

From the Pencil of Nature to the Natural History of Destruction



**Od olovke prirode do
prirodne povijesti destrukcije**

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SAŽETAK

Članak istražuje odnos između kategorije fotografske slike i pojma „memorijski projekt” iscrtavajući pritom historijsku transverzalnu koja povezuje prvu knjigu opremljenu fotografskim tablama *The Pencil of Nature* Williama Henryja Foxa Talbota, književni opus W. G. Sebald i kapitalno djelo Abyja Warburga *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. Polazeći od Sebaldova iskaza prema kojemu sjećanje nije ništa drugo doli citiranje i tvrdnje Kaje Silverman da fotografska slika nije ni indeks ni reprezentacija nego analogija, detektiraju se analogije između diskursa Foxa Talbota i Sebald, odnosno Warburga i Sebald, i postavlja teza da su *The Pencil of Nature* i *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* te nadasve život i djelo Waltera Benjamina opisani u Sebaldov književni opus kao citati bez navodnih znakova. Ta je teza argumentirana bilješkom iz Benjaminove kartoteke koja se odnosi na spoznajnu teoriju i koja glasi: „Ovaj rad mora maksimalno razviti umjetnost citiranja bez navodnih znakova” te zaključkom Giorgia Agambena da je najniže i najbliži pojam Benjaminove misli, pojam slike, *Bild*, pravi *terminus technicus* njegova poimanja povijesti. Susljedno tome, članak razmatra Sebaldovu aproprijaciju i operacionalizaciju Benjaminova pojma dijalektičke slike, kao i elaboraciju koncepta nekronološkog vremena kroz specifični digresivni i tangencijalni narativni postupak „pisanja slikama” koji se manifestira u umetanju reprodukcija fotografskih slika u tkivo književnog teksta i kroz virtuoznu izvedbu ekfrastičkih opisa u kojima se događaju rasprizorenja, odnosno artikulira nesvodiva razlika između povijesne istine i materijalne istine. Članak se usredotočuje na Sebaldovu internalizaciju Warburgova pojma migrirajućih motiva pri „pisanju slikama”. Nadalje, tekst argumentira tvrdnju da je Sebald maestralnom primjenom citiranja bez navodnih znakova ispisao vlastite teze o pojmu povijesti da bi ukazao na ishodišta genocidnih politika dvadesetog stoljeća u povijesti europskog kolonijalizma. Zaključno, u članku se tvrdi da su Sebaldove „prozne knjige neodređene vrste”, poput Warburgove „antropologije slika i ikonologije njihovih intervala”, inaugurirale ono što Georges Didi-Huberman naziva novim žanrom spoznaje.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

reprodukcija, reiteracija, pisanje slikama, dijalektička slika, nijemost traume, transtemporalnost, kolonijalizam, holokaust, arhiv

ABSTRACT

The article discusses *The Pencil of Nature* by William Henry Fox Talbot (1844), the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1927–1929) by Aby Warburg, and the literary opus of W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) in the context of the term “memory project.” In doing so, focusing on the relationship between words, images, and memory, Fox Talbot’s and Warburg’s works have been identified as “citations without citation marks” inscribed in Sebald’s specific narrative procedure.

KEYWORDS

reproduction, reiteration, writing with images, dialectical image, muteness of trauma, transtemporality, colonialism, Holocaust, archive

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W. G. Sebald, a writer, professor of European literature at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, and founder of the British Centre for Literary Translation, refused to call his literary works novels, referring to them instead as “prose books of an indeterminate kind.” In the text of one of these books, titled *The Emigrants* (1992), he anchored a micro-narrative on “silver poisoning, the symptoms of which were not uncommon among professional photographers.” He wrote as follows: “[T]he British Medical Association’s archives contained a description of an extreme case of silver poisoning; in the 1930s there was a photographic lab assistant in Manchester whose body had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life that he had become a kind of photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact [...] that the man’s face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed.”¹

Resisting all disciplinary and genre definitions, Sebald’s writing, existing at the intersection of poetry, novel, essay, (auto)biography, and travelogue, with a rare virtuosity of narrative trajectories, establishes distinctive relations between the world of words and the world of images. These are not manifested only in ekphrastic descriptions, but also in a specific practice of embedding images in the fabric of text. Among these reproductions, there are often photocopies of personally taken or found photographs, many of which have been carefully reframed. In one of his last public addresses, in October 2001, Sebald spoke about the reasons for this procedure of “writing with images.” Photographs, he said, preceded writing and should therefore not be excluded from the text. More importantly, he highlighted the fact that photographs held up the flow of the discourse. Since books, read from beginning to end, had almost by definition an apocalyptic structure, putting weirs in here and there, such as images, held up this inevitable calamity. He pointed out that old photographs, coming from long-forgotten boxes, often had a secret appeal and demanded that one should address the lost lives represented in them. Writing, he said, must be an attempt at the saving of souls—of course, in a completely non-religious sense.²

