” was all that he could see while confined to his bed (RoS 4). Already, this remark is interesting, for no sky is “colourless” as Sebald has described it; it appears as though the black-and-white photograph has altered Sebald’s memory of the view from his window. Sebald’s concern with photography in large part is a concern with the way that photographs are “mnemotechnical supplements [that become] permanently lodged in the psyche as a kind of internal prosthesis” (Long 4). In other words, photography in the modern era has changed the way we view our memories and history, and—as a result—the world around us; this would be fine if we could trust photography, but as Swales notes, photographs are “no guarantee of truth […] images must be suspect for the simple reason that for twelve years Nazi propaganda flooded Germany with doctored images masquerading as historical and ‘racial’ truth” (109). In the modern, post-Holocaust age, images are as influential in shaping our view of truth as they are untrustworthy. Sebald’s concerns with modernity and the Holocaust, then, are aspects of his overarching concern with the limits of representation.
What makes this photograph even more fascinating is Sebald’s declaration that it was during his medical confinement “that I began in my thoughts to write these pages” (RoS 4). This statement is so intriguing because it reveals that the book we are reading is in fact merely a memory of a book that was written in Sebald’s thoughts—a memory fallible enough to become stripped of its color by a single black-and-white photograph. Finally, Sebald reveals to us that, while in the hospital, he found himself looking out the window in order “to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever” (4). There is a certain irony to this statement: in order to remind himself that reality is not vanishing, Sebald looks through a window frame that contains only a single patch of sky, leaving out all aspects of reality that this patch of sky fails to contain. Together, the interaction of these statements with the photograph of the window amounts to a formal confession of the inadequacy of Sebald’s own literary representation: what we are reading is a book reconstructed through the fallible process of memory from his thoughts while the only perspective on reality he possessed was a small patch of sky framed by a window. With each layer of representation—the memory (which is shaped by the photograph) and Sebald’s own perspective (which is shaped by the window frame)—more of what Sebald hopes to represent is lost, and yet he still pursues literary representation. The irony of this predicament is confessional in nature.

This confessional quality is amplified when the grid-like pattern of the window screen shows up again in The Rings of Saturn. Later in this same chapter, a similar structure is seen in a reproduction of an illustration from Thomas Browne’s The Garden of Cyrus. According to Sebald, “Browne identifies this structure
everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter” (RoS 20); it is a sort of ordered understanding of
the connectivity of all things. If Sebald’s reflections on destruction in this book are defined by
the view from his window, which is determined by a gridlike structure similar to Browne’s own,
then Sebald—like Browne—is in some sense describing the pattern that connects all things,
animate and inanimate, in his representation of destruction. And yet Browne confesses that his
worldview is inadequate when he writes that “we are above all occupied with the abnormalities
of creation” (RoS 21) which are lost in our attempt to represent the universe’s uniformity. This is
echoed in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, who write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the
Enlightenment’s quest for a unifying rationality “makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it
to abstract quantities” (7). In the process, as mentioned earlier, that which is abnormal and thus
left out of this unifying representation is destroyed. Sebald’s own attempt to find a connection
between all that he sees—including the connection between the grid-like structure of his hospital
window-screen and the grid-like structure of Browne’s illustrations—destroys the abnormal.
Ironically, Sebald hopes to convey this destruction of the abnormal through the medium of
destruction: by forging a photographic connectivity between that which is dissimilar while noting
that dissimilarity is erased in the process, Sebald’s representation becomes confessional in
nature.

This grid-like structure appears once more in *The Rings of Saturn*, on a cage containing
“a solitary Chinese quail, evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro” (RoS 36). The
inadequate Enlightenment-like quest to find a connecting pattern of all things (as represented by
the grid-like structure of the cage), when imposed upon a creature of the natural world such as a
Chinese quail, imprisons it. The result is that the bird, having lost its orientation, loses its sense
of self: it collapses into dementia, hopelessly pacing about, as though lost or dislocated. Here we see the effect on identity of the disjunction between a subject and its representation that destroys alterity for the sake of similarity: the loss of the subjective self and the sense of non-belonging. By confessing to the inadequacy of the Enlightenment’s attempt to find a connecting pattern in all that one sees, Sebald manages to continue to search for these very connections while foregoing the destructive effect that they have on that which is dissimilar and thus cannot be reduced to a conceptualizing perspective.

