

Coming to terms with
the past: the narrative
methods that convey
the workings of ...



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Since 1945, German literature has met the challenge of evoking mental processing of past events by exploring by what means we access the past. As literature depends far more on individual production and reception than film and television, which are more communal, it has been relied upon as a corrective to official memory.[1] The literature of this period's attitude towards memory's fallibility and subjectivity is inextricably linked to the narrative methods authors use to evoke memory and reflection in their works. A well-known example is W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, a novel which narrates the struggle of a man with a Jewish background who unconsciously represses the memories of his former life, and yet finds no healing in his quest to rediscover his identity. Interwoven with photographs, which Sebald uses as his protagonist's prompt for reflection on memory, the narrative is punctuated by a visual-verbal dialectic[2] which contributes to the reader's perception of the text's authenticity. Similarly, the protagonist Franz Josef Murau of Thomas Bernhard's final novel *Auslöschung* (Extinction) uses family photographs and the technique of perspectivism to evoke his own reflections to enable to him to complete his *Erinnerungsarbeit* or memoir, a writing intended to efface his familial connection with the Austrian home he associates with ignorance, Nazism and cruelty. As neither texts are autobiographical, both can be said to additionally narratively deal with the question of 'perpetrator literature' and how best to represent the Nazi past and the horrors of the Holocaust in German literature, now faced with the extinction of living memory and the inadequacy of cultural memory.

The workings of memory are explored in both texts through the importance of visual perception, most notably in the form of photographs, film and

general media. A ' hybrid of fiction and documentary'[3], Sebald's decision to incorporate a series of black and white, somewhat blurry photographs into the narrative of Austerlitz at first glance serves to underpin the authenticity of the protagonist Austerlitz's story. By illustrating the facts Austerlitz discovers about his unremembered past, the photographs add a sense of authenticity for readers of the novel, caused by our faith as readers in the legitimacy of visual evidence. However, the unreliability of photographs and their positioning in the narrative of Austerlitz as media which the protagonist interprets is used by Sebald to explore the workings of memory, with photographs conversely becoming a paradoxical obstacle on Austerlitz's quest to uncover the truth of his past. The structural similarity between photograph and memory is outlined by Austerlitz; both are fleeting and deceptive: ' genau wie Erinnerungen...die ja auch inmitten der Nacht in uns auftauchen und die sich dem, der sie festhalten will, so schnell wieder verdunkeln, nicht anders, als photographischer Abzug, den man zu lang im Entwicklungsbad liegen lässt.'[4] [' just like memories...which also spring up within us in the middle of the night and which darken again if we try to hold onto them, just like photographic prints left too long in the developing bath.' (my translation)]

As the principal interpreter of the photographs, Austerlitz's theoretical reflection on them in the text demonstrates the psychological implications the photographs have for the protagonist. When confronted, for example, by a photograph of his five-year-old self, Austerlitz describes himself to have been ' sprach- und begriffslos'[5] [' speechless and notionless' (my translation)] - though it sparks no memory in him, the photograph does

sparks two temporal structures in the narrative: Austerlitz is struck by the transience, the separation of this photograph from the present day, and by its capturing of the moment preceding a catastrophe: that is, the forced disintegration and murder of his family. In this way, the photograph of Austerlitz as a child succeeds in recording an event in the technical media, but excludes it from individual memory and consciousness.[6] This lack of connection with individual memory shows Austerlitz's quest for the truth about his past to be more psychologically traumatic than healing, since compensatory memories cannot change the interim period of forty years which Austerlitz has spent feeling disconnected from the world, leading to a hysterical breakdown through which, interestingly enough, memory is lost and recovered by means of photographs. In a similar manner, Austerlitz's obsession with finding a glimpse of his mother in the short film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* [Theresienstadt: The Führer gifts the Jews a city] in order to find a visual prompt for his forgotten memories of her allows Sebald to showcase film, like photographs, as incapable of providing access to experiences traumatically excluded from memory, but instead capable of acting as a shield which distances us from what they reveal.[7] Though Austerlitz's former nanny rejects the notion that the stillframe he becomes convinced by is his mother, the protagonist projects his inherently unreliable idea of how his mother looked, entangled with the verbal narrations he has received from others, onto the stillframe. Here, the process of memory is complicated still further by the use of the film within the novel, both fictional works as Austerlitz is a narrative invented by Sebald, and the film from Theresienstadt concentration camp was a film staged by the Nazis.

