Unraveling Austerlitz

HIB, House 3.1.1, Group 9
Anna Maria Jarosz
Ben Bosse
Bruno Jeremy Flörke
Henry Chase Richards
Herle Andkjær
Jacob Mark Rørhøj
Paulina Anna Gretkierewicz
Rachel Tatum
Supervisor: Mette Blok

Characters: 190.352

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Abstract

This project is a study of the critical stance that W.G. Sebald takes on modernity through his seminal work *Austerlitz*. Since its publication in 2001, *Austerlitz* has sparked contemporary academic debates over the effects modernity can have on an individual within society, as well as how literary fiction can be used as a platform to discuss traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust.

Throughout this novel, Sebald offers insight into essential themes within modern society such as bureaucracy, technology, surveillance and transport, and the issues they reveal. It can be seen as an alternative to a more conservative historical approach, which relies too heavily upon archival information and leaves out the human experience. By using Michel Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish* for his ideas of Panopticism and surveillance, and Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust* for his insightful critique, we aim to understand W.G. Sebald’s view of modernity.
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1. Introduction to the Project

“[...] his crowded study, which was like a stockroom of books and papers with hardly any space left for himself, let alone his students, among the stacks piled high on the floor and the overloaded shelves.” (Sebald, 2011: 43)

1.1 How We Came to Write this Paper

Our decision to examine the novel at hand stems first and foremost from a shared interest in literature. This became evident early on in the process of choosing a topic for our first group project and continued to spur us on in times of doubt and lack of direction. Coupled with individual members’ passion in the fields of philosophy and history this made for a potent blend of minds and helped sustain a creative atmosphere throughout the lengthy and at times difficult process of writing this paper.

The novel presents a unique form of storytelling thwarting classification, which confounds the reader and prompts a fair amount of effort in trying to decipher its perplexing structure (hence the title
of our paper). Spanning decades, jumping between narratives, launching into captivatingly poetic excursions on topics such as architecture, horticulture and temporality, W.G. Sebald manages to enthral the reader over roughly 400 pages filled to the brim with inventive imagery and purposeful prose. This sparked in us, too, a desire to dissect and leave no stone unturned. In making sense of a work as dense as this it proved to be beneficial to be eight people, as the content can be overwhelming at times and warrants discussion and a probing of each other’s minds – thus lending itself perfectly to RUC-style project work.

In accordance with the themes explored by the author we felt compelled to spend a fair amount of time and effort revisiting a complex definitive of the 20th century – the Holocaust. While not an easily digested topic, we find it is none the less of paramount importance to try and understand the underlying causes and mechanisms, and formulate our thoughts on an academic level.

1.2 Dimensions

The dimensions we are choosing to cover in our project are: 'Text and Sign' and 'Philosophy and Science'.

Our reason for electing to use the Text and Sign dimension is that as Austerlitz as a novel constitutes a text, and since the Text and Sign course provided useful tools in the reading of literature this seems to be the logical and inevitable decision. We want to reflect on the photographs used in the book, as well as the metaphors and literary devices within; using this dimension will let us focus on those aspects of the novel.

In the case of 'Philosophy and Science', in order to understand Austerlitz and the age of modernity we will be referring to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the Polish-Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and other figures within similar fields.

1.3 Methodology and Timeline

To begin with we all read Austerlitz in its entirety. Seeing as the book is written in a way in which Sebald jumps back and forth between the past and the present, we decided to dissect it as much as
possible. We split the book up into eight parts and each wrote a lengthy summary of our sections, specifying photographs used, characters and dates mentioned, and key plot points – these summaries we condensed further into one succinct synopsis. This served as a useful tool when we began writing, since there was always someone who knew where a specific event happened in the book or where an important quote was located. We then made a visual timeline of the main character Austerlitz’ life using our synopsis as a reference.

After thoroughly examining all aspects of Austerlitz we all read the chapter on Panopticism in Michel Foucault’s Discipline & Punish in relation to Sebald’s themes of modernity and architecture. From there, we decided to utilize the fact that our group was so large by splitting up Zygmunt Bauman’s Modernity and the Holocaust into eight parts and reading the entire book in two days, followed by brief presentations by each member on what they found relevant in their chapter. Through the increase of our understanding and the influence of secondary literature, the way in which we treated and analyzed
Austerlitz evolved. For example, after reading Foucault and deciding to apply his work and theory to our project, we began to analyze and deconstruct Austerlitz from a Foucauldian, or rather, a Panoptic perspective. This perspective became a kind of school of literary theory with which we approached the genre and themes of the text as well as the actual structure and use of literary devices.

After all of us had a good understanding of the main concepts we would be using, we split up into smaller sections to take on different areas of the project. Some members started writing and others kept on researching further to provide the other members with more information. We tried out different techniques in writing this project. From the beginning we always met twice a week, even if only for a short while to update the rest of the group on our own progress. As the deadline loomed closer we spent more time working together, sometimes for seven or eight hours straight. As always we made sure to be in constant contact through Facebook to set up meetings, ask important questions or share information. When it came to actually writing the paper, there were different techniques used as well. Some of us produced massive amounts of pages in a short amount of time, and then had someone else come in and reign it in with a new perspective. Others worked in tandem, sitting together and bouncing ideas off each other to create a coherent section. We tried to let everyone work in whatever style they felt most comfortable with, either from the comfort of their own home or in groups to stay inspired. By using Google Docs we were able to keep up with everyone else progress, as well as make notes during the writing process. We set a date to be finished with the writing of the paper a week before the due date, to then spend the last week editing and polishing our final product to prepare it for submission.

1.4 Research Reading

It goes without saying that Austerlitz is the ever-present foundation for this paper.

We feature Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, with a tight focus on his chapter on Panopticism, which mainly deals with what means a governing body can employ to exercise control over its governed people.

Another important reference is Zygmunt Bauman. His work Modernity and the Holocaust is used both to explore issues in Austerlitz stemming from modernity as well as to widen our personal horizon in regards to the history of the events leading up to and arising from the Holocaust.
J.J. Long’s *Image, Archive, Modernity* is useful secondary literature by an expert on Sebald and his body of work itself, helping us underline parts of our analysis, serving as a reference point and source of inspiration.

Furthermore, a very fruitful source of background information is a collection of essays on Sebald called *History, Memory, Trauma*. In it several experts shine light on relevant topics such as Sebald’s use of photography, the image of exile and institutions and buildings in his prose.

We use another collection of essays called *Saturn’s Moons*, mainly in reference to Sebald’s personal life and the use of photography. This book helped us understand Sebald through his interviews and the in-depth description of his life.

Finally the collection of essays *On the Natural History of Destruction* written by Sebald offered valuable insight into his approach towards historiography and into his critique of the German post-war authors’ and scholars’ disregard for the German suffering in World War II.

2. Problem Definition

Unraveling *Austerlitz*: How does Sebald use the character Austerlitz to highlight his critical stance on modernity?

2.1 Prompts For The Reader

- What effect is achieved by the unusual structure and style of the novel?
- Furthering an understanding of the connection between the Holocaust and modernity in reference to the novel using Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*.
- How is Foucault’s theory of discipline and power structures reflected in *Austerlitz*?
- What characteristics of the modern archive does Sebald’s novel reveal?
- The role of nature within the context of modernity.
3. Introduction to the Book

3.1 Winfried Georg Sebald’s Biography

W.G. Sebald was born in 1944 in the Allgäu in Wertach, a small village on the northern edge of the Alps in Germany. His father spent most of Sebald’s childhood away due to the war; he was being held as a prisoner of war in a French camp for two years and then working in the town of Sonthofen until Sebald was eight. Because of this absence it was primarily his grandfather Josef Egelhofer who raised Sebald. Wertach was a town untouched by modernity; there was no railroad track leading out to the bigger cities and the bombings during the war never reached that far out. Sebald grew up without books or the cinema, spending most of his time learning about horticulture from his grandfather and taking long walks through nature. All of Sebald’s grandfather’s children, except his mother, had emigrated to the United States before Sebald’s birth, which gave Sebald the familial connection to emigration, which he later investigated in his literary works. It is important to note the education he received from his grandfather, both in nature and through a fascination with maps and almanacs, since these are themes that appear prominently in Austerlitz.

Between 1963 and 1965 Sebald studied German and English at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg im Breisgau. It was here that Sebald became a part of what was called the Max-Heim group, a collective of intellectual students who published a school newspaper in which Sebald published seventeen items, consisting of reviews, poems and prose. It was also through Max-Heim that Sebald was first exposed to the writings of the Frankfurt School, many authors of which would influence Sebald’s later works. In addition to Sebald’s discovery of the Frankfurt School were the reports published in the newspaper of the Auschwitz trials which sparked Sebald’s frustration with the way that German colleges were run and the avoidance of the German past. “I realized that there were subjects of much greater urgency than the writings of the German Romantics. I understood that I had to find my own way through that maze of the German past and not be guided by those in teaching positions at the time” (Hibbitt, 2011: 54). In 1965 Sebald moved to Fribourg in Switzerland to finish his studies at the University of Fribourg and received BA in July of 1966.

Between 1966 and 1970, Sebald was an assistant within the German Department at the University of Manchester. Soon after, in May of 1970 he became the Assistant Lecturer in German
Language and Literature in the School of European Studies at the University of East Anglia. It was here that he had the freedom that he had been searching for in the academic world and was able to make quite an impact upon his students. In 1989 he became the founding director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, and it was here that he worked and lived, writing his novels until his tragic death in 2001.

3.2 Book Summary

The story of Austerlitz takes the reader on a convoluted journey chronicling the latter half of the twentieth century. Sebald forces his titular character to confront himself with his own suppressed past and identity, describing in great detail the architecture he encounters traversing western Europe in the process – Jacques Austerlitz is a lecturer in art history at a London institute with a great passion for architectural history and deeply involved in his field of study.

Austerlitz is brought up as Dafydd Elias in a town named Bala in rural Wales in the years after World War II by a strict Calvinist priest and his wife. This stifling and dogmatic household leaves little room for a happy childhood and it is only at boarding school that he begins to find an outlet for his yearning for knowledge. Indeed he sees his time at Stower Grange, as strict and conservative and his teachers and the environment prove to be, “as a time not of imprisonment but of liberation” (Sebald, 2011: 84). It is here as a teen that he is told his true name. Aside from his friendship to a boy named Gerald and a romantic liaison with a woman called Marie, he develops a peculiar relationship to the narrator of the novel, beginning with a random encounter in Antwerp’s Centraal Station.

The unwinding of the narrative sees the narrator taking a central role in Austerlitz’ life, for it is through the narrator Austerlitz chooses to verbalize his past. Over the course of several, partly coincidental meetings it is revealed to the narrator and thus the reader; that Austerlitz seems to suffer from anxiety attacks and a general mental and emotional imbalance, owing to suppressed memories and the traumatic event of being part of the Kindertransport. Austerlitz unearths the fact that his biological parents had sent him into exile as a young child, fearing for his life. He starts investigating his roots, unlocking long lost memories in the process.

He finally ends up in Prague in the Czech Republic, where he peruses the State Archive and manages to locate his former au pair Věra, who tells him that his father Maximilian had fled to Paris on the eve of the nazi invasion; his mother Agáta had stayed behind with her son. With young Austerlitz on his
way to Wales a terrible fate befalls his mother: Along with countless other Jews she is relocated to live in the internment camp Theresienstadt. An ordeal she is not to survive. Learning of his mother’s demise Austerlitz’ obsession with unearthing his heritage deepens and sends him into a downward spiral of emerging remembrance and confrontation with a past he had chosen to ignore for most of his life. Researching the workings of the internment camp inevitably leads to further deterioration of his mental health, culminating in a most serious breakdown that temporarily costs Austerlitz the ability to put his thoughts into words.

The book ends on an open note with Austerlitz undertaking yet another bout of sifting through historical accounts, this time in the archives of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris – Austerlitz learns of the fact that his father, too, had been interned and sets out to retrace his steps.

3.3 Critical and Literary Observations

In this part of the chapter we will analyze the stylistic layer of the book, Sebald’s writing style and the usage of specific literary devices in the novel. We will also discuss the genre classification, since the author himself does not state exactly what sort of literature Austerlitz is. This is an essential part of our paper, since the style of this book is as important for the interpretation as its content.

3.3.1 The Title and the Name Austerlitz

The title of the book and name of the main character – Austerlitz – deserve a moment of attention. While it is the name of a historical town, where the famous battle of the Three Emperors took place in 1805, it distracts from the semitic origins of the protagonist. His history teacher Hilary's passionate lectures on the battle of Austerlitz, however captivating, were to blame for Austerlitz’ giving up on trying to find his family in Britain. He mentions an investigation he had been pursuing for a while, but the only results were the information that Fred Astaire's real surname was Austerlitz, as well as finding “in Kafka's diaries [...] a small, bow legged man of my [Austerlitz’] own name” (Sebald, 2011: 96) – but these trails led nowhere. Until his past started haunting him from the moment he heard someone mentioning the ship Prague, he accepted the misleading connotation of his name with the Moravian town. The name Austerlitz does not itself evoke the idea of Jewishness, so he accepts that it has links
elsewhere without a need for deeper reflection. His first name of Jacques also distracts from the truth of his heritage, making the fact that he did not associate himself with Jewishness for so long seem logical. There is another place mentioned in the novel which bears the name Austerlitz – the Parisian railway station, Gare d’Austerlitz, where “there stood until the end of the war an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris” (Sebald, 2011: 401). The connection between the name and the Holocaust seems even more significant if one thinks about the phonetic resemblance that Austerlitz bears to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, where Austerlitz’ mother was supposedly sent to her death. This is one example of the author slipping allusions to the Holocaust into the story, on which we will expand later in the chapter.

3.3.2 Style, Stylistic Devices, Structure of the Narration

Through the use of elaborate metaphors, long monologues, labyrinthine sentences that seem never to end and the use of several types of speech entwined in the same passage, Sebald creates his own unique, distinctive style. The rapid, sudden twists in narration give an impression of spoken language, adding authenticity to the narrative: the reader finds himself trapped in a narrative maze, and then often thrown through time to a completely different place in the story than he was a sentence before. This is exemplified in a passage where Austerlitz talks to Věra about a childhood trip to Marienbad when he suddenly goes off on a tangent about his time in Marienbad together with his then-girlfriend in the early 1970s:

“I had retained no memory at all of that summer holiday when I was just four years old, said Austerlitz, and perhaps that was why when I was in that very place later, in Marienbad at the end of August 1972 [...]]” (Sebald, 2011: 290)

The writing resembles casual speech, but is chaotic to the extent that it seems to be reflecting the complex train of thought of the narrator and the protagonists (to whom we will return later in the analysis). With an abundance of details, historical facts, and unexpected digressions, the reader cannot possibly process all the information given by the narrator in the intricate prose of Austerlitz without investing a significant amount of time and effort in research – as will become evident over the course of this paper.
The narration is kept in the first person by an unnamed German man. This conscious narrator, however a part of the plot, is not the main character, since the book includes a story within the story. It is being told in a form of the Narrator’s memoir concentrated around the figure of Austerlitz which makes the structure more convoluted but at the same time creates a sense of coherence, in contrast to the haphazard leaps in time and space that we, as readers, encounter in the book. To recount the events that he has not witnessed himself, the narrator uses primarily direct speech but refrains from denoting the cited passages with quotation marks. The abundant use of inquit (“said Austerlitz”), frequently in the middle of sentences - “Could we not claim, said Austerlitz, that time itself has been non-concurrent over the centuries and the millennia?” (Sebald, 2011: 143) as well as using double inquit when another layer of the storytelling is added: “I remember, said Věra, Austerlitz added […]” (Sebald, 2011: 241) and multiple levels of narration itself make the prose more entangled, but at the same time add up to Sebald’s remarkable style.

Another thing worth noting is that despite being over 400 pages long, the book is not divided into chapters. Instead, the author breaks the continuity of narration with asterisks, which, however scarce, serve to mark separate occasions on which the Narrator meets Austerlitz. The use of photographs also helps the reader orient himself in the dense structure of the text. Long, nested, complex sentences add to the intricacy of the narration – here we aim to visualize Sebald’s use of compound sentences:

“In the middle of her account Věra herself, quite involuntarily, had changed from one language to the other, and I,

who had not not for the moment thought that Czech would mean anything to me,

not at the airport or in the state archives, or even while learning by heart the question which would have been of scant use to me addressed to the wrong quarters,

now almost understood everything Věra said,

like a deaf man whose hearing had been miraculously restored,

so that all I wanted to do was close my eyes and listen for ever to her polysyllabic flood of words.” (Sebald, 2011: 219)
A point can also be made that the sentence structure itself reflects the utterer’s state of mind. A prime example of this is a passage when Austerlitz recalls reading a book about the Theresienstadt ghetto by H. G. Adler. The Narrator puts Austerlitz’ words into an eleven pages long sentence (Sebald, 2011: 331-342), which is a dry emotionless account of the life in the Jewish ghetto by resembling the orderly, cold and calculated Nazi mindset and the bureaucratic meticulousness gives the reader an impression of uneasiness. In fact does this account scarcely differ from a picture inserted at the beginning of the passage, a fastidious listing of job descriptions as outlined in Adler’s tome on the ghetto.

Detachedly the reader is informed about the occupations of the inmates, “industrialists and manufacturers, lawyers and doctors, rabbis and university professors [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 331), which is juxtaposed with the menial tasks these ordinary middle-class people actually end up carrying out “bandage weaving [...], production of horn buttons [...], the splitting of mica, the shearing of rabbits, the bottling of ink dust [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 333), the grueling conditions under which they worked and the psychological toll, paid by the inmates.

It is so horrid, so unimaginably inhumane, that the only way the Narrator or Austerlitz can transmit the facts about the ghetto to his story is by doing it in a seemingly indifferent manner. Dealing with the Holocaust by distancing oneself from it is a reaction to the methods Nazi officers employed when creating a “solution to the Jewish problem.”

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Soziologie

Verzeichnis der als Sonderweisungen bezeichneten Arbeiten.

1. Dienstelle
2. Kammerdienstheim
3. SS-Garage
4. Kleine Feuerung
5. Drusche Dienstpost
6. Reserve-Lazarett
7. Berliner Dienstelle
8. Gendarmerie
9. Reichswappenforschung
10. Landwirtschaft
11. Torfladen
12. Schlosserwerk
13. Eisenbahnbau Ing. Figlovský
14. Eisenbahnbau Ing. Rednung
15. Feuerlöschschiene E, H IV
16. Straßenbahn Leitmeritz
17. Straßenbahn E Rednung Ing. Figlovský (T 32)
18. Umbauarbeiten usw.
20. Bau der Wasserwerke (T 43)
21. Silagebau Ing. Figlovský
22. Konservierungsarbeiten (T 45)
23. Konservierungsarbeiten für Rednung Ing. Figlovský
24. Bau der Silagebau Ing. Figlovský
25. Stoschkul Kamen
26. Kreistierzucht
27. Hilfsarbeiten und Schuharbeiten Kamen-Leitmeritz
28. Kyria-Bauten und deren Erhaltungskosten
29. Chemische Kontrollarbeiten
30. Gruppe Dr. Weidmann (v. 19. Kap.)
32. Schuharbeiterreinigung
33. Uniformkonfektion
34. Rollholzabnehmen
35. Zentralbau (nach Abt.)
36. Gließereischluten
37. Kannehrahmpecheren
38. Tonpulververkäuferen
39. Elektroarbeiten
40. Karomagwerkstätte
41. Lehmpfeile
42. Markenverweiterung (frühere Galanterie)
43. Innereinrichtung von Uniformen
44. Justizzugehöriger
45. Buchdruckerei
46. Streifenannahme und Streifenreinigung
47. Arbeitsgruppe jungfern-Brechen
48. Provisorische Pferdezüchter
49. NSKK-Flugplatz
50. Schleswitzer
51. Schoß-Stand
52. Holzfällerreinigung
As Zygmunt Bauman explains in *Modernity and the Holocaust*,

“The Holocaust could be accomplished only on the condition of neutralizing the impact of primeval moral drives, of isolating the machinery of murder from the sphere where such drives arise and apply, of rendering such drives marginal or altogether irrelevant to the task.”

