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Review of J. J. Long, W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity.

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J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 210 pp. ISBN 9780231145121.

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It is a pleasure to find an original and illuminating study of W. G. Sebald's works amid the superabundance of secondary literature on his fiction and essays. Whereas the thematization of the Holocaust, of mourning and loss, and of a postwar melancholic sensibility of history constitute common thematic threads of discourse on Sebald, J. J. Long offers a novel approach to reading his texts by contextualizing Sebald's thought in the framework of modernism. Long convincingly argues that Sebald viewed the era of modernism as reaching back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, consequently, that the key to the contemporary lies "not in the surface phenomena of the immediate present, but in the structures and the technologies developed a century ago but whose effects continue to be felt" (170). Tracing the roots of modernism to the economic, political, and social changes wrought by Enlightenment thought, the Industrial Revolution, and the French Revolution, Long sheds new light on Sebald's thematic concerns and writing style.

Long focuses primarily on Sebald's depiction of subjectivity in modernity as "formed by archival and representational systems through which various forms of disciplinary power are exercised" (170). In particular, the photograph and the archive—two key leitmotifs in Sebald's work—function as sites whereby the author illumines and contests modernity's "drive towards rationalization, bureaucratization, and documentation" (10).

In Part One, Long pursues a "Foucauldian agenda" in his investigation of the ways the image and the archive in Sebald's works are implicated in structures of power/knowledge (18). The archive that has emerged as part of the modernizing state depicts, as Foucault has pointed out, the relationship between power and knowledge, understood as the "increasing intervention of the state in the life of the individual" (Dreyfus/Rabinow 138). Instances of governmental interventions are apparent in collections (Chapter Two), particularly zoological and medical collections, colonial zoos and natural history museums; in photography (Chapter Three), specifically, on government sanctioned photos such as passports; and discipline (Chapter Four), that is, control of the individual's movements through government maps and passports. All serve as examples of Western dominance over either individuals or non-Western cultures.

Part Two consists of an in-depth analysis of individual works in which structures of power are critiqued, undermined, or circumvented. More specifically, by examining the presentation of museums and collections, photography and various disciplinary images and archives in Sebald's four main prose narratives—*Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*—Long marks the extent to which they "offer possibilities of resisting modernity's disciplinary imperatives" (19).

In Chapter Two, Long points out how the Enlightenment's transformation of the museum from a private space to the site of public instruction helped to initiate ideologies of progress with contemporary capitalism of the West as the pinnacle of this evolutionary development. The civilized and civilizing space of the public museum betrays this educational objective. Long

perceives Sebald's thematization of museums as addressing distinctly modern questions of power and knowledge. Of particular interest is that Sebald's most significant collections consist not of artworks, but of natural specimens such as zoos or medical collections. The modern zoo, for example, came into being in the nineteenth century as a direct consequence of imperial expansion. As Long observes: "The removal of animals from their natural habitat, their reduction to a (Western) system of classification, and their integration into spaces of exhibition are characteristic of a colonial subjectivity defined not only in its power to acquire and to name, but of its ability to place this power on display" (40). Moreover, the appropriation, classification, and recontextualization of exotic animals from colonial territory betray both a Western hierarchy of "superior" and "inferior" cultures and a utilitarian view of nature: "The privileging of Western knowledge over local knowledge legitimizes the capture and transportation of animals in the name of scientific progress, while also implying a paternalistic view of native populations whose knowledge of and ability to care for animals in their natural habitat is deemed inferior to the Western ability to protect and nurture" (43). In short, this paternalism supplies a justification for empire: a country's ability to maintain captive animals so well "demonstrates its capacity for good and benevolent government" (43). In *Austerlitz* Sebald's narrator clearly establishes a relationship between the collections of exotic animals and the colonial project when he compares the Antwerp *Nocturama* to its massive train station, a monument to colonialism. The station's architecture constitutes a spectacular display of power in which the colony could be "brought home" through a global transport network, the extensive rail system. Thus, the modern transport technology, the railways, serves as a prominent emblem of colonial appropriation.

Sebald's depiction of captive animals works to critique their appropriation and imprisonment and, by extension, the capitalist, paternalistic system that establishes such collections. Thus, the animals in the zoo wear a "sorrowful expression" (*Austerlitz* 349-50/353) and the quail in *The Rings of Saturn* runs frantically back and forth along the edge of its cage in bewilderment at its captivity (*RS* 36/50). According to Long, such examples point to a broader agenda in Sebald's text, his critique of modernity's expansive regimes of spectacle and surveillance, themes that are traced in subsequent chapters that focus on photography and control of the individual/human body.

