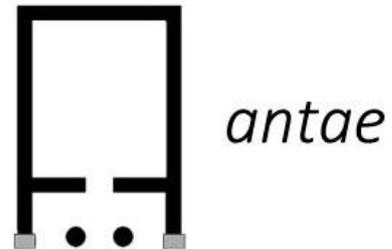


W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Total Destruction

Gabriel Zammit

antae, Vol. 6, No. 2-3 (Dec., 2019), 198-212

Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices



Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism, and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy, and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Total Destruction

Gabriel Zammit

University of Malta

In the early years of the twentieth century, Lev Kuleshov famously claimed that the soul of cinema was in the edit, in the interaction between shots.¹ For Kuleshov, acting in film was always subordinate to the cut, and meaning arose not from any individual shot, movement, or act, but rather from the juxtaposition of several frames. To demonstrate this, he came up with the three-shot experiment: the first shot is of an actor staring at the camera with a blank expression, the second then cuts to something the actor is looking at, and the third cuts back to the actor who is now smiling in reaction (we assume) to what he sees. In a 1964 interview with Fletcher Markle, Alfred Hitchcock explains that the meaning emergent from this three-shot series is wholly dependent on the relationality between the shots, rather than on any single shot in isolation.² The face of the watcher takes on the implication of reaction when placed into series and the meaning of the whole hovers beyond the individual shots.



Figure 1: The Three-Shot Experiment³

The literature of Winfried Georg Sebald functions in much the same way and employs a kind of extreme literary montage in order to overcome the limits of the articulation of past events which, in their excessively destructive and traumatic nature, cause aporetic breaks in

¹ See Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, trans. and ed. by Ronald Levaco (London: University of California Press, 1974).

² See 'Telescope: A Talk With Hitchcock', *CBC*, 1964.

<[https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Telescope: A Talk with Hitchcock \(CBC, 1964\)](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Telescope:_A_Talk_with_Hitchcock_(CBC,_1964))> [accessed 1 December 2019].

³ Image compiled from stills of the Hitchcock-Markle interview, above.

conventional systems of experience and representation. Sebald crafts a literature wherein images, relegated to a dubious realism, are related to one another in mosaics and series which cause a comprehension of truths—ones not accessible through paradigmatic discourse—to emerge over and above any singular textual instance. Sebald recognises that the happenings of the previous two centuries—spurred on by an exaltation of mechanistic rationality—have disabled the direct representation of the universally felt erosion of experience. This essay will suggest that, in an attempt to respond to this diagnosis, Sebald mobilises syntactically fluid textual instances in a performance of absolute magnitude which causes the experience of reading his texts to occasion the sublime. My interpretation of the sublime, as well as the assumed psychological mechanisms of understanding and meaning-making, will follow the architecture set out by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Through the untrammelled and poetic proliferation of meaning, it is this essay's contention that Sebald's texts overcome the aporetic tension inherent to absolutely destructive events in a roundabout way, developing a negative image which supersedes the limited nature of ostensive representation. Sebald tangentially identifies this property in authors he admires, characterising its effect as an experience of "height". Applying this same idea of height/sublimity to his own texts leads one towards a different understanding of Sebald's literature as illustrated here.

The apex of the contemporary experience of destruction is the Holocaust—the ashes of which still sift through the air we breathe—and our enduring inability to come to terms with this event. Paul Ricoeur characterises the insufficiency of the contemporary experience of time and the event of destruction as a 'ruinous dichotomy between a history which would dissolve the event in explanation and a purely emotional retort that would dispense us from thinking the unthinkable'.⁴ Sebald treads this fine line. While being crucially aware of remembering and representing, Sebald's literature builds a structure which, by combining fact, fiction, text, image, and feeling, manages to occasion a truth constantly in recession. Sebald's oeuvre tacitly espouses a comprehensive metaphysics of witnessing, one which traces an arc that begins with a diagnosis of the insufficiencies that led to destruction in the first place and, after sensitively and empathically noting the particularities of the resultant suffering, ends by offering a way out. In this endeavour Walter Benjamin was totemic to Sebald's thought, and I will be making extensive reference to Benjamin's writings to draw out the links between the two authors and thereby contextualise Sebald's ideas in the philosophical cannon. The current essay will focus on *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz*, and *The Emigrants*.

In a conversation about the excessively destructive events which were made possible by the nineteenth and twentieth century mechanisation of warfare, Sebald defines modernism, which unfolded at a parallel to these events, as an attempt at a new understanding of 'the horrible, the shocking and disturbing things that previously haunted only the darkest corners of the Romantics'.⁵ Sebald notes that the twentieth century saw a pressing need for a new form of literary expression which would refrain from explicit and obviously redundant moral maxims

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 188.