To conclude my discussion of photography in Sebald’s literature, I will turn to a standalone image from *Austerlitz*. The image is actually a still taken from a damaged tape showing footage of the Theresienstadt concentration camp and ghetto, which was used by the Nazis to manipulatively produce the illusion that their sites of unimaginable atrocity were in fact places of resettlement with rich cultural lives. As such, the footage from which this still is taken is propagandistic, manipulative, and illusory in function: it exists to hide the reality of brutality, malnutrition, disease, and the deportations of its prisoners to extermination camps. As Austerlitz watches the tape of this illusory construction of history, he notes that he “could get none of these images into my head; they merely flickered before my eyes as the continual source of irritation or vexation” (A 246). The illusory nature of the tape, which lasts only fourteen minutes, reduces its subjects to impermanent flickers, just as the Nazis themselves exterminated nearly everyone the tape represents. In order to counteract this impermanence, Austerlitz creates a slow-motion copy of the tape; by altering the pace of the tape and, in some sense, exaggerating its illusory
qualities, Austerlitz exposes that the images of the camp’s inmates with which we are presented are falsely constructed: as a result of his editing, “the contours of their bodies were blurred and […] had dissolved at the edges,” he notes (A 247). The propagandistic representation of the tape’s subjects is empty of all subjectivity, much in the same way that Austerlitz himself becomes hollowed out in the process of confronting the inadequacy of his own representation; indeed, they are merely ghosts of those who have been lost, the memory of an “ancient shudder,” to once again borrow Adorno’s phrase (Aesthetic Theory 84). In a physical and historical sense as well, the subjects of the tape themselves have been exterminated and destroyed. It is therefore only by exacerbating and calling attention to the illusory nature of the tape’s form that Austerlitz manages to expose both the erasure of subjectivity that the tape enacts and the history of physical destruction that the tape attempts to disguise.

Just as slowing down the tape exposes the illusory nature of its form, “the many damaged sections of the tape,” Sebald writes, “melted the image from its center or from the edges, blotting it out” (A 247). In the tape’s decay, it is exposed as nothing more than the emptiness of appearance. And yet, the decay of the tape itself reveals the decay of the subjectivity that had been destroyed by the tape’s portrayal of its subjects. As such, the decay of form becomes a confession of the inadequacy of formal representation. Adorno suggests this very process when he writes,

The history of the image is its decay, that is, the decay of how truth appears in detail, which the image does no more than express: and it also means the unveiling of its very
transparency if the substance of the truth is to be revealed; it means the truth content which comes to the fore only in its decay ("Schubert" 8).

In the case of the image above, the truth content that the decay of the photograph reveals is the extermination of the subjects presented within it. More precisely, just as the Nazis imposed the uniform identity of “being Jewish” (and nothing else) onto millions of disparate subjects, thus destroying their individuality and facilitating the possibility of their execution, the illusory objective representation of the tape simultaneously destroys the subjectivity of its subjects and hides the reality of brutality and destruction that they endured. The inadequacy of representation and the accumulation of material destruction over history are connected by the process of identification, which itself is an inadequate representation of its subject. This connection is revealed through the decay of the representation, which is exposed as illusory; by inserting into his text a decayed image and connecting it to the accumulation of material destruction over history, Sebald confesses to the illusory nature of his own representation and suggests that, were it not for this confession, it too might lead to material destruction.

Having shown how Sebald employs photography as a means of confessing to the inadequacy of his melancholic representation, I will now turn to another formal technique utilized by the author for the same purpose: that of the narrative collage. Simply, the phrase “narrative collage” as applied to Sebaldian aesthetics describes the construction of a story by various narrators. By multiplying the number of narrators of a given narrative, Sebald hopes to re-position the role of the narrator entirely by transforming it into one that calls attention to the falsehood of literature rather than imbuing it with the illusion of truth. In his essay “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel”, Adorno astutely writes that this type of formal
technique “takes a stand against the lie of representation, actually against the narrator himself, who tries, as an extra-alert commentator on events, to correct his unavoidable way of proceeding” (34). To explore how the use of a narrative collage becomes a formal confession of the inadequacy of representation in Sebald’s narratives, I will turn to his second literary text, *The Emigrants.*