Addressing the subject of writing with images, which he claims to be far broader than the disciplines of art history, art theory, and art criticism, although including them at the same time, James Elkins has singled out the Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach among Sebald’s predecessors, or rather his innovative narrative procedure applied in his novel *Bruges-la-Morte* published in 1892. Speaking of the relationship between photographs and text in that first novel ever containing photographs, Elkins argues that there is a “family resemblance” between the photographs of Bruges reproduced by Rodenbach while articulating the theme of death of the protagonist’s wife and those reproduced by Sebald a hundred years later within his prose works *Vertigo* (1990) and *The Rings of Saturn* (1995).³

1 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 177.

2 Sebald, *92Y Readings*.

3 Elkins, *Writing with Images*.

4 Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1*, 1.

10 I am referring here to the theses of Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, and even Roland Barthes.

11 Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 11.

12 *Ibid.*, 12.

13 *Ibid.*, 29.

14 Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

15 Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 6.

In this text, I would like to consider another “family resemblance,” that between Sebald’s narrative procedure and the discourse of one of the inventors of photography, the English chemist, linguist, and archaeologist William Henry Fox Talbot. Shortly after the discovery of calotype, also called talbotype after him, a technique in which paper coated with silver chloride is exposed to light by means of a camera obscura, Fox Talbot published the first book containing photographic plates in 1844, calling it *The Pencil of Nature*.⁴ In the introductory remarks, he explained that the plates of which the book consisted had been created by the mere action of light upon sensitive paper; the images had been formed by optical and chemical means alone, without the aid of anyone with drawing skills. “They are impressed by Nature’s hand; and what they want as yet of delicacy and finish of execution arises chiefly from our want of sufficient knowledge of her laws.”⁵ Although in a brief historical overview of the invention of the new art he acknowledged Daguerre’s “great discovery” of which he had been unaware at the time of his experiments, Fox Talbot did not fail to point out that photography was a British discovery: “The author of the present work having been so fortunate as to discover, about ten years ago, the principles and practice of Photogenic Drawing, is desirous that the first specimen of an Art, likely in all probability to be much employed in future, should be published in the country where it was first discovered.”⁶ And elsewhere he writes: “The chief object of the present work is to place on record some of the early beginnings of a new art, before the period, which we trust is approaching, of its being brought to maturity by the aid of British talent.”⁷

The Pencil of Nature, besides the introductory remarks and a brief history of the discovery of photography, contains twenty-four plates where each photograph is accompanied by Fox Talbot’s text. The motifs in the photographs are varied, and the text ranges from a precise description of the shooting process, including the angle from which a photograph was taken, the time of day and the duration of exposure, to short essays on the history of a specific depicted building, characterized by a solid degree of fictionalization. In some plates, such as Plate III, which contains a shot of some articles of china, Plate X showing a haystack, or Plate XI, which is a photographic reproduction of a comical nineteenth-century lithograph, Fox Talbot writes about the comparative advantages of applied photography over the potency of verbal descriptions or painterly representations. From the text in Plate VI, which contains a photograph of a detail of a door left ajar, with a wicker broom leaning against the stone jamb, and the aforementioned note on the British talent, it is evident that Fox Talbot thought of photography as art. Thereby he makes reference to the “authority in the Dutch school of art” in depicting seemingly insignificant scenes: “A painter’s eye will often be arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable. A casual gleam of sunshine, or a shadow thrown across his path, a

time-withered oak, or a moss-covered stone may awaken a train of thoughts and feelings, and picturesque imaginings.”⁸

Kaja Silverman begins her book *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography* by stating that we have grown accustomed to thinking of the camera as an aggressive device, an instrument for shooting, capturing, and representing the world: “Since most cameras require an operator, which is usually a human hand that picks up the apparatus, points it in a particular direction, makes the necessary technical adjustments, and clicks the camera button, we often transfer this power to our look. The standardization of this account of photography marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of modern metaphysics—the history that began with the *cogito*, which seeks to establish man as the ‘relational center’ of all that is, and whose ‘fundamental event’ is ‘the conquest of the world as a picture.’”⁹ Through an implicit critique of Heidegger’s thought, writing his terms in quotation marks, and contrary to the opinion of many theorists of photography,¹⁰ Silverman has put forward the thesis that the photographic image is neither an index nor a representation, but an analogy. “Every analogy,” she writes, “contains both similarity and difference. Similarity is the connector, what holds two things together, and difference is what prevents them from being collapsed into one.”¹¹ By analogy she implies not only the photographic image, but also “the fluid in which it develops. This process does not begin when we decide that it should, or end when we command it to. Photography develops, rather, *with us* and *in response to us*.”¹²