(Bauman, 2000: 188)

This quote relates to an interpretation of the long sentence worth mentioning: Sebald might have his narrator (who seems to directly quote Austerlitz in this long-winded passage) employ this descriptive way of speaking because of his helplessness in the face of cruelty or possibly a sense of collective German guilt.

The reader delves through multiple layers of narration, to find that Sebald is circling around the effects of the Holocaust without speaking about it directly, just as Austerlitz avoids that part of his personal and national history for half of his life, but continuously gets driven back to it wherever he goes.

The author, without stating any clear opinions himself but merely using the voice of the Narrator, gives subtle hints of the events (*Kindertransport*, the Holocaust in a broader sense, Austerlitz’ Jewishness) that shaped the life of his protagonist as well as modern civilization. For instance, when exploring Fort Breendonk, the Narrator reflects on his own memories, saying that “No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open.” (Sebald, 2011: 33) But as one delves deeper into the book, it becomes obvious that this observation can also be interpreted as a musing on Austerlitz’ childhood trauma that shadows his whole adult life and defines his personal identity. The perfect example of his emotional turmoil and inability to face his demons is when we learn that he refuses to write letters to Germany. This act that at first might seem infantile and inane, shows the extent of damage that Austerlitz as a victim suffers from.

“As far as I remember I wrote to Austerlitz from Munich a couple of times, but I never had any reply to my letters, either because, as I thought at the time, Austerlitz was away somewhere, or as I now think because he did not like writing to Germany.” (Sebald, 2011: 46)
3.3.3 Narrator

The first two layers of narration: the actual first-person narrator and Jacques Austerlitz as a second narrator within the Narrator's narration seem to be inextricably intertwined, both stylistically in the complex narrative and as protagonists of the story. One may even speculate if the Narrator and Austerlitz are not alter egos of the same person, since the Narrator quotes long monologues of Austerlitz with such precision, as if he somehow could remember not only his exact words, but also his thoughts. He intermixes different types of discourse, which often times makes it confusing for the reader to follow which of the two is the one speaking at any given moment. For instance, he starts with indirect speech saying “[...] in front of the blue gas flames, I said something about the incomprehensibility of mirror images, to which he [Austerlitz] replied that he often sat in this room after nightfall” to switch unexpectedly to directly quoting Austerlitz in the following sentence “[...] in the middle of gleaming black varnish of the darkness which, said Austerlitz [...] — But where, he continued, shall I take up my story?” (Sebald, 2011: 169).

Even if the Narrator and Austerlitz are not one person, since their paths have crossed in Antwerp, there is a strange bond between them, perhaps more complex and stronger than it would normally be between two apparent strangers that meet coincidentally several times.

Jacques Austerlitz' story is demanding to be told but as “the endless possibilities of language [...] became a conglomeration of the most inane phrases” for him (Sebald, 2011: 173), his inability to write finds a remedy in the form of a stranger he meets one day at the Antwerp Centraal Station. Katja Garloff in her essay *The Task of the Narrator: Moments of Symbolic Investiture in W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz*, mentions a conference participant asking “[...] is this a story of 'Jewish storyteller meets German historian' in which only the latter is able to put the story together and transmit it to his readers?” (Garloff, 2006: 166) which of course is a simplification of the narrator's role, but seems to make a laconic summary of the complex relation between the two characters. Austerlitz, with his broad expertise in history and architecture, plays the role of a teacher, a mentor to the Narrator who seems to be devouring his impromptu lectures and is deeply fascinated by the extensive knowledge of his interlocutor.
“When I began my own studies in Germany I had learnt almost nothing from the scholars then lecturing in the humanities there [...], and I found Austerlitz the first teacher I could listen to since my time in primary school.” (Sebald, 2011: 44)

Apart from the assumed teacher and student roles, their relationship appears to be more complex. As Austerlitz suffers mental breakdowns and feels helpless when trying to confront ghosts of his own past, pouring out his personal story onto a patient listener helps him gain a certain distance, come to terms with his true identity and deal with what has been done to him and his family.

“Oddly enough, said Austerlitz, [...] that afternoon he had been thinking of our encounters in Belgium, so long ago now, and telling himself he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story [...] for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been in Antwerp, Liège and Zeebrugge.”(Sebald, 2011: 59 - 60)

Thus the Narrator takes on the role of a therapist listening to his patient’s confessions attentively. Still, this is not all there is to their mutual cooperation, since (despite it not being clearly stated), one may argue that the narrator, as a German - descendant of the perpetrators who deprived Jacques Austerlitz and millions of other Jews of their identity, their past and in six million cases of their lives - seems to be suppressing a certain sense of collective guilt for the Holocaust. This shows in fort Breendonk, where he reminisces not only images from his childhood but also the horrid things that his countrymen did to prisoners there during World War II (Sebald, 2011: 31-34). In that light, although neither of the protagonists mentions it anywhere in the book, one can presume that the therapy functions mutually – the Narrator, through passing on the testimony in form of the personal story of a Jewish survivor, redeems himself for the atrocities committed by Germans to Jews.

3.3.4 Genre

The inevitable question that arises from examining the style of Sebald is what genre can Austerlitz be classified into?

The story seems partly a work of fiction and partly a subjective account of a witness’ experience of history. The author never denied that the main storyline is vastly inspired by the story of
Susi Bechhoefer and her quest for identity. She was brought up in Wales in a Christian family, unaware of her Jewish heritage until she was instructed in school to sign her exam papers with a different name, which revealed her true origins. But it was not until she was in her late 40s that she started investigating her past and what she found out changed her life forever: Susi discovered that she had been sent to Wales from Munich on Kindertransport at the age of three. W.G Sebald stumbled upon a BBC documentary on Susi’s story and found it deeply moving.

“WG Sebald: Behind Austerlitz hide two or three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, real persons. One is a colleague of mine and another is a person about whom I happened to see a Channel 4 documentary by sheer chance. I was captivated [...] The story struck home; it cast my mind back to Munich, the nearest big city to where I grew up, so I could relate to the horror and distress.” (Jaggi, 2001: 1)

Being loosely based on a real story, the book cannot help but give an impression of a report, a meticulous, although chaotic, not chronologically ordered and subjective documentation of Austerlitz’ life presented to the reader by the narrator. Critics argue, however, that it is Sebald’s first and only “real” novel (Long, 2007: 149), which seems to be supported by the fictional characters and the specific use of photographs that differs from his other works (i.e. The Emigrants), where the pictures illustrate the text but do not form a part of the storyline. Austerlitz is said to be carrying his camera with him and the narrator mentions taking pictures of seemingly random objects is the protagonist's “usual custom” (Sebald, 2011: 141); Austerlitz also passes his collection of photographs on to the narrator in the end. As Long states, “the photographs, which must have been taken by somebody in the ‘real world’, are deemed to have been produced by a character who is fictional” (Long, 2007: 149). However confusing it might be for the reader, as it makes genre classification more difficult, this explanation of the pictures inserted in the middle of sentences creates the feeling of a fictional story more than an illustrated documentary.

3.3.5 Witness Literature

If Austerlitz should be treated as fictionalized survivor literature – in terms of the protagonist being a survivor of the Holocaust – it seems unclear who the actual witness telling the story is.
The obvious answer would be Austerlitz himself, who confesses his story and his struggle to deal with the traumatic events that cast a shadow over his life. In that case, what has he actually borne witness to?

According to Giorgio Agamben, it is in a sense impossible to be a witness to the Holocaust, since the only “complete witnesses” were the ones slaughtered in the concentration camps (Agamben, 2002: 82). Some of the actual survivors of the camps admit that becoming a witness has been the main drive that has been keeping them alive (Agamben, 2002: 15), but they turn out to be only half-witnesses as their survival excludes going all the way down to the gas chambers. The real witnesses were the prisoners that reached the last stage of malnutrition, the *Muselmänner* (derived from a German term for Muslims), as some posit they were called since their bended figures resembled praying Arabs. Agamben cites different survivors who all agree that the *Muselmänner* were a stage in between life and death (Agamben, 2002: 54), not human anymore, since they have lost the basic human drives that made prisoners fight for their lives, they have lost their human dignity; they were not physically dead yet. However the prisoners who lived to tell these stories pass on their testimonies and talk about the *Muselmänner*, the actual witnesses who perished in gas chambers have not been forgotten – the survivors are the witnesses for the real witnesses, they speak in their name for the dead cannot speak. They are witnesses to other people’s stories.

Jacques Austerlitz in that way would be even less than a half-witness of the Holocaust, since he experienced the *Kindertransport*, but not the ghettoization nor the last stage of the Nazi extermination as for example his mother Agáta did. Being a Jewish boy he played nonetheless a part in the tempest of World War II and had his personal history altered by the wind of global history.

Austerlitz also investigates what happened to his parents, tells their story since they cannot tell it themselves – thus he is in some way witnessing for the witnesses. Stories of people who have survived the ghetto, like Bauman’s wife Janina, who inspired him to write the sociological study of the Holocaust, a phenomenon he had not been a witness to (since he emigrated to the USSR when the Nazi occupation started), can only be told by the people who were there and have seen it with their own eyes. Austerlitz delves into books about Theresienstadt, goes to great lengths to find a propaganda film about life in the ghetto, in an attempt to find his mother but also to learn her story, to become a witness of what she has not survived to testify.
Then again, one may argue about the role of the Narrator in the testimony of the Holocaust – he is the one who conveys the story, he recounts the experiences of someone who himself is unable to express himself well enough to write them down on paper, he is the voice of the one that cannot speak for himself; which is exactly what the half-witnesses do according to Agamben.

Another argument for classifying Austerlitz as fictionalized witness literature is that the protagonist’s behavior seems to a great extent similar to the one of the Holocaust survivors’. Agamben mentions two attitudes shown by survivors – some of them remain silent and do not speak of their past, and the others cannot stop talking about their experiences. Austerlitz embodies both of these bearings: he never speaks about his past and about the trauma he has lived through until he decides to confide in the Narrator and lets him be the witness of the story of Jacques Austerlitz. An interesting point may be made that Austerlitz shows signs of what is called survivor guilt (survivor syndrome), which Oxford English Dictionary defines as:

“the (freq. delayed) symptoms, such as disintegration of personality, nightmares, tension, and guilt, which are classed as a syndrome and can afflict someone who has survived a dehumanizing and degrading experience of terror.” (Oxford, 2014: 1)

Austerlitz suffers several mental breakdowns; even before he finds out the truth about his family he somehow feels that there is more to his past than is known to him and he experiences mental flashbacks of his childhood memories. There is a passage when he mentions struggling with his suppressed trauma, not realizing at the time what it all meant:

“I also recollected how once, while my mind was still quite submerged, I had seen myself standing, filled with a painful sense that something within me was trying to surface from oblivion, in front of a poster painted in bold brushstrokes which was posted to the tunnel wall and showed a happy family on a winter holiday in Chamonix. [...] the straight upper edge of which did not entirely hide a yellowed notice issued by the Paris city council in July 1943.” (Sebald, 2011: 377)
This picture may be an allusion to one happy family trip to Marienbad, symbolising a childhood he might have had, had it not been for the war – a barely visible paper from the war times being a reminder of that.

While visiting the ghetto he has this sudden feeling that the inhabitants are still inside the walls of Terezin, that they haunt the place since “they had never been taken away after all” (Sebald, 2011: 281). This can be another example of him not being able to come to terms with the past, but this time rather his ethnic past as a Jew than the personal memories – he seems as if he did not want to accept that the prisoners, including his mother, perished forever, he sees them strolling around the streets and standing in the windows, clinging to the place of their doom.

3.4 Photography

The use of photography in Austerlitz is a subject that one could write an entire paper on, as it plays such a pivotal role in the way the book is digested. Sebald had a fascination with photography, with the idea of “[rescuing] something out of the stream of history that keeps rushing past,” this “nomadic thing that has only a small chance to survive” (Zeeman, 2006: 24). Since the photographs within Austerlitz play a key role in maintaining the novels ungraspable nature, Sebald never fully reveals their origination. Sebald collected photographs his entire life, either from his own family albums or flea markets and, as explained in an interview shortly after the publication of Austerlitz in 2001, he placed many of these found images within his books: “And when I began to write, somehow it became clear to me that they, these images, were part of the material that I had stored up [...] as very frequently they provided the starting points or they came from the photo albums of the people I had talked to... ” (Hibbitt, 2011: 366). This adds even more depth to the novel itself as the photographs suddenly become mysteries of their own, dislocated from the novel as a whole.

Photography is a tool often used to provide factual evidence, and when placed within a text it takes on the role of bolstering the texts credibility.

“...the reader of fiction wants to, in a sense, be assured in the illusion, which he knows to be an illusion, that what he is reading is not just an invented tale but somehow grounded in fact. Any what better way of demonstrating this than including a photograph - which we tend to all believe, certainly at first sight.” (Hibbitt, 2011: 366)
The reader automatically associates the photograph with the surrounding text, while the photograph validates whatever the text is trying to convey. The way Sebald uses photography within Austerlitz gives the novel the face of a historical and non-fictional piece of work, when in reality the photographs relate thematically but might show depictions of unknown individuals. Often times the photographs fit so perfectly within the text that one questions whether Sebald wrote specific sections of the novel around particular photographs. For example, this photograph that Austerlitz’ nanny Věra finds hidden inside a book. The text surrounding this specific photograph describes it perfectly.

“[...] one of the photographs showed the stage of a provincial theatre, perhaps in Reichenau or Olmütz or one of the other towns where Agáta sometimes performed before she was engaged to appear in Prague. At first glance, said Austerlitz, Věra said she

had thought the two figures in the bottom left-hand corner were Agáta and Maximilian - they were so tiny that it was impossible to make them out well - but then of course she noticed that there were other people, perhaps the impresario, or a conjuror and his woman assistant. She had wondered, said Věra, what kind play or opera had been staged in front of this alarming backdrop, and because of the high mountain range and the wild forest background she thought it might have been Wilhelm Tell, or La Sonnambula, or Ibsen’s last play.” (Sebald, 2011: 257)

This is just one example of Sebald writing ‘around the photograph’, adding to the mystique of Austerlitz as a whole, forcing the reader to question its factual validity or fictional purpose. Seeing as Sebald had set out to deal with issues revolving around Germans and World War II, more specifically to take on the task of telling the German story in a more approachable way than the historical texts, it
makes sense why he would consciously create Austerlitz as a book difficult to categorize so as not to limit its impact.

The placement of the photographs plays another role in how Austerlitz is read. Usually situated in the middle of a sentence, the eye merely skims over the photograph until the sentence is finished, only to return to the photograph afterwards. Sometimes the photograph is one that is referred to in the text, such as the photograph that Austerlitz finds of his mother in the Prague theatrical archives or the image of a postcard that Austerlitz sends the narrator with white tents in an Egyptian desert on it. At other times the photographs seem to be placed only to bolster the text; an image of indistinguishable plants in reference to Austerlitz’ newfound love of horticulture, or a two page large photograph of billiard balls after a story of an insomniac who played billiards against himself throughout his sleepless nights. In addition to the placement, the photographs are all black and white, some of them grainy, composed as a snapshot, or simply a fragment of a larger photograph. This enhances the melancholic tone of the novel, the feeling the reader has that it is always grey and rainy when Austerlitz is telling his story.

An aspect of photography that cannot be overlooked is its association with memory, whether it be in relation to the reconstruction of a forgotten past or the questions it presents about one’s own memory. Photographs are the preservation of memory, and in the case of Austerlitz they are the concrete proof of this past life, of which he has no real memory. In moments of resurgence, memories for Austerlitz are often associated with a feeling or a dream, a sudden flash of uncanniness within himself. When retracing his journey on the Kindertransport, Austerlitz mentions one such dream in association with an image of the passing landscape during the train trip.

“As I gazed out a distant memory came to me of a dream I often had both in the manse at Bala and later, a dream of a nameless land without borders and entirely overgrown by dark forests, which I had to cross without any idea where I was going, and it dawned upon me, said Austerlitz, that what I now saw going past outside the train was the original of the images that had haunted me for so many years.” (Sebald, 2011: 316)
Upon visiting his old nanny Věra, Austerlitz is shown a photograph of himself as a young boy, and although he studies every detail of it scrutinously he says that he “could not recollect [himself] in the part” (Sebald, 2011: 259). As Věra poetically explains, “pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives.” (Sebald, 2011: 258) These interactions with photographs bring to the surface questions of memory, whether or not photographs fill in the spaces long left empty or bring to light moments that have just been hidden away.

Photography has another important role to play as the epitome of archiving. It is the easiest and most reliable form of documentation, to be stored away and looked at as a reference to the past. Much more reliable than taking notes or sketching something out, the camera can be used as a precise tool to categorize and record. It is used in the documenting of and keeping track of human beings, as J.J. Long points out in reference to passport photos.

“The passport photograph demonstrates the workings of the ‘microphysics of power’ at two levels. First, the very concept of the passport is disciplinary, facilitating social regulations by tracing the movement of bodies both within and across national boundaries, and establishing inclusion in or exclusion from the citizen body of a given state. Secondly, the subject is in part constituted by the apparatus, right down to the most intimate bodily performances. An undisciplined smirk at the wrong moment and the legal validity of the photograph vanishes.” (Long, 2007: 50)
This is a prime example of the archival powers of photography, the categorization of human beings and the ability to keep track of one’s whereabouts. As well as with personal identification cards or drivers licenses, this photograph of one’s face is associated with a number to be filed into a system. This photographic process of archiving ties in with similar concepts of modernity which Sebald touches upon in *Austerlitz*, controlling populations and creating an orderly society. It plays a necessary role in the novel, representing memory and archive within a modern era. This concept is one that we will touch upon later when discussing archiving in *Austerlitz* as a whole.

### 4. Modernity

As our analysis of *Austerlitz* relies fundamentally on the concept of modernity, it is necessary to shape a common understanding of the term. Since its strong ambiguity, mutually exclusive and varied usages by different scholars and writers makes it impossible to settle on a conclusive definition for modernity, the following characterization can be seen as an attempt to give the reader a summary of its most relevant aspects for the reading and understanding of *Austerlitz*.