Additionally, the photographs in the text can be said to 'guide' the verbal <https://assignbuster.com/coming-to-terms-with-the-past-the-narrative-methods-that-convey-the-workings-of-memory-in-austerlitz-and-extinction/>

narrative of Austerlitz by referring to it in a retrospective or anticipatory manner: when the narrator describes the photos laid out on the table in Austerlitz's home, it becomes clear that some have been inserted without commentary in the novel's narrative, while others depict events which have not yet been narrated, such as his future visit to Theresienstadt.

In Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung* however, Franz Murau's quest is not to discover his own past by means of memory, but instead to obliterate it. Again, memory through visual representation plays a major role in the protagonist's psychological reaction to this task. When the telegram arrives to notify him of his relatives' death at the start of the novel's first section, Murau's initial reaction is to take out the three photographs of his family he has retained and use them to evoke memory. We then see Murau, in this work the first-person narrator determined to outline and separate himself from his family's *Zerfall* or decay, contemplate the ability of photographs to function as an ersatz reality and misrepresent what really was: 'Die Fotografie ist tatsächlich die Teufelskunde unserer Zeit, sagte ich mir, sie läßt uns jahrelang und jahrzehntelang und lebenslänglich spöttische Gesichter sehen, wo es nur ein einziges Mal solche spöttische Gesichter gegeben hat [...]'[8] ['Photography truly is the devil's work of our age, I said to myself: it permits us to see mocking faces over years and decades and lifetimes where in fact the mocking faces were only there on that one occasion [...] (my translation)]. Bernhard's employment of photographs in the narrative, which in contrast to in Austerlitz do not appear printed for the reader, is to much more manipulative ends than Sebald's: Murau, the narrator, admits that these particular three photographs are ones he took

deliberately when the subjects didn't wish to be captured. The act of photographing, then, and the capture of a moment becomes an agonistic enterprise whose ultimate goal is Murau's self-assertion as an individual who is different from his family.[9] Instead of Murau reading the images as documentation of all that is important to family life, such as unity and togetherness, Bernhard manipulates these photographs as the starting point for Murau's narrative process of Auslöschung or extinction; that is as symptomizing all that the family represses, and alongside the death of his relatives, becoming the motivation for him finally being able to break the silence.

While the narrator of Austerlitz is able to connect the private story of Austerlitz with public history, which in the form of nineteenth-century architecture becomes an 'ersatzweises, kompensatorisches Gedächtnis'[10] ['substitute, compensatory memory' (my translation)] for the protagonist as a way of avoiding confrontation with his own history and memory, Bernhard presents Murau as psychologically bound up in what he views as the downfall of his family into both cultural ignorance and Nazism: 'Es läßt mich seit Jahrzehnten keine Ruhe. Tatsächlich verfolgt es mir Tag und Nacht.'[11] ['For decades, it has preyed on my mind. In fact, it pursues me day and night.' (my translation)] The narrative structure of Auslöschung then becomes a telling of the family story by a naturally biased Murau, relying upon his childhood and youthful memories to depict all he views as wrong with the family at Wolfsegg. As a result, Wolfsegg becomes not only the setting for remembrance of a traumatic past, but also the scene of the burial of this past along with his relatives.[12] Due to the limited viewpoint we receive as

readers through Murau's depiction of a life in Wolfsegg, dominated by his mother's cruelty and the realization that his parents had harboured Nazi perpetrators in their Kindervilla during his childhood, it is important to consider that the world depicted in *Auslöschung* is one 'contingent on recursive observations'[13] - meaning that the world of *Auslöschung* is the one remembered by the narrator and therefore portrays what Wolfsegg to him meant to him both then and now. Wolfsegg then, as presented in the novel, is a memory itself. In this sense, it could even be said that the narrative methods used by Bernhard in *Auslöschung* to convey reminiscing consequently associate Wolfsegg, Murau's familial home, with the memory of fascism in twentieth-century Austria and the problems of guilt the Nazi occupation left in its wake. It is worth mentioning too that in *Austerlitz*, memory also appear in the form of an architectural location, with Liverpool Street Station itself spontaneously merging into a physical representation of the labyrinth of *Austerlitz's* lost memories - again supporting the view that the resurfacing of memories is spontaneous, and can be prompted by visual encounters with source loci (in these two novels, architecture, photographs, and film).

