One essential reason why the German–British author W. G. Sebald’s prose works are not only peculiarly unclassifiable but also unusually compelling is the way in which their textual surface is interrupted by uncaptioned black-and-white photographs and other visual images. This essay will explore how Sebald responds to the historical events of the Second World War and the Holocaust by using such visual images as integral parts of his narratives. I will focus on two of his books, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, a collection of essays first published in German in 1999, and *Austerlitz*, the strange novel that appeared in 2001. I will discuss two visual images presented in the first essay of the former book and then proceed to comment on three images that appear toward the end of the latter. In each case, I link the visual images to the narrative discourse in which they are situated and of which, I argue, they form an integral and important part. The critical aim of my discussion is to show how the interplay of verbal text and visual image serves not only to obliquely present Sebald’s abiding preoccupation with the war and the Holocaust but also to urge the reader to reflect on the temporal reach of these historical events, not least the significant absences they generated in individual lives.

Before turning to Sebald, I want to make four observations on the aesthetic and ethical effects of visual images presented in verbal narrative. These brief comments on a complex issue are related to, and inspired by, the discussion that follows. My obvious yet important first point is that once a visual image is included in a verbal text, we are confronted not just with
what we can term two different media but also with a constellation of, and opposition between, two aesthetic and communicative registers. Simply put, the reader also becomes a viewer, and the fact that we are looking at a photo when reading a verbal narrative does something to the way we read both the verbal text next to the photo and the whole narrative. As Silke Horstkotte notes in an essay titled “Photo-Text Topographies,” a photo-text topography indicates “a spatial dimension which the photos introduce into the linearity of verbal narrative” (50). In a narrative like *Austerlitz* this spatial dimension is added to, or superimposed on, that of the verbal narrative itself. Literature, and not least fictional literature, has a topography of its own—a spatial dimension at once linked and opposed to the temporal one. The topography of a photo-text, or what J. W. T. Mitchell calls “imagetext” (83), is thus a combination of two topographies, one verbal and one visual, and our construction of the former (an integral and essential part of the reading of fiction) may be supported or complicated by our understanding of the latter. Thus the relation of the topographies can vary across a wide spectrum with total reinforcement at one end and complete conflict at the other.

Second, since we conventionally relate a photograph to our experience of the external, physical world, the encounter with a photo when reading a verbal narrative, and especially a fictional one, raises the issue of authenticity. Broadly, two dimensions are activated here. If one purpose of the narrative is to say something about historical reality (historical events, characters, processes), a photograph can support that purpose. But if, not least in a fictional narrative, the author wants to exploit the ambiguity of the photograph, he or she can make it part of “an elaborate play with interdiscursive (intertextual, intermedial, and intericonic) allusions” (Horstkotte 50), thus problematizing the notion of authenticity. Interestingly, the two dimensions need not necessarily exclude each other; rather, they may coexist in curiously alogical fashion. One illustrative example of this kind of combination, which presents the reader (and viewer) with a considerable interpretive challenge, is that of the photographs of Vita Sackville-West included in the first edition of one of the major fictional biographies of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928).

Third, since, as indicated already, the presentation and layering of space in incorporated photos and other visual images can relate in different ways to the topography and storyworld evoked in the verbal narrative, issues of narrative are highlighted. I identify two such issues, both of which are possessed of aesthetic as well as ethical aspects. The first aspect is located at the intersection of narrative, reading, and viewing. If we are confronted with a visual image when reading a verbal narrative, our reading of the verbal text is tem-
porarily suspended as we look at the image and wonder about its relevance and significance. Seen thus, there is a sense in which the visual image has the potential to disrupt the previous narrative progression but also the potential to enrich it. And yet the image, the textual picture we are looking at, can itself include narrative features—features that may be convergent with, accentuated by, or opposed to the surrounding verbal narrative. Such an imbrication of visual and verbal elements becomes particularly noticeable if, as in the case of Sebald, the textual pictures are uncaptioned, thus in a way making the verbal text an extended caption and, conversely, turning the pictures into an oblique commentary on the verbal text. This dimension of the first aspect blends into the second: who or what are the narrative agent(s) responsible for the visual images? If we use the verbal narrative as our interpretive starting point, is the relationship between the author and the narrator different as far as the textual pictures are concerned?

Fourth, while most visual images are imbued with an aesthetic aspect, the ethical dimension may be more implicit and may to a larger extent depend on the reader’s interpretive activity. Unsurprisingly, as far as the Holocaust is concerned it is a matter of considerable debate how photographs and other visual images of this historical event can, and should, be presented. As Anette H. Storeide notes in her contribution to this volume, “an unwritten rule has been that the images should not be shown at the expense of the victims and not satisfy the audience’s need or greed for sensations and shocking images.” This issue is interestingly linked to both of the narratives that I now proceed to discuss. One reason why the question is important is that it highlights the narrative dimension of photographs of this kind: when a viewer is looking at a photo from, say, Auschwitz, his or her more or less accurate or comprehensive narrative of Auschwitz is activated; moreover, he or she is forcefully reminded of the close, in this case even insistent, interplay of visual image, narrative, and historical as well as personal memory.5