#### 4.1 The Concept of Modernity

By nature an iridescent term, modernity refers both to a historical period and the socio-cultural phenomena associated with that time, which is the modern era. This era covers a period of time of varying definition, starting around the French Revolution but with some scholars denoting its end after World War II, while others claim it to have transformed into postmodernity in the late 20th century or even to extend into our present time. For this paper we will use modernity as being an ongoing era, constituted of the seismic social, economic, political and cultural transformations that took place in European societies from the eighteenth century onwards“ (Long, 2007: 1), including but not limited to the following:

- The industrialization of production; increasing standardization and rationalization in both the production and consumption of serially produced goods; secularization of society; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; developments in communications technology binding together
diverse and geographically dispersed people and societies; the formation of increasingly powerful nation states, bureaucratically structured and operated; and, bearing and driving all these processes along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. (Berman, 1988: 16)

As such, modernity marks the epoch that is based on a faith in rationalization, structuralization and the inevitability of progress sparked by the utilization of these principles. This manifests itself most visibly in the creation and later proliferation of bureaucratic apparatuses within the structure of the state (e.g. ministries, municipalities or archives), which were intended to regulate, discipline and control populations (Long, 2007: 2) to make for more efficient and orderly societies. In that way modernity forces the individual to cast their look forward and to make use of the past, of tradition only to break with it and develop new and necessarily different mechanisms for their life. In so doing modernity promises to solve all past problems with radical new approaches whose quality will, according to the underlying principle of perfectibility, only ever increase. However, “the continual production of the new in capitalism has as its concomitant the continual destruction of the old, and the acceleration of obsolescence itself” and this installs within society “a profound sense of historical rupture” (Long, 2007: 4). In a world where everything is always challenged and overturned, nothing secure remains and thus feelings of fragmentation, loss, uncertainty, disorientation and deracination inevitably become part of the modern experience, as the American philosopher and writer Marshall Berman illustrates powerfully:

“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.” (Berman, 1988: 15)

In this manner modernity strongly dislocates and unsettles the individual, while at the same time the mechanisms of classifications and regulations – “fixations” so to say – employed by the state through
its bureaucracy exert an ever-stronger control over the individual. This twofold impact, an uprooting from the foundation, an annihilation of familiarity on the one hand and a limiting of freedom on the other, is then also a synthesis of modernity’s effects that brings us back to *Austerlitz*, as this issue is constantly raised by Sebald in his novel and can be found to fundamentally and perpetually shape the character Austerlitz.

This of course paints a very one-sided picture, concentrating exclusively on the negative effects of modernity, while ignoring the beneficial developments it has brought about throughout the last centuries. It is indisputable for instance that the advancement in technology has had positive effects on life expectancy and education, and provided accessibility of information on a global scale. Furthermore it has become easier to ascend in social hierarchy by moving from traditional sectors such as agriculture to an increasingly industrial and later service-oriented society. *Landflucht* and the consequent rapid urban growth not only mark a paradigm shift but also a fundamental upheaval of a formerly largely predestined way of life. In this way modernity is for many an era of opportunity and improvement. This conception, however, is predominantly dismissed in the novel *Austerlitz*, and therefore we will not focus on it in our paper.

In trying to be as brief as possible, here then is a rather succinct characterization of modernity, as we are going to refer to it:

Modernity is comprised of rationalization; industrialization; the emergence of institutionalized bureaucracy; the underlying system of capitalism; and the ever-increasing interconnectedness of societies, countries, and the world as a whole. These processes do not necessarily carry a negative connotation. But in incorporating all these processes modernity is inextricably linked with negative effects on the individual, namely self-alienation, disorientation, powerlessness, loss of identity, isolation, fragmentation and discontinuity. Sebald tends to focus on these unfavorable effects in his writings.

### 4.2 Laying the Foundation for Austerlitz’ Fate

The theme of modernity pervades the novel so thoroughly that an extensive analysis of the phenomenon in *Austerlitz* would go beyond the constraints of this section. It will therefore be a
recurring topic in the paper to interlink modernity and different aspects of Sebald's novel. We do, however, wish to substantiate the relevance of modernity for our analysis in general and further the reader's understanding of the overall connection between the two. For this we will introduce a sociologist whose thoughts on the causality and ramifications of the Holocaust prove insightful in furthering our understanding of the novel at hand.

Zygmunt Bauman was born on November 19, 1925 in Poznań, Poland to secular Jewish parents. The 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland led to his family fleeing eastwards into the Soviet union – he soon enlisted in the Polish First Army, fighting the Wehrmacht and receiving the Cross Of Valour for his services (Tester, 2014: 1). After the war Bauman joined the Polish KBW, or Internal Security Corps, in line with his communist conviction. Having completed his sociology and philosophy studies in 1954 he went on to lecture at the University of Warsaw. As a result of the 1968 “Anti-Zionist” campaign, Bauman was forced to revoke his Polish citizenship and in 1972 accepted the offer of a chair in sociology at the University of Leeds, England (Leeds, 2014: 1).

In his later years the philosopher and sociologist published several works on modernity and rationality. His highly influential work Modernity and the Holocaust (1989) aims to illuminate the history of Jewish ‘othering’ and posits that the Holocaust was facilitated by modernity and is not inherently linked to Jewry. A quote from the introductory chapter reads:

“The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house.” (Bauman, 2013: 62)

The story of Austerlitz is intrinsically linked to the events and effects of the Holocaust, although Sebald tends to circle around the issue. We will now draw on one of the few historical accounts mentioned in the novel, which illuminates Bauman’s relevance.

4.2.1 Sealing off the Victims

“Before the bureaucratically organized power may count on the co-operation of the selfsame category that is to be destroyed or hurt, that category must be effectively ‘sealed off’: either removed physically from the context of the daily life and concerns of other groups, or separated
psychologically by overtly and unambiguously discriminating definitions and the emphasis on the targeted category’s uniqueness.” (Bauman, 2013: 280)

After the National Socialist invasion of Prague Austerlitz’ mother Agáta finds herself in an increasingly isolated position, brought about by the occupying force. Since her liberties are only gradually taken away from her she fails to fully realize the severity of her predicament until it is too late. This is in part due to her perceived high social standing as a famed opera singer, leading her to falsely believe that she might be able to halt the encroaching development. This sentiment is bolstered by the fact that because of her connections she is able to secure Austerlitz’ seat on one of the few children transports out of harm’s way.

“Since the Germans had issued their decrees on the Jewish population, she could go shopping only at certain times; she must not take a taxi, she could sit only in the last carriage of the tram, she could not visit a coffee-house or cinema, or attend a concert or any other event. Nor could she herself appear on stage anymore, and access to the banks of the Vltava and the parks and gardens she had loved so much was barred to her.” (Sebald, 2011: 243)

Because of these limitations Agáta feels alone in her struggle; without her son and husband (who had fled to Paris at this point) the au pair Véra constitutes her only ‘ally’; a socially engineered ‘othering’ vital to the success of the National Socialist agenda. Bauman calls this “the loneliness of the Jews” (Bauman, 2013: 291) the ghettoization begins with individualized constraints, mentally – but subconsciously – preparing the Jews for their imminent imprisonment by restricting smaller freedoms in everyday life. A quote ascribed to Rabbi Joachim Prinz of Berlin reads:

“The ghetto is the “world”. Outside is the ghetto. On the marketplace, in the street, in the public tavern, everywhere is ghetto. And it has a sign. That sign is; neighborless. Perhaps this has never happened before in the world, and no one knows how long it can be borne; life without a neighbor…” (Bauman, 2013: 280)

“Life without a neighbor” here alludes to the fact that the inhumane treatment of the Jewish population was designed to have no negative effect on the general, non-Jew citizens, thus further widening the gulf between the two opposing groups. This hinges on a precise definition of ‘the Jew’, the clear-cut
separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’, leaving no room for a fear of these encroachments happening to non-Jews.

Austerlitz’ mother encapsulates this development, which sends her into crippling depression and desperation, to the point where she admits defeat and ends up “[sitting] motionless for hours in the blue-velvet armchair in the darkest corner of the drawing-room, or [lying] on the sofa with her hands over her face. She was simply waiting to see what happened next […]” (Sebald, 2011: 246)

This goes to show the cold rationale and calculated sentiment that went into designing this unparalleled undertaking. Modernity provided the tools to realize an ‘othering’ of this scale – while decrees were enforced on a localized level they were issued from behind desks hundreds of kilometers away, often without fully grasping the severity of the consequences. Tasks were delegated down a long chain of command until responsibility, and in turn blame, was diluted to the point of nonexistence. Since discrimination, deportation and finally extermination happened in so many stages it becomes nigh impossible for the individuals to fully grasp the cause and effect of their actions.

“It must be kept in mind that most of the participants [of genocide] did not fire rifles at Jewish children or pour gas into gas chambers … Most bureaucrats composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, talked on the telephone, and participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk.” (Bauman, 2013: 75)

4.2.2 False Hope

“To make their victims’ behaviour predictable and hence manipulable and controllable, the Nazis had to induce them to act in the ‘rational mode’; to achieve that effect, they had to make the victims believe that there was indeed something to save, and that there were clear rules as to how one should go about saving it.” (Bauman, 2013: 294)

Further investigating the underlying causes for what amounted to genocide of historical proportions leads to a cynical observation: the unwillingness of human beings to foresee a heinous reality, a tendency the National Socialists thoroughly made use of. To prevent panic and outrage the false notion of operating within a civil contract, within a legal framework typical of modern society was of paramount importance. This served also to keep the perpetrators from fully realizing the extent of the
roles they played. The modern Jew was seen as possessing and being protected by civil rights, to be recognized as a contributing member of society rather than defined by their religious affiliation. In relation to pre-Third Reich history Bauman quotes Patrick Girard as saying:

“The Jewish assimilation into surrounding society and the disappearance of social and religious distinctions had led to a situation in which Jews and Christians could not be differentiated. Having become a citizen like any other and mixing with Christians through marriage, the Jew was no longer recognizable.” (Bauman, 2013: 144)

It is this self-perception of the Jews as just another upstanding citizen that the National Socialists exploited. Pretending to act in line with existing social contracts in keeping with modern society was aimed at curbing suspicion in the Jewish community. In *Austerlitz* this is expressed in the description of the ghetto Theresienstadt and the circumstances under which the deported willingly signed their lives and savings away. The ghetto is painted as a desirable destination free of the turmoil plaguing the bigger cities, a place of refuge with all essential amenities provided. For a not insubstantial fee one was to enjoy health-care and relative safety in the confines of a Bohemian resort.

“[...] and these people, who before they were sent away had been led to believe some tale about a pleasant resort in Bohemia called Theresienbad, with beautiful gardens, promenades, boarding houses and villas, and many of whom had been persuaded or forced to sign contracts, so-called *Heimeinkaufsverträge*, said Austerlitz, offering them, against deposits of up to eighty thousand Reichsmarks, the right of residence in what was described to them as a most salubrious place, these people, Austerlitz continued, had come to Theresienstadt, completely misled by the illusions implanted in their minds, carrying in their luggage all manner of personal items and mementos which could be of no conceivable use in the life that awaited them in the ghetto [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 335)
By and large, this strategy of large-scale deception was only made possible through societal norms that became commonplace and universally accepted in the modern age. The breach of this agreed-upon societal framework was so far-fetched in its scope that it took a long time to realize the ramifications and permanent mark upon history this would leave. To bring this into perspective, as Austerlitz becomes more aware of his idyllic pre-war childhood he feels “nothing but blind terror in the face of the better turn [his] life should have taken at that time.” (Sebald, 2011: 290) – the magnitude of the impact the events of the Holocaust had on his personal life and the alternative course his life might have taken are overwhelming.

4.3 Modernity in the Character Austerlitz

As with the whole novel, the actual character Austerlitz is inextricably connected to the modern era, since his entire life is shaped throughout by factors of modernity. But its effects can here be seen on a more individual and thus concrete level, as we will show on the following pages by elaborating on the aspects of time, loss of identity, and interconnectedness.

4.3.1 Conceptions of Time

Modernity marks “the externalisation, rationalisation and reification of time” (Long, 1997: 96), thus forming a concept of time as being clearly delineated and of universal regulative authority. The modern age sees the emergence of shift work as seen in factories, the standardization of time zones, and a shift
from natural time division (e.g. dependence on sunlight) to an artificially created scheduling of daily routine and work (e.g. the 8-hour work day). On the level of the individual this development manifests itself in “the increased use of the pocketwatch [...], responsible for both accelerating the pace of modern life and instilling a greater sense of punctuality, calculability and precision in both business transactions and human relations more generally [...]”, as J.J. Long quotes the writings of Georg Simmel (Long, 2007: 97).

While instruments to measure time are an ever-present feature of Austerlitz’ musings, he makes it clear that his attitude towards a society dictated by the clock is apprehensive bordering on dismissive. In a passage describing a visit to the Royal Observatory he remarks that “time [...] was by far the most artificial of all our inventions” (Sebald, 2011: 141). He goes on to criticize modern life as being too dependent on an arbitrarily imposed standard and almost celebrates his refusal to bend to time’s will – as a matter of fact he sees himself as “be[ing] outside of time” and backs up this claim by saying “[...] I have never owned a clock of any kind, a bedside alarm or a pocket watch, let alone a wristwatch.” (Sebald: 2011: 143).

Trying to be unmoved by current events, this timeless existence, Austerlitz hopes, will enable him to undermine the cause-and-effect reality of history, to “turn back and go behind it” (Sebald, 2011: 144) and discover past events not to have happened yet. Naturally, these attempts at reversing a development typical of the modern era prove futile; as any human being Austerlitz cannot escape his own past nor the relentless advancing of time. Without explicitly stating it, it is apparent that Sebald imparts on the character Austerlitz a relativistic mindset – this should not be mistaken for philosophical relativism. Opposed to the linear, irreversible flow of time Austerlitz, through endless amassing of historical facts, constructs for himself a safe haven of timelessness: “Austerlitz’ substitution of scholarship for memory forms part of his wider efforts to resist the power of linear time by stressing the radically relative nature of temporality.” (Long, 2007: 154)

Paradoxically then Austerlitz resists the grip of the temporal nature of modernity by excessively making use of another modern phenomenon – the obsessive storing, categorizing and shelving of knowledge.
4.3.2 Identity Crises

The unease Austerlitz’ expresses at the linearity of time and his subsequent attempt at halting or even reversing this law of nature can be traced back to the defining struggle he faces – the struggle with finding his own estranged identity. After his deportation to Wales on the eve of the Holocaust and upon arrival at his foster home he expresses unhappiness with being dressed in new clothes, with “the inexplicable disappearance of [his] little, green rucksack”, and lately thinks that he could even “still apprehend the dying away of [his] native tongue, the faltering and fading sounds [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 195). As this unfamiliar, stern couple robs him of the few remnants of his early childhood he still possesses, his identity is already severely compromised. Even when his foster parents die, this does not liberate his dormant past self, since he cannot reclaim what time has claimed already. And his particular fate is just one example of countless lives deeply affected by the Holocaust.

This then is inextricably linked to modernity, since, as Bauman points out, “the Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve.” (Bauman, 2013: 25). If we take the Holocaust to be an event made possible by the negative repercussions of modern achievements, such as the widespread rationalization of production and the rise of efficient administrative power structures spanning multiple nations, then the so-called Kindertransport constitutes a modern phenomenon as well. As a huge organizational undertaking aimed at saving the lives of thousands of children it is a rationalized operation typical for modernity, and although fundamentally a humanitarian deed, the rescue inevitably leads to an uprooting or displacement of the individual.

In the case of young Austerlitz this has severe consequences. His foster parents raise him to be a person after their liking and in their image. Bauman states that this behavior is consistent with that of the modern individual:

“The modern world-view, after all, proclaimed the unlimited potential of education and self-perfection. Everything was possible, with due effort and good will. Man was at birth a tabula rasa, an empty cabinet, later to be covered and filled, in the course of the civilizing process, with contents supplied by the levelling-up pressure of shared cultural ideas.” (Bauman, 2013: 146)
While the Elias-family ultimately unsuccessfully attempts to “fill” their foster son with religious values, this quote, however, can also be understood in relation to Austerlitz constituting a “tabula rasa” not only at birth, or upon arrival in Wales but again when his birth name is revealed to him. From this point on he overwrites Dafydd Elias’ existence steadily by spending decades constructing an identity based on his academic writing and research, only to find it crumble when confronting the impossibility to concretize his perpetual studies on wildly varying topics, as he collects “the bundles of papers [...] and the endless reams [he] had written in the course of the years.” (Sebald, 2011: 171). Where others might base their identity on family, religion, and heritage, Austerlitz had substituted the lack thereof with his scholarly endeavors.

This throws him into an existential crisis decades in the making: “Like a tightrope walker who has forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other, all I felt was the swaying of the precarious structure on which I stood.” (Sebald, 2011: 172-173). All supposed certainties have left him until he feels his personality disintegrate, “that all [his] life had been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself and the world” (Sebald, 2011: 174), which manifests itself in him losing first his ability to write and finally to read.

Throughout his life, Austerlitz makes excessive use of research and amasses knowledge, thus drawing on two of modernity’s prime achievements. This proves futile and Austerlitz ends up a blank slate, confused and lost. Here he resembles the modern individual as described by Nietzsche in Berman: “Our instincts can now run back in all sorts of directions; we ourselves are a kind of chaos”. Filled with the prospect of finding his ‘true’ identity but at the same time with the dread of forever remaining in a state of uncertainty, “the possibilities are at once glorious and ominous.” (Berman, 1988: 22) Since Austerlitz’ mechanisms of evading his own past are now out of effect, this opens up the possibility of long-suppressed memories to emerge and finally leads him on his path to reclaim a past thought permanently lost.

Sebald makes use of aspects of modernity to highlight both the possible negative effects but also opportunities that arise from it, yet ultimately succeeds in conveying a feeling of inescapability for the individual – put bluntly, Austerlitz loses his identity because of modernity, creates himself a second identity through modernity, and finally obliterates it by obsessively employing tools of modernity. This will be expanded upon later, when we explore how Austerlitz recreates his original identity through the archive.
4.3.3 Notions of Interconnectedness and Heimat

Austerlitz’ quest for identity leads him to traverse countries all over Europe. This opens another topic of discussion: the increasing interconnectedness and relative ease of travel made possible by modernity and how this corrodes the notion of Heimat for Austerlitz. The German word refers to a permanent home, both a physical place and a social space where one feels rooted and secure – which Austerlitz fundamentally lacks throughout his life. This is congruous with Bauman’s representation of the Jewish diaspora. According to the sociologist “The permanent and irremedial homelessness of the Jews was an integral part of their identity virtually from the beginning of their diasporic history.” (Bauman, 2013: 96). Though Sebald hardly characterizes his protagonist as a Jew and indeed Austerlitz, after having learned of his heritage, does not seem to dwell on the religious implications thereof, it is undoubtedly part of his innate identity. Indeed, for a big part of his life Austerlitz unknowingly represents a historical continuity and shows qualities consistent with those Bauman ascribes Jewry.