As an 'anti-autobiography' however, the operation of self-erasure that Murau is intent on creating with his narrative is problematic: by going through the process of remembering and reflecting and creating a narrative from this process, though Murau's family line may become extinct, the narrator simultaneously creates a text which in itself lends permanence to that which is transient - and therefore to his memories - by remaining behind after Murau's death, shown by the edit made by what we must

presume to be a second narrator in the final paragraph. The Auslöschung becomes complete in this sense in the death of Murau, marking the extinction of his family line immediately after his extinction of his memories through writing about them, and the extinction of Wolfsegg as a contemporary place, as opposed to the Wolfsegg of his memory, in his donation of the property and lands to a Jewish foundation. By describing the process of reliving past memories as an effacement of them, the narrator of Auslöschung appears to view the narrative progress of the novel as a form of therapy, similar to Austerlitz's act of telling his story to a separate narrator, who also appears displaced and troubled by unresolved memories. While Bernhard's narrator devotes specific time to the evocation of his memories, such as by observing the three family photographs or eagerly reading the newspaper articles published on his relatives' deaths, the encounters between Austerlitz and Sebald's narrator appear random and unpredictable, echoing the disjunctive rhythm with which traumatic memories come to the fore.[14] As a case in point, the sheer unreliability of memory is well-depicted by Bernhard's technique of perspectivisation in that both verbal and written reports of the accident that killed three members of Murau's family show considerable perspectival differences[15], leading Murau to conclude that ' Jeder berichtet von dem Unglück so, wie er es durch seine Empfindungen sieht und es handelt sich immer zwar um ein und dasselbe Unglück, aber immer doch um ein anderes [...]'.[16] [' Everyone tells of the accident in the way they perceive it, and it is always the very same accident, but still always a different one [...]'] (my translation)] As such, the narrative of Auslöschung explores the fallibility of memory, with Bernhard's typically long sentence structure emphasizing the confusion this causes.

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The decision of Sebald to employ a first-person narrator who both physically encounters and then relays the reflections and stories of Austerlitz can be seen as an attempt to reestablish the grounds of narrative legitimacy in literature of this period.[17] As someone who did not personally suffer the Holocaust or its aftermath, Sebald as an author was required to discover a manner of writing to remember these events without appearing presumptuous of this suffering, and the avoidance of Austerlitz, the sufferer, narrating in the first-person in the novel is evidence of this. In a similar manner, the blurring of fiction and documentary of the photographs serve to increase the novel's authenticity for the reader: if not in the sense of their aid in helping Austerlitz come to terms with his past, then their promotion of narrative legitimacy when writing about the Holocaust. However, the exploration of the workings of memory within the text does not depend on a restoration of authenticity, but instead on the conditions of the story's transmission - likewise, the narrative of *Auslöschung* emphasizes the protagonist's move away from his ignorant family by means of exploring his own memories, though they are proven to be fallible.

Both Sebald and Bernhard seek to expose the prefabricated images of history that the age of visual media has allowed to colonize our memories[18] as fallible and subject to change in their employment of narrative methods to explore the workings of memory. The protagonists of *Austerlitz* and *Auslöschung* reflect on their memories using visual media, though this is proven to be more hindrance than help on their respective psychological paths of remembrance as a critique of the modern visual age. The narrator of *Austerlitz* is needed to establish a sense of order to the

jumbled observations and reflections of the protagonist, and since it is implied that Austerlitz's death is relatively imminent, will and has decided on his legacy in the form of the novel, preserving these memories. Quite differently then, Sebald's protagonist indicates his desire to prevent just this by writing to obliterate his memories, but then produces the opposite effect through the act of writing and, unavoidably, remembering.

[1] On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction, Helmut Schmitz, 2004, University of Birmingham [2] Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz', Russell J. A. Kilbourn, in W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead, Edinburgh 2004, Edinburgh University Press [3] '...only signs everywhere of the annihilation' - W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz', Helmut Schmitz in On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post 1990 German Fiction, Birmingham 2002, University of Birmingham [4] Austerlitz, W. G. Sebald, Frankfurt am Main 2003, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag [5] Austerlitz, W. G. Sebald, Frankfurt am Main 2003, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag [6] Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz', Carolin Duttlinger, in W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead, Edinburgh 2004, Edinburgh University Press [7] Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz', Carolin Duttlinger, in W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead, Edinburgh 2004, Edinburgh University Press [8] Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall, Thomas Bernhard, 1988, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag [9] 'Die Teufelskünde unserer Zeit'? Photographic Negotiations in Thomas Bernhard's

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