Born in a hamlet in the Bavarian Alps in 1944, Sebald was literally as well as metaphorically a child of the Second World War. After the German capitulation in May 1945 his father, a soldier in the Wehrmacht (the German army), was detained in a prison camp in France for two years. When he finally returned to his family in 1947, Sebald’s father, who hardly ever spoke about his war experiences, was not recognized by his three-year-old son. Whether the difficult relationship with his father was one reason why Sebald later decided to leave Germany we do not know. After having studied German and comparative literature at the University of Freiburg and in French-speaking Switzerland, Sebald emigrated to Britain in 1966. After that he spent most of his time in Norwich, writing and teaching at the University
of East Anglia and becoming the first director of The British Centre for Literary Translation. His writings stretch from his MA thesis on Carl Sternberg and Alfred Döblin, via essays on German and Austrian literature, to the more personal essays and the book of poetry titled Nach der Natur. In the 1990s Sebald’s writing moved closer to fiction, and Austerlitz has often, though never by Sebald himself, been referred to as a novel. Tragically, since he was killed in a traffic accident in 2001, his major work was to become his last book. Both generally and with a view to Austerlitz in particular, the passage from Luftkrieg und Literatur that I will consider in this essay marks an important stage in Sebald’s development as a writer.

Even though Luftkrieg und Literatur assumes documentary form, it is not generically simple. The two first chapters consist of lectures Sebald delivered in Zürich in the autumn of 1994. Two related purposes of these lectures were, first, to argue that postwar German literature had failed to address the massive destruction of German cities and the killing of German citizens in the last years of the war, and, second, to provide a belated account of, and reflection on, this vexed issue. While, unsurprisingly, the language of these lectures is predominantly argumentative, in the third chapter the discourse’s narrative dimension is strengthened. Here Sebald reflects on the reactions to his Zürich lectures. The shift to a more narrative mode is accompanied by, and partly the result of, the inclusion—or perhaps rather intrusion—of elements of autobiography. Few passages in Sebald are more painfully autobiographical than the long second paragraph of chapter 3. Here aspects of narrative, memory, and photographic image are suggestively combined, thus producing rich thematic effects.

At the beginning of this paragraph, which is at the center of my critical attention and blends into my first quoted passage, Sebald makes an unusually explicit statement on the effect that visual images of the war can have on him. “When I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war,” he notes, “I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge” (71). He then goes on to link this observation to a book published in 1963 on the history of a small hamlet in Bavaria, the region where he grew up. As we can see in figure 1, the page that Sebald reproduces from this book shows two photos: an idyllic landscape and a small, laughing girl. The page includes two caption-like comments placed next to the photos. Sebald presents, in English translation, the first of these comments: “The war took much from us, but our beautiful native landscape was left untouched, as flourishing as ever.” For Sebald, however, the photos are blended with “images of
de ein Jahr alt und kann also schwerlich auf realen Ereignissen beruhende Eindrücke aus jener Zeit der Zerstörung bewahrt haben. Dennoch ist es mir bis heute, wenn ich Photographien oder dokumentarische Filme aus dem Krieg sehe, als stammte ich, sozusagen, von ihm ab und als fiele von dorther, von diesen von mir gar nicht erlebten Schrecknissen, ein Schatten auf mich, unter dem ich
destruction—and oddly enough, it is the latter, not the now entirely unreal idylls of my early childhood, that make me feel rather as if I were coming home.” (71)

Considered as an integral part of Luftkrieg und Literatur, this textual picture is important for two related reasons. The first reason is suggested by the formal and semantic elements of the picture itself. We note the rhetorically effective way in which the two captions not only comment on the photos but are also commented on by the verbal discourse into which they are incorporated. This comment also applies to the second caption, that is, the one positioned to the left of the laughing girl, “And gradually we move on—accompanied by the laughter of our children—into a hopeful future” (my translation from the German). If separated from the surrounding narrative and considered as captions only, these two sentences reveal an attitude that is naïvely optimistic and willfully vague about “the war.” When read as part of Sebald’s discourse, however, the words accompanying the pictures—even more than the photographic images themselves—become ironically ambiguous. I identify two facets of this ambiguity, which is thematically productive and considerably strengthens the picture’s narrative dimension. First, the noun “the war”/“der Krieg” may refer not just to the Second World War but also to the first. Although this link may be rather weak, it is supported by the second facet: the picture of the little girl strikingly calls to mind the way in which girls and young women were presented by Nazi propaganda in the 1930s. Significantly, this association on the part of the reader, and perhaps also Sebald, becomes possible only as a result of the visual image—neither the caption nor Sebald’s verbal discourse refers to the prewar period. The photo of the laughing girl accentuates the irony of Sebald’s observation, while at the same time furthering the discourse’s narrative and thematic complexity. The textual reference to “images of destruction” (which are not presented or reproduced visually) colors our reading of both the visual image of the beautiful landscape and of the laughing girl. As readers who also become viewers, we see these visual images and simultaneously imagine war’s destruction.