Silverman states that at the time of Fox Talbot’s discovery, some commentators linked photography to self-portrait.¹³ Fox Talbot, in fact, produced many photographs by placing the object directly on a sensitized sheet of paper coated with silver chloride and exposing it to light. Thus the object in question, preventing the light from reaching the part of paper on which it was placed, literally left its own image on it, a light imprint. Fox Talbot often did this with plant leaves and even lace, which he describes in detail in Plates VII (*Leaf of a Plant*) and XX (*Lace*).¹⁴

Following the notion of photography as an analogy, I will notice the analogy between the “self-portrait of a plant leaf” and Sebald’s photographic lab assistant who, poisoned with silver, developed each time when he stepped out of the darkroom into the light. Furthermore, I will recall the seminal text *The Body and Archive* in which Allan Sekula, based on Fox Talbot’s commentary on the photograph contained in Plate III (*Articles of China*), concludes that the discourse of the author of *The Pencil of Nature* contributed to defining a new subject in the 19th century—a criminal body—and consequently to inventing a more extensive “social body.”¹⁵ For in Plate III, under the photograph showing the shelves with articles of china, Fox Talbot writes: “The more strange and fantastic the forms of his old teapots, the more advantage in having

their pictures given instead of their descriptions. And should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures—if the mute testimony of the picture were to be produced against him in court—it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind; but what the judge and the jury might say to it, is a matter I leave to the speculation of those who possess legal acumen.”¹⁶ These sentences led Sekula to the conclusion that Fox Talbot recognized a new instrumental potential in photography: silence that silences.¹⁷

In *The Body and the Archive*, Sekula actually discusses the biopolitical mission of photography in the second half of the 19th century, and the themes of biopolitics and the muteness of trauma permeate the complete literary opus of Winfried Georg Sebald. Born in 1944 in a rural part of Bavaria, Sebald left Germany in the mid-1960s and soon settled permanently in East Anglia. It was an area where British military bases were located during World War II and from which Allies’ bombers started for German cities to shell them with incendiary bombs. The reason for his emigration was the realization that many eminent professors, including some who had taught him at the University of Freiburg, built their careers during the Third Reich as supporters of National Socialism and yet suffered no consequences in the postwar period. In his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, based on a series of lectures he gave in Zurich in 1997 on the subject of silence or inadequate response of German post-war literature to the horrors of the Holocaust and the firestorms that destroyed German cities from 1942 to 1945, Sebald wrote: “[...] I had grown up with the feeling that something was being kept from me; at home, at school, and by the German writers whose books I read hoping to glean more information about the monstrous events in the background of my own life.”¹⁸ The English translation of the essay was published in his book *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

For Sebald, the natural history of destruction was an ostinato theme.¹⁹ By articulating it, he traced the origins of the 20th-century genocidal policies back to the history of European colonialism, inseparable from rationalism and industrialization. Erich Santner has derived the genealogy of Sebald’s obsession with the subject of natural history from Benjamin’s use of the term *Naturgeschichte*: “[Naturgeschichte] refers, that is, not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life (think of the process whereby architectural ruins are reclaimed by nature). [...] Natural history, as Benjamin understands it, thus points to a fundamental feature of human life, namely that the symbolic forms in and through which this life is structured can be hollowed out, lose their vitality, break up into a series of enigmatic signifiers, ‘hieroglyphs’ that in some way continue to address us—get under our psychic skin—though we no longer possess the key to their

meaning. For Benjamin, natural history ultimately names the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning, that are, for him [...] always connected to violence.”²⁰

The life and work of Walter Benjamin are permanently present in Sebald’s literary oeuvre, in which they are inscribed as “citations without citation marks.” Analysing Benjamin’s fifth thesis on the concept of history,²¹ Giorgio Agamben has concluded that the term image or *Bild*, one of the most enigmatic concepts in Benjamin’s thought, is the true *terminus technicus* of his concept of history.²² He thereby considers as crucial one of the comments from Benjamin’s index cards containing notes on a theory of consciousness, where he wrote: “This work should fully develop the art of citing without citation marks.” Agamben therefore concluded that citation serves a strategic function in Benjamin’s writing: “Just as through citation a secret meeting takes place between past generations and ours, so too between the writing of the past and the present a similar kind of meeting transpires; citations function as go-betweens in this encounter. It is therefore not surprising that they must be discrete and know how to perform their work incognito.”²³ The writing of W. G. Sebald likewise fully developed the art of citing without citation marks. In doing so, it has written its own theses on the concept of history by permanently focusing on the vertiginous difference between material truth and historical truth. Sebald perfectly operationalized Benjamin’s notion of dialectical image²⁴ by rejecting the historicist concept of universal history, that is, history as something that can be narrated.²⁵ He, like Benjamin, saw culture as “the inventory of the spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished.”²⁶

I will now return to the analogy between Fox Talbot’s pencil of nature and Sebald’s natural history of destruction, bearing in mind that every analogy “contains both similarity and difference,” whereby “similarity is the connector, what holds two things together, and difference is what prevents them from being collapsed into one.”

