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Photography, memory, metonymy or, W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*

Abstract:

The precarious and vertiginous quality of memory is a continuous thread running the extent of W.G. Sebald's writing. In Sebald's first novel *Vertigo* (1990), the attributes of memory are explored through its metonymic relation with photography. Broadly speaking, one of photography's functions is to metonymically represent memory. For Sebald, however, this metonymy is unreliable and unpredictable. The febrile, fragmented, and ultimately autonomous memories triggered by the metonym are the cause of the vertigo in the title. Sebald's vertiginous metonymy leads us to Roland Barthes' notion of the *punctum*. In his meditation on photography *Camera lucida* (2000) Barthes explicitly states that the photograph's *punctum* performs metonymically. 'However lightning-like it may be,' he writes, 'the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic' (45). Barthes' theory provides an analytical framework for understanding Sebald's aetiology of vertigo and his narrative treatment of the metonymic encounter between memory and photography.

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Nonfiction – Memory – Photography – Literature – W.G. Sebald – Metonymy

There is a creative work by British artist Tacita Dean that pre-emptively *FILM*, her critically acclaimed 2011 commission for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. *Kodak* (2006) captures on film the last days of production at the Kodak factory in Chalon-sur-Saône. It is a mesmeric *memento mori* for the obsolescent technology of film, which is, of course, self-reflexively implicated and reflected in the almost extinct practices it records. Given Dean's artistic and academic interest in the writings of W. G. Sebald (2003), it might not be such a stretch to claim that *Kodak* approaches a Sebaldian phenomenology of memory in that it represents a technology of nonfiction whose material decline leads us to interrogate its mnemonic potential and effects. Amidst the pathos of the Kodak company, once a metonym itself for the practice and medium of photography, closing its remaining production plants and filing for bankruptcy, Dean's elegiac meditation offers a fitting introduction to this discussion of Sebald's use of, and response to analogue photography, which itself now exists largely in and as memory. Sebald explores the problems of memory and nonfiction through the metonymy of memory and photography, in particular, a relation that has been predicated historically on an assumption of realism, an assumption that Sebald, in an interview from 1997, does not necessarily discount:

the written word is not a true document after all. The photograph is the true document par excellence. People let themselves be convinced by a photograph. [...] I use the camera as a kind of *aide memoire* (qtd. in Scholz 2007).

Yet Sebald's textual deployment of photography in his novels is as ambivalent as his relationship with nonfiction and the memoir genre, as J.M. Coetzee observes:

Of course the 'I' in Sebald's books is not to be identified with the historical W.G. Sebald. Nevertheless, Sebald as author plays mischievously with similarities between the two, to the point of reproducing snapshots and passport photographs of 'Sebald' in his texts (2008 147–8).

The camera may function as an *aide memoire* but the memories that it produces are unpredictable and unreliable.

In its emphasis on the narrator's personal history Sebald's first novel *Vertigo* (1990) is an intimate meditation upon memory's landscape and, as the title delineates, is the most explicit on memory's role in Sebald's aetiology of vertigo. It is the fragmented and febrile memories triggered by material metonyms of the past that cause the vertigo of the title. For this reason, the discussion here concentrates on this text, though it also develops in references to Sebald's other works. In *Vertigo*, the relation between photography and the past is problematic. Sebald indirectly signals this state of affairs in the book's original German title: *Schwindel. Gefühle*. The two distinct parts of the title linguistically conjoin to denote 'vertigo.' Separately, however, they translate respectively as 'swindle' and 'emotion'. It is tempting to read this as an allusion to the affective 'swindle' that is perpetrated by memory's material metonyms. In *Vertigo*, Sebald emphasises the unpredictable action of memory when encountering the photographic image. Memory flickers, pulsates, reverberates. It instigates prodigal emotion when faced with its

seemingly inert material counterpart, the photograph. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera lucida*, the ‘photograph is in no way animated ... but it animates me’ (2000: 2).

Metonymy, explain George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, ‘has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another’ (2003: 36). Broadly speaking, photography stands for memory through visual reference to something that triggers that memory. Susan Sontag has commented on a metonymic link between the photograph and the past by observing that the photograph ‘passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture’ (2002: 5). Sontag’s ‘incontrovertible’ may be overstated in the age of computer-generated images. The epistemic shift in visual technology from analogue to digital, and its associated developments, have resulted in an increasingly mediated photographic image. Regardless, photography still has, as Sontag noted some time ago, ‘the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile of the mimetic arts’ (2002: 51) and a widespread tendency continues towards reading and relying upon photographs as factual evidence and hence as an authentic stand-in for past events. Thus the photograph, at first glance, can reassure even, paradoxically, when its image simultaneously shocks or unnerves.