⁵ Sebald, as quoted in David Kleinberg-Levin, *Redeeming Words* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. 159.

or consolatory and teleological narratives.⁶ He states that, while we are part of a ‘greater process, which in a very reassuring way, follows its course,’ transcendental or theological explanations cannot be relied upon.⁷ It is the ‘tiny invisible, unfathomable details’, retrieved through a literature which bears witness to suffering, that are the props upon which the hope for restitution rests.⁸

Walter Benjamin gives a clear diagnosis of the loss of meaningfulness and absolute guiding principles in his essay ‘The Storyteller’.⁹ Therein Benjamin suggests that experience as continuity—as making up some small part in a higher narrative—has been eroded and reduced, after WWI, to singular moments detached from any kind of mnemonic structure, where falling out of sync with rapidly churning social conditions has the effect of disallowing proper expression to identity and trauma. ‘[N]ever has experience been contradicted more thoroughly’, Benjamin writes, ‘than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power’.¹⁰ The logical end-point of Benjamin’s argument is that the modern era has placed death, pure otherness, at the root of experience and meaningfulness as such. The first key to Sebald’s fictions follows from Benjamin’s thought, and occurs in a paper titled *Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction*, where he notes that the event of destruction can never be *expressed* directly as it is never *experienced* directly.¹¹ Sebald’s fictions, in fact, never attempt an expression of their true subject through direct ostentation.

In a discussion about literature in the aftermath of the destruction of German cities in WWII, Sebald notes that ‘the aim of the text as a whole [...] depends on the fact that experience in any real sense was actually impossible in view of the overwhelming speed and totality of the destruction’.¹² In other words, Sebald understood that the event of destruction is not totalisable and, in its excess, slips away from constructed modes of experience. Sebald’s claim is further developed in the same essay and, quoting Alexander Kluge, Sebald points to the disturbance in the experience of temporality when, during the moment of destruction, ‘normal time and the sensory experience of time [are set ...] at odds with each other’.¹³ Emotional states guide the human experience of time, and subjectivity in the experience of temporality is well documented. The experience of chronological continuity acts as the trelliswork upon which experiences are hung and, during extreme experiences, the mind’s emotional condition cycles out of control into a manic, panicked state, where the individual sense of time also unwinds and thereby renders experience incoherent. In the controversial Zurich lecture series *Air War and Literature*, Sebald goes on to point out that, as a result, the event of destruction is covered

⁶ See Winfried Georg Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell, ed. by Sven Meyer (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 89.

⁷ Sebald, as quoted in Kleinberg-Levin, p. 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁹ See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83-109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, (p. 84).

¹¹ Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Alexander Kluge, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 94.

up my modes of compromised recollection the purpose of which is to protect the victim—and here we come to understand the problem inherent to the direct delineation of destructive events. In Sebald's words:

the accounts of those who escaped with nothing but their lives d generally have something discontinuous about them, a curiously erratic quality, [whose function] is to cover up and neutralise experience beyond our ability to comprehend. [A] gesture sketched to banish memory.¹⁴

Mechanisms of representation and understanding therefore come up against an intrinsic limit when treating with the nuclei of destructive events. Just as these moments slip away from direct comprehension on an individual level, direct artistic representation and any attempt to couch them in logical discourse will always fail to witness their fulness, neglecting the subjective experience of the inability to understand. 'Images', Sebald claims in an interview with Michael Silverblatt, 'militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things, and also paralyse, as it were, our moral capacity'.¹⁵ The attempt at restitution through paradigmatic thought is therefore, in a certain sense, futile. Against this failure, Sebald argues that writing must return to the objectivity and a responsibility that inheres in realism. Again in the Zurich lectures, he claims that precision and 'unpretentious objectivity [...] proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction'.¹⁶ A realism wholly detached from explicitly emotive or pseudo-metaphysical meanderings is thus needed. Furthermore, according to Sebald, truth inheres in dispassionate prose which, although direct and objective, refrains from focussing on the centre of traumatic moments so as not to disperse their truth in images which will consistently and inevitably fall short of true expression.