In researching for his vast, meandering studies and later trying to piece together emerging fragments of past memories, Austerlitz often finds himself in train stations and travelling via train. He seems deeply fascinated by this means of travel and finds moments of tranquility and reflection both during his journeys and among the teeming comings-and-goings of busy train stations: “I sat there for half an hour [...], trying to think my way back through the decades.” (Sebald, 2011: 307). Oblivious to the defining event of displacement in his early childhood train rides carry a positive connotation for the prepubescent Austerlitz. In excited anticipation of the blissful summers at the Andromeda Lodge he states, “Scraps of steam vapour flew past outside; you could hear the engine whistling and feel the air cool on your forehead. Never had I travelled better, said Austerlitz, than on this journey of seventy miles” (Sebald, 2011: 112). This sets up a prominently featured trope and the reader sees Austerlitz returning to this way of travelling again and again. The underlying positive notion to travelling by train is, however, revoked by the fact that his first train ride alone was the Kindertransport, and consequently that journey does not have a pleasant or calm atmosphere to it, rather the traumatizing ride repeatedly comes back to Austerlitz in his later life as “a dream of a nameless land without borders and entirely overgrown by dark forests, which I had to cross without any idea where I was going” (Sebald, 2011: 316). Ultimately, Austerlitz’ entire narrative is framed by the Narrator meeting him at Antwerp Centraal Station for the first time and ends with the Narrator seeing him off at the Gare d’Austerlitz. Austerlitz’ arrival in and departure from the Narrator’s life mark the beginning and end of
a journey for both the Narrator and the reader, alighting at pivotal stations in Austerlitz’ life. In this way Sebald ascribes great importance to a theme that is intrinsically linked to modernity, as the following passage will highlight.

Walter Benjamin describes the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin as “the mother cavern of all railways”, creating “the reality of that marvelous and equally dubious nineteenth-century dream of progress characterized by, among other things, the possibility of connecting to a faraway place” (Presner, 2007: 2). Conveniently interconnecting places that were formerly separated by months of travelling under strenuous conditions, the train receives a central role in modernity, as it kindles commerce between nations and rapidly becomes the means of transport for the masses:

“Over the course of the [20th] century, the railway emerged as an embodied, transitional space emblematic of both the emancipatory hopes and the destructive nightmares of an epoch. [...] The rapid expansion of the railway was driven by its unprecedented capacity to produce capital and facilitate transnational material transport. It became a “dream space” of modernity, displaying and exchanging the fetishized objects of a capitalist economy. The railway [...] thus became the symbol and proof of [its] epoch: Railways represented progress because they were the technological realization of mobility, speed, and exchange. They also became the first mode of transportation to move the masses, from the formation of mass politics to the implementation of mass deportations.” (Presner, 2007: 3)

The last sentence mirrors the fate that befell Austerlitz’ mother and father, who were deported to the ghetto of Theresienstadt and the concentration camp at Gurs, respectively. Again an aspect of modernity commonly perceived as beneficial shifts into a negative connotation when put into the context of the Holocaust, as it facilitates an unprecedented forced displacement of ‘enemies of the state’.

To the continuously displaced Austerlitz the train station serves as a fixture in an otherwise uprooted, transient way of life. While the locale changes depending on which country he happens to be in, the general principle stays the same; he seems to seek out its familiarity when he studies the architecture, taking photos and notes, going as far as describing his interest as an obsession. It almost seems as if train stations serve the purpose of a shelter, as if Austerlitz finds peace and feels at home in a place that for most constitutes a mere transit point, an intersection of itineraries, a ‘non-place’ that
only exists in relation to trains and people passing through. Impossibly Austerlitz appears to pursue \textit{Heimat} precisely in this fleeting environment.

But even though Austerlitz is fascinated and calmed by the buildings, “he had quite often found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion in the Parisian railway stations, which, he said, he regarded as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune” (Sebald, 2011: 45). At a crucial point in the story a scene at Liverpool Street Station in London takes on a revelatory character, provoking an emergence of new recollections detrimental to Austerlitz’ state of mind:

“[...] the longer I stared upwards with my head wrenched painfully back, the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe.” (Sebald, 2011: 191)

Remembering small details from when he first stepped out of the \textit{Kindertransport} in England deeply disturbs Austerlitz, but in line with Sebald’s tendency to ambivalence this also has illuminating qualities triggering an urge to introspect, which he avoided for decades. The successive investigation into his own past leads to him learning of his heritage and his parents’ demise.

\textbf{4.4 Interim Conclusion}

Now, where does this leave us? All in all, having explored the aspects of time, loss of identity and interconnectedness in relation to modernity, it has become evident that the grander theme of modernity pervades \textit{Austerlitz} from start to finish. But it is peculiar that the reader rarely notices that a bulk of the narrative actually takes place in the 1990s – modern technology is seldom mentioned, neither the Narrator nor Austerlitz ever use cell phones, watch television or use a computer. The framing narrative of Austerlitz relating his life’s events to his coincidental chronicler might just as well take place several decades earlier. Technological progress is more or less obscured, as the world does not appear to evolve beyond the state it is in during Austerlitz’ youth. “For Austerlitz, let us recall, the world ends in the late nineteenth century.” (Long, 2007: 154). And it thus seems almost anachronistic, when waiting on a train the pair passes time in a McDonalds restaurant. Sebald ushers his protagonist through a
convoluted world of memories and historical facts, a world removed from today’s reality and all practicality – it is jarring then to see such a mundane facet of everyday life suddenly intersect Austerlitz’ detached existence. In that way Sebald devises a character that struggles to no avail against the unrelenting progression of time and society, trying to reconnect with a lost past and disconnect from the dictate of modern life; but its grip proves too powerful, as Austerlitz gets violently tossed around by crises and revelations brought about by factors beyond his control. Austerlitz then serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting how the modern individual can drown in the most complex era of humanity.

5. A Foucauldian Perspective

Another facet of Austerlitz that plays a hidden yet vital role both in the narrative and modern society is that of surveillance. In order to bring this topic to the surface we will acquaint the reader with the ideas of Michel Foucault, who thoroughly analyzed the historical development of the individuals’ exposure to institutionalized authority. To quote the sociologist David Lyon: “Surveillance is a distinctive product of the modern world. Indeed, surveillance helps to constitute the world as modern.” (Lyon, 2003: 161) Now, how does this find expression in Sebald’s novel? The author explores the topic in a roundabout way, touching on but never explicitly stating the obvious, as effective surveillance mainly manifests itself in concealed form.

Foucault raises this issue by mapping out Gedankenexperimente that show modern society’s subversive power over the individual; this in turn is mirrored in Sebald’s writing, as we will prove over the following pages.

5.1 Works And Life

Born in Poitiers, France, on October 15, 1926, Michel Foucault was a historian and philosopher who is associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist schools of thought. (Gutting, 2014: 1) Educated at L’École Normale Supérieure and taught by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and existentialist Jean Hippolyte he was an avid and outspoken proponent of marginalized groups in society, such as homosexuals and artists; in 1970 he founded the Groupe d'information sur les
prisons, a group that counted amongst others Jean-Paul Sartre to its members, aimed at educating about and reforming the inhumane state of the French prison system. (Oxford, 2014: 1) He revisits his interest in the penal system in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which will be discussed shortly.

*The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965) are two works that examine another topic of importance to him, the history and development of mental disorders and the medical establishment; these, while being a historical recount of those subjects also offer social critique and express dissatisfaction, which can attributed to Foucault’s own brush with mental institutions: A homosexual in a time in France where homosexuality was still largely taboo he attempted suicide and self-mutilation multiple times, which led to his being examined by a psychiatrist. (Eribon, 1991: 26)

In Sebald’s *Austerlitz* both the questioning of sanity and a feeling of being incarcerated are prevalent issues noticeable throughout, which is why it lends itself to reflection in a Foucauldian manner. Michel Foucault died in Paris, France on June 25, 1984 of neurological problems brought on by his suffering from AIDS.

5.2 Superimposing Discipline And Punish Onto *Austerlitz*

Even though Foucault’s body of work offers discourse on a wide range of subjects that could lend itself to further investigation in light of *Austerlitz* – the mentioned explorations of the medical world or *The Order of Things* (1966) dealing with knowledge and its representation throughout history are two examples – we chose to base our observations on the highly relevant *Discipline and Punish* (1975). While the work presents interesting thoughts and historical accounts on the callous punitive measures employed by the wielders of power over the last centuries there is one chapter of particular relevance to *Austerlitz*, Panopticism, for reasons the reader will find to ring true over the following paragraphs.
5.2.1 The Plague Stricken Town

Foucault starts his chapter with a description of measures to be introduced in a quarantined town in the 17th century suffering an outbreak of the plague, a disease that one might wager parallels the Third Reich National Socialists’ perceived threat of Jewishness.

“According to an order published at the end of the seventeenth century” (Foucault, 1975: 195) a town in the vise of the epidemic first has to be cordoned off – leaving the quarantined zone is a capital offence. This is then further divided into districts, headed by an intendant, down to individual streets being placed under the supervision of a syndic, where again a departure is punishable by death. On a certain day the syndic will ask all inhabitants of the street he supervises to stay inside their homes in order to carry out an account of the sick. Important to note is here the emphasis put on complete isolation of individuals and families from one another. These inspections are carried out meticulously and without room for error; furthermore there are guards stationed at town gates, the town hall and within the districts, as well as sentinels at the end of each street. The intendants, who relay their information to those exerting absolute control over the allocation of medical treatment, inspect their quarters ceaselessly, investigating the syndics’ findings and thus keeping check on any possible development within their allotted zones. The omnipresent surveilling and surveying, regulating and relegating are all features to be found in Sebald’s description of the ghetto Theresienstadt.

As part of the Endlösung der Judenfrage a mock town is built on the grounds of the former military fortress Terezin, in which “some sixty thousand people were crammed together in an area little more than a square kilometer in size”. (Sebald, 2011: 331) Prevailing is a state of “crazed administrative zeal – […] this system had to be constantly supervised and statistically accounted for, particularly with respect to the total number of inmates of the ghetto” (Sebald, 2011: 337), which ties in with Foucault’s depiction of the disease-ridden town:

“Every day [a syndic] calls each of [the inhabitants] by name […], gets all the inhabitants to appear at the windows […], calls each of them by name; […] This surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor.” (Foucault, 1995: 196)
In *Austerlitz* on the other hand this process takes place out in the open, so to speak, where

“on 10 November 1943 outside the gates [...] the entire population of the ghetto – children, old people and any of the sick at all able to walk not excepted – was marched out [...] to carry out the count of heads [by the SS men] and then repeat it twice before they could feel that the final result [...] did in fact tally with the expected number of forty thousand one hundred and forty-five.” (Sebald, 2011: 338)

Rather than being isolated from each other as in Foucault’s description they are isolated ‘as one’, as part of a faceless body constituted by figures with numbers in place of names. In one succinct and cynical sentence Foucault goes on:

“The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, [...] immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.” (Foucault, 1995: 198)

Exchange ‘plague-stricken town’ with ‘ghetto Theresienstadt’ and you have a poignant representation of Sebald’s powerful passage about the internment camp, the book’s centerpiece – a long sentence spanning several pages meticulously crafted to display the cruelty and inhumane circumstances the imprisoned suffer, stripped of cultural and religious identity. The author makes it clear that this particular disciplinary apparatus realized by the National Socialist Party excels in its function; invoking Bauman, who proposes that the bureaucratic efforts are unparalleled in their efficiency and effect sheds light on the highly organized nature of said apparatus. He quotes Christopher R. Browning saying that “The Nazi mass murder of the European Jewry was not only the technological achievement of an industrial society, but also the organizational achievement of a bureaucratic society”. (Bauman, 2013: 53). The internment camp Theresienstadt proves this on a smaller scale, showing the meticulous management and rigorous delegation symptomatic of the Holocaust.

A look at the nature of Jewish ghettos as constructed by the Nazis supports a transition into the next sub-chapter. These ghettos provided the Nazis with an ideal mode of surveillance, as an isolated and dense population could be watched over more easily and by fewer eyes. As we will see when
looking in depth at Foucault’s Panopticism, effective surveillance is one of the key features of the panopticon. Bauman encapsulates this function of the Jewish ghettos when he writes,

“In the long run, ghettos were to disclose their role as instruments of concentration – that necessary preliminary stage on the road to deportation and destruction. In the meantime, however, ghettos meant also that one German officer could exercise complete supervision over tens of thousands of Jews – with the help of the Jews themselves, who supplied clerical and manual labour, the communal infrastructure of daily life and the organs responsible for the maintenance of law and order.” (Bauman 2013: 307)

This insight also indicates that the Nazi organization of ghettos coerced productivity from the imprisoned Jews. Increased productivity was a potential ‘benefit’ of the Panopticon foreseen by Jeremy Bentham (the designer of the Panopticon), when he conceived the idea, which inspired Foucault’s broader philosophy of Panopticism. In addition, the societal construct of these ghettos entailed a system of self-government. The Panopticon prison’s effectiveness relies upon the principle that inmates begin to police themselves and their own behavior, which arises from the fear that they may be being watched at any given moment. Here in the ghetto as described by Bauman, this Panoptic attribute manifests itself beyond individual self governing to groups or “organs” of Jews maintaining “law and order” for the entire population. In this case, individuals within this population have been stripped of their identities and boxed together with others with the same label; they then control the behavior of themselves, reducing the work-load for their captors. This example of a Panopticon style control system will assist the understanding of the concept of Panopticism and how it can be applied as it is further detailed in the section to follow.

5.2.2 The Panopticon and The Notion of Panopticism

Here Foucault turns to the titular concept, which expands on the binary nature of the observed and the observer and aims to maximize efficiency of the process of surveillance. The word derives from the ancient Greek mythological creature Πανόπτης, meaning ‘the all-seeing’, a giant with a hundred eyes and hence the ultimate overseer.
The Panopticon was an alternative design for an institutional building by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham. His initial plans were published as a book in 1791. The Panopticon is largely associated as being intended as a prison environment, though Bentham proposed that the concept could be used in other contexts as well, such as educational and medical. (Britannica, 2014: 1)

A summarized principle of his design is that a single watchman or guard could be placed in a tower at the center of the institution, with a 360-degree view of inmates held in a circular edifice encompassing this tower. Though the design of the tower would allow the watchman a full, unobscured view of every prisoner, whenever his gaze should fall on them, the prisoners would be able to see nothing inside the tower. In this way, the inmates would never know if and when they were being watched. This theoretically meant that even if there was no watchman in the tower at any given time, the inmates would, for fear of being watched, control their own behavior. Furthermore, all prisoners are kept in total isolation, not being able to communicate with one another. Using Foucault’s own words:

“The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities. From the point of view of the guardian, it is replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised; from the point of view of the inmates, by a sequestered and observed solitude.” (Foucault, 1995: 201)

To encapsulate, the key concepts of Panopticism as applied to Austerlitz are: isolation and enclosure; the absence of communication between detained subjects; the total control of information by authority; and the potential for constant surveillance. As Foucault writes in reference to those held within a Panopticon, “He is seen but he does not see; he is the object of information but never a subject in communication.” (Foucault, 1995: 200) With such a detachment from guards and prisoners and with an extremely rational overall structure, the Panopticon seems to inevitably verify what Bauman claimed: “the more rational is the organization of action, the easier it is to cause suffering.” (Bauman, 2013: 115)

5.2.3 The Panoptic Metaphor Pervading Austerlitz

A reader approaching Austerlitz from a Foucauldian perspective will hear the concept of Panopticism echoing throughout the work. The book itself holds an oppressive timbre from the first pages. The
format of the book, void of chapters and even paragraphs, has a heavy effect on the reader. The reader finds herself caught amongst a 415-page block of words often feeling disoriented or confused, a stylistic device employed by Sebald. The book is riddled with long-winded sentences, testing the focus of the reader; page 331 sees the beginning of aforementioned sentence, which lasts until page 342 when finally a full stop allows the reader a chance to breathe. From here arises the question - what was the intention behind this and what is achieved by Sebald’s employment of this stylistic device?

This textual structure imbues a feeling of entrapment, transcending its stylistic, literary nature and taking on an almost architectural form. It is as though one has entered a kind of prison, a prison where Sebald looms over, aware of where the story is going whilst the reader is left in the dark. In this way the very text itself has a panoptic quality with Sebald himself acting as the panoptic watchman.

The choice of language throughout the book is largely melancholic, in keeping with the overall oppressive nature. The wording is often academic and esoteric, the characters referring to obscure architectural specifics, historical events, literature and sciences such as ornithology. This further serves to alienate the reader, just as the prisoners of the Panopticon are alienated from each other and their captors.

At the outset of the novel, specifically on page 3, we are met by four sets of eyes, photos cropped so that we see eyes alone. Two sets belong to nocturnal animals which the reader supposes the Narrator is seeing in his visit to the Antwerp Nocturama as the scene indicates. Beneath these are photos of human eyes, a metonym which conveys the idea of surveillance to an observer, just as the human eye is used in the same way on numerous covers of George Orwell’s famous novel, 1984. This idea of surveillance is impregnated into the mind of the reader, which gives the impression that the reader herself is being watched. The eyes we see on this page are focused, scrutinizing and almost intimidating. They are also faceless, anonymous, as is the watchman in his tower within the Panopticon. The reader may discover that one of these sets of eyes belongs to the German artist Jan Peter Tripp, a close friend of Sebald since their schooling years together. To the average reader, these eyes are foreign and anonymous. The name Jan Peter Tripp holds no significance to those unfamiliar with his work or the personal life of W.G. Sebald. This anonymity and ambiguity has a potent effect on the reader, one of alienation and unease. The other set of eyes depicted belong to the British-Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein, one of the greatest minds of the 20th century. This furthers the link between this device and the panoptic idea of the power of information being in the hands of the watcher.
After closer inspection of the text surrounding these cropped photographs, however, an acute reading may lead to a different interpretation. In reference to the eyes, Sebald states through his narrator,

“Otherwise, all I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking.” (Sebald, 2011: 3)

This insight renders the subjects, the owners of the eyes, as prisoners rather than overseers. This “inquiring gaze” seeks to penetrate the surrounding darkness in an effort to make sense of one’s oppressive environment, to lift the veil. In the case of a Panoptic denizen, that elusive thing the eyes search for beyond the darkness and uncertainty is the observer hidden in his tower.

Returning to Orwell’s novel 1984, Sebald actually includes a reference to this work towards the end of Austerlitz though he withholds the name 1984 in his otherwise clear allusion. He refers to the buildings of the new Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, “The four glazed towers themselves, named in a manner reminiscent of a futuristic novel La tour des lois, La tour des temps, La tour des nombres and La tour des lettres” (Sebald, 2011: 389). This alludes to the ministries from 1984, themselves named ‘The Ministry of Love’, ‘The Ministry of Plenty’, ‘The Ministry of Peace’ and ‘The Ministry of Truth’. These bureaucratic agencies, specifically ‘The Ministry of Love’ and ‘The Ministry of Truth’, exert control over the citizens of Orwell’s imagined dystopia through various means including perpetual, relentless surveillance (‘The Ministry of Love’) and the complete ownership and manipulation of information (‘The Ministry of Truth’). Here we see a clear parallel to Foucault and his concept of Panopticism.

Austerlitz himself as a character seems to show qualities consistent of those pertaining to a prisoner of a Panopticon. We are met in these early pages with the image described of a raccoon held captive within the Nocturama. The Narrator observes this creature “as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived.” (Sebald 2011: 2-3)
This captive raccoon occupies an environment highly comparable to a Panopticon. As Mark Ilsemann writes in his essay on *Austerlitz*, “There can be no doubt that the bizarre behavior of the raccoon hints at the kind of disorder Sebald’s protagonist is suffering from. Endlessly repeating the same senseless act.” (Ilsemann, 2006: 309)

It seems that this raccoon is a metaphor for Austerlitz as a prisoner and an individual suffering from mental disorder. Austerlitz is a man whose existence is led predominantly in isolation. This began with his childhood, as a young boy growing up in Wales and carrying on throughout his life, “I came to realize how isolated I was and had always been, among the Welsh as much as among the English and French.” (Sebald, 2011: 177) As a grown man he confines himself to his studies, to libraries, preferring the company of books to the company of others. Austerlitz, like the raccoon, repeats the same activities endlessly; even when in dialogue with other people such as the Narrator, his studies keep creeping in.