The second reason why this picture is important is that it provides the starting point for, as well as an elegant transition to, the concluding part of the paragraph and its incorporated photograph. The English translation of the passage accompanying the photo reads thus:

I know now that at the time, when I was lying in my bassinet on the balcony of the Seefeld house and looking up at the pale blue sky, there was a pall of smoke in the air all over Europe, over the rearguard actions in east
and west, over the ruins of the German cities, over the camps where untold numbers of people were burnt, people from Berlin and Frankfurt, from Wuppertal and Vienna, from Würzburg and Kissingen, from Hilversum and The Hague, Naumur and Thionville, Lyon and Bordeaux, Kraków and Łódź, Szeged and Sarajevo, Salonika and Rhodes, Ferrara and Venice—there was scarcely a place in Europe from which no one had been deported to his death in those years. I have seen memorial tablets even in the most remote villages on the island of Corsica reading “Morte à Auschwitz” or “Tué par les Allemands, Flossenburg 1944.” I saw something else in Corsica too—if I may be permitted a digression: I saw the picture from my parents’ bedroom in the church of Morosaglia, a half-decayed edifice with a dusty, pseudo-Baroque interior. It was a bluish oleograph in the Nazarene style, showing Christ before his Passion seated deep in thought in the moonlit, nocturnal Garden of Gethsemane. The selfsame picture had hung over my parents’ conjugal bed for many years, and then at some point it disappeared, probably when they bought new bedroom furniture. And now here it was again, or at least one exactly like it, in the village church of Morosaglia, General Paoli’s birthplace, leaning against the plinth of an altar in a dark corner of one of the side aisles. My parents told me that just before their wedding in 1936 they had bought their picture in Bamberg, where my father was transport sergeant in the cavalry regiment in which the young Stauffenberg had begun his military career ten years earlier. Such is the dark backward and abysm of time. Everything lies all jumbled up in it, and when you look down you feel dizzy and afraid. (71–74)

Relating this passage and its textual picture to our concern with narrative and memory, we can start by noting how the narrator’s, and Sebald’s, associative train of thought gradually brings him closer to the key words “deported to his death.” In Sebald’s original German, the concluding part of the sentence (following all the place names) reads: “—kaum ein Ort in Europa, aus dem in diesen Jahren niemand deportiert worden wäre in den Tod” (78) (“—there was scarcely a place in Europe from which no one had been deported to his death in those years”). The subjunctive in the passive construction “deportiert worden wäre” is doubly significant: while the passive reminds us that they were deported by somebody, that is, the Nazis, the subjunctive form wäre refers to “niemand”/nobody, thus indicating that in spite of the narrator’s wish, deportations actually occurred in all of these places. The double negation affirms a historical truth.

The association of names prompted by the first picture brings the narrator into touch with the second one, which then takes over as the narrative’s
primary point of reference. I do not find it necessary to distinguish between
the narrator and Sebald here. What is important, however, is to note how
suggestively, almost imperceptibly, three constituent elements of the narra-
tor’s experiential self are blended. James Phelan has usefully drawn atten-
tion to the ways in which, in much autobiographical narrative, the “I” “will
sometimes speak from the perspective of her former self, thereby making
the communication shift from the direct to the indirect” (1). In this passage,
the narrator is speaking from two perspectives of his former self: while at the
beginning the “I” is looking up at the “pale blue sky” (71) from the balcony
of his parents’ home in Bavaria, the “memorial tablets” (73) which he refers
to are clearly seen not only in a “remote” place but also at a much later stage
of his life. Moreover, since Sebald’s own perspective as narrator at the time of
writing is not totally eliminated, it is added to, or perhaps rather infiltrated
by, the other two.

The documentary feature of this variant of first-person account serves
to delineate its narrative purpose. It also strengthens the narrative’s autobio-
 graphical dimension, which has two distinctive features in this paragraph.
On the one hand, the narrator is induced by the idyllic scene from the Bavar-
ian countryside to think of the many places from which people, in large part
Jews, were deported to Nazi concentration and extermination camps. On
the other hand, or rather as a digression (Abschweifung) from his train of
thought, the narrator takes the reader into his parents’ bedroom. I am not
claiming that looking at this picture (see figure 2) makes us feel voyeuristic.
But I am suggesting that the addition of this second autobiographical facet
brings the reader embarrassingly and almost painfully close to Sebald’s dif-
ficult relationship and lasting preoccupation with his parents, his Bavarian
home, his past, and the Holocaust.

It is characteristic of Sebald's narrative art that the transition from the
first to the second autobiographical facet is provoked by his associative inter-
linking of two physical objects seen in the same place, that is, Corsica: first
the “memorial tablets” and then the oleograph in the church of Morosaglia
which he identifies as “the picture from my parents’ bedroom” (73). To these
two elements of space are added the geographical names of Auschwitz and
Flossenburg, yet in Sebald's discourse all of these places are immediately
temporalized. The memorial tablets are related both to the time of his visit
and to 1944; the painting of Christ in Gethsemane is related not just to his
parents’ bedroom but also to the time when he (the narrator/Sebald) was a
child, perhaps sleeping in the same room. Thus the atrocities of the Holo-
caust force themselves into the author’s most private sphere. This narrative
association of historical events and personal memory is strengthened by the
reference to Bamberg, where Sebald’s parents had bought the picture in 1936. Sebald’s father was a transport officer in Bamberg at the time, and exactly here “the young Stauffenberg had begun his military career ten years earlier” (74). This information is historically correct: Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, born 1907, entered the so-called Reiterregiment in Bamberg in 1926. Stauffenberg later played a key role in the attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1944; when this attempt failed, he was caught and executed.