Drawing on an idea developed by Andrew Bowie¹⁷ in an examination of Kluge's *Neu Geschichten Hefte 1-18*, which Sebald considers a paradigmatic example of successful writing, we are told that:

[Kluge's] texts do not correspond to the pattern of retrospective historiography nor to the fictional story, nor do they try to offer a philosophy of history. Instead they are a form of reflection on all these methods of ours for understanding the world. Kluge's art [...] consists in using *details* to illustrate the main current of the dismal course so far taken by history.¹⁸

By focussing on tiny personal details, Kluge, who presents his books as large swathes of unorganised pictorial and textual material while recounting his experiences during WWII,

¹⁴ Winfried Georg Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 25.

¹⁵ Sebald, as quoted by in Michael Silverblatt, 'A Poem of an Invisible Subject', in *The Emergence of Memory*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 77-86 (p. 80).

¹⁶ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 53.

¹⁷ See the final chapter of Andrew Bowie, 'Problems of Historical Understanding in the Modern Novel' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 1979).

¹⁸ Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 99.

draws the past into the present and exhibits the conditions through which destruction is experienced on a personal level, when history is constructed and memory is formed and erased.

Kluge's writing lifts itself above functional recollection and manages to create a non-rational understanding of the event through the dense experience of encountering the text itself. Kluge's writing, ostensibly like Sebald's, results in the strange affect (characterised by Sebald in an essay on Vladimir Nabokov) as *height* or *clarity*. In the Nabokov essay (and elsewhere),¹⁹ Sebald states that intense and precise prose, in its sustained recollection of the hidden life of lost objects,²⁰ eddies and furls around itself, accumulating into a lace-like structure which, when the rhythm and flow is right, serves to overcome the aporetic cataracts around unattainable moments and has the effect of lifting the reader into a synoptic perspective which occasions a kind of *claritas* and 'seems to stand on the threshold of an absolute truth'.²¹ In other words, sufficiently concentrated prose—written in a realist-objectivist register and which mingles fact and informed speculation to the exclusion of any novelistic tropes in the circling of traumatic and unrepresentable loci of destruction—manages to shed some light on what are generally impenetrable zones through accumulating into a dense structure where the experience of the text mirrors its content. Michael Silverblatt's clarification is instructive, who tells us that the sustained intensity of Sebald's prose has the effect of breaking the perception of things as continuous, making them 'stop in space' revealed anew, so to speak.²² One clear instance where Sebald's texts have this effect is the seven-page sentence occurring towards the end of *Austerlitz*. In going on and on about the details of the concentration camp in Theresienstadt, Sebald's writing overwhelms the reader, and its incessant, driving force halts time and causes every detail—from the peeling varnish on hand-drawn carts to the dead bodies 'stacked in layers on top of each other in the central morgue'—to emerge anew and cause in the spectator a perspective which encompasses every layer of the suffering and experience at concentration camps (such as those at Theresienstadt) without obliterating individual experience under any overarching narrative of trauma.²³ In the words of Amir Eshel, Sebald exhibits:

the tension between masterable progression and the catastrophic, the moment in which mere succession is shattered by a seemingly meaning-generating event—by the instant in which *chronos*, the successive, the repetition of the same, is succeeded by *kairos*, the event of [...] intemporal significance.²⁴

The density of this prose, proliferating in multitudinous directions, causes in readers an effect of the sublime, overwhelming their ability to reflect the precise totality of meaning, leaving only an experience of being inundated.

¹⁹ See Winfried Georg Sebald, *A Place in the Country*, trans. by Jo Catling (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 16.

²⁰ In this same essay on Nabokov, Sebald speaks about a child's memory of steam rising from a bathtub, or the patterned bathroom floor tiles, which, in their literary recollection, draw a whole childhood back into imaginary being.

²¹ Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 152.

²² Silverblatt, 'A Poem of an Invisible Subject' (p. 83).

²³ Winfried Georg Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 337.

²⁴ Amir Eshel, 'Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in WG Sebald's *Austerlitz*', *New German Critique*, 88 (2003), 71-96 (p. 90).

Kant's characterisation of the sublime describes Sebald's texts well and leads to a productive interpretation of the manner in which his literature has the double effect of both saying and performing. According to Kant, the sublime is occasioned when consciousness meets objects that are immense in terms of either size or power, and which have the effect of confounding the faculty of the imagination. Kant calls these, respectively, the mathematical and the dynamical sublime. Objects which occasion the sublime present a problematic between particularity and totality. In order to observe an object of huge magnitude in its completeness, one must retreat to a perspective which, though its distance, obliterates the particulars of that phenomenon. On the other hand, to note the intricacies of the sublime object, one must approach to the point of being overwhelmed. As Douglas Burnham puts it, in the sublime there is a 'failure of the task of adequate cognition, which is to both present the object in its haecceity (as this particular or "thisness") and in its quiddity (as the kind of thing it is, or "whatness")'.²⁵ Phenomena which have this effect are untotalisable and consequently highlight a fault-line in our conceptual apparatus.