In the third segment of *The Emigrants,* the story of Ambros Adelwarth, the great-uncle of the narrator Sebald, is told primarily by Sebald’s aunt Fini, who herself heard the story from her uncle Ambros. Thus, when we hear Ambros’s life story, it has already gone through multiple iterations: from Ambros to Fini to Sebald to us. This is a specific type of narrative collage that Sebald frequently employs in his work, which can be called the narrative chain. The effect of the narrative chain in all of Sebald’s literature is to encourage the reader to question the accuracy of the representation of the narration’s subject: we are encouraged to ask both what might be lost and what might be added by each narrator in the process of narration.

This complexity—which is characteristic of all of Sebald’s narrative chains—is further complicated by the fact that Ambros Adelwarth, who is supposedly the subject of narration, dedicates much of his self-representation to the narration of the life of his friend Cosmo when he speaks to Sebald’s aunt Fini. This links Ambros to the narrator Sebald: both dedicate their lives to recounting the lives of others. The effect of this is that the narrators’ lives become shaped by the subjects of their narrations. Unable to fathom that he will not be able to forge a perfect representation of Cosmo, Ambros submits himself to the same institution where Cosmo died and

---

7 *The Emigrants* will be referred to in my citations with the letter E followed by a page number.

8 The text of the English-language translation seems to go back and forth between the spellings “Ambros” and “Ambrose.” For the purposes of this paper, I will stick to the former and more frequently-used spelling, except in quotations where the latter spelling is used.
self-destructively goes through successive treatments of electro-convulsive therapy. This “willing obliteration of self at the site of his lost friend” (Anderson 113) functions as an attempt to memorialize Cosmo’s destruction; in doing so, it raises the question of how much of Sebald’s representations of his narrators are determined by those narrators’ narrated subjects: if Ambros re-enacts the death of Cosmo, then the implication is that Sebald re-enacts the life of his narrated subjects as well, perhaps in order to endow them with a subjectivity they are robbed of in his otherwise journalistic portrayal of their lives. This is suggested when, in imagining the life that Ambros and Cosmo lived together, Sebald journeys to Deauville, where they spent time travelling, as though re-enacting their lives in a desperate attempt to give voice to the dead.

To go even further, Sebald’s representation is complicated by the multi-faceted nature of Ambros’s relationship with Cosmo. Ambros begins as the employee of Cosmo’s father, Samuel, who hires Ambros as “personal attendant to his son, to watch over him, since he believed, not without reason, that great dangers lay in his path” (E 90). More precisely, these dangers emerge due to Cosmo’s habitual spending addiction, which—through his youth—was maintained by an allowance that “in point of fact had been unlimited” (E 90). When Cosmo’s father begins to limit his son’s allowance, Cosmo responds by developing a gambling addiction. The subtext behind this information is that Samuel’s wealth allowed him to raise Cosmo with a hands-off approach to parenting; when this approach backfires, he hires Ambros as a surrogate father to his son. And so, in addition to being the personal attendant to Cosmo and the employee of his father, Ambros is in some sense a father figure to Cosmo. This, of course, is only how Sebald’s aunt Fini describes their relationship; his uncle Kasimir presents Ambros as Cosmo’s “valet and travelling companion” (E 88). To make matters even more complicated, the two develop an exclusive
friendship, such that Cosmo “never went out to eat with anyone but Ambros, whom he always
treated as an equal,” according to Aunt Fini (92). Uncle Kasimir, meanwhile, suspects that the
two were in a homosexual relationship—or else that they harbored romantic feelings for one
another that were never acted out—when he declares that Ambros was “of the other persuasion,
as anyone can see” (88). This multi-faceted and potentially romantic nature of the relationship
between Ambros and Cosmo suggests that the emotions underlying their relationship were
tremendously complex. And yet, all we receive as representations of this relationship are various
perspectives of its outward appearance; the subjectivity underlying this objectifying
representation inevitably remains inaccessible. As a result, we are left with empty shells of our
subjects.