The first sentence in the first plate of *The Pencil of Nature* heralds in a way what Benjamin would come to consider in terms of natural history in the first decades of the 20th century. Under a photographic image of one of the front façades of Queen’s College in Oxford, Fox Talbot wrote: “The building presents on its surface the most evident marks of the injuries of time and weather, in the abraded state of the stone, which probably was of a bad quality originally.”²⁷ The monumental main portal of Queen’s College appears in Table XIII (*Queen’s College, Oxford, Entrance Gateway*), where in the accompanying text the author pointed out the need to carefully examine the photograph with a magnifying glass, such as elderly persons frequently employ in reading. A lot of minute details, writes Fox Talbot, escape the photographer himself, so that upon examining the photograph through a large

lens later on, he realizes that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. This explicitly self-reflexive observation anticipates what Walter Benjamin would call the optically unconscious ninety years later.²⁸

Motifs from Oxford, a symbol of British knowledge that is power (economic and political, i.e. colonial) are the subject matter of two other plates: XVIII (*Gate of Christchurch*) and XXI (*The Martyrs' Monument*), and the plates reproducing photographs of the Lacock Abbey have an analogous function in *The Pencil of Nature*. These are Tables XV (*Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire*), XVI (*Cloisters of Lacock Abbey*), and XIX (*The Tower of Lacock Abbey*). Fox Talbot's text in Plate XV begins with the statement that it is one of the views representing his country seat in Wiltshire and continues: "In my first account on the 'Art of Photogenic Drawing,' read to the Royal Society in January, 1839, I mentioned this building as being the first 'that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture.' It was in the summer of 1835 that these curious self-representations were first obtained. Their size was very small: indeed, they were but miniatures, though very distinct: and the shortest time of making them was nine or ten minutes."²⁹ The photograph that he explicitly calls the self-representation of a building, seen in the context of his text, becomes a kind of *mise en abyme*, since a mirrored, inverted image of the monastery building can be seen in the foreground upon the calm surface of standing water.

In the next, sixteenth plate, under a photograph of the *Cloisters of Lacock Abbey*, Fox Talbot's text touches on nothing related to the new art of "photogenic drawing." Instead of the expected "technical details," he tells the story of Countess Ela of Salisbury, founder of the abbey and its first abbess in the 13th century, who was also buried in its cloister. Citing a Latin epitaph from her tomb, Fox Talbot's narrative turns to a fictionalization reminiscent of a 19th-century historical novel: "Here, I presume, the holy sisterhood often paced in silent meditation; though, in truth, they left but a few records to posterity to tell us how they lived and died. The 'liber de Lacock' is supposed to have perished in the fire of the Cottonian library. What it contained I know not—perhaps their private memoirs. Some things, however, have been preserved by tradition, or discovered by the zeal of antiquaries, and from these materials the poet Bowles has composed an interesting work, the *History of Lacock Abbey*, which he published in 1835."³⁰

Fox Talbot's essayized history of the Lacock Abbey continues in Plate XIX, which contains a photograph of its tower. We learn that in this fort, built in the Elizabethan period, an invaluable treasure was kept—the original Magna Carta of King Henry III, transmitted to the "illustrious Ela" as the sheriff of the Wiltshire county. The inventor of photography also considered it necessary to tell that from the parapet wall of this building, three centuries before, Olive Sherington, the heiress of Lacock, threw herself into the arms of her lover John Talbot, a gallant gentleman of Worcestershire and cousin of the Earl of Shrewsbury. The

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Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

17

Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 6.

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Sebald, "Air War and Literature," 70.

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Sebald's literary study on the absence of the theme of destruction of German cities in German postwar literature has been published in English as "Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction," in: *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

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Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, 16–17.

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Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390–391.

22

Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, 141.

23

Ibid., 139.

24

Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'," 403.

25

Ibid., 406.

26

Ibid., 406–407.

27

Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

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Cf. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "A Short History of Photography."