Long relates official use of photographs to the "disciplinary aspects of modernity's visual culture" (48). For example, Sebald's passport photo, which is reproduced in *Vertigo*, exemplifies the modern state's regulation and oversight of the movement of bodies across national boundaries while also establishing the individual's inclusion in or exclusion from a particular state. Thus, the passport photo represents the power of the state. Similarly, the colonial photographs by Europeans serve as examples of Westerners taking possession of foreign places and peoples without questioning their assumption of superiority over the colonized. For instance, Long (51) points out the "unsettling continuity" between the tourist photography of Ambros Adelwarth in *The Emigrants* (*E* 134/199) and the "trophy photography" of the gypsy woman in *Vertigo*, which is inserted into the photographic album that the narrator's father gives to his wife as a souvenir of his participation in the German invasion of Poland (*V* 184/210). Cosmo's photograph of an attractive Turkish boy during his travels foregrounds the desire for possession as the young dervish yields himself up to the photographer's gaze, offers himself up for "later visual consumption" (53). Thus, the photograph functions in this instance as a substitute for sexual possession of the body. These questions of race, sexuality, and power in relation to photography

became even more pronounced in the image of the gypsy prisoner who lived in a camp on the periphery of the narrator's native village. As the German army invaded Eastern Europe, it was common practice for Wehrmacht soldiers to take photographs of the inhabitants of occupied territories who were considered primitive and uncivilized (Bopp 2003: 109-13; Schmiegelt 2000: 29). Like the dervish in *The Emigrants*, the gypsy woman is forced to submit to the photographer's gaze. As Long points out, the ethnographic gaze of the narrator's father implicitly aligns him with Nazi racial ideology and implicates him in the genocidal war in Eastern Europe.

There are, however, significant moments in Sebald's narratives in which the role of photography in the power/knowledge matrix is called into question. An incongruence between the text and the images contests photography's assumed evidential claims inasmuch as it questions the image's ability to supply accurate information (Klebes 2006: 71). The indeterminacy of the text/image relation illustrates the impossibility of reducing human subjects to diagnostic categories and subverts the power/knowledge relationship discussed above. Long also examines some of Sebald's group photographs as "sites of resistance": in some of these portraits the photographed subjects refuse to return the camera's gaze.

Many of Sebald's photographs underscore the increasing role of spectacle, as well as the mediation of experience that points to "the erosion of subjective authenticity" (67). The mass production of photos in the postcard format, for example, transforms space into spectacle and reveals, according to Long, a disciplinary effect in that it establishes a hierarchy of spaces—some worthy of representation, some not. Moreover, he draws upon Susan Stewart's observation that the photograph as souvenir replaces memory of the body's relation to the phenomenological world with the memory of an object, a process "in which 'authentic' experience becomes increasingly mediated and abstracted" (Stewart 1993: 133).

In the final chapter in this section, "Discipline," Long explores the various ways in which Sebald both exposes the means by which modernist states subjugate bodies (such as through torture) or control their movements (through official documents such as passports). Yet, as with museums and photography, Sebald also ultimately calls into question the state's presumably absolute authority over the individual. For example, cartography, a significant component of the "archival desire" and a prominent feature of modernism, plays a pivotal role in Sebald's works, in which maps are frequently linked to "state oppression, colonial exploitation, and industrialization" (77). Central in colonization and empire building, maps effectively served to claim land on paper before effective occupation. In *The Rings of Saturn*, this central role of maps in colonization is evident in references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which describes the colonizer's atrocities in the Belgian Congo. In this critique of Western colonization, the map, the result of western surveying techniques, symbolizes the West's power over the colonized insofar as it enables conquest and exploitation of the land.

In *Austerlitz* the most dire political implications of maps as a means by which knowledge and power come together in modernity become evident in their association with the Theresienstadt ghetto. The juxtapositions of the map of Theresienstadt with the inmate registration room, and the Nazi storage yard with the Bibliotheque Nationale imply a critique of archival practices. The relative proximity within *Austerlitz* of the registration room (*Registrierungskammer*) to the map of the ghetto underscores the political effects of such archives. As Holocaust scholars have noted,

the Nazi murder of Jews was predicated on the administrative and bureaucratic structures of modernity. Similarly, the national library, a metonymic representation of the French state, is built on the site of the Nazi facility for the cataloguing and "redistribution" of possessions of Parisian Jews, which suggests that the state is built on a "willed historical amnesia" (83). (The overzealous collaboration of the French police in cooperating with the Nazis in the deportation of French Jews, including children, to concentration camps is well known.)