In Sebald's literature, the sublime initially becomes manifest as a species of the historical sublime. Following Frank Ankersmit, I will tentatively define this as an understanding of history which opens out from an individual experience of being faced with that which cannot be grasped.²⁶ In *Austerlitz*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *The Emigrants*, this comes through in subjective moments of experience or contemplation which carry and imply the weight of all history. A particularly poignant example (whose form is also emblematic of the structure of the rest of the book) can be discerned in the fourth chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*,²⁷ which begins with the narrator sitting on a bench on a hill in Southwold, contemplating naval battles and the balance of power in seventeenth century. European monarchies, and ends with a reflection on the fact that the tapes included aboard the Voyager II probe were recorded by a member of the Heersgruppe E²⁸ who later went on to become secretary general of the United Nations. Between these two points we find ruminations on the decline of the Dutch empire, Sebald's own patron saint, and on 'how frightening it is no realise how little we know about our own species, our purpose and our end'.²⁹ This statement, indexed on the contents page as part of a section treating the 'invisibility of man', takes its cue from the fact that the narrator realises, as he flies from Amsterdam to Norwich, that from the air, one can never discern any individual human beings, only the 'things which they have made and in which they are hiding'.³⁰ The other nine chapters of *The Rings of Saturn* mirror this digressive tendency and contain meanderings of comparable breadth.

The Emigrants and *Austerlitz* also exhibit this same drift, forwards and backwards in time, exhibiting the dense and problematic mingling of personal and general history. In the third section of *The Emigrants*, for example, Sebald's narrator is investigating his great-uncle's life,

²⁵ Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 94.

²⁶ See Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998), pp. 75-99.

²⁸ A particularly cruel division of the German army posted in Eastern Mediterranean countries which committed atrocities 'that made even the hair of the Reich experts stand on end.' Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 97.

²⁹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

one Ambros Adelwarth, and in the process builds a vision of twentieth century existence and the manner in which the calamitous events occurring in that century distilled down into individual lives.³¹ Ambros, a German emigrant in America, obtains the position of personal assistant to Cosmo Solomon, a reckless millionaire, and the two develop an unusually close friendship as they travel across Europe and to the Middle-East. After returning to America in 1914, the outbreak of WWI incapacitates Cosmo, ‘disallowing him to regain a footing in the unchanged daily life of America’ and, after a few years, causes him to die of grief in the most tragic manner imaginable, in a sanatorium in Ithaca, New York.³² After the loss of his beloved friend, Ambros, who was a lifelong sufferer of chronic, pathological depression, takes a similar turn and submits himself to the same sanatorium in Ithaca where, after a protracted amount of time receiving electro-shock therapy, he also slips quietly into death. In Ambros and Cosmo, the increasing drag of personal history—compounded by that of the age (and by proxy, everything unnamed and unnameable that came before)—shatters their ability to comprehend the world around them. Sebald deftly opens vast tracts of history out of single moments and experiences, and this movement, which sweeps away any intimations of self while at the same time locating personal subjectivity as that point upon which the whole ineffable weight of history presses, is the historical sublime. As Anne Whitehead puts it, Sebald’s

continual digressions move across time, mediating between the present, the narrator’s own past, the more distant past of those who are now passing out of living memory [...] the narrator ranges across an almost bewildering array of subjects. [...] The narratives are caught in an infernal movement without progression.³³

In its intractability, the content of this writing and the breathless rush it creates, which prevents the reader from pinning down any final meaning, reflects the non-rational subjective experience of broken time as portrayed within the text’s narrative. The effect of this writing, then, is to shock or outrage structured modes of comprehension though the sheer magnitude and quantity of subject matter. Each paragraph, often spanning several pages, is a carefully constructed structure with links and implications pointing in every direction. What we see is a dissolution of time and space into a single continuum through which Sebald’s forlorn characters move.

Against the inability to represent and the erosion of experience as diagnosed by Benjamin and Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, and *Austerlitz* dissolve the subject-object divide (between reader and narrative subject) and every instance in these texts becomes metaphorical and metonymical.³⁴ The stacking and patterning of metaphor-moments into a hyper-montage overwhelms the faculty of cognition in the reader, who attempts to reflect and understand the text as a totality, and this mirrors the discontinuities and aporetic breaks in Sebald’s subjects, foregrounding these lacuna both on paper and as the *experience* of encountering the text itself. On a formal level, what this consists of is ultimately a corollary of the mathematical sublime. In section 25 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant defines the mathematical sublime

³¹ Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002), pp. 67-145.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³³ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 124-25.