29

Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

30

Ibid.

impact made him fall to the ground and lie lifeless for a while, while the lady just broke a finger. Fox Talbot's comment on this story is intriguing: "Unwritten tradition in many families has preserved ancient stories which border on the marvellous, and it may have embellished the tale of this lover's leap by an incident belonging to another age. For I doubt the story of the broken finger, or at least that Olive was its rightful owner. Who can tell what tragic scenes may not have passed within these walls during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? The spectre of a nun with a bleeding finger long haunted the precincts of the abbey, and has been seen by many in former times, though I believe that her unquiet spirit is at length at rest. And I think tale of Olive has borrowed this incident from that of a frail sister of earlier days."³¹

Although Fox Talbot explicitly states in his introductory remarks that the need for greater delicacy and finish of execution arises chiefly from our want of sufficient knowledge of nature's laws, his words accompanying each of the photographs allow for the conclusion that *The Pencil of Nature* was what one would nowadays characterize as a memory project. And Sebald's literary opus is a memory project as well. Unlike *The Pencil of Nature*, which also honoured British history and culture with its discovery of the "new art of photogenic drawing," Sebald's persistent literary performance of detecting the milestones of the "natural history of destruction," echoing with Benjamin's ekphrastic description of Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus*, sees history as an uninterrupted sequence of catastrophes. In his "prose books of an indeterminate kind," from which "black and white photographs that come from long-forgotten boxes" emerge in the middle of the text, words do not describe images, because history is lived as a trauma, and trauma is mute. Unlike with Fox Talbot, in Sebald's digressive, transtemporal narrative texture stories do not clarify; instead, by tangential circumvention they amplify the silence of the "mute testimony" of photographic images. In the corpus of literature about Sebald, the term "spectral presence"³² has become commonplace, but this presence, marked by enigmatic signifiers manifested in the appearances of reproduced photographs embedded in the prose text, is something completely different from Fox Talbot's spectre of a nun with a bleeding finger.

I am convinced that Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* is inscribed in Sebald's memory project as a citation without citation marks. However, in the process of citing, during a reiteration that necessarily re-contextualizes a particular photographic (or literary) genre, conditionally speaking, the performative effect of the cited motif changes. Photographs of architectural edifices that appear in the vagueness of deliberately low reproductive resolution amidst the digressive stories of Sebald's transpersonal narrator, whose voice is in fact an echo of many voices silenced by trauma, are deprived of an honouring perspective and thus indeed articulate the spectral presence.

31

Ibid.

32

On "spectral presence" as one of the main features of Sebald's writing, see Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*.

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Sebald, Tripp, "As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp," 93.

34

Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 125.

35

Benjamin, "Paralipomena..." 403.

36

Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 258.

37

Ibid., 140.

38

Ibid., 120.

39

Ibid., 139.

40

Ibid., 9.

41

Ibid., 10.

42

Ibid., 29.

Muteness. In an essay on the painter Jan Peter Tripp, Sebald wrote: “Remembrance, after all, in essence is nothing other than a quotation. And the quotation incorporated in a text (or painting) by montage compels us—so Eco writes—to probe our knowledge of the world. This, in turn, takes time. By spending it, we enter into time recounted and into the time of culture.”³³ Sebald’s writing procedure, with its interference between words and images, disenacts that narrated time which is historiography. In *The Rings of Saturn*, he writes that the art of representing history requires the falsification of perspective.³⁴ Disenactments of this narrated time take place through the key figure in Sebald’s discourse—the dialectical image, which Benjamin defined as the “involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.”³⁵

In Sebald’s insistence on probing one’s knowledge of the world by recalling or montaging citations, I find support for the claim that the seminal work of Aby Warburg, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, was likewise incorporated into his literary memory project as a citation without citation marks. Significantly, there is no mention of either Warburg or Fox Talbot in any of Sebald’s literary texts or academic papers known to me. I will therefore borrow Agamben’s formulation and say that it was a “a secret meeting between the past and the present” in which citations of Fox Talbot’s photographic themes and Warburg’s groundbreaking idea of migrating motifs “were discrete and performed their work incognito.” Sebald’s character Austerlitz says something analogous to Agamben’s assertion: “And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?”³⁶

As a four-year-old Jewish boy, Austerlitz came with the so-called *Kindertransport* from occupied Prague to England, where his adoptive parents changed his name and kept his origin secret. With “little practice in using my memory” and “avoiding everything that related in any way to my unknown past,” throughout his life he learns to look by photographing. He says of himself: “I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory.”³⁷ As a researcher of the history of architecture and civilization, a professor who took early retirement “because of the inexorable spread of ignorance even to the universities,”³⁸ he admits the following: “Inconceivable as it seems to me today, I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped, or at least, what I did know was not much more than a salesgirl in a shop, for instance, knows about the plague or cholera. As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that,