Nevertheless, Sebald's work also sets forth the limits of discipline. In particular, the disciplinary archive is revealed as susceptible to failure from within; this internal weakness suggests that it is also susceptible to subversion from without. For instance, in *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator's map of Milan, which promises to be a reliable guide, proves to be completely useless and the narrator eventually loses all sense of spatial orientation. In a similar vein, in *Vertigo*, the inadequacies of psychiatry in explaining deviant, even violent behavior portrays the failure of the disciplinary institution and its archival apparatus. In particular, in the story "All'estero" the psychiatric reports of two young members of the Italian terrorist group *Organizzazione Ludwig* provides no definitive knowledge on them that would impose the correct regime of punishment and rehabilitation. The exposure of the limitations of psychiatry, which, as Foucault states, is central to structures of power/knowledge, also reveals the limits of the state's power and, by inference, the possibility for resistance, one of the key concerns of Part Two.

In Part Two, Long demonstrates how each prose work offers a distinctive formal response to the problems of modernity, and in particular to the dissolution of an autonomous subjectivity. His insightful reading of *The Emigrants* constitutes one of the more persuasive examples of this reading. If the lives of the characters are marked not only by geographical, but also by cultural displacement, then the combination of narrative style and photography serves as an attempt at the level of form "to counteract the dispersal, dissipation and rupture inherent in the history of modernity" (127). Long rightly claims that the narrative discourse attempts to weave together the disparate strands of fragmented biographies not only through leitmotifs that are repeated throughout the four stories, but also through individual and familial archives: diaries, letters, family albums, slide collections, and autobiographical writings. Thus, through his "reading" of the family album, the narrator compensates for the protagonists' failure to form their obsessive visual memories into a coherent narrative. More specifically, if this reading of family albums allows the narrator "to suture himself into the stories of others and construct a sense of narrative and biographical continuity as compensation for exile and loss" (127), then the patterns of repetition "hint at an order behind the ostensible chaos of history and entropy of matter" (127). This tendency to allow aesthetic form to compensate for the lack of an explicit meaning or of subjectivity marks a crucial element in many modernist works. For instance, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* portrays the decline of traditional European values and consists of a tapestry of self-referential leitmotifs that substitute aesthetic meaning for more traditional belief systems. Similarly, Joseph Roth's 1932 *chef d'oeuvre Radetzky marsch* depicts the obsolescence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and portrays an aesthetic order as a substitute for an absent cosmic or political one (Landwehr 2003).

In a similar vein, in *Vertigo*, the narrator's quest for a hidden network of relationships among the disparate events in his wanderings constitutes a search for meaning. Long identifies this desire to link together events that belong to the same order of meaning as a metaphorical (and, thus, an

aesthetic) process and defines paradigmatic equivalence as *Vertigo's* structuring principle. While perusing his diary, the narrator discovers to his "amazement" ("*Verwunderung*") and "considerable alarm" ("*Schrecken*") that he had been sitting in the cafe near the Doges Palace in Venice on the anniversary of Casanova's escape from the palace's prison. Such uncanny coincidences suggest the invasion of the fantastic into the material world (104) and elicit in the narrator a sense of wonder that serves as an antidote to his moments of self-alienation and estrangement. At the chapter's conclusion, Long places Sebald's work in a larger context by referring to both its realist and modernist characteristics. Citing Theodor Adorno, who claimed that an appropriate subject for the bourgeois novel was the portrayal of the disenchanted world (*entzauberte Welt*) of modernity, Long notes that Sebald's "obsessive" need to anchor his fictional worlds in physical spaces and to fill those spaces with an inordinate abundance of objects clearly shows that his texts participate in "the discourse of bourgeois realism" (106).