³⁴ This dissolution is a trope Sebald also applies to himself as author, by making the main character in each of his novels a lightly fictionalised version of himself.

as '[t]hat [...] which even to be able to think of, demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses'.³⁵ In other words, the feeling of the mathematically sublime arises from objects which are larger than any unit of measurement can delimit; the historical sublime in Sebald, as characterised above, hinges at its deepest level on the text's performance of absolute magnitude.

Thomas Weiskel espouses a three-phase understanding of the sublime moment through which one may clarify Sebald's performance of excess. In the first phase, consciousness is in a determinate relationship of cognition with the objects around it. There is no 'discrepancy or dissonance interrupt[ing] representation, [and there is a] smooth correspondence of inner and outer'.³⁶ Consciousness signification matches perfectly with the traces of the signifiers it encounters. In the second phase, this relationship breaks and becomes characterised by a 'disproportion between inner and outer. Either mind or object is suddenly in excess—and then both are, since their relationship has become radically indeterminate'.³⁷ Phase three consists of the recovery of balance from a 'meta'-perspective which, in the Kantian designation of the sublime, incorporates a refreshed awareness of totality in relation to unified consciousness itself (as opposed to the object). Weiskel goes on to specify that, in relation to the reading individual, what happens psychologically is that 'we are reading along and suddenly occurs a text which [...] seems to contain a residue of signifier which finds no reflected signified in our mind', and it is thus that the habitual first phase relationship is disturbed and the sublime becomes manifest.³⁸ Sebald's work achieves this by interweaving meaning in the multidirectional matter outlined above, to the point where no single symbol or set of symbols can reflect what is being said and, characterised thus, it becomes clear what the proliferation of meaning implies and how this becomes a performance of absolute magnitude. 'The feeling', Weiskel writes, 'is one of *on and on*, of being lost. The signifiers cannot be grasped or understood; they overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream'.³⁹

Applied to Sebald's fictions, Weiskel's characterisation of the sublime is tantamount to the suggestion that these texts act like poetry, in that the texts final meaning enacts a recession from total comprehension. Poetic formulations confound the imagination in the manner of the mathematical sublime; they disallow a closed comprehension of the totality of the poem in all its particularity. In poetry, the sematic configurations within the text remain open-ended and the rules of language and meaning are in a state of play. As a result, in the attempt to understand, the faculty of reason generates a semi-subjective image which is an idealisation of untotalisable content. The meaning of poetic structures is ultimately only comprehensible as an approximation of the way in which the linguistic configurations play upon the totality of the reader's subjectivity. In more specific terms, we encounter a problematic between haecceity and quiddity, just as in the sublime. In order to trace the overall contour of a poem's meaning, it is

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 134.

³⁶ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

impossible delineate the specific function and play of every syntactic moment within the text, thereby reducing the particular to the general and retreating from the overdetermination of meaning which threatens to occur from embarking on a detail-oriented interpretive spiral. Conversely, when zooming in to specific instances within the whole, one loses sight of the general shape of the poem and also loses something by way of understanding. As has been argued, Sebald's texts have this same internal tension and, in the eminently quotable words of Gaston Bachelard, 'they accumulate infinity within themselves'.⁴⁰

It is this balance which Sebald strikes, between analogy and particularity, which causes his text's deepest meanings to emerge. The incomprehensibly vast imagistic flow, which opens in the consciousness of the reader, delimits untotalisable moments by being oriented towards moments of destruction and, to refer to Weiskel once more, can be characterised as 'the absence of meaning becom[ing] significant [...] since it resolves the breakdown of discourse by substitution'.⁴¹ The text abstains from meaning making through a structure of stand-in images, which are meant to be synonymous with the authors meaning; rather, it creates meaningfulness out of the pure *absence* of definite meaning and the consequent lack of interpretative guidance, thereby witnessing and respecting the unattainability of certain moments and experiences. Michael Rothberg describes this effect as a dispersal of 'void' into ever-wider networks of signification; 'Sebald's transversal forms of association', Rothberg writes,

create new memories even while marking those sites of loss [...] by revolving obsessively around that which cannot be seen, [...] a detour around the void that does not turn away from implication and responsibility but disperses them into more extensive networks of association in order to negotiate a new ethics of the gaze.⁴²

Sebald avoids direct contact with his true subject, yet by merging an infinity of peripheral perspectives, so to speak, builds a negative image whose clarity and force surpasses that of any direct figuration. By not imposing any form onto his subject, Sebald overcomes the problem of mediacy, managing to communicate in terms that manoeuvre around the pitfalls of paradigmatic expression while at the same time still being understandable in actuality. The text intends the performance of that which is left unsaid within it. Sebald creates webs of narrative and formal associations within his books that suggest and infer rather than make explicit, and this has the effect of bringing to the reader's mind an awareness of his unmentioned subject.

