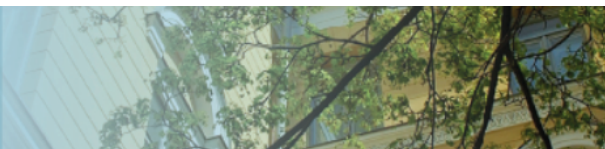


Language and the Scientific Imagination
The 11th International Conference of ISSEI
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)
28 July – 2 August 2008



Memory Transmission and Barthes' Concept of Photography in *The Emigrants* by W. G. Sebald

The main topic that underlies the work of the German writer and journalist W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) is memory: his journalistic and literary works all deal in some way or another with the issues of individual and collective memory and memory transmission. What connects many of Sebald's writings on a structural level is his signature combination of the written text with visual material, specifically photographs. "The writer's curse is that he doesn't work with tangible matter of any kind, and this is a little device that helps," noted Sebald in an interview about the role of photography in his writing process.¹ Photography, which Sebald rather modestly called "a little device," occupies considerable space in his literary and journalistic work. This has been discussed in numerous studies on the visual aspect of his writings since the appearance of his first novel, *Schwingel. Gefühle* (1990).² Sebald used photography in all his fiction works (*The Rings of Saturn*, 1995, *Austerlitz*, 2001) as well as in his non-fiction works, of which *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999) is the best known. Sebald's non-fiction works, with their relatively loose connection between journalistic text and photographs, hardly fit into the framework of typical photo reportage or illustrated texts. Even if one considers their visual aspect as fulfilling an illustrative function, Sebald's incorporation of photography into his fiction brings forth a set of questions, particularly regarding the connection of the

textual and the visual aspects, as well as the relationship between the photographs and the fictional characters.

Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen (The Emigrants. Four long Narratives, 1992),³ the work which brought the writer a worldwide reputation (to some extent thanks to its English translation by Michael Hulse⁴), is the second literary work in which Sebald uses photographic material. Two studies that deal specifically with the use of the photographic material in the book, Stefanie Harris's "The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*"⁵ and Silke Horstkotte's "Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*"⁶, stress the close connection of the photographs to the narration and their interaction with the literary text. The two articles examine the relationship of the written text and the photographs through the analysis of the topics and motifs of Sebald's text, focusing in particular on the connection of the photographs with the notion of death suggested by the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915-1980) in his book *La chambre claire*.⁷ Horstkotte proceeds from "indexing the nature" of photography and regards the imbedded images in Sebald's text as symbols or emblems for the indirect representation of the narrative's Holocaust theme.⁸ Harris investigates Barthes' connection of the photography with death and examines the motif that she calls "the return of the dead and our relationship to the dead."⁹

The topic of my paper is also an analysis of the function of photography in *The Emigrants*, but its focus lies on the aspect of narration. Thus, I present neither a thematic analysis of the text nor a detailed analysis of the individual photographs Sebald used, but

rather concentrate on the narrative technique he applies to address the transmission of memory. I argue that the interaction between the text and the photographs constitutes the means of memory transmission, which is of crucial importance for the figure of the narrator and also provides the reader with insights into the persona of the author himself. In support of my argument I will analyze the Barthesian model of photography and its necessary modifications to reflect the implications of embedding photographs into a fictional text.

The four narratives of *The Emigrants* are thematically and structurally connected through the figure of the narrator. The facts of his biography are not expounded systematically, but from various separate mentions, as well as from many detailed descriptions, it can be deduced that he, although not equated with Sebald himself, closely resembles the author in many respects: he is, like Sebald himself, a German intellectual who occupies himself with literature, is married, and, at the time of the narration, has been living in England for many years.

The topic of the individual narratives is the representation of the lives of four persons—Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, and Max Aurach—which the narrator bases on information collected in personal conversations, while visiting the places where they had lived, and through the study of various documents. The reason for the narrator's interest in the life of these four individuals and his motivation for researching their biographies, even if never explicitly formulated, seems to lie in the

common fates he and the protagonists of the stories share: all of them, at different times and for different reasons, left their homelands and settled in foreign countries.

What started for the narrator as a coincidental encounter or re-encounter with the protagonists of the stories—a chance meeting while taking a walk, searching for a house, reading an obituary, or looking at photographs in a family album—eventually develops into a deep interest on the part of the narrator in the lives of the others, compelling him to write. In the process of writing the narrator internalizes the memories of the others through the investigation of his own memories. He then, in turn, passes these on to the reader. In this process of memory transmission, the others become closer to the narrator and thus to the reader. The latter lose their status as a stranger, while their memories are re-lived by the narrator and become part of his experience. In his search for tangency points between his own story and the lives of the others, the narrator departs from his “own very fond memories” and joins them with the stories of the others, which results in a sense of relatedness, sympathy and understanding, i.e., in a connection of his own memories with those of the others. A particular means for establishing this connection is photography.