It would be misleading, however, to claim that it is the connection between Sebald’s father and Stauffenberg that leads the narrator to make the observation on time and history at the end of the passage. Although inspired by it, this generalized comment is generated by the narrative’s implications and thematic thrust. The picture inserted into the middle of the paragraph simultaneously prompts and silently accompanies the narrator’s observation, serving as an obscure visual illustration of it. Considered as a photograph, the picture is not a good one; it seems amateurishly contrived and there is no way we as readers can decide whether it is authentic or not. That is not the main issue here, however. What is essential from my critical perspective is the picture’s narrative and thematic function in this particular paragraph, and as an integral part of Luftkrieg und Literatur. Seen in this light, it is arguably very significant. Since the photo shows a bedroom with a painting on the wall, the visual medium of painting is added to that of photography; and the defining features of both these variants of visual representation simultaneously enrich and complicate our reading of the verbal text. As the photograph shows both a bedroom and a painting, two elements of space are presented as one. Yet there is a tension between them. Accentuated by the different forms of visual media (photograph and painting), this tension is generated in large part by the contrast between the temporal positioning of the bedroom in the late 1940s and the image of Christ in Gethsemane almost 2,000 years earlier. This constellation of two spatial images held together in one spatial frame considerably strengthens the photograph’s temporal dimension, while also accentuating the religious (Catholic) dimension of Sebald’s childhood milieu. It is significant that, as described by the narrator, Christ is not only alone but “seated deep in thought.” It is as though the narrator is identifying, and even accentuating, a distinctly melancholic aspect of the painting—an aspect imbued with a sense of loneliness and powerlessness. Thus the content of the visual image contributes to the dizziness and fear associated with looking at the past. Markus Weber has suggested that, for Sebald, pictures do not document reality but rather indicate the narrator’s searching movement. Weber’s term Suchbewegung (68) is suggestive, and his point would seem to be supported by this picture. The movement is not just into the past, since the “abyss of time” also brings the past closer. There is a
strong sense in which the visual image documents reality not only as remembered by the narrator but also as experienced by him at the time of seeing the picture in the church in Morosaglia. What he sees in the church is not the photo but the painting in it; thus he is reminded of his childhood by looking at a work of art—an object that is made, created, rather than mechanically reproduced. And yet the painting is of course reproduced here, in the photo, thus adding one more complication.

Turning to *Austerlitz*, a perhaps obvious yet important first point to make is that since this long narrative is closer to the novel than to autobiography, the effects of its insistent linking of verbal discourse and visual image both resemble and differ from those noted in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. As in the latter book, the verbal discourse of *Austerlitz* is punctuated by visual images, which are here not just photographic but also graphic and filmic. I will discuss the way in which three different textual pictures—a map, a frozen video image, and the photo of a railway station—influence and shape our understanding of the three passages of verbal discourse into which they are inserted and from which neither author nor reader—or, inside the fictional universe of *Austerlitz*, neither narrator nor character or narratee—is able to dissociate them.

One important reason why the visual images in *Austerlitz* both resemble and differ from those in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is generic. I have described the chapter from the latter book as a blend of essay, commentary, and autobiography. Even though we must be wary of collapsing these generic categories into one, they all purport to refer to, and thus represent, aspects of the real world—such as Sebald’s reflections on the reactions to his Zürich lectures or the account, albeit selective, of aspects of his childhood in Bavaria. The essential point to make here is that in this discourse the embedded photographs confirm, rather than complicate, its nonfictional character. I am making this point in spite of the fact that the photo of the bedroom of Sebald’s parents may be “constructed,” and thus in one sense fictional. One of photography’s defining features, and also one of the strongest conventions associated with this medium, is its capacity to visually represent a segment of physical reality at a given point in time. Seen thus, photography is a marker of nonfictionality, and not just in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* but also in *Austerlitz*. In the latter text, however, the relationship between visual image and verbal discourse is more complex, also in the sense of being more problematic and presenting the reader with considerable interpretive challenges. The reason is that in contrast to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, the verbal discourse of *Austerlitz* is possessed of several signposts of fictionality. Even though there is no theoretical consensus as to whether any combination of linguistic usages or narrative and literary devices can unambiguously indicate fictionality, David Gorman
is right to note, in his helpful entry on “Theories of Fiction” in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, that the combination of such signposts at least makes a text more likely to be fictional. Two signposts of fictionality in this novel (I will call it a novel, though it is a strange and highly original one) are extensive use of dialogue and what Gorman calls “distinguishability” of narrator from author.

As my reading of the three visual images in Austerlitz turns on the way in which they are embedded in a verbal discourse, I need to briefly indicate how the narrative is established and sustained. The main character of Austerlitz has grown up ignorant of his past, and many years after the Second World War he is forced to explore what happened to him and his parents, both of whom were Jews and in all probability victims of the Holocaust.

This is how the novel begins: “In the second half of the 1960s I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me, staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks” (1). On a first reading, we may think that the first-person narrator, the “I” who travels “repeatedly from England to Belgium,” is identical with Austerlitz. Yet although, as it turns out, there is a peculiarly strong resemblance between the first-person narrator and the novel’s main character—who also becomes eventually a main narrator—this beginning is actually a frame narrative whose function is to establish a narrative situation in which the two can meet and in which Austerlitz can talk.