In *Vertigo*, the written word is also presented as metonymical to memory. Indeed, the narrator tells us that the impetus for one of the novel’s multiple journeys was, in part, the desire to textually recuperate and document the memories of a past journey. He explains that

seven years after I fled from Verona, I finally yielded to a need I had felt for some time to repeat the journey from Vienna via Venice to Verona ... in order to probe my somewhat imprecise recollections of those fraught and hazardous days and perhaps record some of them’ (2000: 81).

The narrator (re)discovers that the endeavour to corral his recollections on the page and textually represent his memories is consistently thwarted by memory’s capricious movement. This time, the previously elusive memories return prodigiously and, as he writes, they ‘(at least so it seemed to me) rose higher and higher in some space outside of myself, until, having reached a certain level, they overflowed from that space into me, like water over the top of a weir’ (2000: 82).

Sebald parallels the narrator’s vertigo with that experienced by Henri-Marie Beyle (better known to history as the writer Stendhal). In one of the many pilgrimages to the sites of memory – ruins, shrines, reliquaries – that engender the narrative trajectory of *Vertigo*, Sebald recounts Beyle’s visit to a war memorial. For Beyle, the return to the battlefield of Marengo, where he had fought with Napoleon’s army some years earlier, triggers ‘a vertiginous sense of confusion such as he had never previously experienced’, precipitated by the ‘difference between the images of the battle which he had in his head and what he now saw before him as evidence that the battle had in fact taken place’ (2000: 17). Vertigo is generated in the discrepancy between ‘the mean impression’ of the memorial

and the fuller dimensions of Beyle's individual memory. The incommensurability here between memory and its material metonym, undermines the epistemological certainty of material links to the past. This is again confirmed when the narrator returns to the town of his childhood and is shown an attic of forgotten objects, an experience that is worth quoting at length given its narrative salience.

The attic was indeed a daunting sight [...] In a corner a bass tuba still glistened from beneath the layer of dust covering it, and next to it, on an eiderdown that had once been red, lay an enormous, long abandoned wasps' nest, both of them – the brass tuba and the fragile grey paper shell – tokens of the slow disintegrations of all material forms [...] I became aware of something like an apparition, a uniformed figure, which now could be seen more clearly, now more faintly behind the blade of light that slanted through the attic window. On closer inspection it revealed itself as an old tailor's dummy, dressed in pike-grey breeches and a pike-grey jacket [...] Perhaps because it had been concealed behind the shaft of light that cut through the darkness of the attic and in which swirled the glinting particles of matter dissolving into weightlessness, the grey figure instantly made a most uncanny impression on me, an impression which was only intensified by the smell of camphor exuding from it. But when I stepped closer, not entirely trusting my eyes, and touched one of the uniform sleeves that hung down empty, to my utter horror it crumbled into dust (2000: 223–7).

The friable uniform, indistinct in shape and languishing abandoned in a graveyard of material detritus dissolves at attempts to investigate it and thus refuses to point to its past. The residue coating the narrator's fingers, 'dusty and ... blackened from that one touch, like the token of some great woe that nothing in the world will ever put right,' is understood through the prodigal feeling it stimulates, rather than its inauspicious material form. As Carolyn Steedman's work (2001) eloquently illustrates, dust is the trigger for great sentiment and imaginative thought, and this theme is reiterated by an interlocutor in a later Sebald work *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) who asserts that Gustave Flaubert saw in a 'grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown ... the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains' (2002: 8).

This affectively potentialised dust has a correlate in photography: the *punctum*. In *Camera lucida*, Roland Barthes observes that 'occasionally [...] a "detail" attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This "detail" is the *punctum*' (2000: 42). According to Barthes, the *punctum* acts metonymically: 'However lightning-like it may be the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic' (2000: 45). In *Vertigo*, the idiosyncratic detail of an ex-lover's simulated digit impresses itself upon Beyle's psyche in a similar manner to the *punctum*:

On his writing desk, as a memento of Métilde, he kept a plaster cast of her left hand, which he had contrived to obtain [...] That hand now meant almost as much to him as Métilde herself could ever have done. In particular, the slight crookedness of the ring finger occasioned in him emotions of a vehemence he had not hitherto experienced (2000: 20–1).

The *punctum* is useful in understanding the aetiology of vertigo as experienced by Sebald's narrator. Barthes even speaks of 'vertigo' when describing the phenomenology of the photograph (2000: 97). The *punctum*'s reverberations are so powerful that the photographic information surrounding it falls away. It is the residue that provokes thought, and by extension, memory. A photograph from a photo-album that was a gift from the narrator's father to his mother provides an example of the Barthesian *punctum*.