However, this Sebaldian performance of the sublime sets up a critique of rationality which disallows the foreclosure that constitutes the final phase of the sublime reflex. This is described by Kant as the 'subject's own incapacity reveal[ing] the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the very same subject [...] and thus the contrapurposiveness of the faculty of the imagination [...] represented as purposive for the ideas of reason and their awakening'.⁴³ Within Kant's schema, the experience of the sublime leads to the comprehension of a rationalistic absolute

⁴⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 186.

⁴¹ Weiskel, p. 28.

⁴² Michael Rothberg, 'Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge', in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 39-58 (p. 46).

⁴³ Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, pp. 142-43.

which eventually alludes to God as the widest condition of possibility for unified consciousness. Through a process termed “subreptition”, the subject redirects towards himself the awe he feels as a result of the sublime experience, with the effect of infusing the phenomenal world with an overarching purpose of beneficence which does not seem to describe Sebald’s literature well, or indeed tally with the happenings of the last two centuries. Sebald’s work, in fact, describes the precise opposite; ‘his oeuvre’, Rothberg writes, ‘demonstrates the dangers intrinsic to the alleged superiority of reason and enlightenment’.⁴⁴ The turning inward and recuperation of the Idea is lost in the ever-widening dispersals that Sebald’s books enact, and it is at this junction that these texts’ prescriptive element can be discerned. What surfaces is a critique of the corrosive Enlightenment mentality and a concept of history as a destructive series of events. As will be shown slightly further on, Sebald once again follows Benjamin in making an argument for the idea that “history” is a history of destruction, and this is what comes through in a sublime reflex which negates the ideas of totality contained in the faculty of reason.

The terrible nature of the image which flashes upwards at the prompting of the sublime, blurring the dialectical relationship between stasis and continuity, casts reason as a destructive force—and this is seen quite clearly in Sebald’s fictions. Midway through *Austerlitz*, for instance, Austerlitz himself tells the narrator of the increasing unrest in his imagination and recounts how, on his nocturnal wanderings through London, he begins to see visions of ‘what might be described as shapes and colours of diminished corporeality’.⁴⁵ For some unknown reason, Austerlitz is repeatedly drawn to Liverpool Street Station, which he describes as ‘one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld’.⁴⁶ It transpires that the site on which Liverpool Street Station is built once housed a hospital for the insane, to the West of which was a makeshift graveyard intended to remedy the grave shortage in Victorian era London. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this site and others like it were indiscriminately dug up and ‘mingled with the dust and bones of decayed bodies into a warren of putrid streets and houses for the poorest Londoners, cobbled together out of beams, clods of clay and any other building material that came to hand’.⁴⁷ These settlements and the bone-filled earth out of which they sprung were later cleared away and dumped to accommodate the development of the gargantuan London transport system. This passage in *Austerlitz* is accompanied by an image of the blueprint for Liverpool Street Station where the railway lines look ‘like the muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas,’ and it seems that Liverpool Street Station is both literally and metaphorically representative of the muscle of reason and mechanisation flexing outwards in a highly destructive gesture.⁴⁸ The rest of *Austerlitz*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *The Emigrants* are full of similar moments where Sebald explores the consequence of reason unfolding in its various shapes; the ultimate form of highly structured rational thought, then, takes a final form in the hyper-efficient, near zero waste, death camp.

⁴⁴ Rothberg, (p. 45).

⁴⁵ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 179.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Winding past and present into one another, and setting out from places and moments where the untotalisable horrors which are Sebald's true subject come closest to surfacing, these texts draw out and enact a dialectics of destruction which results in a comprehension of reason as having a destructive force at its operative centre. Within Kant's schema of the sublime, the faculties of imagination and understanding turn onto themselves and, by means of subreptition, manifest awe at the infinite totalities contained within the faculty of reason. In section 29 of *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*, Kant states that subreptition has the effect of transferring pre-figured ideas from the subject into the object.⁴⁹ This is a rational absolute, and it becomes an occasion for the moral body to recognise and contemplate a freedom ultimately rooted in God. In Sebald, however, the same reaction of subreptition gives back a principle of reason as ruinous.