although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time.”³⁹

These shadows of the catastrophic events are epitomized by the Antwerp Central Station and its waiting room with the iconic name *Salle des pas perdus*, where the narrator first encounters Austerlitz photographing its darkened mirrors with an old-fashioned camera with telescopic bellows. One of the pages of the book reproduces a very dark, almost black square-format photograph showing the interior of the sixty-meter-high dome in that monumental building, taken from below. On the same page, there is a much smaller photograph, likewise square-format, showing a building in flames from a distance and taken from the upper angle. From a digression in the narrative text, it is possible to assume that it was the fire that the narrator personally witnessed in 1971, and in which the dome of the Lucerne train station burned down. The relationship between these two photographs is established by what the architectural historian Austerlitz tells the narrator: the dome of the Antwerp Central Station was modelled on the dome of the railway station in Lucerne, whose monumentality impressed King Leopold II of Belgium so much that he sent his architect Delacenserie to study it. Leopold decided to spend the wealth accumulated in a short period of time by the colonial exploitation of the African continent “to erect public buildings, which would bring international renown to his aspiring state.”⁴⁰ Delacenserie’s project was inspired by the Roman Pantheon and “borrowed the main elements of his monumental structure from the palaces of the Italian Renaissance, but he also struck Byzantine and Moorish notes,” so that “even today, said Austerlitz, exactly as the architect intended, when we step into the entrance hall we are seized by a sense of being beyond the profane, in a cathedral consecrated to international traffic and trade.”⁴¹

The course of the narrative then turns to the Belgian fortress of Breendonk, where in 1940 the Germans set up a concentration camp in which Jean Améry was tortured, among others. Sebald incorporated the floor plans of Breendonk and several photographs of the fort’s exterior, interior, and the surrounding landscape into the text, followed by a photograph of the Palace of Justice in Brussels, described as a building of “singular architectural monstrosity.” According to Austerlitz, it is “the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe,” inside which “there are corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority.”⁴²

Austerlitz was Sebald’s last literary work, published in 2001. It clearly articulates an analogy between the unimaginable crimes committed in the late 19th century in Belgian Congo and those committed in German concentration

camps during the Third Reich. However, the itinerary leading from Congo to Auschwitz had been traced previously, in Sebald's prose work *The Rings of Saturn*, published in 1995, which he subtitled "An English Pilgrimage." Sebald devoted the fifth chapter of the book to the subject of genocide in Congo, in which tens of millions of Congolese, treated like slaves, were killed during the existence of the so-called the Free State of Congo, essentially a private colony personally ruled by King Leopold II of Belgium. The area of Congo had been ceded to the self-proclaimed philanthropist Leopold, who "brought the benefits of Christianity, Western civilization, and commerce to African natives"⁴³ in 1885, by the conclusions of the Berlin Conference defining the spheres of interest of European colonial powers in Africa. He began to amass enormous wealth through ivory trade and then focused on the exploitation of caoutchouc after the rise in rubber prices during the 1890s. In the labour camps that he established for this purpose, not only adults were mutilated who, according to the supervisor, did not work fast enough, but also children. Children and adolescents with severed fists and feet are a regular motif in photographs taken by Belgian photographers at the turn of the 20th centuries, and postcards sent from Congo to Europe at the time included portraits of exotic "savages" with the primary goal to visually verify the racial superiority of the colonizers. Only fifty years separate Leopold's Free State of the Congo from Hitler's death camps, with their *Arbeit macht frei* inscriptions looming over the entrances.

Belgian crimes against humanity in Congo became known as early as 1903, due to a report by the British Consul Roger Casement, whose photographic portrait opens the fifth chapter of Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*. Casement was decorated in 1905 for his report on the situation in Congo, but executed in 1916 for high treason, as he was one of the leaders of the Easter Uprising aimed at liberating Ireland from British colonial rule and establishing the Republic of Ireland. Sebald writes: "The images of this film, many of which were taken from rare archive footage, immediately captivated me; but nonetheless, I fell asleep in the green velvet armchair I had pulled up to the television. As my waking consciousness ebbed away, I could still hear every word of the narrator's account of Casement with singular clarity, but was unable to grasp their meaning. And when I emerged hours later, from the depths of a dream, to see in the first light of dawn the test card quivering in the silent box, all I could recall was that the programme had begun with an account of Casement's meeting with the writer Joseph Conrad in the Congo. Conrad considered Casement the only man of integrity among the Europeans whom he had encountered there, and who had been corrupted partly by the tropical climate and partly by their own rapaciousness and greed."⁴⁴