In it are pictures of the Polish campaign, all neatly captioned in white ink. Some of these photographs show gypsies who had been rounded up and put in detention. They are looking out, smiling, from behind the barbed wire, somewhere in a far corner of the Slovakia where my father and his vehicle repairs unit had been stationed (2000: 184).

The accompanying image in the text shows strings of barbed wire cutting across a portrait of a mother and child. The woman's smile is inexplicable, at odds with her imprisonment. Barthes writes that a 'photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (2000: 26–7). This smile is what wounds the viewer because incongruously it speaks of the horrors of Nazi genocide. The *punctum* of the smile concertinas multiple personal and collective narratives – the woman's internment, the fate of European gypsies in World War 2; the narrator's memories of his childhood, the history of his family – into a single detail, which due to the psychological impact of their affective and mnemonic intensity then spring back open, spilling over beyond the visual and material limits of the image. The woman's smile struggles to withhold the excess of affective and narrative signifiers proliferating from its visual representation. The plenitude of signifiers, captured by what Susan Sontag calls the 'insatiability' of the photographic eye, saturate the image and appear immured, stable, but meaning spills over, leaks. This excess in the end subsumes the *punctum* and overwhelms the metonym's capacity to contain the memory for which it claims to stand.

A series of dialectics are therefore rehearsed within the frame of the photograph – material/immaterial, fixed/ephemeral, past/present, absence/presence – none more so than excess/insufficiency. Photography dialectically dramatizes its own excessive insufficiency and/or insufficient excess as an apparatus of capture. As metonym, the surplus and deficit mark a double failure to correspond to the past that it claims to represent. The resulting 'ruin' of the metonym thus ruptures any totalising account of photography as nonfiction, as 'proof' of the past. To an extent, the photograph too can be interpreted as ruin. Initially, it seems to visualise the mortification of time and space. It is, however, a reminder of the forward pull of temporality that is quite different to metonymic structures that stand-in for the past through reconstructing it – sometimes, ironically, through the use of photographs. The photograph dramatizes temporal instability through its inextricable relationship with the contingent; it is an actualization of what can never be again.

In addition to serving as a catalyzing trigger, the *punctum*'s other function is to puncture 'unary space' (Barthes 2000: 41–2). A unary space, as delineated by Barthes, is one that is uniform through conforming to acculturated expectations regarding its generic features

and communicative objectives. The ruin replicates the function of *punctum* in that it punctures a certain type of unary space, that of historical narrative. As residue of the past the ruin is a spatio-temporal aberration that carries with it the potential to explode a linear logic of historical consciousness. It represents temporal and spatial ambivalence because it does not try to replenish history in the aspirational manner of the photograph. In Sebald's last novel *Austerlitz* (2001), a character remarks (no doubt in reference to Albert Speer's notion of *ruinenwert*, or 'ruin value') that the edifices of imperial powers are designed to survive as ruins, to be the eternal markers of great civilizations (2001: 19). Yet the image of imperialist or totalitarian architecture such as Antwerp's Centraal Station wasting away is a potent material denial of the immortality of empires and signals the impossibility of the master narratives of history which deliberately and invariably overlooked the true repository of history that is, according to Walter Benjamin (2003), the texts of the quotidian. Sebald's situating of the ruin reveals his awareness of Benjamin's influential 1940 essay *On the concept of history*, an awareness confirmed in later years in a series of essays by Sebald collected under the title *On the natural history of destruction* (2003: 68). According to Susan Buck-Morss, Benjamin read the ruin as a critique of 'the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history's "continuum"' (1989: x). In order to affirm this counter-narrative of historical consciousness, the landscapes travelled by the narrators of Sebald's novels are strewn with Benjaminian ruins. The windmills of East Anglia in *The rings of Saturn* are particularly poignant. Cervantes' hero tilted at windmills believing them to be a mighty foe, but these windmills in their enfeebled state are easily ensnared by the photographic eye (2002: 30).

'Photography is a mode of bereavement. It speaks to us of mortification' writes Eduardo Cadava (1997: 7). Sontag elaborates:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art ... All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out the moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (2000: 15).