Sebald’s use of a frame narrator can be linked to a tradition of such narrators in literary fiction. With a view to the narrative and thematic fabric of Austerlitz, the gains of employing a frame narrator are considerable, and they strikingly resemble the effects of Joseph Conrad’s use of a frame narrator in Heart of Darkness. Conrad’s famous novella from 1899 is one of the strongest intertexts in Austerlitz. In both narratives, the main narrator is introduced by a frame narrator, who then becomes a keenly interested listener or narratee. Moreover, in Austerlitz as in Heart of Darkness, the frame narrator’s relative conventionality renders him more reliable, thus making it easier for us to believe Austerlitz’s story, which the frame narrator reports to us as readers. This narrative strategy creates a tentacular effect: we are drawn into the narrative in a manner comparable to the way in which the frame narrator is irresistibly attracted to Austerlitz’s account. And one of the elements that attract him, and the reader, is Austerlitz’s pictures. In Story and Situation, Ross Chambers draws attention to the manner in which, at a deep and frequently unthematized level, the narrator’s motivation to narrate is complemented by the narratee’s readiness to listen, and he notes that for both parties, possibilities of gain as well as risks of loss are involved (51). The narrative situations
in *Austerlitz* offer ample illustrations of this important point. For example, by telling fragments of his story Austerlitz risks confirming his sense of loss and estrangement, yet his narration may enable him to negotiate that loss. By listening to the story, the narratee risks losing, or being drawn out of, a comfortable position of ignorance; yet the fact that he not only listens to but also retells what Austerlitz has told him suggests a learning process, and thus the possibility of gaining essential knowledge.

Even though both the frame narrator and Austerlitz are presented as fictional characters, the pictures Austerlitz takes—and at least some of which, the reader assumes, are presented in the book—seem to refer to the same physical reality as those included in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. And yet we read them differently, since the pictures in *Austerlitz* simultaneously oppose and are colored by the fictional verbal discourse in which they are embedded, and from which Sebald makes it exceedingly difficult to disentangle them. During one of their first conversations in the railway station in Antwerp, “Austerlitz took a camera out of his rucksack, an old Ensign with telescopic bellows, and took several pictures of the mirrors, which were now quite dark, but so far I have been unable to find them among the many hundreds of pictures, most of them unsorted, that he entrusted to me soon after we met again in the winter of 1996” (7). If Austerlitz’s narrative is relayed to the reader via the frame narrator, so, it seems, are his pictures.

In an insightful comment on *Heart of Darkness*, Tzvetan Todorov has said of Marlow’s narration that it spirals toward a thematic core or center, which, however, turns out to be empty (167, 169). There is a sense in which this description applies to Austerlitz’s narration too, and the three textual images to be discussed support the notion of gravitating toward a nightmarish vacuity. A Czech Jew, Austerlitz escaped from the Nazis in the summer of 1939, on a Kindertransport to Britain. Austerlitz’s father, Maximilian, fled to France, while his mother, Agáta, remained in Czechoslovakia together with Věra, a non-Jewish friend of the family. As Austerlitz’s search for his parents now, many years later, takes him “further and further east and further and further back in time” (262–63), his conversations with Věra, with whom he resumes contact, make him believe that his mother was interned in Terezín (the German name is Theresienstadt) in late 1942 (281) and then “sent east in September 1944” (287). Accordingly, Austerlitz, with typical thoroughness, studies an 800-page book “which H. G. Adler, a name previously unknown to me, had written between 1945 and 1947 in the most difficult of circumstances, partly in Prague and partly in London, on the subject of the setting up, development and internal organization of the Theresienstadt ghetto . . .” (327). In the German edition of *Austerlitz*, this sentence is divided into two by this textual picture, shown in figure 3.
An illustrative example of Sebald’s technique of integrating visual images into his verbal discourse, this map invites three comments. First, although not a photograph, this textual picture has a topographical dimension in that it indicates—and makes Austerlitz, the frame narrator, and the reader visualize—an element of space, a place complete with streets, houses, and a surrounding border. However, as our knowledge that this place was a concentration camp during the Second World War blends into our impression of its topographical shape, it is temporalized and linked to our own history. Second, as if preempting such a reading of the map, Austerlitz makes an attempt to qualify or counter it by stating that “because in its almost futuristic deformation of social life the ghetto system had something incomprehensible and unreal about it . . .” (331). This is as close as the verbal discourse in *Austerlitz* comes to being a caption, or caption-like. Third, like most maps, this one too has names written on it. Names, as we well know, have to be read; and two general names in particular become semantically loaded in the context of the proper names to which they are linked and of the verbal narrative in which they are situated: “(BHF)” [railway station] and “KREMATORIUM.” “BHF” signifies both Austerlitz’s restless train journeys across Europe and those of countless Jews being deported to the extermination camps; “KREMATORIUM” is repeated in the main text when the frame narrator reports that the “incinerators of the crematorium, kept going day and night in cycles of forty minutes at a time, were stretched to the utmost limits of their capacity, said Austerlitz” (337).