One could add that Sebald's writing style was influenced by that of Adalbert Stifter, a Biedermeier novelist, whose texts are marked by a plethora of minutiae and lengthy descriptions of facial features, clothing, household objects, and landscapes that perform a function similar to the overabundance of details and interminable, descriptive passages in Sebald's works. As Sebald himself observes in his essay on Stifter, "*Bis an den Rand der Natur: Versuch ueber Stifter*," the writer's materialism is a response to the "*Aufloesung der metaphysischen Ordnung*," the disintegration of the metaphysical order. Stifter's scrupulous registering of the tiniest details and endless enumeration of everything that exists (in a scene) indicate, for Sebald, a loss of faith, and mark the point in time when the bourgeois doctrine of salvation can no longer be sustained. ("*Der Aufloesung der metaphysischen Ordnung entspricht der Stifters gesamtes Werk durchziehende erschuetternde Materialismus . . . Die skrupuloese Registrierung winzigster Details, die schier endlosen Aufzaehlungen dessen, was—seltsamerweise—tatsaechlich da ist, tragen alle Anzeichen des Unglaubens und markieren den Punkt, an dem auch die buergerliche Heilslehre von der sukzessiven Entfaltung des Weltgeists nicht laenger aufrechtzuerhalten war.*" *Die Beschreibung des Ungluecks*, 18.)

Thus, this last stage of literary realism with its intrinsic pessimism regarding any inherent meaning in nature contains the seeds of modernism's response to this loss with the aesthetic creation of meaning. Long sums up this discussion with the observation that the leitmotifs and numerous coincidences transform the fragmented and disorganized modern urban spaces of *Vertigo* into places of wonder, replete with possible hidden meanings amid the self-estranged narrator's wanderings. I take a more skeptical view, however, about Long's conclusion that Sebald's fictional world always seems to signify something either metaphysical, psychological, or historical that lies beyond it. If one applies Sebald's pessimistic reading of Stifter's works cited above to Sebald's own works, then one can add a fourth possibility to the various categories, namely an aesthetic meaning, the narrative creation of meaning from disparate details and uncanny coincidences by either the narrator or author. The frequent intertextual allusions to earlier forms and writers that feature prominently in Sebald's texts (Swales 57) may constitute an attempt to create an aesthetic world, replete with meaning, to replace the lost metaphysical one.

The Rings of Saturn, like *Vertigo*, portrays the more circumscribed wanderings of a narrator. Although Sebald's texts reveal an increasing pessimism regarding a narrative's ability to compensate for the dissolution of subjectivity, Sebald appears, especially in this text, unwilling

to abandon entirely the idea of an autonomous subjecthood. Thus, the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* "seeks to resist modernity not only by walking, but by employing a poetics of digression" (171). As noted, maps depict the inextricable entanglement of power and knowledge, which Foucault designates as the quintessential form of power in modernity: cartographers were given the legal rights to survey the terrain, the location of urban settlements, communications routes, and so on, in a manner that enhanced the more efficient exercise of state power. The narrator's remarks on the inadequacy of the map he uses to orient himself and his willful exploration of uncharted land and trespassing of actual barriers depict for Long a resistance to modernity. This relationship between freedom of movement and knowledge/power calls to mind its antithesis, Kafka's land surveyor in *The Castle*, who embodies the connection between restricted movement with the limitations of knowledge and power. As antithetical forerunner of Sebald's independent narrator, Kafka's K underscores Sebald's indebtedness to the modernist writer Kafka to whom he refers at length in *Vertigo*. Unlike Sebald's character, Kafka's protagonist has very limited access to the seat of power, the castle, which depicts his ignorance and powerlessness. His passive acquiescence to this state of affairs contrasts starkly with Sebald's character's physical transgressions and narrative digressions.

Moreover, the narrator's wandering with no ostensible purpose or goal and with its diversions and recursions represents Sebald's meandering "poetics of digression" with its preponderance of micronarratives and associative meditations. Long reads this style of poetics as a response to modernity's tendency toward increased efficiency in economic and bureaucratic life with a similar imperative governing reading and writing. Thus, the resistant moment in such a digressive narrative resides in its refusal to achieve goals with maximum efficiency. The proliferation of inventories and lists, micronarratives and reminiscences not only delay the end of the main plot, but make it impossible to ascertain what the main story is. What holds the narrative together is not the linearity of plot or character development, but rather variations of the leitmotifs of loss and decay, again a central characteristic of modernist writing. Thus, the ordering principle of Sebald's text is less a cohesive narrative than an "archival ordering" that "produces equivalences" (143) rather than hierarchies. Long astutely observes that it is this narrative technique that lends the text its particular historical pessimism in that it demonstrates that history can only be grasped "in terms of repeating patterns of folly, greed and destruction" (144).