As always, the eradication of subjectivity by representation is imbued with self-
awareness; here, Sebald links his own inadequate narrative collage with the objectifying
representation of society’s rumor mill. As Sebald’s aunt Fini describes, Cosmo and Ambros’s
relationship became “caught in the imagination of society” (E 92); similarly, when Sebald
follows the apparitions of Ambros and Cosmo to Deauville, where he re-enacts their travels, he
notes that “my dreams in Deauville were filled with constant whisperings of the rumours that
were in circulation concerning Cosmo and Ambros” (E 124). Sebald’s choice to focus on the
gossip-obsessed society surrounding the multifaceted pair indicates a self-consciousness in the
sense that the narrative collage he creates in his own representation of their relationship takes the
same form as society’s gossip itself: it is constructed by mixing together various limited
perspectives on Ambros’s outward appearance, without the inclusion of his underlying
subjectivity.
As usual, the inadequacy of representation has a concrete toll on Sebald’s subject: Sebald’s uncle Kasimir describes Ambros as “hollowed-out” (E 88), while Aunt Fini says, “I gradually became convinced that Uncle Adelwarth had an infallible memory, but that, at the same time, he scarcely allowed himself access to it” (E 100). Here, Ambros internalizes the eradication of subjectivity characteristic of his representation by society’s rumor mill, which is mirrored by Sebald’s own narrative chain. Thus, the empty shell of outward appearance that we receive as a portrayal of Ambros becomes a physical reality. This physical reality is completed when Ambros commits the re-enactment of Cosmo’s death alluded to above. The doctor who helped administer Ambros’s electro-convulsive therapy tells Sebald that, following Adelwarth’s final session before his death, “I could see from Ambrose’s face that he was now destroyed, all but a vestige of him” (E 116). Decades of erasure of his subjectivity has literally put an end to Ambros’s life. Sebald’s choice to then represent his great-uncle through the form of narrative collage, which mirrors the objectifying representation of societal gossip, is self-conscious in its inadequacy: by exposing the destructive effects of a portrayal similar in form to his own, Sebald hopes to prevent the potential destruction that his own writing might have caused had it lacked its confessional aspect.

Conclusion

I have shown that Sebald’s central concern in his literature is finding an ethical representation of destruction when destruction itself is often the result of the inevitable inadequacy of representation. I have shown that Sebald’s solution to this conundrum is his confessional melancholy, in which he expresses his anguish over the loss of that which has been destroyedby
admitting that his literary representation is inadequate. I have explored the effect of this theme on the nature of identity, which itself is an inadequate representation that robs a subject of its subjectivity. I have likewise shown that the innovative formal techniques employed by Sebald, including his incorporation of photography into his texts and the use of narrative collages, have the primary purpose of serving as a confession of inadequacy.

Therefore, I feel that it is most appropriate to conclude with a confession of my own. The task of literary interpretation is a difficult one, in that it is itself a representation that reduces its subject, literature, to a hollowed-out shell. In the case of W.G. Sebald, who was so preoccupied with this process, the difficulty is of course exaggerated. For those of us who were never blessed to have known Sebald personally, the only portrayal we have of him following his tragic and premature death is his inadequate self-representation in the form of his writing; it becomes problematic, then, to subject this writing to further inadequate representation. When I make the claim that Sebald’s all-encompassing theme is the transformation of melancholic expression into a confession of that expression’s own inadequacy, I am in some sense eradicating every word he wrote that is not conducive to this theme. In order to attempt to undo this very eradication, I feel I must—in a Sebaldian way—confess to it. So here, in photographic form, is the image of Sebald I have presented, taken from a photograph of the author the size of a postage stamp on the back inside flap of Austerlitz. I have over-saturated the image and have made it grainer and more transparent. I hope that, in the artificial decay I have created for it, I have exposed the image of Sebald’s texts, as well as that of Sebald himself, that I’ve presented in this paper: blurred, empty, and faded, as though a hollowed-out apparition of a subject who has been lost.
Bibliography


Images
Aside from the following two, all images reproduced in the text are scanned by myself directly from Sebald’s books. Both of the following images are in the public domain.


*Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/