The protagonist and main narrator Austerlitz makes this comment in the middle of the novel’s longest sentence, which stretches from page 331 to page 342. Through this long, convoluted sentence, Austerlitz’s first-person narrative—relayed to the reader via the frame narrator—makes a sustained attempt to move beyond the sterile surface of the map, grooping for a different kind of sign that could possibly affirm, for him, the existence of his mother in the camp. At the very end of the ten-page sentence, Austerlitz suddenly mentions that, according to Adler, the Nazis made a film at Theresienstadt, a film Adler never saw “and thought it was now lost without trace” (342). However, Austerlitz eventually manages to obtain “a cassette copy of the film of Theresienstadt for which I had been searching” (343). Watching the film, he cannot see his mother, Agáta, anywhere. But then he gets the idea of having a slow-motion copy made. Watching this artificially extended version, he notices the face of a young woman in the backdrop. The visual image is accompanied by this passage:

> Around her neck, said Austerlitz, she is wearing a three-stringed and delicately draped necklace which scarcely stands out from her dark, high-
necked dress, and there is, I think, a white flower in her hair. She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze again and again at that face, which seems to me both strange and familiar, said Austerlitz, I run the tape back repeatedly, looking at the time indicator in the top left- and corner of the screen, where the figures covering part of her forehead show the minutes and seconds, from 10:53 to 10:57, while the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read and capture them. (350–51)

As it turns out, this woman is probably not Agáta, since Věra cannot recognize her. Nor does Austerlitz himself seem to be certain of her identity, as words such as “imagined” and “faint memories” indicate. The failure of identification is revealing. My main concern, though, is the presentation and effect of the image. Unusually for Austerlitz, the textual image inserted into this passage is filmic. This means that, in concert with this medium’s conditions of production (that is, making a film), what we are looking at here is just one frame out of the 24 frames per second that our eyes need to be exposed to in order to experience an optical illusion of movement. The temporal dimension of the filmic image is insistent in a way that that of a photograph is not, and here it is visually presented in the form of the numbers indicating the day, month, and year of the recording of the tape, as well as the time (close to eleven minutes) played and seen so far.

And yet what we are looking at is a frozen image, an image that insists on moving and yet stands still, suspended in time and space. It is as though Austerlitz, or Sebald, or the frame narrator, is attempting to stabilize or temporarily halt a fleeting, moving image by freezing it in time—first by having the slow-motion copy made and then by making the still copy. Avi Kempinski finds that by running “the tape back repeatedly,” Austerlitz evokes Roland Barthes’s notion of the “defeat of Time” (96) in historical photographs; Austerlitz seems to experience a punctum whose uncoded intensity and “power of expansion” (Barthes 45) lead him to believe that the woman in the photo may be his mother.10 Kempinski is correct to note that “despite this attempt to resuscitate the mother-image through the ‘defeat of time,’ this faint image ultimately betray a face, but not the mother’s” (466). The two faces in the image seem to be approaching the viewer from an unknown place somewhere in the past, and the lack of textual commentary on the man in the foreground of the still seems conspicuous. He appears to be unknown, yet he may irresistibly remind Austerlitz of his lost father. Although there is something ghostlike about the appearance of the two faces, they do add a human dimension to the map of Theresienstadt, the place where these two human
alten Herrn, dessen kurz geschorenes graues Haupt
die rechte Hälfte des Bildes ausfüllt, während in der
linken Hälfte, etwas zurückgesetzt und mehr gegen
den oberen Rand, das Gesicht einer jüngeren Frau
erscheint, fast ununterschieden von dem schwar-
zen Schatten, der es umgibt, weshalb ich es auch
zunächst gar nicht bemerkte. Sie trägt, sagte Au-
sterlitz, eine in drei feinen Bogenlinien von ihrem
dunklen, hochgeschlossenen Kleid kaum sich abhe-
bende Kette um den Hals und eine weiße Blumen-
blüte seitlich in ihrem Haar. Gerade so wie ich nach
meinen schwachen Erinnerungen und den wenigen
beings were at the time of the shooting of the film. The image contributes to, and further extends, Austerlitz’s attempt to understand at least something of the terrible conditions under which the inmates of the camp lived. As Marianne Hirsch has shown in *Family Frames*, the appearance of faces, human beings, in a photograph prompts a form of narrativization of it—not least if it is one of a family member. In this textual picture, narrativization is accentuated partly by the way in which time and space play equally important roles in film, partly by the imprint of temporal markers (numbers) on the frozen image.

We have noted that although the visual images in *Austerlitz*, in common with those in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, seem to refer to physical reality, we read them differently because of the fictional verbal discourse into which they are integrated. One of the ways in which Sebald makes it difficult to disentangle this frozen filmic image from the fiction in which it is embedded is that Austerlitz thinks he can recognize his mother, Agáta, in a historical film made at Theresienstadt by the Nazis. As it would seem impossible for a fictional character such as Austerlitz to recognize his mother in a documentary film about people in the real world, there is a sense in which the historical film is fictionalized—even though it links Austerlitz to historical reality. Moreover, fictionalization is also very much part of the film itself: as a Nazi propaganda film it presents a picture of Theresienstadt that is entirely false. Before making the film, the Nazi authorities fixed up the camp and arranged cultural activities to give the appearance of a happy community; after the filming ended, the camp slipped back into its cruel routine. In the fictional world of the novel, Austerlitz thinks that Agáta was “sent east in September 1944” (287); in historical reality, both before and after shooting the film at Theresienstadt, the Nazis deported a large number of the camp’s inmates to Auschwitz. Accentuating the novel’s ethical dimension, Sebald’s incorporation of the documentary into the fiction of *Austerlitz* testifies to a powerful concern on his part not just with the relations between history and fiction but also with the relations between truth and falsity: the documentary has a historical existence but its purpose was not to fictionalize but to lie, whereas Sebald’s narrative is fictional but its purpose is to capture truths that the documentary either denies or neglects. Indeed, the Nazi film does not really merit the term “documentary,” even if, as Sebald demonstrates, documentary evidence of some sort may be obtained from it through an oppositional reading.