The seeds of Sebald's critique of reason can be found in a three-page page fragment in *The Arcades Project*, titled *The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction*, wherein Benjamin points out that post-eighteenth century exaltation of reason is typified in the industry of iron construction. 'The beginning of the 19th C.', Benjamin writes, 'witnessed those initial experiments in iron construction whose results, in conjunction with those obtained from experiments with the steam engine, would so thoroughly transform the face of Europe by the end of the century'.⁵⁰ Quoting Alfred Gotthold Meyer, Benjamin writes that:

the heroic age of technology found its monument in the incomparable Eiffel Tower, [wherein] the plastic shaping power reseeds [...] before a colossal span of spiritual energy. [...] Here thought reigns over muscle power, which it transmits via cranes and scaffoldings.⁵¹

Benjamin is suggesting that a tacit idea of reason, exemplified by the workings of iron construction, became the dominant force in the latter centuries of the second millennium. The culmination and apex of this was the death camp, and the 'thorough transformation of the face of Europe' through mechanised warfare along with explosive economic growth driven by the consumerism that flourished in the post-War years. In both Benjamin and Sebald then, when the ideas of reason surface, construction and creation is always a companion to destruction. Sebald's exposition is all the more powerful as he manages to draw this concept out as an *experience* from a sublime reflex consequent to the experience of reading his texts.

In his Zurich lectures however, Sebald makes the same point in argumentative form and identifies the irrationality inherent to extreme forms of rationality in the thrust behind the efforts of the war industry. Looking at the 'intensive expansion of factories and production plants' and the huge amount of material and spiritual resources poured into achieving maximum destructive power during WWII, Sebald claims that this enterprise built 'such a momentum of its own that short-term corrections of course and restrictions were more or less

⁴⁹ See Immanuel Kant, 'On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World', in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 373-416 (pp. 413-14).

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 885.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 887. Meyer was a historian of iron construction.

ruled out'.⁵² In other words, the highly abstract thought figures inherent to the politics, economics, and war-planning—which guided the progression of the twentieth century—lead to a non-rational point of destruction. This demonstrates the force inherent to reason, which made any alternative impossible. Under the assumption that all humankind acted in a rational, self-preserving way, doing what was best in every situation, doing what was most productive and conducive to the preservation of the principles intuitively held by every nation, it was impossible for the World Wars not to happen. Sebald's arguments and the argumentative forms in his fictions, therefore, demonstrate the 'notorious irrationality to which rational arguments lead'.⁵³ Sebald goes on to suggest that this is telling of the architecture of human consciousness, arguing for a loosely defined "nature" as the cause of rational thought in the first place.

In the final critique of reason and rationality we see Sebald's poetics of destruction come full circle: moving from registering the inability for rational thought to represent and comprehend extremely destructive events to diagnosing the cause of that destruction, all the while, through form, effect, and content, penetrating the nebulous haze surrounding the subject of his investigation and responding to the aporetic problem. Sebald paints a pretty bleak picture of reality, and it is left up to the reader to navigate through the complexities of his argument and draw out actionable principles which could open a way forwards. In a rare moment of explicit invocation, occurring in the closing paragraph of the second Zurich lecture, Sebald quotes Benjamin's ninth thesis on the philosophy of history, featuring Paul Klee's 1920 *Angelus Novus*, and it is here, in the final key to reading Sebald's enigmatic works, that one can deduce a prescriptive element in the contours of his thought.

'This is how one pictures the angel of history', Benjamin writes in reference to Klee's painting, '[h]is face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'.⁵⁴ It seems to me that Sebald's perspective of "height" is strangely similar to that of Benjamin's *Angelus*; the subject hovers over an incomprehensible maelstrom which teeters on the edge of being something else. The vision of Benjamin's angel allows the comprehension of past and present to be combined into a potentially fruitful movement into the future. While bearing witness to loss and destruction, the *Angelus* is also in a position to act, and I would like to suggest that Sebald's witnessing of destruction and the untotalisable facets of suffering and catastrophe form the beginning of an ethics which rests on what Benjamin calls interruptive gestures. In a study on the playwright and social critic Berthold Brecht, Benjamin describes the ability for gesture to 'make [...] strange' the conditions of our everyday existence and interrupt the unexamined flow of life.⁵⁵

A gesture, which can be a movement, an image, a sound, a word, or any other performance, can cause a rupture or shock in the flow of time and rational thought when it happens out of context, thereby causing a comprehension of the conditions which make normalisation possible, by raising them from their latent state to the forefront of consciousness. Benjamin clarifies:

⁵² Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 18.