In this way it seems that Austerlitz is rather like a prisoner of his studies, which keep him isolated, from communicating with others and which hold the key to information. His studies are within architecture and he intends to write a book on the Palace of Justice in Brussels as well as a series of essays on a broad range of subjects including hygiene and sanitation, the architecture of the penal system and zoological gardens - environments which Foucault also focuses on within his literature and thought.

Austerlitz meanwhile repeatedly alludes to a kind of internal architecture, which he has constructed within his mind as a defense mechanism. The main character seems to have internalized his studies deeply, his subconscious manifesting itself as constructions, which trap Austerlitz in haunting scenes at various points in the book. Harrowing recurring nightmares plague Austerlitz and expose his architectural, psychological state,

“In that sleep, when my body feigned death while feverish thoughts whirled through my head, I was at the innermost heart of a star-shaped fortress, a dungeon entirely cut off from the outside world, and I had to try finding my way into the open, passing down long, low passages which led me through all the buildings I had ever visited and described.” (Sebald 2011: 196)

Again just fourteen pages later, Austerlitz involuntarily returns to this dark, architectural dream world, “I spent the whole night either lying awake or tormented by fearful dreams in which I had to climb up and down flights of steps ringing hundreds of doorbells in vain…” (Sebald, 2011: 210) and the scene
continues. This reoccurs later in the book with a dream of similar nature when Austerlitz describes to the Narrator, “I lay in my semi-conscious condition for several days, and in that state I saw myself wandering around a maze of long passages, vaults, galleries […]” (Sebald, 2011: 376)

In addition, Austerlitz frequently likens his psychological condition to an architectural form, choosing to use edifices as the vehicle in metaphor for his psychology, as observed in the following passage, “I felt that the decrepit state of these once magnificent buildings, with their broken gutters, walls blackened by rainwater, crumbling plaster revealing the coarse masonry beneath it, windows boarded up or clad with corrugated iron, precisely reflected my own state of mind […]” (Sebald, 2011: 299). Whether consciously or subconsciously, Austerlitz has constructed a fortress of his own, which prevents him from coming to terms with his past and which controls his life. He avoids ever having to even consider the country of Germany, blocking it out and sealing himself off, “I had never before set foot on German soil, I had always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, history or modern German life, and so, said Austerlitz, Germany was probably more unfamiliar to me than any other country in the world […]” (Sebald, 2011: 313) He cannot recall any early memories and he distracts himself perpetually with studies, often in a way which is arbitrary and frivolous. We see in the scene in which Austerlitz describes his time visiting daily the rue Richelieu Bibliothèque Nationale:

“In place there until evening [...] losing myself in the small print of footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 363)

What compels Austerlitz to live a lifestyle such as this one? It could be argued that Austerlitz is occupying his own, self constructed Panopticon. He isolates himself from others, totally absorbed in the realm of literature just as prisoners in the Panopticon are themselves isolated. His past is like the prison guard, something he cannot grasp or observe but which is always present and ominous. It is invisible and unknowable to him yet plays a key role in his behavior and identity. When he is finally confronted with his past for the first time, within the waiting room of Liverpool Station in London, he is overwhelmed; “[...] I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect on me of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death.” (Sebald, 2011: 194)
Leaving the characters of *Austerlitz* and expanding on Sebald’s application of architecture as a metaphor, the dome- or tower-shaped Panopticon turns up again and again, for example in the Narrator’s initial description of the ‘Salle des pas perdus’ of Antwerp Centraal Station, “with its dome arching sixty metres high above it [which] ought to have cages for lions and leopards let into its marble niches, and aquaria for sharks, octopuses and crocodiles [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 5) – it does not take a leap of faith to think of these proposed cages and aquaria as cells for prisoners.

Further describing features of the train station Austerlitz remarks to the Narrator that “the movements of all travellers could be surveyed from the central position occupied by the clock in Antwerp Station, and conversely all travelers had to look up at the clock and were obliged to adjust their activities to its demands.” This clock “reigns supreme” “some twenty metres” above the crowd and alludes to Foucault’s omniscient watchman. It exerts control and dictates the movement of the travelers purely by existing. (Sebald, 2011: 13)

The 1880s see the construction of the Palace of Justice in Brussels, a monumental undertaking that ended up being the “largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe” (Sebald, 2011: 38). This kafkaesque assortment of mostly empty corridors and stairways leading nowhere, of dead-ends and forgotten rooms – as Austerlitz tells the Narrator in an anecdote – indeed both literally and metaphorically oversees the city, the embodied judicatory looming on Gallows Hill, its inner workings hidden behind “several hundred thousand cubic metres [of stone].” (Sebald, 2011: 39)

After Austerlitz experiences an attack of “hysterical epilepsy”, as he refers to it, following his trip to the Veterinary Museum at Maisons Alfort in Paris, he is brought to the men’s ward of Salpêtrière Hospital. As the Sebald-scholar J.J Long so succinctly puts it, “[... the protagonist ends up in the Salpêtrière in Paris after suffering a breakdown on the Métro. He describes the Salpêtrière as a ‘gigantic complex of buildings where the borders between hospital and penitentiary have always been blurred’” (Sebald, 2011: 376-378) - a comment that is thoroughly Foucauldian in its understanding of the relationship between power, knowledge and architecture” (Long, 2007: 61). To offer more clarification on this insight, as stated in our introduction into Panopticism, in Jeremy Bentham’s view the Panopticon was not limited to the penal system but could be implemented in other institutional contexts, including hospitals, sanatoriums and asylums. Austerlitz comparing the Salpêtrière environment to a penitentiary conjures a scene, which one could imagine finding between the pages of
Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, as Long seems to suggest. Interestingly it was in this same famous, Parisian hospital where Foucault finally died an AIDS related death on the 25th of June, 1984. This institution was also studied by Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Eribon, 1991: 357). According to the extensive biography on Sebald, *Saturn’s Moons: W.G Sebald - A Handbook*, Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* can also be found amongst the books in the catalogue of Sebald’s personal library. It seems beyond mere coincidence that an author as meticulous as Sebald would choose to have his protagonist committed to a hospital of such significance in regards to Foucault, whilst subtly referencing to the same philosopher's thought.

Rarely, if at all do the reader and Austerlitz both take the world Sebald describes at face value – everything is larger than life, looms, towers, watches, permeates, infiltrates. It comes to no surprise that Sebald’s titular character feels oppressed and adrift in this surreality, that he loses the struggle to stay sane in an increasingly shifting, intertwined narrative. Oftentimes buildings fulfill the role of a watchman, timeless and passively observing the passing of the surrounding world, idly standing by as Austerlitz and thus the reader find themselves isolated in a headspace that at times borders on magical realism. Only once in the book do we encounter a space of complete sparsity, that of Austerlitz’ apartment in London. Analytically the Narrator walks us through a simple, austere, honest arrangement where everything has its place and nothing is superfluous. It shares none of the characteristics of other buildings, seems almost devoid of character, lacks texture and color, has no positive or negative connotation and just ‘is’. It seems as though Austerlitz created himself a refuge from the confused world his mind inhabits, a place for at least his body to be at peace and free of any temptation to over-analyze, imbue meaning and value, see his surroundings through tinted spectacles.

5.4 Interim Conclusion

With the onset of ever-present surveillance, both online and in a public setting manifested as CCTV-systems in place in every major city, Panopticism is a tolerated if not accepted reality in modern life. In terms of *Austerlitz* it should now be clear that and to what extent the novel lends itself to a Foucauldian reading. Searching for the French philosopher’s name in the secondary literature we draw upon in our reading of *Austerlitz* yields countless results, a fact that alone substantiates Foucault’s relevance for Sebald’s final work. In J.J. Long’s words:
“the salient disciplinary techniques he identifies, and the configuration of power within which they operate, provide a highly fruitful framework for the study of a wide variety of other practices and institutions that bear directly on the subject of this study, namely modernity, the image and the archive in the work of W. G. Sebald.” (Long, 2007: 15)

Singling out a quite concrete aspect of modern life, that of surveillance proved highly enlightening and provoked interesting lines of thought; it furthered our understanding of the character Austerlitz, his motivations and fears, and painted an arguably grim image of the inner turmoil Sebald subjects his protagonist to. In Long’s quote the concept of the archive is also touched upon, a concept that rose to significant importance in the modern era and extensively features in the novel at hand, as we aim to clarify in the following section. While it, too, strongly relates to Panopticism, the fact that archiving is such a broad theme in *Austerlitz* and the realm of modernity as well, we feel that it warrants its own extensive examination.

6. Archiving

6.1 Introduction

“The idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and protected from its erosion, the project of thus organizing a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move – well, in fact, all of this belongs to our modernity.”

(Foucault in Long, 2010: 11)

In analyzing *Austerlitz*, the topic of the archive is ubiquitous and gives rise to much contemplation pertinent to modernity, as the large-scale amassing of knowledge is at its apex in our time. The archive is a broad term and often used in a conceptualized way. The way we will apply it in this chapter is firstly as the place where information or objects are compiled, sorted and recorded so that they may be accessible for future consultation. Secondly objects themselves are considered to be archives should they contain an organized collection of information (e.g., a newspaper or textbook).
The relationship of human and archive as well as the nature of the archive is what we aim to explore in this chapter, drawing upon many examples from the novel that we will expand on by looking at other literature, particularly at the works of Bauman and Foucault.

We will start by considering the archival institutions that play an important role in *Austerlitz*, followed by an examination of the archival nature of history. Then we will go on to analyze the connection of the archive to both the novel and the protagonist himself in separate sections. In the next subchapter Foucault and Bauman will be brought into focus, when we take a look at the role of the archive in extreme circumstances, such as the Holocaust. The final section will be an exploration of the overall values and implications of the archive for Austerlitz the character and society as a whole.

### 6.2 Archival Institutions

There is no doubt that Austerlitz is intrigued and at times empowered by the concept of the archive. He spends most of his waking hours in libraries and museums, institutions, which physically encapsulate an archive for the benefit of visitors. Despite its superficial usefulness and positivity, Sebald and Austerlitz point to a sinister side of the archive and its realized institutions, pernicious in nature and effect. An example is found in regards to the original Bibliothèque Nationale in the rue Richelieu, the library Austerlitz frequented whilst staying in Paris for the first time,

“[…] when I was watching a short black and white film about Bibliothèque Nationale and saw messages racing by pneumatic post from the reading rooms to the stacks, along what might be described as the libraries nervous system, it struck me that the scholars, together with the whole apparatus of the library, formed an immensely complex and constantly evolving creature which had to be fed with myriads of words in order to bring forth myriads of words in its own turn.”

(Sebald, 2011: 364)

This vivid description shows the monstrosity of the archive as more powerful than any user of it, and though the library’s users and visitors may feel that the archive offers nothing but benefit, there is a distinctly negative side to it. As scholars contribute to the mass of information, the archival “creature” gains authority whilst its contributors and users grow increasingly dependent on it. Soon the archive becomes larger than life and dwarfs its makers as it “has […] expanded to such an extent that it exceeds
the cognitive capacity of any single individual fully to apprehend it.” (Long, 2007: 10) And this expansion will never stop, since, as Long quotes Derrida, the archivist only “produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out onto the future”. So “while it is driven by a desire for totality and comprehensiveness [...] the archive becomes a self-generating, self-referential system that entails a perpetual deferral of the moment of completion.” (Long, 2007: 154) Over time the scholars appear outwardly to have less and less value in relation to the archive. Despite the fact that each of their contributions is a necessary step to reach the platform of knowledge in the present, every thought becomes redundant and insignificant at some point. As the system defies finality, their thought and work is departed from, revised and replaced by more current and relevant information, until the archive has departed from them completely, leaving little trace of their contribution. In the end that human part becomes just a book on a shelf or a file in a cabinet; the archive continues to grow.

The black and white film which inspires the thought from Austerlitz, his metaphor in which the library becomes a “constantly evolving creature”, is worth exploring in order to grasp the nature of the archive as is depicted by Sebald. The short film of a little over 20 minutes is entitled *Toute la mémoire du monde* by French director Alain Resnais. Whilst appearing to be a documentary about the Bibliothèque Nationale, this film is steeped in too much pathos to be taken as an objective reportage of the institution; books, other literature and media held by the library are repeatedly referred to as “prisoners” and the building itself as a “fortress”. It seems as though Sebald intended for readers of *Austerlitz* to watch this film whilst reading or upon finishing the book, for the themes shared between both works are so prevalent. In further regards to the pathos of the film, the music heard from the outset is orchestral and predominantly played in eerie, epic and climatic tones. At various points throughout the film there are panning and tracking shots in which the camera shows myriad rows of shelves depicted as though they were cells holding prisoners. Library employees are seen walking the halls lined by these cell-like shelves, as prison wardens would wander the halls of a penal institution.
The portrayal of the institution in such a fashion gives *Toute la mémoire du monde* an undertone of Panopticism.

The film opens in a spacious, stone walled room, reminiscent of a basement and filled with innumerable stacks of books and aging papers. A microphone drops downwards to deliver the message (in French, as is the entire narration), “Because he has a short memory, man amasses countless memory aids.” (Resnais, 2013: 00:55-01:00) The camera then continues to explore the room with the dramatic soundtrack, which typifies the film; the viewer sees stack after stack of compiled information that remains a mystery. The narration returns after a time with the words, “Faced with these bulging repositories, man fears being engulfed by this mass of words. To safeguard his freedom, he builds fortresses.” (Resnais, 2013: 02:29-02:41) This seems to correspond with Austerlitz’ musings on the archive, its eternal growth resembling the growth of a life-form, whilst mentioning fortresses, a topic that is constantly occupying Austerlitz’ mind. As is Sebald’s tendency in *Austerlitz*, the Bibliothèque Nationale is “biomorphized” throughout the film – this concept will be expanded upon in the later chapter on nature. Due to the volume of information it must “digest”, the library “[...] constantly burrows deeper underground and reaches higher up into the sky.” (Resnais, 2013: 05:34-05:40) The catalogue room is like the brain of the library, so the Narrator says, and like a brain this catalogue possesses a memory, though one far more effective than that of the human brain, extending over hundreds of books. The creation of this catalogue is an achievement of scrupulous and on-going organization. This process is followed through the film, which continues to refer to literature in the
library as “prisoners”. The impression that these books are intended as metaphors for Jewish prisoners of the Nazi regime may meet the viewer, particularly in a scene following the fate of a specific book with a photograph of a woman on the front cover and the word “Mars”. The juxtaposing of concentration camp prisoners with this book and others is consolidated cogently in this scene accompanied with the following narration:

“To mark a volume as having entered the library, never again to leave it, it is stamped. [...] An identification card is created without delay. After that, the prisoner awaits the day it will be filed.” (Resnais, 2013: 09:30-10:23)

Just as the prisoners of Auschwitz were tattooed and numbered when they were interned in the concentration camp, so here at the Bibliothèque Nationale volumes are stamped so that they can be organized and recognized later.

_Toute la mémoire du monde_ was made in 1956, a year after the same director, Alain Resnais, directed the short film _Night and Fog_ about Nazi concentration camps. The fact that this image so alluding to imprisonment in a concentration camp appears in a film by the same director a year later seems very much intended. As the narrator in _Toute la mémoire du monde_ states, “In Paris words are imprisoned at the Bibliothèque Nationale.” (Resnais, 2013: 04:12-04:16)

The pneumatic post system from Resnais’ film, which Austerlitz comments on and likens to a nervous system, sparks his musings on the library being like a creature. Despite this being the key aspect of the film which Austerlitz remembers, this messaging system is actually a relatively small part of _Toute la mémoire du monde_, appearing in the 16th minute, towards the end of the film. It is as if
Sebald does not wish to give too much away about this film, even though so much of it relates so strongly to *Austerlitz* and its themes.

The narrator does not seem to criticize the library with what he says, but merely makes statements in a matter of fact fashion, as in a documentary. Referring to books as prisoners, however, does appear to be a critique in its very nature of the institution doing the imprisoning. This archive is so vast that books remain inert and filed away, until the moment when they are finally read, occurring perhaps only once in any book’s “life”, a moment, “[...]

No reference is given here to the author of any work awaiting this ‘glorious’ moment of being read. What is evident here, as was evident at the beginning of this subchapter, is that due to the magnitude of the archive, works and their authors are lost until they are looked upon, which may never happen at all. They are “imprisoned” within a “fortress” by a “creature” which continues to grow and which is indifferent, for the most part, to their existence.

Sebald scrutinizes the archive, or rather an archival institution, more clearly and earnestly later when Austerlitz moves from discussing the old Bibliothèque Nationale to the new site of the library at Quai François Mauriac. The journey inside this edifice, Austerlitz describes as “[...]
an utter absurdity, something that must have been devised [...] to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers, especially as it ends in front of a sliding door of makeshift appearance which had a chain across it on the day of my first visit, and where you had to let yourself be searched by semi-uniformed security men.” (Sebald 2011: 389) This strongly alludes to Foucault in exposing a disciplinary and controlling side of the institution that subjects the individual to its mechanisms.

Once inside, the descriptions of the library maintain their confronting, somber feeling. The chairs are uncomfortable at best. Inquiries to staff may result in long waits in “cubicles” after taking a number which Austerlitz likens to a visit to a tax office or as if one were “on business of extremely dubious nature, or [...] had to be dealt with away from the public gaze [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 390) He goes on to describe the library as “a place of banishment” (Sebald, 2011: 391) and talks of birds flying into the glass windows of the reading-room to fall dead to the ground below. Suddenly a site of death, the institution seems to be in every way something ‘gone wrong’ and Austerlitz concludes:
“[...] in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in practice coincide [...] with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability.” (Sebald, 2011: 392-393)

The archive is the attempt at creating a flawless mechanism, and when it does not conform with reality, reality is altered; as more categories are developed and more shelves added to process the endless increase in material, the completeness of the archive is always maintained, but artificially so. The excess of information and the incomprehensibly large structure are underlying problems that never get fixed; on the contrary, they get enhanced over time. As Long encapsulates: “increasing rationalization thus paradoxically gives rise to a perception of [...] confusion and epistemological chaos” (Long, 2007: 10), so that the structure ends up generating exactly what it tries to eradicate. In trying to create the perfect apparatus, human factors like emotions and flexibility are taken out of the equation, and in dehumanizing the institution, it becomes alien and strange to the ones exposed to it. It seems almost natural then, when Austerlitz describes the library “[...] placing an increasing strain on my nerves” (Sebald, 2011: 393) and finds it to be “useless”, as – despite days and weeks of research – he cannot find the information he sought out.