Just after the presentation of this image, Austerlitz tells his narratee, who has been listening patiently for a long while, that “he was now about to go to Paris to search for traces of his father’s last movements” (354). If the visual image of the woman from Theresienstadt is as close as Austerlitz thinks he is
able to come to his mother, the last one I want to discuss is a forceful visual representation of his search for his father (see figure 5).

Linked to this visual image is the following paragraph:

Curiously enough, said Austerlitz, a few hours after our last meeting, when he had come back from the Bibliothèque Nationale and changed trains at the Gare d’Austerlitz, he had felt a premonition that he was coming closer to his father. . . . an idea came to him of his father’s leaving Paris from this station, close as it was to his flat in the rue Barrault, soon after the Germans entered the city. I imagined, said Austerlitz, that I saw him leaning out of the window of his compartment as the train left, and I saw the white clouds of smoke rising from the locomotive as it began to move ponderously away. (404–6)

Reading these lines and looking at this textual picture, the reader has a sense of the narrative coming full circle, for one of the first images of Austerlitz is also one of a railway station. Moreover, the name of the railway station at Antwerp, Salle des pas perdu (Hall of Lost Steps), can equally be linked to the Gare d’Austerlitz, whose name is blended with one significant aspect of the protagonist’s name. As the frame narrator tells us that Austerlitz takes several photographs in the Salle des pas perdu, he may have taken this one too.

Significantly, there are no people in this photo—just a large hall and two trains, one on each side of the hall. We assume that it is a photo of the Gare d’Austerlitz, but we cannot be sure, and probably are not meant to be. This kind of ambiguity is thematically productive: the image induces us to think, first, of Austerlitz imagining his father traveling out, aus, escaping from the Nazis in 1940 and yet, we suspect, ending up in a concentration camp a few years later. Second, the image also invites us to think of this railway station as one of many sites of deportation. The German words Zug and Bahn/Eisenbahn are semantically loaded for Sebald, as are the various references to trains and railways throughout Austerlitz. On the one hand, they signal voluntary travel and possible escape (as in the case of Austerlitz himself); on the other hand, they are inextricably linked to the transport of Jews to the concentration and extermination camps. Giving a visual anchorage to one of the novel’s most important leitmotifs, this last image is suggestively linked to the one from Theresienstadt just discussed. While the first one gives us an image of two humans with textual commentary about Austerlitz’s effort to identify the woman as his mother, the second gives us an image without any humans but with commentary about Austerlitz’s imagining his father leaning out of the window of a train leaving the station. The first juxtaposition of image and text
vor von einem Mitarbeiter des Dokumentationszentrums in der rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier eine Nachricht erhalten habe, derzügige Maximilian Aychenwald Ende 1942 in dem Lager Gurs interniert gewesen sei, und daß er, Austerlitz, diesen weit drunten im Süden, in den Vorbergen der Pyrenäen gelegenen Ort nun aufsuchen müsse. Sonderbarerweise, so sagte Austerlitz, habe er wenige Stunden nach unserer letzten Begegnung, als er, von der Bibliothèque Nationale herkommend, in der Gare d'Austerlitz umgestiegen

leads to the conclusion that the woman is not his mother, while the second emphasizes the gap between what is known and what is imagined. In different ways the combinations of visual image and verbal text underline the same larger point about the absence in Austerlitz’s knowledge—and in his life.

Concluding, I link my observations on these three textual pictures in *Austerlitz* to those made on the three photographs from *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Even though these images would appear to support Mieke Bal’s notion of making “discourse a partner, rather than dominant opponent, of visuality” (288), we must not forget that, as we have seen, the visual images’ narrative and thematic functions vary considerably. Broadly speaking, the relationship between visual image and verbal discourse is less obvious, and more indirect, if this discourse is fictional. And yet the map of Theresienstadt, the frozen filmic image of two of the camp’s inmates, and the photo of Gare d’Austerlitz serve to anchor the constructed story of the fictional character Austerlitz in historical reality. Aided by his fictional narrator, Sebald manages to make some contact with aspects of his past, the war, and the Holocaust that would otherwise have remained out of reach.

All the visual images discussed here, and not least the last one from *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, contribute significantly to the two texts’ multidimensionality of narrative and thematic purpose not only by altering the verbal meaning but, more importantly, by extending and enriching that meaning. Since the photograph of the bedroom of the narrator’s parents is placed in the narrative of Sebald’s familial history, and since that history is available to him essentially through associative, narrativized memory, the temporal and spatial variants of distance observable in the photo simultaneously reflect and intensify the narrator’s sense of being permanently removed from something or somebody he cannot possibly retrieve but still needs to go on searching for. The visual images in *Austerlitz*, and the passages of which they become integral parts, reveal narrative fiction’s unique capacity to make a strong, generalized statement about human action—ranging from mass murder on the one hand to the importance of not forgetting those murders on the other.