⁵³ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, pp. 245-255 (p. 249).

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), p. 18.

instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being. The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions.⁵⁶

The interruptive gesture causes a critical engagement with the conditions of one's being; the conditions of thought and reality. Sebald's sublime enacts this, and the shock to cognition which comes a result of encountering the ruin as a product and consequence of that same process of thought necessarily leads to a sense of widened responsibility and empathy—one comes to the understanding that the reasoned understanding of the world and objects in that world can also function to obliterate their essential truth by casting them within a socio-historically located discourse which levels the reality it perceives by reducing everything to extrapolations of whatever first principles are axiomatic to that particular perspective, while at the same time neglecting the possibility and validity of difference under the assumption of absolute authority. Benjamin does not seek to ground an ethics in a completion or a totality—which he recognises as essentially unattainable from within embodied subjectivity and must therefore always exist only as a rationalistic projection—but in the tiny, forgotten and overlooked details which in their uniqueness reveal the world anew. Sebald's portrayal of ruination and the experience of rationality's inability to access the essential truth of suffering, through a focus on the deluge of tiny moments, has the effect of creating this refreshed, 'estranged' view in its readers, elevating them to the perspective of the angel of history. Art moves in when reason becomes corrupted, and when wound into the concept of what Mariana Torgovnick calls 'an ethics of identification' the interruptive gesture in Sebald forms a stable foundation for an ethics which functions meaningfully in the absence of an absolute and leads to actions which are more informed, more caring, and more sensitive.⁵⁷

An ethics of identification hinges not on a perspective of exclusivity located in a crystalline structure with the self at the centre, but on a vision that incorporates 'an awareness of others as beings as important to themselves as we and ours friends and families are to us'.⁵⁸ To this I would add that Sebald's literature also injects an awareness of the fundamental inaccessibility of the subjectivity of the other, appended to a respect and acknowledgement of that lacunary realm. According to Torgovnick, identification is achieved through the process of defamiliarisation—making strange—and this can be seen in Sebald's revival of the lost and hidden minutia of experience. The consequence of this is the formation of a common foundation for understanding and empathy; an empathic awareness of other's experience in a fullness which also acknowledges its ultimate untranslatability and allows for the formation of relationships devoid of conflict based on the same principle of inaccessibility. Placing this perspective at the helm of action, and recognising the open-minded responsibility that comes with it, leads to a morality which causes a recession of the dogmatisms that deceive human beings, caught in the nightmare of reason, to convince themselves that the un-understandability in fellow beings is an alien otherness and somnambulate into mass destruction. In place of this, an ethics of destruction, based on sameness through strangeness, creates a perspective where

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the unity of all things is the operative principle. As Torgovnick elegantly puts it, '[t]here is a *generosity*, a *shining* at the core of Sebald's works', which is, in my view, what remains after the impact and shock of encountering his texts.⁵⁹

List of Works Cited

- Ankersmit, Frank, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)
- Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)
- Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999)
- , *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)
- , *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998)
- Bowie, Andrew, 'Problems of Historical Understanding in the Modern Novel' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 1979)
- Burnham, Douglas, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000)
- Eshel, Amir, 'Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in WG Sebald's *Austerlitz*', *New German Critique*, 88 (2003), 71-96
- Kant, Immanuel, 'On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World', in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 373-416
- , *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Kleinberg-Levin, David, *Redeeming Words* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013)
- Kuleshov, Lev, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, trans. and ed. by Ronald Levaco (London: University of California Press, 1974)
- Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Rothberg, Michael, 'Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge', in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 39-58 (p. 46)
- Sebald, Winfried Georg, *A Place in the Country*, trans. by Jo Catling (London: Penguin Books, 2013)
- , *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2002) Winfried Georg Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2002)

⁵⁹ Torgovnick, *The War Complex*, p. 130.

Sebald, Winfried Georg, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell, ed. by Sven Meyer (London: Penguin Books, 2005)

——, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2004)

——, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002)

——, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998)

Silverblatt, Michael, 'A Poem of an Invisible Subject', in *The Emergence of Memory*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 77-86

'Telescope: A Talk With Hitchcock', *CBC*, 1964.

<[https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Telescope: A Talk with Hitchcock \(CBC, 1964\)](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Telescope: A Talk with Hitchcock (CBC, 1964))>

[accessed 1 December 2019]

Torgovnick, Marianna, *The War Complex* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

Weiskel, Thomas, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)

Whitehead, Anne, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004)