The picture we get of the institution and of the archive in general is that of artificial entities which lose touch with their initial purpose and integrity. The Bibliothèque Nationale becomes a sterile, alien establishment, which dehumanizes the very readers it aims to serve. To add a sinister edge to the topic of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the modern building stands on a site, which was once home to the Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage depot, where all items of value confiscated from Parisian Jews were taken and held. As the character Lemoine tells Austerlitz,

“[...] Party grandees on visits from Germany and high-ranking SS and Wehrmacht officers stationed in Paris would walk around the halls of the depot [...] with their wives or other ladies, choosing drawing-room furniture for a Grunewald villa, or a Sèvres dinner service, a fur coat or a Pleyel piano.” (Sebald, 2011: 403)
The depot was known by the Drancy internment camp prisoners (prisoners to whom these objects belonged and prisoners, many of whom, worked at the depot themselves) as “Les Galeries d’Austerlitz”. Here again it becomes apparent that Austerlitz is thoroughly entangled with the archive and its institution, with him and the library both experiencing a change of name and a change of identity. Austerlitz became Dafydd Elias, the Austerliz-Tolbiac depot or Galeries d’Austerlitz became the Bibliothèque Nationale - the old identity hidden behind the new labeling. This interpretation is bolstered by Sebald’s likening of the entrance platform to the library to the deck of the ship *Berengaria*, whose original name was the *SS Imperator*. This ship was built as an ocean liner by the Germans, which after World War I fell into the hands of a British shipping company, where it received the name *RMS Berengaria*. (Britannica, 2014: 1) In this way, Sebald seems to call for reflection on the past of any given entity, whether it be building, ship, or human, especially if that past is embedded with negativity. The understanding of present identity will always fall short, if the history is not justly acknowledged. In line with this thought, the former function of the Bibliothèque Nationale can and perhaps should influence the perception of its current use. The Austerlitz-Tolbiac depot worked as a form of archive, using the same principles as a museum or catalogue. But whilst the function of the site has changed and the edifice has been rebuilt, what is maintained is the overall archival nature of the institution. The significance of the practices of “Les Galeries d’Austerlitz” for an understanding of the new library is made clear by J.J Long when he writes,

“ [...] the new Bibliothèque Nationale is built on the site of a Nazi facility for the cataloguing and ‘redistribution’ of goods confiscated from Parisian Jews. This was itself a vast archival enterprise, and foregrounds the close connection between archives and power.” (Long, 2007: 8-9)

The power and its connection to the archive can be found in the case of the Bibliothèque Nationale, in the employment of security guards, the need to consult bureaucrats in order to access information and the overall nature of the building itself. The relation of power and authority to the archive is clearly problematic, as we see in these unsettling examples within *Austerlitz*. We will return to the interplay between the archive and power in a later section.
The negative side of the archive and its institutions is exposed again when Austerlitz is overcome by a fit of “hysterical epilepsy” directly following his visit to the Veterinary Museum at Maisons-Alfort. Austerlitz recounts the morbid exhibits he sees whilst at the institution, including

“[...] jaws of many different kinds of ruminants and rodents; [...] the cross-section of a piglet only a few hours old [...]; the pale blue foetus of a foal [...] ; the skulls and skeletons of many different creatures; trees of bronchial tubes [...] ; and in the teratological department there were monstrosities of every imaginable and unimaginable king, Janus-faced and two headed calves, Cyclopean beasts with outsized foreheads [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 373)

One set of the aforementioned “trees of bronchial tubes” is shown as a photograph in the middle of this list.

The graphic list and detailing continues, culminating in

“Far the most awesome of all [...] the life-sized figure of a horseman, very skillfully flayed [...], so that every strand in the tensed muscles of the rider and his mount, which was racing forward with a panic-stricken expression, was clearly visible in the colors of congealed blood, together
with the blue of the veins and the ocher yellow of the sinews and ligaments.” (Sebald, 2011: 371-373)

The specimen which Austerlitz describes and appears above was flayed by French anatomist Honoré Fragonard. The portrayal of a once living and breathing human being in the archive shows the entity at its most horrifying. The threat of being “engulfed” by the archive, as it is worded in Toute la mémoire du monde, becomes real as we see a butchered human body on display, forever subjugated to the institution. Despite the impassive tone with which he describes the surroundings afterwards, this archival extreme seems to be what triggers Austerlitz’ fit. Though this is not stated specifically, the link between the museum visit and the attack of hysterical epilepsy is undeniable. For combining this horrific manifestation of an archive with plunging the main character into mental disarray, memory loss and his subsequent institutionalization has a climatic effect. Communicating a critique of the archive to the reader, Sebald lays bare the alienating qualities of the institution by presenting such a grotesque form of it. The effects on Austerlitz, the observer, arising from exposure to this macabre archive reinforces this critique.
6.3 History as an Archive

Recorded history (historiography) is another form of archiving touched upon by Sebald. His commentary on the flaws and inadequacies of recorded history is most evident with the description of Austerlitz’ school teacher André Hilary and his inspiring history lessons. Hilary provides an interpretation and relaying of history which is seldom found in society’s institutions. He brings history to life for his students, painting a colorful picture of battlefield scenes, switching between characters all whilst lying on his back on the classroom floor. He is engaging, and the students enjoy and remember his lessons and their content, as is evidenced by Austerlitz’ detailed recounting of them so many years later to the Narrator. The critique of history manifests itself in Austerlitz’ words:

“Hilary could talk for hours about the second of December 1805, but none the less it was his opinion that he had to cut his accounts far too short, because, as he several times told us, it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form recording who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how, or simply saying what the battlefield was like at nightfall, with the screams and groans of the wounded and dying. In the end all anyone could ever do was sum up the unknown factors in the ridiculous phrase, ‘The fortunes of battle swayed this way and that’, or some similarly feeble and useless cliché. [...] Our concern with history, so Hilary’s thesis ran, is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere.” (Sebald, 2011: 100-101)

The criticism put forward by Sebald through Hilary and Austerlitz can be interpreted as pertaining to archival history’s inability to account for the human side of recorded events. Hilary makes an effort to bring the individuals and their stories to the forefront of his lessons, but by and large all we learn in regards to historical events are dates, figures, places and so forth. The true tragedy that pervades events like war is lost, as its full scope cannot be captured by text alone. What historiography aims at is the objective; the subjective is never fully accounted for. As the German philosopher, literary and social critic Walter Benjamin writes in his work Theses on the Philosophy of History, “The true nature of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant it can be
recognised and is never seen again.” (Benjamin, 1968: 255) The truth of past events can only be unveiled temporarily by the subject, but is lost in the greater historical archive.

Despite Sebald bringing focus to the issue of the loss of humanity and subjectivity from historical events in their documentation, when looking at his other writings one can see ambivalence in Sebald’s position. In the essay *Air War and Literature* from the collection *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he argues that the witnesses of a traumatic event such as the Holocaust cannot in fact provide a reliable account of these events. In regards to the survivors of the Hamburg bombings during World War II, Sebald writes,

“[...] in the shock of what these people had experienced, their ability to remember was partly suspended, or else, in compensation, it worked to an arbitrary pattern. Those who had escaped the catastrophe were unreliable and partly blinded witnesses.” (Sebald, 2003: 35)

These findings can be applied to any event having a heavy psychological impact on the people involved. As Sebald finds them to resort to “clichés” and “stereotypical phrases” in describing their experiences, he diagnoses a tendency to evade the explicit and direct account of what has happened, since it exceeds the witnesses' emotional strength to recount the horrors they were exposed to. The account of the witness does therefore not further the understanding of what has happened, but, on the contrary, serves “to cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend.” (Sebald, 2003: 36)

The subjectivity lacking in historiography according to the character Andre Hilary is unobtainable if subjective sources cannot be relied upon. It takes a historian or second party to process and record the information, as Sebald elaborates, “The accounts of individual eyewitnesses [...] are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals.” (Sebald, 2003: 37) Sebald himself thus reveals a conflicting opinion in regards to historiography; in different contexts we find him to favor different approaches to understand past events. Achieving a synthesis between subjective accounts and the constructed narrative of historians is the ideal, which Sebald strives to reach by way of his literary style. Defying genre classification, *Austerlitz* could be taken as the attempt to use a pioneering form of fiction to illuminate a topic that is difficult to approach because of the emotional charge to which neither traditional historiography nor purely subjective witness accounts can do justice.
It appears, however, that by and large Sebald focuses less on the shortcomings of subjective accounts, but rather stresses the problematic sides of attempted use of objectivity in history. We know from his biography that Sebald was disillusioned and frustrated that topics from Germany’s history were not acknowledged or dealt with after World War II, particularly within German universities and post-war literature. To counterbalance this he wrote *The Natural History of Destruction*, where he focuses on the destruction of German cities and the suffering of the German population as a result of World War II which was not discussed after the war,

“[...] no doubt mainly because a nation which had murdered and worked to death millions of people in its camps could hardly call on the victorious powers to explain the military and political logic that dictated the destruction of the German cities.” (Sebald, 2003: 25)

As the Germans were by and large being perceived as the villainous perpetrators of the Holocaust, it was a societal taboo to consider Germans as victims. Consequently, there was no attention given to the pain and loss experienced by millions of German citizens through the catastrophe of modern warfare. With neither German historiography nor German literature covering this issue, the events became almost invisible over time, as accounts of what happened are scarce and hard to find. If it was not for writers such as Sebald, uncovering this part of the past, it could have become virtually non-existent. We see here an example of how topics may be overlooked or avoided from within the historical archive, in preference of other more palatable subjects. Historical events and their documentation are susceptible to being lost amongst the colossal plexus that is the modern archive, especially if those who utilize it choose to avoid this particular information. The construction of the archive itself may also lead to a record of events which is biased, fragmentary or flawed; the archive is an artificial construct and therefore “[...] a recording of history from a particular perspective; it thus cannot provide transparent access to the events themselves. [...] Someone decided what was worth counting and counted it.” (Manoff, 2004: 14) This bias in historical archiving and the focus put on it thereafter, such as the bias, which partly caused Sebald to emigrate from Germany, is an obvious flaw of the archive.
6.3.1 Austerlitz as an Archive

“Austerlitz seems to represent an extreme example of a subject constituted entirely by the archive.” (Long, 2007: 20)

The internal conflicts and tribulations of Austerlitz seem to arise from his being a personification of the archive - throughout his life he is collecting notes, compiling data, and taking photographs. Indeed, Austerlitz is loading himself with information from early on, beginning unwillingly in his childhood at the Elias’ house with biblical and homiletic literature, but developing into an increasing thirst for knowledge during his boarding school years in which “[he] read everything in the school library [...] and everything [he] could borrow from [his] teachers” (Sebald, 2011: 85) as well as fuelling his interest in photography, the epitome of archiving. Austerlitz then moves on to his studies, which stay with him long after his time at university. He finds a place of comfort and exploration in libraries, spending the bulk of his time in such institutions. Later in his life, as he goes on his quest for reconstructing his past, his relation to the archive becomes even more intense, but also more desperate. As Austerlitz feverishly tries to puzzle together his personal identity from photos and documents taken from libraries and other archives, “[he] continues what he has always done, which is to compensate for his lack of memory by substituting the archive for interiority.” (Long, 2007: 162)

His archival nature also expresses itself in him blocking some memories from the conscious surface, as though they were material banned from public archives. Austerlitz will go to any length to sidestep the potentially harrowing recollections of his past, as he underscores with the following remark, “I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past.” (Sebald, 2011: 197) Much like a user of the archive might get lost in the vastness of the institution but then unexpectedly stumble upon what they sought out, Austerlitz unearths his repressed memories entirely by coincidence:

“And certainly the words I had forgotten in a short space of time, and all that went with them, would have remained buried in the depths of my mind had I not, through a series of coincidences, entered the old waiting-room in Liverpool Street station that Sunday morning, [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 195)
Upon the Narrator's first two meetings with Austerlitz, he finds him sitting alone “bent over his notes” (Sebald, 2011: 37) writing and making sketches in regards to his architectural studies; a perpetually ongoing enterprise. The archive is an ever-growing “creature”, Austerlitz adhering to this hallmark with inexhaustible zeal. Although he follows this path of fervent amassing of data far beyond reason, Austerlitz seems to be stuck in what Bauman called “sequential action”, a concept he elaborates on quoting Sabini and Silver: “To deny the propriety of the step he is about to take is to undercut the propriety of the step he just took, and this undercuts the subject’s own moral position. The subject is trapped by his gradual commitment”, and, as Bauman adds himself, “becomes a slave of his own past actions.” (Bauman, 2013: 352) This pattern originally describes the gradual descent of an individual into inhumane action, but it works remarkably well in unraveling Austerlitz’ convoluted situation. As Austerlitz slowly makes the archive the driving force of his life, it becomes ever more impossible for him to give it up, for acknowledging its defectiveness would render the bigger part of his life futile.

The Narrator also comments on how Austerlitz’ personality develops an archival nature, pointing out his “rigorous objectivity” (Sebald, 2011: 41). In addition, despite Austerlitz pouring forth information through in-depth monologue, it takes him fifteen years to share “only a hint of personal life” (Sebald, 2011: 45), expressing his obsession with railway stations. This is in keeping with Hilary's comments on history and its tendency to forsake the subjective, the emotional, the personal in favor of the objective, the indisputable, the factual. “Austerlitz is in the most literal sense an archival subject.” (Long, 2007: 162)

6.3.2 The Novel and its Relation to Archiving

Sebald's choice to construct his character as a sentient metaphor for the modern archive seems an aim to reflect on the tragedy of archiving. For Austerlitz’ existence is indeed tragic. As seen with early post-war Germany's reluctance to deal with the reality of the Holocaust, Austerlitz for many years distracts himself with his continual accumulation of knowledge. In doing so, he avoids coming to terms with his past, sensing issues and truth but never dealing with them for years on end, meanwhile isolating himself from others.

In her essay *Theories of the Archive Across the Disciplines*, Marlene Manoff writes, “[Suzanne] Keen describes romances of the archive as stories of archival research involving characters seeking
information in libraries and archives. [...] In romance of the archive, travelling to do research and hunt down information in libraries, archives, and museums is invested with a kind of glamour once confined to adventure stories.” (Manoff, 2004: 16)

According to this definition, the novel *Austerlitz* may be described as a “tragedy of the archive”. One finds little glamour in the archive and its institutions, or in the characters’ use of them. We may also take on J.J Long’s description of the novel as a “drama of the archive” (Long, 2007: 163), though the turmoil of the main character and the themes which *Austerlitz* touches upon seem far more extreme than the label “drama” indicates. In any case, this novel seems an opposite of the romance and adventure that Manoff and Keen draw attention to. Thus the original use of the archive as seen in *Austerlitz* can be taken as a statement against the entity and its representation in literature hitherto.

The book *Austerlitz* itself holds characteristics of an archive. Though a work of fiction, the book is an intricate patchwork of information, which at times gives *Austerlitz* a textbook-like atmosphere. Furthermore, the documenting of the protagonist’s life, which comprises the book’s plot, is archival in nature, despite the fact that Austerlitz is predominantly a fictional character. Photography plays a key role in the structure of the novel, as touched upon in the “literary observations” section of this paper. Photographs’ intrinsic relationship to the archive as a method of first-hand documentation, support the archival nature of *Austerlitz*. Going into depth on these points at this point in the paper would be superfluous as they have already been explored in earlier sections. There is no doubt, however, that the topic of the archive is deeply intertwined with Austerlitz not just as a character but as *Austerlitz* the novel as well.

### 6.3.3 The Archive as Seen in *The Holocaust and Modernity Through the Lens of Austerlitz*

In terms of the Holocaust itself, the archive was used as an effective tool in the genocide committed by the Nazis against the Jews of Europe; logistically, the Holocaust would not have been possible had the archive not been implemented so effectively. An example of the archive as used by the Nazis is seen whilst Austerlitz is looking through an American architectural journal (another archive) and stumbles upon a “[...] photograph showing the room filled with open shelves up to the ceiling where the files on the prisoners in the little fortress of Terezín [...] are kept today.” (Sebald, 2011: 395) A large photograph of this expansive room is shown covering the two pages to follow.
This ability of the Nazis to accumulate information, made possible by modern society, was requisite if their titanic project of the *Endlösung* was to be successful. Bureaucrats, bastions of the archive, played a key role in facilitating the Holocaust in all its scope and effectiveness. As Bauman quotes Christopher R. Browning, “The Nazi mass murder of the European Jewry was not only the technological achievement of an industrial society, but also the organizational achievement of a bureaucratic society.” (Bauman, 2013: 22) The bureaucratic orchestration of the Holocaust entailed the incorporation of the Jews into the archive, robbing them of their identity, as professions, relationships and even names no longer matter in ‘real life’, but become a factor only on paper. As people lose their agency, the archive acquires more and more power and through it so does the Nazi government; this then reveals a more general connection between the extent of archiving and the extent of control its exploiters hold over those incorporated into the archive.

Foucault highlights this relation in *Discipline and Punish*, where he presents the use of a form of archiving as necessary to obtain and maintain a completeness in a given authority’s control. In the chapter *Panopticism*, Foucault illustrates the use of the archive in establishing power. This is first seen with Foucault’s description of the plague stricken town. Here we see that the governing body holds a monopoly of information leading to a monopoly of power,

“At the beginning of the 'lock up', the role of each of the inhabitants present in the town is laid down, one by one; this document bears 'the name, age, sex of everyone [...]'; a copy is sent to the intendant of the quarter, another to the office of the town hall, another to enable the
syndicate to make his daily roll call. Everything that may be observed during the course of the visits [...] is noted down and transmitted to the intendants and magistrates. The magistrates have complete control over medical treatment [...]. The relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power, the registration they make of it, the decisions they take on it.” (Foucault, 1995: 196 - 197)

In the scene outlined by Foucault, data in regards to the town’s citizens, whether ill or healthy, is noted and thereby added to the record or archive. Foucault claims that this strict system of discipline, “[...] brings into play its power, which is one of analysis.” (Foucault, 1995: 197). Archival data is the foundation on which analysis can take place and is therefore paramount in the process of gaining and exhibiting power. Again in this passage, as seen earlier in regards to Sebald and Bauman, we see bureaucrats as the bastions of the archive and key-players in the power structure. As for the data itself as recorded by these bureaucrats, Foucault writes that information about an individual “[...] is no longer a monument for future memory but a document for future use.” (Foucault, 1995: 191) This leaves the subject and the data pertaining to them as pawns for the use by the controlling body, not only objectifying the subject but also giving power to the holders of this data.

To some extent it does appear necessary, in a crisis situation such as a plague, for authorities to hold such power and control. In order to effectively quarantine members of this plague stricken town and thus reduce future infection and death, there must of course be measures in place; and information recorded and at hand. However, there does seem to be something amiss in the way this preventive plan is carried out. In the description of conditions the reader comes to see the situation inextricably linked with “power” and “complete control” held by the authorities. This exposes how the whole setting nullifies the control which individuals have over their own lives; their survival is in the sole hands of the government, while the dependent citizens find themselves in a “lock up”, wholly at the mercy of the administration’s decisions. The whole process therefore has a dehumanizing effect on the vulnerable, quarantined citizens. And if the same authoritarian use of the archive were to be applied elsewhere, the result would be a totalitarian and extremely imbalanced system of control. Archiving is directly linked with power.