Coming back to Kaja Silverman's claim that it is not only the photographic image that is analogy, but also the fluid in which it develops, so that consequently a photograph develops with us and in response to us, I will indicate some more analogies between Fox Talbot's and Sebald's motifs. I will thereby juxtapose the abovementioned Plate III, which, in addition to the photograph of various articles of china, contains the author's suggestion of the possibility of using photography in criminology, with three photographs from the prose work *Austerlitz* showing an antiques shop in Terezín, a fortified town in the Czech Republic that was transformed into a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Photographs of the shop window, which seem grotesque considering the place where it was located, may have been taken by Sebald himself, because a reflection of the photographer in the glass is vaguely discernible in one of them. The first reproduced photograph is a wide shot showing the huge inscription "Antikos Bazar," extending over the entrance and all the four shop windows. The second and third photographs show parts of the shop window in which the image of the exhibited antiques, including porcelain figures, merges with the vegetation and architecture behind the photographer's back, reflected in the shop window glass. This process of zooming from wide shot to detail reminds me of Fox Talbot's description of a photographer who only later, with the help of a magnifying glass, discovers something he did not notice at all while shooting. I would say that Sebald, while framing the scene, was fully aware of both the spectral reflection of the environment and his own image in the shop window selling items that belonged to those who no longer were. These items were silent testimonies of some lost lives. Paraphrasing Fox Talbot, I will say that the photographer's, or writer's eye was "arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable" and that something awakened "a train of thoughts and feelings" in him. The voice of Sebald's narrator utters the words in which Austerlitz describes the flow of his thoughts in front of the window with a porcelain figurine of a horseman rescuing a young girl: "They were all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils, and mementoes stranded in the Terezín bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them. [...] I finally walked on, going up and down a few streets until suddenly, on the northeast corner of the town square, I found myself outside the so-called Ghetto Museum, which I had overlooked before."⁴⁵ Ninety pages later, over an entire double page of the book, Sebald reproduced a photograph of the Terezín registry office. The arrangement of files on shelves that run along all the walls from floor to ceiling makes me recall the photograph of a bookshelf from Plate VIII (*A Scene in a Library*), in which, describing a hypothetical experiment with a sunlight refracting prism, Fox Talbot writes: "[...] the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness."⁴⁶

The photograph of the Terezín registry office is anchored in a narrated meeting in Paris, during which Austerlitz explains to the narrator that by the decision of the French President Mitterrand the new Bibliothèque nationale de France was built on the site of a huge warehouse where during the war Germans deposited the looted property of Parisian Jews: “The most valuable items, of course, were not sent off wholesale to the bombed cities, and no one will now admit to knowing where they went, for the fact that the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President’s Grande Bibliothèque.”⁴⁷ Photographs of this library named after François Mitterrand, today the largest in the world, are embedded in Sebald’s textual weaving, which, among other things, contains the following sentences: “The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described, so Lemoine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past.”⁴⁸ It is, of course, the process of constructing historical memory, in which remembrance is often erased. This process also necessarily implies the question of archives.

The spectral presence that defines the weft of Sebald’s literary works is a topic that Jacques Derrida stratigraphically examined in his lecture given at the conference on *Memory: The Question of Archives* held in February 1994 at Freud’s house in London, later published under the title *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.⁴⁹ It is a study in which the implantation of a transpersonal discourse analogous to Sebald’s narrative procedure tangentially concerns the person and work of Sigmund Freud. Derrida argues that the archive “takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the memory”⁵⁰ and that its structure “is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met.”⁵¹ He recalls that the *arkhe* names at once the commencement and the commandment, and that the name apparently coordinates two principles in one—the ontological principle (of the physical or historical beginning) and the nomological principle (according to the law, commandment, where authority and social order are exercised, from which order is given). The concept of the archive, he says, shelters in itself this memory of the name *arkhe*, sheltering itself from this memory which it shelters, which comes down to saying that it also forgets it. Derrida notes that the word “archive” comes from the Greek *arkheion*, which initially referred to a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The archons, he continues, were first of all the documents’ guardians, but they also had the power to interpret the archives, and he concludes that there is no political power without controlling the archive, if not memory as such.⁵²

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“Leopold II king of Belgium” [Adam Hochschild], *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

44

Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 103–104.

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Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 197.

46

Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*.

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Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 289.

48

Ibid., 286.

49

Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.”

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Ibid., 14.

51

Ibid., 54.

52

Ibid., 9–11.

Resisting the control of memory, that is, of “conquering the world as an image,” Sebald’s Austerlitz plays the game of patience with photographs: “Apart from what seemed to me a curiously elongated, old-fashioned ottoman, the front room, into which Austerlitz took me first, had nothing in it but a large table, also varnished matt gray, with several dozen photographs lying on it, most of them dating quite a long way back and rather worn at the edges. Some of the pictures were already familiar to me, so to speak: pictures of empty Belgian landscapes, stations and Métro viaducts in Paris, the palm house in the Jardin des Plantes, various moths and other night-flying insects, ornate dovecotes, Gerald Fitzpatrick on the airfield near Quy, and a number of heavy doors and gateways. Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the gray tabletop, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman.”⁵³