It seems to have become the tradition in the analysis of Sebald’s works to apply the concepts of Roland Barthes, who in his last book, *La chambre claire* (1980), attempted to unveil the essence of photography (“découvrir l’essence de la photographie”), which he sees as a special medium associated neither with art (visual arts or film) nor with the written text. If photography can be related to some artistic genre, then it should be,

according to Barthes, theatre, whose roots show certain commonalities with photography in regard to the ancient cult of the dead. Otherwise, an attempted connection of photography to some other sign system (e. g., art or language) would negate, according to Barthes, the unique, magic qualities of the medium as an “emanation of the past reality” (“*émanation du réel passé: une magie, non un art*”, 138). Thus, photography is for Barthes a unique phenomenon to be studied without connection to other sign systems: “*une image sans code*” (138).

In the production and the effect of a photograph, Barthes differentiates three entities: the *operator* (the photographer), the *spectator* (the viewer of the photography) and the *spectrum* (the photographed object; with this term Barthes connects simultaneously to the notion of death and that of theater). The triad of entities suggested by Barthes is only possible if the photographs are seen as such, i.e. as non-coded images in isolation and without any context, in which they could be embedded. The latter is to be understood not as the cultural context, of which no photograph can be completely free and on which Barthes bases his concept of *studium*—the primary general interest in the picture, which is based on the cultural background of the viewer. Rather, it exists as the context of a narration to which an embedded photograph would refer, as is the case in Sebald’s *The Emigrants*. The integration of the photograph into a text (a story, a narrative) brings one more entity into play: the agency that accomplishes this integration. This figure tells the story and shows the photographs to the *spectator*. This *narrator/demonstrator* has control over the choice and manner of presentation of the photographs. The photographs, which may belong to the *narrator/demonstrator*, are often connected to his memories, which he

shares with the *listener/reader/spectator*. The *narrator/demonstrator* is neither necessarily the photographer (*operator*), the subject/object presented in the photograph (*spectrum*), nor the only viewer of the pictures (*spectator*), but has a strong inner connection to the photographs, which he expresses through his decision to save them, to embed them into the story he is telling, and to show them while telling this history. Through his memories and through his gesture of showing, the photographs become coded and transmitted to the *listener/reader/spectator* as coded images contextualized in the story being told.

The *narrator/demonstrator* can be the keeper of the family album, who shows the guest the photographs and tells the family history; or he can be a writer, who embeds the photographs into a text he creates. In Sebald's book, several figures perform the function of the *narrator/demonstrator*. In the first narrative it is Dr. Selwyn, who shows the narrator the pictures from his trip to Crete and tells the narrator about it (25). In the second narrative it is Mme. Lindau, who shows the narrator a "large-sized photo album, in which not only the time in question, but... almost the entire life of Paul Bereyter is photographically documented," as well as Paul Bereyter himself, who had annotated the album „with his own hand“ (68). In the third narrative, the function of the *narrator/demonstrator* is performed by Aunt Fini, who tells the life story of the grand-uncle of the storyteller, Ambros Adelwarth, using his postal card album, which she keeps affectionately in „one of her bedroom drawers“ (114). In the fourth part it is Max Aurach, who refers to the photographs, which the narrator later takes over into his own story (255).

However, the most prominent figure, the one who performs this gesture of showing, is the narrator himself. It is he who has collected the photographs and who now tells the story to the reader. The way the photographs are presented in the text, as well as the references to them and their descriptions within the text, do not leave any doubt to the reader that the photographs are an integral part of the text produced by the narrator. In other words, the photographs are not an external element added by the author, a publisher, or an illustrator, but rather represent the intention of a fictional character. That makes both the selection and the use of the photographs a part of the characterization of the figure of the narrator. The seeming lack of a system in the presentation of the visual material, the diversity and heterogeneity of the photographs and their sources, and their purely associative connections to each other and to the text make the reader follow the narrator's chain of thoughts and associations and at the same time make the fictional text appear authentic.

The *narrator's* gesture of showing, which is directed toward the reader, is the expression of his desire to pass on his own memories by showing and watching at the same time. In this act of joint contemplation the photographs do not take over the function of the narration (they do not tell the story by themselves), but rather produce the connection to the reality being told, something that is crucial to the *demonstrator*. This reference to reality does not occur here, as with Barthes' isolated photograph, between the photographer, the viewer, and the object shown, but rather is led by the narration. The *narrator/demonstrator* connects the visual and the linguistic modes of representation through his memories.