In relation to the Third Reich administration, whose system is exactly that aforementioned possible result, Bauman draws our attention to another phenomenon that arises when a whole population becomes mere archival material; which is the fragmentary effect such authoritarian use of
the archive has on a group of people. As the Nazis invade a new country, they disempower the native leadership and replace centers of authority with their own, thus breaking up the cohesiveness of societal structure:

“The inner structure of the group will collapse, thereby dissipating it into a collection of individuals who may be then picked one by one and incorporated within the new structure administered by the victors, or forcibly re-assembled into a subjugated, segregated category, ruled and policed directly by the managers of the new order.” (Bauman, 2013: 272)

Cast in a state of flux, the individual has nothing to fall back on than himself - but alone he can offer no resistance against the new regiment. Used in this way bureaucracy splits apart, fragments, separates. But the process is never arbitrary; individuals are separated in terms of their identity according to set rules and categories as determined by the archive. Returning to the plague-stricken town, Foucault exposes this bureaucratic categorization of the individual in the following paragraph,

“Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of a binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal) and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution [...]. The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time [...]; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise.” (Foucault, 1995: 199)

From this passage it becomes apparent that the act of noting and recording information as an archive not only facilitates control but also creates a need to categorize individual subjects into binary oppositions. The implications of this function are the creation of a division between subjects; and the potential of the ‘othering’ of the allegedly inferior subject. Furthermore it removes the human overlap of people into more than one category, as a label establishes their identity however arbitrarily it may be applied. As Foucault states, this is a consequence of archiving, which remains true in our time of modernity. It is also manifested clearly in regards to the Holocaust, with the Nazis’ separation of citizens into binary categories, e.g. German/Jew; us/them; normal/abnormal; human/subhuman;
ally/enemy and so forth. Once a difference is proclaimed and a binary opposition is created, it allows for equally opposite treatment to each party whilst giving rise to a conflict between these two polarized groups. What is ultimately an arbitrary system is imposed on the societal reality in such a way that it becomes real and unquestionable. In that way the subject will inevitably act within this new reality and adjust her behavior to the code of what is desirable and what is not. ‘German’ irrefutably meant ‘we’, it meant normal and human; the Jewish population could not fight this ‘othering’, but rather had to resort to the scramble for getting closer to the privileged category, in whatever limited way.

“The sheer existence of bureaucratically defined categories of varying degrees of rights and deprivations prompted frantic efforts to obtain a ‘re-classification’, to prove that one 'deserves' to be assigned to a better category.” (Bauman, 2013: 295)

As touched upon in False Hope in the section on modernity, the rational framework of the Holocaust prevented the realization of how deeply inhumane the imposed measures and laws really were, and likewise how hopeless the situation really was. Consequently, most Jews did not stand united against the Nazi regime, but rather sought out their advantage individually, trying to work their way up on what seemed to be a ladder leading to a possibly good life. It seemed obvious, however, that not everyone could succeed in their efforts, so each tried to be the first and often the only ones to receive a certain benefit. As the prospect darkened, the disregard for others grew, as becomes particularly evident in the events within the ghetto, “The poor died first, and in droves. So did the unresourceful, meek, naive, honest, unpushing.” (Bauman, 2013: 306) With the constant threat of deportation looming over those living in the ghetto, there was little room for compassion, for the price might turn out to be death. As Bauman describes,

“Amidst the universal scramble for survival, the value of self-preservation was enshrined as an uncontestable legitimation of choice. Everything that served the self-preservation was right. With the ultimate end at stake, all means seemed to be justified.” (Bauman, 2013: 330)

Especially in the Judenräte, the governing bodies of the ghetto, fates were sealed by the hundreds in exchange for the extension of one’s family’s life. Thus unfolds “[...] the dismal and disheartening story of rampant bribery and blackmail, extortion and deceit, which had become a mark of many Judenräte,
or at least many individuals partaking of their awesome power to separate death from life.” (Bauman, 2013: 330) The enemy outside of the ghetto was completely out of reach, so rather than turning against their oppressors, Jewish people turned against each other in an increasingly desperate struggle for first benefits and later sheer life. It is a cynical twist that the injustice imposed on the Jewish people from outside generated more injustice within their own community. Meanwhile, the moral degeneration of the inhabitants of the ghetto served to ‘justify’ the Nazi portrayal of them as Bauman states here,

“The Jews were first proclaimed immoral and unscrupulous, selfish and greedy detractors of values, who used their ostensible cult of humanism as a convenient cover for naked self-interest; they were then forced into an inhuman condition where the definition promoted by propaganda could become true.” (Bauman, 2013: 331)

All this was only possible because seemingly everybody assumed some rationality behind the ghettoization that included reward and improvement when complied with. The actual rationality behind it, however, lay in the minimization of resistance and the continuous dissolution of solidarity within the Jewish population, so that “Ideally, the Nazis themselves would limit their own role to that of detached observers.” (Bauman, 2013: 313) In perpetuating their own demise, the ghetto’s inhabitants kept the administrative machine of destruction running smoothly.

Ultimately, all of this reinforces Foucault’s claim that “discipline fixes”, as those exposed to the categorization and labeling of archival institutions cannot escape the mechanism set in place by it. Whether it is the inhabitant of the plague-stricken town or the person in the ghetto, the individual becomes what the recorded data ascribes to it. There is no way to challenge the label ‘diseased’ or ‘to be deported’. The archive empowers, but only those that control it and those exempt from the ‘wrong’ labeling. Its facilitation of the Holocaust shows the very real dangers that lie dormant within an institution that establishes objectivity based on categories that are created by humans and selected over others which are deemed deficient. The reasons for choosing in such a way may prove sensible, but they may also prove fundamentally flawed - with possibly disastrous consequences.
6.4 Dialectics of Archiving

Whilst there does seem to be a general tendency for the archive to be rendered as a negative force, there are moments in *Austerlitz* where the archive plays a positive role. In a final exploration of the topic, we will assess what positive experiences Austerlitz gains that are brought about by the archive and if they prove beneficial in the end.

At the family home – the Andromeda Lodge – of Gerald Fitzpatrick, Austerlitz’ school friend who was assigned to him as fag, Austerlitz encounters a house transformed “[...] into a kind of natural-history museum[...]]” (Sebald, 2011: 119) With apparent enthusiasm rare coming from Austerlitz, he recalls the collections of a variety of exotic and indigenous dead birds and their eggs as well as shells, minerals, insects, reptiles, crustaceans and flora. A photograph of a case displaying butterflies of various species, shapes and sizes is indeed reminiscent of a similar such cabinet found in a conventional natural history museum. Reportedly, the Fitzpatricks even paid host to Charles Darwin.

Though Austerlitz speaks so fondly of the Andromeda Lodge, its surroundings and the Fitzpatrick family, he later goes on to undermine his superficial approval of an archival collection such as the one formerly mentioned. Austerlitz recalls Uncle Alphonso Fitzpatrick describing his childhood wanderings along the chalk cliffs of Devon and Cornwall, and the abundant biodiversity of this region.
which has since disappeared. After noting the rich colours, species, the multitude of life, Austerlitz quotes Uncle Alphonso when he says, “[...] barely half a century later, those glories had been almost entirely destroyed by our passion for collecting and by other imponderable disturbances and disruptions.” (Sebald, 2011: 127)

The simple, human tendency to collect, as is necessary for the construction of any archive, has in this case caused the degradation of a formerly thriving, natural environment. The negative implications of this form of archiving are made clear in the passage above by Alphonso. Despite the seeming benignity of the archive as constructed by the Fitzpatricks’, when broken down, such an archive is constituted by death, and, according to Alphonso’s statement, leads to further destruction in the future. This will be returned to later in the Nature chapter of the paper.

In terms of an archive’s utility, Austerlitz’ extended search for traces of his family reveals some of the beneficial sides of the bureaucratic apparatus. It is thanks to the state archive in Prague and its staff that Austerlitz finally obtains some tentative information, which can assist him in his search. This takes the form of a list noting all the citizens of Prague with the last name “Austerlitz” or similar. Through this list Austerlitz is able to find the former home of a woman who turns out to be his mother: Agáta Austerlitzová. When visiting this apartment, Austerlitz encounters for the first time his early childhood nanny Věra Ryšanová and his quest for answers takes a turn of renewed promise.

Despite the fact that the help offered by the state archives in Prague leads to conclusive answers, Austerlitz mentions that his teacher André Hilary, in his effort to begin the process of naturalizing young Jacques, consulted various archival institutions in Britain. The social-services office in Wales, the Foreign office and the Aid Committee all prove useless in finding answers concerning Austerlitz’ origins. The Aid Committee was in fact responsible for the transport of children via the Kindertransport to England and had lost numerous files whilst evading the bombings of London during World War II. This draws attention to the fact that archives and their data are temporal and susceptible to loss and damage. The futility of the search for information undergone by Hilary also reveals the inadequacy, which the archive and its institutions often suffer from.

In addition, the disheveled condition of the state archives in Prague seem to have a debasing effect on themselves, as Austerlitz describes them. After entering the building which he recalls as resembling that of a prison, invoking interpretations pertaining to the Foucauldian analysis of the novel, Austerlitz states,
Amongst this chaos there are “a good dozen” potted plants, seeming unnecessary and inapposite. This overt disorder seems absurd in a place of such officiality and importance, which may lead to a reader’s questioning of the validity of the archive as a whole.

These conclusions aside, the archives have undeniably been of benefit to Austerlitz. Whether insubstantial, vulnerable or biased, the archive can prove a valuable tool accessible in modern society. Austerlitz does owe a major portion of his education to archives. An archive also gifts Austerlitz the only remnant of his mother that he will ever have, a tenebrous photograph of Agáta appearing pensive and melancholy,

“[…] in the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetná, […] I came upon the photograph of an anonymous actress […] in whom Vera […] immediately and without a shadow of doubt […] recognized

Agáta as she had been then.” (Sebald, 2011: 353-354)
The archive has provided the photograph, but it takes another person to confirm its relevance and validity. This then puts the archive into perspective; it is shown as neither negative nor positive. In the end humans are the contributors to, the users of and possible subjects of the archive, so in turn anything resulting therefrom is man-made. The archive is then not some ominous, living creature but a medium whose power depends solely on how it is appropriated by human beings. Without us the archive would be dormant and inconsequential. As soon as the apparatus is set in motion, however, it can be as destructive or constructive as our intentions are in consulting or using it. Sebald’s critique of the archive then, is in fact a critique of modern humanity at large. Yes, the archive is an entity of enormous power but how this power manifests itself comes down to how it is applied by society.

As for the novel, it draws to a close featuring the archive in a positive light. It is through the staff at the records center in the rue Geoffroy-l’Asnier that Austerlitz finds the record that his father was sent to the concentration camp at Gurs, France. Austerlitz expresses his plan to continue his search for his father, and the Narrator and the reader say goodbye to the protagonist for the last time. The outcome of Austerlitz search for his father remains a mystery to the reader, which prevents a conclusive reading; there is no final word on the matter of the archive. The equal potential for worth and detriment of the archive for Austerlitz is spelled out by Long: “The archive is both a symptom of Austerlitz’ lack of memory and [...] the resource of the cure.” (Long, 2007: 20)

6.5 Interim Conclusion

As we have seen, archiving is a theme that can be found just as much in the structure of the novel as in its content, while also pertaining on a fundamental level to the character Austerlitz. Our analysis has shown that the archive’s part within modernity is predominantly a negative one, dehumanizing its users due to its artificiality. It can create an imbalance of power or consolidate an already existing imbalance, as Foucault and Bauman have illustrated. It has the risk of spinning out of proportion because of the rigor necessary to maintain its consistency and the endlessness of information coming in. Moreover, it has the tendency to fix certain ‘truths’ as it follows the agenda of constructing objectivity. The objectivity assumed in the archive gives it authority so that definitions it applies are irrefutable. This can entrap individuals in rigid boxes, creating binary conflicts which both Bauman and Foucault draw attention to.
All this aside, the archive can be a place of intellectual enrichment for an individual as well as a place for society to preserve relics of the past and the work of generations which assure future progress. If not for the archive, all this information would be scattered over endless places, making it near impossible to track down whatever one needs to find.

This duality of positive and negative seen in the archive hinges on peoples’ application of it. An element of caution is necessary to ensure that the interaction of human and archive has a beneficial outcome. Whether a source of answers or an evolving creature feeding on words, the archive is an irremovable part of Austerlitz’ life and identity, as it is for humankind in times of modernity.

7. Nature

“If you have a recollection, at least a mental one, of what these landscapes looked like fifty, [a] hundred, two hundred years ago and see how they have been sanitized now, straightened out, controlled, hemmed in, then you do realize that much has been lost and what’s been lost is some kind of freedom and some form of beauty which we no longer have access to.” (Hibbitt, 2011: 370)

In the last part of our paper we will introduce the theme of nature in *Austerlitz*, since it is a common thread within most of Sebald’s literary works and it permeates the ambience of the book, creating a sense of melancholy. The concept of a certain discrepancy and an ambiguous relationship between humans and nature, created within the discourse of modernity, is being put under examination and analyzed by Sebald. The question of humanity’s place in the world and whether people are part of a natural environment or not seems to be troubling Sebald and that is visible in his work. Nature is described as a remedy for industrialization and the overwhelming bureaucracy that is taking over the modern society. It is introduced as a binary opposition to the organized landscape of an architecturally planned city, filled with concrete buildings, seemingly creating a feeling of being under constant surveillance and yet alienating the inhabitants from each other, making them feel anonymous and lonely.

“The nearly obsessive references to ruined and destroyed buildings, monuments, and cities in Sebald’s writing attest to the impossibility of humans controlling their own histories; the ruins
exist only as reminders of human hubris, and as proof that we cannot control, cannot [...] domesticate nature. We are part of the natural world in strange and unpredictable ways, and our meddling attempts to create an autonomous sphere are destined to failure.” (Friedrichsmeyer, 2006: 85-86)

Throughout the whole novel the reader stumbles upon recurring pictures of abandoned buildings and forgotten graveyards that are being taken over by wildly growing trees and weeds. The ruins of the ghetto, forsaken by the living, the remains of fortifications - nature encounters no difficulties comfortably inhabiting the long forgotten remnants of civilization, taking them back after humans have lost interest in them or are not able to sustain conditions necessary for them to populate the area. This points out a convoluted interrelation between humans and places they inhabit. Despite people’s conviction that they are empowered to tame the environment, the author reminds the reader that nature is a wild, powerful force that does not need supervision for its own sake and blooms most beautifully when left alone; like in *The Emigrants* when the most delicious vegetables come from the garden long after it was neglected by its owners. (Friedrichsmeyer, 2006: 86)

The village of Llanwddyn is an extreme example of a futile attempt to rearrange nature for a community’s benefits. After erecting a dam the entire village is destroyed by a deadly and destructive force of water that people were not able to control, the wave takes everything,

“[...] his family home lying down there at a depth of about a hundred feet under the dark water, and not just his own family home but at least forty other houses and farms, together with the church of St John of Jerusalem, three chapels and three pubs, all of them drowned when the dam was finished in the autumn of 1888”. (Sebald,2011: 71)

No one but one witness, reverend Elias survives, everything else disappears under the ”dark water” and now will become part of the natural landscape – a lake. Sebald depicts the same phenomenon again in *On the Natural History of Destruction*. In one of the darkest moments of German history, when entire towns were overtaken by chaos and misery and burned to ashes, when millions of people had lost their homes and starved - nature bloomed with almost incredible strength.
“[...] the narrator comments that you could tell the date of a building’s destruction from the plants growing among the ruins. [...] In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature’s ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire. If the Morgenthau Plan had ever been implemented, how long would it have taken for woodland to cover the mountains of ruins all over the country?” (Sebald, 2003: 52)

These two extreme examples of nature reclaiming its territory represent a competition for space to live and grow, in which one party benefits from the suffering of the other. People and nature coexist in harmony only in a very limited dimension; when one of them is somehow submitted to the other. In Austerlitz modern civilization and wild flora and fauna never go hand in hand harmoniously.

### 7.1 Andromeda Lodge

The most important manifestation of that convoluted relationship is described in the part of the novel, where Austerlitz and his school-friend Gerald Fitzpatrick are spending their summer holidays together. We partly touched upon that topic in the chapter about the archive and its different representations in the novel. It is certainly not coincidental that the most joyful memories in Austerlitz’ life were from the summers spent in Andromeda Lodge, the Fitzpatricks’ family house, situated on a picturesque coast in Wales. The name of the estate itself alludes to the fascination in natural sciences and astronomy, which shapes the lives of both Austerlitz and Gerald. The part of the book that captures Austerlitz’ adventure in Andromeda is like an exotic journey through a tropical country, preceded by a train ride through landscapes of wilderness, thick forests and riversides. Sebald devotes pages of his novel to long descriptions of nature and its beauty. We mentioned earlier that the book creates the impression of constant gloominess, as if it was always raining in the background. This definitely does not apply to pages where the author is writing about landscapes and places surrounded by wild nature.

“I looked down from above on the treetops, mainly of cedars and parasol pines and resembling a green, hilly landscape going down from the road below the house to the riverbank, I saw the dark folds of the mountain range on the other side of the river, and I spent hours looking out at
the Irish Sea that was always changing with the time of day and the weather. How often I stood by the open window, unable to think coherently in the face of this spectacle, which was never the same twice.” (Sebald, 2011: 134)

The time spent in Andromeda Lodge stays with Austerlitz as the most beautiful memory of his life, forever reminding him how blissful the innocence of childhood can and should be – nature plays a pivotal role in that dream-like scenario. From the moment Austerlitz arrives at the house, he feels intrigued by the atmosphere of that magical place: Uncle Alfonso’s knowledge on the subject of nature, exotic birds flying above Austerlitz’ head, unforgettable breathtaking views from his bedroom window, a tropical climate created in the house as well as butterflies and birds kept as artifacts in the collection. “I would feel my heart begin to lift.” (Sebald, 2011: 111)

But even if the nature around the Andromeda Lodge seems to be cherished and beloved, there is a very special relationship between the inhabitants and their animals. They are kept without paying too much attention to the fact that they are indeed living creatures and a part of the wilderness. Instead, they are treated as artifacts in the family’s collection, alive or dead, for pleasure (Austerlitz later continues this tradition of collecting dead animals and starts to preserve moth cadavers in jars in his apartment in London). Not only do the people of the Andromeda Lodge store birds’ corpses, they study the habits of e.g. parrots or pigeons. What makes these animals so interesting to people is that they seem to be a lot like humans, but nonetheless they remain a part of nature separated from us, and are treated as such, closed off behind glass or trained to do whatever their owners want them to. The Fitzpatricks study stars and geography, but mostly birds – especially homing pigeons, towards which both Jacques and Gerald develop a deep fascination. Pigeons’ ability to find the way ‘home’ from any place (according to Gerald by using the stars to orient themselves) is something that both of them strongly want to understand and maybe even learn for themselves. It does not seem to occur to them that pigeons are trained to do so by humans for their own use.