Long's analysis of *Austerlitz*, "The Archival Self," is particularly perceptive and compelling. The eponymous protagonist Austerlitz admits that he has no inner life, no autonomous self. His self is composed of book learning, of knowledge that he has accumulated in archival fashion. In short, he has substituted scholarship for memory. After his insight that he has lived so far "*ein falsches Leben*," an inauthentic life, he attempts to reconstruct his past and retrieve his repressed memories through archival research. But his research fails to jolt any faint memories. The photograph of himself as a child on the book cover produces no shock of recognition, while his other archival endeavors prove to be equally dissatisfying. What the reader learns about Austerlitz's identity is conveyed through photographs, objects, the narratives of others such as Vera, his nursemaid, and what Long names "externalized and fragmentary allegories of the protagonist's self" (165)—notably the fortifications and railways that fascinate him. If the architecture that Austerlitz studies foreshadow his discovery of Theresienstadt, where his mother presumably died, then the railways call to mind his traumatic journey as a Kindertransport child

to England and, consequently, the uprooting of his identity. Thus, Long's argument, that the entire novel can be read as "an archive of Austerlitz's subjectivity" and that the text "is strewn with signs of Austerlitz's subjectivity that are not assimilable to a model of psychological interiority" (165), rings true. Long's observation that Austerlitz's history and subjectivity are "sedimented spatially in the material world of objects, writing, images, and places" (166), which are also "archived" within Sebald's dense text to be discovered and interpreted, offers a coherent reading of both the content and style of this intricate work.

Long's depiction of *Austerlitz* as "devoid of a stable and subjective interiority" places the text squarely in the modernist tradition that includes such German literary texts as Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* or Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and calls to mind the rejection of a stable ego proclaimed by the influential Viennese thinker Ernst Mach, in his *Beitraege zur Analyse der Empfindungen/Contributions to an Analysis of Sensations* (1886/1900). In this significant work, Mach dismisses the ego as a useless hypothesis and from his empirical research formulates a doctrine that sensations constitute the sole elements of experience (Johnston 184-5). Mach's view of the psyche influenced such significant, modernist Viennese writers known as the Impressionists, among them, Arthur Schnitzler. (The well-read Sebald was familiar with Schnitzler's works and wrote a critical essay on his quintessential Impressionist work, *Traumnovelle/Dream Novella* in the collection *Die Beschreibung des Ungluecks/The Description of Unhappiness*.)

The title's explicit reference to the Napoleonic wars and presentation of the Holocaust as the horrific result of the authoritarian trends and industrialization of war since the nineteenth century support Long's contention that Sebald's vision has a wider scope than those of the German generation of '68. This reading of Sebald's masterpiece not only offers the most convincing argument that Sebald's oeuvre, both in content and style, belongs to modernist, not postmodernist, texts, but also foregrounds Sebald's political concerns that are frequently neglected in most critical discussions of his writings. If Sebald's contemporaries focus primarily on the concerns of the postwar years such as guilt for the Holocaust and *Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung*, or working through the (Nazi) past, Sebald contextualizes World War Two as a continuation of the horrors of colonialization of the previous century. He concurs with Mark Anderson's view that Sebald was concerned with the *epoque de longue durée* of European modernity and quotes him in his introduction: "[T]he roads in Sebald's work do not all lead to Theresienstadt. The view of human devastation and darkness is much larger, at once geophysical and metaphysical, though their roots lie in a profound meditation on the violence of European modernity" (Anderson 120). Indeed, Napoleon's great victory at Austerlitz in Moravia proved that complete domination of Europe was within his grasp. As the historian Paul Johnson (66) notes in *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830*, Bonaparte, as a great law codifier, institutional reformer, road builder, and product of the French Revolution, followed in the eighteenth century tradition of Enlightened Despots, but, in other respects, his conduct as a brutal general who ravaged Europe and established dictatorships anticipates the horrifying totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Johnson points out that Napoleon, whom many regarded as standing for the principles of individual liberty, of being "a thorn in the side of kings," created the first modern police state which he exported to lands he conquered. Thus, the term "Austerlitz" refers not merely to a turning point in European history, but also represents the

tumultuous modernizing force of the inheritor of Enlightenment ideals whose overthrow of the old order eventually led to the corruption of those very ideals he was supposed to espouse.

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