The photographic images inserted in Sebald's texts corroborate Cadava and Sontag's position. In *The Rings of Saturn*, a vintage picture postcard from the once prosperous English town of Lowestoft is reproduced (2002: 54). It shows a group of fisherman standing with their prodigious catch of herring. The souvenir contains a melancholy catalogue of extinct narrative detail: the *expired* lives of the photograph's subjects; their *obsolete* practices; the halcyon days of the herring industry leading to an *unsustainable* exploitation of natural resources. The history of the herring, its excessive numbers ultimately insufficient to protect against depletion over time, can be read as an allegory on the illimitable signifiers of the photographic image whose excessive meaning has spread out across and beyond the limits of the photograph rather than being condensed within the frame. The photograph, a material compression of the immaterial, struggles to withhold an overflow of affective signification pressing at its boundaries. The boundless

details that were, at the instant of the photograph's creation, replete with meaning, now exist only as chemical residue on treated paper. Captured by the insatiable photographic eye, they saturate the image and appear secure in their plenitude, but now mimic the herring's fate.

Many of the images reproduced in *Vertigo* illustrate the futility and folly of human action in the face of the intractable pull of history. Photography, by portraying what has already become extinct, prophesies humanity's eventual demise. According to Sebald's worldview, humanity's self-destructive trajectory is coupled with its destruction of the natural environment. It is the denial of nature that has led to this piteous state. Sebald has a certain sympathy for Franz Kafka's philosophy that if 'we were to open our eyes ... we would see that our happiness lies in our natural surroundings and not in our poor bodies which have long since become separated from the natural order of things' (2000: 158). *Vertigo* closes with Samuel Pepys' account of the Great Fire of London, an image of manmade urban conflagration. In *The rings of Saturn*, an ostensibly innocuous and picturesque snapshot that purports to be the narrator in front of a Lebanese cedar assumes a melancholic aspect when we learn through the accompanying written text that this tree has been lost, along with fourteen million like it, to the ravages of pestilence, insect infestation, or extreme weather conditions (2002: 262–8). (In an instance of the textual playfulness that Coetzee identified earlier the image is actually a photograph of Sebald from his own archives. The notion of bereavement that situates the image is therefore unintentionally amplified by our knowledge of Sebald's untimely death in 2001.)

The logical medium for recording these morbid processes, says Sontag, is the camera:

Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing (2002: 15–6).

The photographs displayed in Sebald's books tell stories of decay, decline and death, thereby resisting the application of photography as commemoration of life and posterity. Indeed Sebald, through Beyle, cautions against the dangers of the metonym put to such service because the memory of the metonym can supercede the memory of the past:

It was a severe disappointment, Beyle writes, when some years ago, looking through old papers, he came across an engraving entitled *Prospetto d'Ivrea* and was obliged to concede that his recollected picture of the town in the evening sun was nothing but a copy of that very engraving. This being so, Beyle's advice is not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one's travels, since before very long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them (2000: 8).

Curiously, Sebald ignores Beyle's advice. The narrator of *Vertigo* laments 'the view from Burg Greifenstein is no longer the same. A dam has been built below the castle. The course of the river was straightened, and the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was' (2000: 42). Yet a photograph of the dammed river is

inserted into the text, thereby ensuring that the altered vista is impressed upon the reader's mind.

Perhaps Sebald is warning of the perils inherent in photography. Photography, the metonym, is the dangerous *supplement* to memory. For Jacques Derrida (writing about Jean-Jacques Rousseau's supplemental deployment of the written word as confession):

the *supplement* supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence ... As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness [...]. This presence is at the same time desired and feared' (1976: 145, 155).

Following a similar path, Barthes maintains that

not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory, but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory ... The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed' (2000: 91).

Ultimately, Sebald undermines the prevailing photographic double in *Vertigo* by also including a photograph of a paradisiacal Danube 'before The Fall' so to speak, that is, before the desecration caused by the dam.

In doing so, Sebald draws attention to the photograph's spectral quality. Photography's eidola, vertiginously hovering between presence and absence (Derrida: 2006), are all the more affecting given that the technology of photography as represented in Sebald is an obsolescent practice for which the material tools are increasingly difficult to obtain and conserve. Thus his books are now haunted by the concept and practice of photography they represent. Memory outlives and exists independently to the technologies designed to capture it, as the fate of analogue photography, and the book for that matter, exhibits. Photography can only hope to trigger memory, and it is this inter-relation between the seductive ostensible readability of the photographic image and the precarious dimensions of that triggered memory that induces 'vertigo' (Sebald 2000: 21). The traces of memory dwell most vividly in the *chiaroscuro* of our minds and are not accountable to the technically reproduced metonyms of our past. In the final pages of *Vertigo*, the narrator spies a butterfly. His memory of it is as unanchored to any material object as the butterfly's autonomous movement:

I could hardly believe my eyes, as the train was waiting at a signal, to see a yellow brimstone butterfly flitting about from one purple flower to the other, first at the top, then at the bottom, now on the left, constantly moving. But that was many months ago, and this butterfly memory was perhaps prompted only by a wishful thought (2000: 260).

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