The combination of the linguistic and visual aspects creates a special effect that reflects the process of memory formation. The linear structure of the narration brings the story to life for the *reader/listener*, at least for the moment of reading/hearing. It evokes in the *reader/listener* images, associations and emotions, which he can experience in the present of the narrated time. The photography, however, with Barthes' noema "ça a été" ("that has been" 148) always re-establishes some moment in the past. Thus, it always brings the viewer back from the imagined past into the present of reading/listening/looking. The combination of these two opposite tendencies in the mechanism of perception resembles the process of memory, in which one's experiences are evoked from the past, re-experienced imaginatively in the present, while at the same time felt as no longer being in the present.

For Barthes, a single photograph is always an expression of "passé absolu de la prose (aoriste)" (150). However, the descriptive tense of the narration—(imparfait = "présent dans le passé," present in the past), which is neither connected to the moment of the narration nor completed in the past—is brought into the narration through the photographs. The photographs, which would otherwise contain, according to Barthes, a reference to the present and thus mark a separation from it, are brought to life in the narration because they contain the deictic reference to the "now" of the story being told. As soon as the photographs become part of a narration, the Barthesian noema of the photography "ça a été" ("that has been") gives way to the concept "ça était" ("it was [being]"). It is the narration that liberates the photography from the Barthesian shade of death and brings it back to life, at least for the moment of the narration.

The language of the narration is linear and the narrative proceeds in one direction: information moves from the source (remembering person) to the receiver (listener/reader), who receives this information, compares it with his own experiences, and adopts it in one form or another into his own memory. Thus, linguistic memory transmission always implies a border between the experiences of the narrator (remembering source) and the listener (receiver of information). This process of sharing memories does not produce a shared memory, which has to be based on a common experience. Language alone cannot substitute for experience. The experience does not, however, need to be an experience as *aventure* in the Barthesian sense, since not all photographs have a *punctum* (a detail that appeals to each viewer personally). It can be an experience of common contemplation that puts the *narrator/demonstrator* and the *listener/spectator* on the same side relative to the photograph: they look at the same picture from a similar vantage point and this experience of common contemplation becomes their shared experience. This shared experience creates the effect of participation and of genuine sharing of common memories through which both parties are enriched. In this, the narrator assures that his memories are being passed on in a form which would be the closest to his experiences, while the *listener/spectator* gains insight into the thoughts and associations of the *narrator/demonstrator*. He can reflect upon what the *narrator/demonstrator* found interesting in a particular photograph, why he has kept it, and why he includes it in his story. The *listener/spectator* can also consider if he sees the photograph in a similar way to the *narrator/demonstrator's*.

Sebald's *The Emigrants* can be viewed as a model for the formation of collective memory, in which individual memories become part of the world view shared by many members of a community. The individual memory, i. e. a person's recollection of their past experiences, does not require a sign system; one does not need a language in order to remember. The formation of the collective memory, however, always requires a coded form of information transmission for the mediation between the individual memories, which must be mutually accessible. The adequacy or sufficiency of the language to fulfill this task has long been questioned (primarily since Adorno), especially in the context of passing traumatic memories. The visual form of photography, although not undisputed in terms of its reliability, presents, if not an alternative, then an additional means for memory transmission.

The embedding of photography into a fictional text can also provide the reader a fruitful insight into the persona of the author. As does his narrator, Sebald goes beyond the usual function of the writer by embedding photographs into its text. He is now not only the mediator of the information about himself and the figures and events about which he writes, but also moves himself closer to the reader through the inviting gesture of showing. By sharing his own memories in an act of joint contemplation, he appeals to the experiences of the latter. This opens a new dimension for the transmission of memory, one that could hardly be possible by using either the text or the photographs on their own.

Alexander E. Pichugin

University of Pennsylvania

Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures

28 Hiram Square

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1270

USA

pichugin@sas.upenn.edu

¹ Kenneth Baker, "Q & A. W. G. Sebald up against Historical Amnesia," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 7, 2001.

² Richard Eder, "Exploring a Present That Is Invaded by the Past," *New York Times*, May 22, 2000; W. S. Di Piero, "Another Country. An Early W. G. Sebald Novel Explores the Destabilizing Role of Memory," *New York Times*, June 11, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/11/reviews/000611.11dipiert.html>.

³ Winfried Georg Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1992).

⁴ In my paper, however, I use my own translations of quotes from Sebald *The Emigrants* because of considerable differences between Hulse's translation and Sebald's original text.

⁵ Stefanie Harris, "The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," *German Quarterly* 74.4 (Fall, 2001): 379-91.

⁶ Silke Horstkotte, "Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (2002): 33-50.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Seuil: Gallimard, 1980).

⁸ Horstkotte, "Pictorial and Verbal Discourse": 37.

⁹ Harris, "The Return of the Dead": 382.