In Austerlitz’s game of patience, just like, after all, in the disenacting transversals of Sebald’s unique literary procedure, I recognize a citation, of course without the citation marks, from the *Bilderaltas Mnemosyne*, a work in progress that Aby Warburg composed from February 1927 until his death in October 1929. In individual *Atlas* plates, images of various provenances are placed together because of a certain “family resemblance,” sometimes difficult to discern at first glance. Warburg covered wooden panels measuring 150 × 200 cm with black Hessian, on which he pinned groups of images (photo-reproductions, photographs, postcards, diagrams, sketches, newspaper clippings, advertisements). All these types of images are also embedded in Sebald’s prose. But unlike Sebald’s “medium”—the book, which does not allow spatial reconfiguration of its content after printing—Warburg constantly rearranged the images on his plates, so that the selection, the number of plates, and the arrangement of images were constantly changing. During the creation of the *Atlas*, the plates were photographed three times; in May, August, and September 1928. The last, and therefore the best-known series, consisting of 63 plates with a total of 971 pictorial elements, was photographed after Warburg’s death.⁵⁴

Warburg defined the history of images as a “history of ghosts for big people.”⁵⁵ The subject of his interest was the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of images. In Sebald’s sentences describing the experience of developing photographs in a darkroom, I find an analogy with Warburg’s search for the afterlife of images: “In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz,

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Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 118–119.

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The information has been taken from the website of the Warburg Institute in London.

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Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*, 197.

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Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 77.

57

Sebald, “Le promeneur solitaire: On Robert Walser,” 149.

58

Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*, 158.

59

Ibid., 11.

60

Ibid., 229.

61

Ibid., 210.

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Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 93–94.

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by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long.”⁵⁶

In interpreting Warburg’s seminal and unfinished work, Georges Didi-Huberman pays special attention to photographs from his war file (*Kriegskartothek*), a collection of photographs taken between 1914 and 1918, emphasizing that Warburg started working on his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* after leaving the mental hospital in 1924. Horrified and powerless at the extent of war destruction, he suffered a mental breakdown on November 2, 1918, threatening his family and himself with a revolver, and was urgently hospitalized. This detail from his biography leads me to recognize an analogy with Sebald’s favourite writer, Robert Walser, who, although by no means aggressive, spent most of his life in asylums. In an essay on Walser in which he reproduced photographic portraits from all periods of the writer’s life, placing them in relation to photographs from his own childhood in which he posed with his grandfather, Sebald admitted that it was due to Walser that he slowly learned to grasp how everything was connected across space and time.⁵⁷ That, of course, was also Warburg’s conclusion.

Referring to Warburg as the founder of the anthropology of images and the iconology of their intervals, Didi-Huberman argues that, according to Warburg, the history of images must be thought of as a history of a tragedy.⁵⁸ The *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, he concludes, inaugurated a new genre of knowledge.⁵⁹ The atlas “did not seek, however, to clarify art history, but rather to make it more complex, if not to darken it, by superposing onto it a foliated cartography of memory, or a complex geology of survivals. [...] By redoubling art history with a ‘psycho-historical’ point of view on the memory of images—images understood as memory functions—Aby Warburg smashed the disciplinary boundaries that still separated the *Kunstgeschichte* from a philosophically constructed *Kulturwissenschaft*, and where the *Mnemosyne* atlas fulfilled its role of conceptual apparatus.”⁶⁰

The micro-narrative in which Austerlitz played a game of patience with photographs, including shots of moths and other night-flying insects, undoubtedly points to the fact that the life and work of Aby Warburg are inscribed in Sebald’s literary oeuvre as citations without the citation marks. Warburg’s doctor wrote in his notebook that Warburg became agitated at night, when moths, attracted by light, flew into his room. Convinced that the guard would kill him, he did not sleep, but confided his pain to the moths, calling them little creatures that had a soul, and worried that they had nothing to eat, he gave them milk and a linden leaf that he had picked during his walk.⁶¹ Moths are also

a leitmotif in Sebald’s prose work *Austerlitz*. A photograph of one of these little creatures is framed by these words: “But I always found what Alphonso told us at that time about the life and death of moths especially memorable, and of all creatures I still feel the greatest awe for them. [...] I believe, said Austerlitz, they know they have lost their way, since if you do not put them out again carefully they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grief even after death, held fast by the tiny claws that stiffened in their last agony, until a draft of air detaches them and blows them into a dusty corner. Sometimes, seeing one of these moths that have met their end in my house, I wonder what kind of fear and pain they feel while they are lost. As Alphonso had told him, said Austerlitz, there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life.”⁶²

The *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, opened in 1926 in Hamburg, was a central place for interdisciplinary research in the humanities during the Weimar Republic. Its founder did not live to see the coming to power of the National Socialists and the pogrom of Jews, although he had suspected it. His associates closed the Warburg Haus in 1933 and moved the library to London. The library thus became an emigrant, and emigrants are the big theme of emigrant W. G. Sebald.*

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