“We get an impression of how desperately Sebald’s characters wish to impersonate that ideal themselves, and how cruelly their desire remains unfulfilled, if we consider Gerald’s further destiny. Partly due to scientific speculations that “pigeons take their bearings from the constellations”, Gerald studies astronomy and later uses his share from the sale of Andromeda Lodge to buy – a Cessna. This episode provides further proof that we are dealing with an
intricate topography: an ideal dwelling-place, which is named after a galaxy, is transformed into a plane in order to bring about another transformation, the transformation of the astronomer Gerald into a pigeon, which is supposed to endow him with the supernatural gift of being perfectly oriented at all times.” (Ilseman, 2006: 311)

Austerlitz’ enthrallment originates from his constant feeling of not-belonging, and his suffering of not remembering his home or heritage. He envies never forgetting where one came from, an instinct that cannot be withdrawn from the pigeons. There is a parallel to be drawn between the protagonist and these birds, as the pigeons were taken away from their home against their will just like Austerlitz, but contrarily to him, the birds can always fly homeward. Unfortunately neither of the men is successful in their longing to mimic the pigeons. Gerald dies in an accident, crashing his plane in the mountains and Austerlitz never finds his way home until the end of his story; indeed he feels like he has lost his home forever. This highlights the fact that there are certain aspects of nature that cannot be copied, much less outdone by humanity and its technology.

As mentioned before, moths also occupy a special place in Sebald’s narrations:

“I do remember, said Austerlitz, that the two of us, Gerald and I, could not get over our amazement at the endless variety of these invertebrates, [...] China Marks, Dark Porcelains and Marbled Beauties, Scarce Silver-lines or Burnished Brass, Green Foresters and Green Adelas, White Plumes, Light Arches, Old Ladies and Ghost Moths, but at any rate we counted dozens of them, so different in structure and appearance that neither Gerald nor I could grasp it all.” (Sebald, 2011: 128)

The approach to studies of nature is distant and observant, and the object of examination is of equal value to the examiner whether it be dead or alive. He describes moths trapped inside the apartments, still waiting in hope for their last breath. This morbid interest in decaying organic matter shows once again how nature is objectified and detached from humanity, even if we find human-like qualities in them – as Austerlitz does when he attributes them feelings:

“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. We are not alone in dreaming at night for, quite apart from dogs and other domestic creatures whose emotions have been bound up with ours for many thousands of years, [...] perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night.” (Sebald, 2011: 133)

7.2 ‘Biomorphism’

Several times in the novel a very interesting theme reappears: a form of anthropomorphism, for lack of a better term we will refer to it as ‘literary biomorphism’, with which the author breathes life into formerly lifeless structures. Where the mythical, all-seeing Πανόπτης finds a real-life expression in Bentham’s proposed Panopticon, so does Sebald go the extra length of likening overshadowing, massive monuments to living organisms, thus completing the circle.

Early in the book the Narrator visits the Belgian fort Breendonk, a sprawling structure built in the early 20th century to protect the city of Antwerp. In a haunting passage he describes it as:

“[...] a low-built concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from the Flemish soil like a whale from the deep.” (Sebald, 2011: 25)

He continues:

“[...] when I studied the symmetrical ground-plan with its outgrowth of limbs and claws, with the semi-circular bastions standing out from the front of the main building like eyes, and the stumpy projection at the back of its body, I could not, despite its now evident rational structure, recognize anything designed by the human mind but saw it, rather, as the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature.” (Sebald, 2011: 27)

This likening is interspersed with black-and-white photos and a schematic ground plan of the fort, in stark contrast to the vivid imagery evoked by the author. It becomes obvious that Sebald is fascinated by the apparent paradox of man-made, stationary structures ‘behaving’ in organic ways.
In London the Narrator imagines the districts as “crowding ever more closely together as they marched east and north, one reef of buildings above the next [...]” (Sebald, 2011: 51) and sees the railway lines leading into Liverpool Station as “muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas.” (Sebald, 2011: 186)

As mentioned before, in one of the interviews Sebald expresses a certain amount of grief for lost wilderness, its beauty covered by concrete and built upon to be taken over by people. That grief could be a reason for an attempt to find something organic in human-made structures, something familiar and natural in the industrial landscape of the city. Arguably everything that is man-made has to and will resemble nature, as it is inevitably derived from materials found in nature.

There is also the notion of fear that our own creations at some point could grow into something that will become by itself powerful enough to endanger us. We have already mentioned this in the chapter on the archive, the institution created by and for humans changing into an inhospitable monstrosity. This fear, albeit metaphorical, is to an extent grounded in reality. Technological advancement created almost unlimited possibilities for destruction. The usage of mustard gas in World War I to wage destruction on the enemy is an example of trying to harness forces found in nature but ultimately failing to control them. This organic compound proved to spread indiscriminately depending on wind, annihilating everything in its path.

In the end nature will reclaim what was originally hers. Sebald foreshadows this development by breathing life into fortifications and railways, making a point out of humanity’s ultimately doomed encroachments.

7.3 Therapeutic Gardening and Destructive Landscaping

Nature in Austerlitz undoubtedly also has calming and remedial properties. Being surrounded by plants, trees or animals brings peace, and is a backdrop for the few happy moments that happen in the main character’s life. Describing one of his scant childhood memories, Austerlitz reminisces about long walks in the park that he used to take with his nanny Věra, when he was still living in Prague. That park is something they both enjoy; it is well maintained and large, yet intimate and familiar. It provides a good setting for lazy afternoons and is a perfect place for a child to explore nature in the middle of the city. That special place is forgotten by the main character for a long time, until when revisiting Prague Věra reminds him of it. That same park remains a place of melancholy for Věra after all of
Austerlitz’ family disappear from her life. Austerlitz’ mother Agáta, before being sent away, asks Věra to always recall her when she visits it.

When later in the book Austerlitz endures a mental breakdown, and is being admitted to a mental hospital, a part of his therapy is gardening. Direct contact with plants and being able to tend them is helping not only him but numerous different patients in the institution. This relationship with nature mirrors the romantic ideal of harmonious coexistence. Surrounded by and immersed in nature, humans find tranquility and authenticity in an increasingly fast-paced society. When we do not keep the balance between civilization and nature, we jeopardize our mental health.

But there is more to the theme of people organizing natural landscapes and nature for their own pleasure and it is not always as positive as parks and houses filled with flora and fauna. Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* uses the example of gardening to explain German mentality during World War II and their point of view on the Jewish community within German society.

“I suggest, further, that the bureaucratic culture which prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many ‘problems’ to be solved, as ‘nature’ to be ‘controlled’, ‘mastered’ and ‘improved’ or ‘remade’, as a legitimate target for ‘social engineering’, and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force (the gardening posture divides vegetation into ‘cultured plants’ to be taken care of, and weeds to be exterminated), was the very atmosphere in which the idea of the Holocaust could be conceived, slowly yet consistently developed, and brought to its conclusion.” (Bauman, 2013: 62)

In that metaphor every Jewish person is perceived as a weed that has to be pulled out of the ground and destroyed for the ‘greater good’ of the entire garden - its existence and the quality of fruits it produces. That shows an entirely different point of view on ‘healing’ qualities of gardening; it is no longer relaxing activity that might bring peace to a troubled mind - it is a strategy used to control the garden and something that could be described as its pureness. Everything regarded as a threat to its health or productivity has to be recognized, labeled and removed. The fact of regarding this activity within nature as a strategy for Jewish extermination shows how one concept can easily be used to explain even extreme example of political action and also how organizing and conquering nature exists in a discourse of warfare.
Sebald also describes how nature is completely despiritualized, in the example of the library in Paris, in the end of the novel, where trees are incorporated as a part of the huge concrete building – made into something artificial for sheer aesthetic pleasure.

“[… ] from the surface of the promenade deck and sunk two or three stories deep, which has been planted with about a hundred full-grown stone pines from the Forêt de Bord transported, how I do not know, to this place of banishment. If one looks down from the deck at the spreading gray-green crowns of the trees, some of which perhaps are still thinking of their home in Normandy, it is like looking across an uneven expanse of moorland, while from the reading room you can see only the blotched red trunks which, although fixed in place with steel hawsers rising at an oblique angle, sway slightly back and forth on stormy days like waterweed in an aquarium.” (Sebald, 2011: 391)

The image he paints is undoubtedly not only a critique of the institution of the library that changed into an unwelcoming monstrosity but also a grotesque representation of a human attempt to tame nature with technology within civilization. As noted before, Sebald talks about that in one of the interviews, mentioning people straightening rivers to fit the landscape of the city and in doing so destroying the beauty of its wilderness. (Hibbitt, 2011: 370) That lack of understanding between humanity and nature, as well as fruitless attempts to coexist on equal footing
are something that might be read as a critique of industrialization and the careless destruction that follows every time people conquer any territory.

To conclude this chapter it would be worth mentioning what Marie said to Austerlitz while visiting a zoo in Paris, and what he found important enough to never forget:

“Marie particularly asked me to take a photograph of this beautiful group, and as she did so, said Austerlitz, she said something which I have never forgotten, she said that captive animals and we ourselves, their human counterparts, view one another à travers une brèche d’incompréhension.” (Sebald, 2011: 368)

The chance to reconnect with nature has faded away with the modernization of our society. We are unable to relate to the natural world on a level that would enable us to exist side by side in peace. This sullen conclusion can explain why Sebald describes flora and fauna with such nostalgia. As we mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, for Sebald nature is something that equals freedom and beauty, something worth cherishing, with calming qualities, bringing peace and pleasure to people. In the right circumstances, the harmony between humans and nature can be achieved and should be something that we aim for. Unfortunately, most of the examples in Austerlitz show that people have huge difficulties with understanding how to treat it properly and as a result disfigure and destroy it.
8. Conclusion

Over the course of this paper we have shown how the convoluted, unusual structure of the book serves to illuminate and reflect the struggle Austerlitz faces throughout his tumultuous life; how Sebald intersperses his text with photographs, providing the reader with further insight and steering the reader’s imagination; how *Austerlitz* constitutes a novel thoroughly grounded in modernity and how the author makes use of its symptoms to highlight his critical stance; how the novel lends itself to a Foucauldian reading and reflects the concept of Panopticism outlined in *Discipline and Punish* in numerous ways; how the novel provides a platform to analyze a notion inherently linked to modernity, the archive; and how for Sebald nature provides a refuge from modern society, even though this is undermined by humanity’s encroachment.

We have endeavored to detangle and explore a breadth of themes and references appearing in *Austerlitz* often subtly or hidden. In regards to these references peppered throughout the novel, we have examined some of these in depth and found in them a strong relevance to our project. This project has provided us with a window, as it were, to the mind of the late W.G. Sebald. By looking at biographical material and thoroughly investigating his literary work we have gained an understanding as to his motives as a writer and scholar, as well as his relationship to the world as a human being in modern society. Then bringing in the work of other important figure pertaining to modernity as it is outlined in this project, we have seen where Sebald and the work *Austerlitz* fit into a broader spectrum of the humanities and academia.

The character Austerlitz can be seen as the embodiment of the negative aspects of modernity. Where most of humanity after World War II seems to have managed to carry on with their lives to the best of their abilities Austerlitz epitomizes the human lost in the modern age. His tale serves as a reminder to be wary of modern society’s characteristic to dehumanize and advance relentlessly, with no regard for the individual. In creating a character so utterly adrift W.G. Sebald captivates the reader, painting a picture of the effects of the Holocaust with familiar content but using a unique palette of innovative imagery, investigating a multitude of themes symptomatic of the modernity.
Bibliography

Books

E-books and PDF


**Encyclopedia**


**Films**


**Images**

All images are taken from *Austerlitz* with the exception of:

Image 1: Images used for collage


Image 2: Still from film


Image 3: Still from film


Image 4: Cropped photograph

Websites
10. Appendix

Project Technique

The first stones were laid for the project halfway into the group formation process, where we all came together and joined each other in mutual curiosity about the novel Austerlitz and our shared interest and passion for literature. After the completion of the group formation a crude image began to form of the project and content in itself. We had thoughts and ideas of how to go about and work as a group and extract the best out of the process of working together as eight. Given our different understandings and backgrounds we felt it was of great importance to sit down and evaluate and brainstorm our individual ideas of both academic direction (philosophical, historical, psychological, etc.) and group structure. It was crucial for us to draft a schedule of when to meet, how to do meetings with an agenda and a secretary, whether we should split up and delegate our work-process or stick more closely together through the whole process, and how to organize research, notes, films and written content for the project.

Creating our problem definition was the start of our first important decision as a group. We had all joined our interest in literature and our high spirits for the project, but the problem definition sparked the question of where we wanted to go with it. We all sat down and brainstormed our individual thoughts on how to approach Austerlitz, and some introduced the idea to tackle the novel from a more philosophical aspect, while everyone agreed that we could not miss out the obvious use of the dimension Text & Sign. Though there was a general agreement on the use of the dimensions in the group, we thought that it might be troublesome leaving out the historical aspect in our project because the book’s themes are centered around historical events, such as the Holocaust. For that reason, we were in constant contact with the thought of applying a historical aspect to the paper until the mid-term seminar.

After a good session of feedback from both supervisor and opponent group we came to the agreement of leaving the historical approach out; we accepted that history would appear in our project naturally but not as a fixed dimension. The problem definition we created together was meant to specifically point us in the right direction and most importantly state what primary literature we would use and how to unravel the novel. Having decided that the novel should be analyzed and looked into through a philosophical lens, we chose to use Foucault and his book Discipline and Punish in order to create academic relevance – a choice we, all eight in the group, found “ethically defensible” (Pedersen,
as the novel illustrates Foucault’s Panopticon both metaphorically and literally, as seen in architectural photographs for example. The problem definition would change throughout the process but only once did we experience crucial changes. In our eagerness to fit Zygmunt Bauman into the project we became aware that the space and value we had been giving him in our project and problem definition were too vague. We realized that Bauman did not have enough relevance to the bulk of our work to warrant an entire chapter in relation to him. Thus we had to rethink our strategies and find a new way to incorporate this important figure into our project. This development led us to, what felt like a natural direction towards our chapter on modernity. We realized that in order to create the broadest coherence in our project and keep everything linked together, we had to concentrate on modernity as an underlying thread to our project into which we could then work Bauman.

Following our reflections on Bauman and the project in general, the altering of our problem definition came and worked out naturally for us as a part of the process. We as a group could have been better at constantly reminding ourselves of our problem definition, reading it every time we met and wrote something. If greater and more continuous attention had been given to the problem definition, we might have seen the slight change a little sooner. In our defence though, we seemed to all have the same perception of the project’s direction and understood our project without much discrepancy.

In the start right after the group formation, we had our first meeting where we decided how often to meet, how to meet and all talked about our individual strengths and weaknesses. It became very obvious that some in the group are natural born writers with experience ranging from academic writing to creative writing; others had gone through previous education that had led them to be skilled in research, that is, finding the right literature and extracting the essentials out of it. Therefore we quickly delegated the different tasks having some of the group members looking for secondary and primary sources for our project. We used Copenhagen Library and RUC library to obtain the right primary literature for our project and used platforms and databases from RUC’s website to gain polarized opinions upon specific subjects – some of them worth mentioning were JSTOR and Britannica Online Encyclopedia. We knew that Google would be a valuable search engine to gain inspiration but a messy and uncertain affair to gain literature in form of novels, journals, articles and movies. On the other hand we found, advised by our lecturers and opponent group, that Google provides a great tool to group work – namely the Google Docs. Google Docs made it possible for us to
constantly read each others written work, edit it, and at the same time be in different places while still writing ‘together’ and being able to communicate in a way that would not dislocate our focus.

From the start of our journey, the journey into an unknown land of constant insight and knowledge, we thought that we knew where the destination would be – though as the project and group process evolved, we all grew wiser about the importance of being unaware of the destination. Before we had set sail, we took a moment of introspection and came to realize that we had so much information and knowledge from literature, films, photos, etc. that we had to discuss and agree on how to use and combine it. This particular discussion was ongoing at every meeting in our own attempt to make the destination appear in the fog; even though we were well aware that a part of the group-project process was that we should feel comfortable about searching for India and finding America – as “The most important qualification for project work is a willingness to set out on a journey towards new insights without knowing its end destination beforehand.” (Pedersen, 2008: 74)

Our project went through many different phases, starting off with the general discussions about structure. We must admit that from an objective point of view we did not incorporate a lot of structure, but we have not experienced any obstacles on our way due to group structure. On the contrary, we have experienced a well-balanced dynamic between all members and a crucial point has been the transparency and honesty in combination with eight people that found out that we work together cohesively. We have not felt that our lack of group structure has had any negative effects, but it is a valid consideration to think about whether a more structured group process could have benefitted the group in a positive way. As a group we decided to meet each week and most weeks more than twice, and at the same time we concluded that we should use different techniques acquired from the Project Technique Course, as well as from other groups. We made agendas for our meetings and had someone who could lead it and make sure that everybody had the opportunity of expressing their concerns, ideas, etc. It was important that we had a secretary each time and made sure that we used the reports while working in between the meetings. We chose not to have a chairman or a group leader as we felt it would be too much pressure to have one that would function as ‘policeman’. In future projects it might be a good idea to have one taking the responsibility of the group moving at the right pace, but with our dynamic in the group it ended up not being necessary. All the way through the group process we remembered to listen to each other – we had times at every third or fourth meeting where we would
hear about each others individual perspectives on the project and its direction, while at the same time making room for people to express if there was anything personal, practical or emotional that would disrupt focus and orientation.

We found an efficient way of leaving out some structure to the group while still being productive, target-oriented and dedicated. We did have minor problems, however, creating a work plan in a formal way, as we did not always specify the exact task of a group member or put a set deadline for its completion. Everyone in the group did work on each their part or section either in pairs or alone, but due to the fact that our working plan didn’t stay updated in small periods of the process, we had small problems staying updated on what each other was working on. This could of course have been avoided with a more strict use of the work plan but seems to us unavoidable with eight people in a group; and we are happy and satisfied with the minor incidents we had with lack of transparency.

The seminars were a great use for all of us, both our group and the opponent group. It was interesting to get an insight to the process of other groups and definitely helped us and inspired us in how to organize eventual split-ups within the group. Most important of all we gained confidence from each seminar in our own project and it was a blessing to have both the supervisors and our opponent group confirming that we were not walking around blindfolded but actually had a great sense of direction. Especially our supervisor Mette, who was our main inspiration for the project on Austerlitz, helped us clarify what parts of our project that were not coherent enough and what terms we should be careful to use.

All in all we worried about being left in the sea of knowledge on a raft too small for eight people to hang on and stay positive – we were warned about the process being sometimes uncomfortable, stressful and out of balance dynamically. All the way through the process we anticipated it and waited for the storm to reach us, but it never came. Our tolerance towards each other, our way of understanding each other’s skills and using them, and our capability of sticking together and living up to each other’s expectations - all these skills have been crucial for us to succeed. We do feel that there are several things we could have done to eventually improve the process, especially concerning structure. Our mutual way of working a little less structured has served us well throughout the whole process, and we do not think that we could have created such a result without making room for our own way of doing it. At the same time we are aware that some of the techniques we learned from the course may be important for future projects in order not to loose anyone academically or emotionally. We did
feel for a certain amount of time that we were only reading and discussing and we quickly discovered that sometimes you need to start writing to gain more knowledge and broader understanding – because “Writing and understanding are two sides of the same coin.” (Pedersen, 2008: 92) Now we have got a much broader and natural perception of how to work in a group. We have learned what works for us and what does not work for us. We have been able to apply different ideas to the project and group process from the course, supervisor and other groups and students - and more importantly we now know what areas of group structure and group techniques we should pay more attention to for future projects. The raft made it out of the fog and the destination appeared, all men and women were still on board and the raft had turned into a beautiful, majestic ship that was reaching shore. It was a helpful and educational process being out in the sea of knowledge with an unknown destination; as long as we are together and help each other out, then we will reach shore wiser, brighter and better.