In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* as in *Austerlitz*, the visual images confirm and intensify the narratives’ ethical dimension. In the novel’s fictional discourse, the ethical facet is closely linked to, and developed through, Austerlitz as character narrator. Austerlitz keeps searching for his parents because he feels he has a moral obligation to do so and because he has an existential need to search for his own past. The novel’s ethical thrust is perhaps even stronger for the frame narrator, who feels compelled to listen to Austerlitz as a kind of moral duty of learning and also of witnessing by passing on Austerlitz’s story to the reader. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub put emphasis on the impor-
tant role of the listener in testimony (57–59)—in an important way, the frame narrator and via him the reader are placed into that role here. Thus the novel has two main narrators, since Sebald makes the entire narrative depend on a frame narrator who is German and who as a German born at the end of the war comes distressingly close to awful crimes he did not commit. While Austerlitz is drawn toward the victims of the Holocaust, the frame narrator seems unable to reassuringly distance himself from the perpetrators responsible for the crime. The photograph of the empty railway station—be it the Gare d’Austerlitz or an anonymous site of deportation or both—is a forceful visual reminder of the novel’s ethical dimension, effectively relayed to the reader via the frame narrator as Austerlitz’s narratee. In our example of non-fictional, autobiographical discourse the ethical dimension becomes particularly noticeable in the narrator’s associative linking, in the village in Corsica, of the “memorial tablets” of Holocaust victims and “the picture from my parents’ bedroom” (73). It is significant that, in common with most autobiographies or fragments of autobiography, this narration is in the first person. As a first-person narrator is involved in the plot, it becomes more difficult for him or her to remain at a comfortable distance from that plot. Although Sebald was born during the war, this narrative association suggests that in a distressing sense his father’s service in the Wehrmacht brings him, the first-person narrator Sebald, problematically close to wartime actions making possible, and including, the Holocaust. The reference to Stauffenberg, whose moral decision to attempt to assassinate Hitler cost him his life, further strengthens the passage’s ethical dimension. So does the painting in the photograph: Jesus, immobile and in a moment of doubt, is also facing an ethical dilemma at this difficult stage of the narrative of His Passion. Although this kind of affinity should not be exaggerated, it suggests, in combination with the other aspects we have noted, Sebald’s narrative method of linking together apparently disparate elements of space and time.

Notes

1. The title of the German original is preferable to the English one, On the Natural History of Destruction. However, quotations from this book as well as Austerlitz are from the English translations by Anthea Bell.

2. The helpful collections of essays on Sebald are Görner, The Anatomist of Melancholy; Long and Whitehead, W. G. Sebald; and Patt, Searching for Sebald. Two important monographs are McCulloh, Understanding W. G. Sebald; and Long, W. G. Sebald. In addition to the contributions to Patt’s volume, four essays dealing specifically with the issue of visual images and narrative in Sebald are Shaffer, “W. G. Sebald’s Photographic Narrative”;

3. I use the terms “visual image” and “textual picture” synonymously to indicate photographs and photocopied matter (e.g., an illustration or a map) presented in, and thus made a part of, a verbal text. Even though such images are generically and aesthetically very different from the images formed in, and by, verbal language, the interpretive activity prompted by the reading of Sebald can establish points of contact between the two main variants.

4. In *Topographies* J. Hillis Miller gives a detailed account of the complexity of the term; see especially 3–5. I make more comments on the spatial aspect of narrative fiction in my “Space, Time, Narrative.”

5. Two helpful books on narrative and memory are King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*; and Rossington and Whitehead, *Theories of Memory*.


7. Since the positioning of the photos is inaccurate in the English editions of *Luftrieg und Literatur* and *Austerlitz* compared to the original German ones, illustrations of pages with photographs or other images inserted into the body of the text are taken from the German editions. Quotations from the passages associated with the images, however, are from the English translations by Anthea Bell.

8. Although Anthea Bell’s translation is generally good, it needs to be pointed out that Sebald’s *niemand* (nobody) refers not just to people deported to “his death” but also “her death.” Large numbers of women were deported from locations across Europe, and their chance of surviving a camp like Auschwitz was even smaller than that of the men.

9. A specific and historical camp, Theresienstadt is at the same time representative of the concentration and extermination camps constructed and run by Nazi Germany. Of all the camps, Auschwitz has come to symbolically represent the Holocaust, and it is hardly coincidental that the first three and last three letters of the names Austerlitz and Auschwitz are identical. See my “Narrative, Genre, Memory,” 117.

10. While in *Camera Lucida* the concept of *studium* refers to the cultural, linguistic, and relatively conventional interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denotes the wounding, intensified, subjective, and personally touching detail that establishes a more direct relationship with the object or person within the photo. See Barthes, 26–27.

11. The film’s original title is *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (*Th. Führer Gives a City to the Jews*), written and directed by the Jewish actor Kurt Gerron. Forcing Gerron to make the film, the Nazi authorities promised him his life. Filming started on August 16, 1944, and was completed on September 11 of that year. After that, Gerron was deported to Auschwitz, and he was gassed in Birkenau on October 28, 1944. See The Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, [http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/toc.html](http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/toc.html). Surviving footage of the film, a portion of which can be seen on YouTube, is about twenty minutes long. The YouTube excerpt includes the filmic image of the man and woman presented on page 351 of the novel and discussed in this essay. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp_KaenGnDM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp_KaenGnDM).

12. Although the frame narrator lives in England, he tells the reader, “I returned to Germany at the end of 1975, intending to settle permanently in my native country, to which I felt I had become a stranger after nine years of absence” (45). The number “18.5.44” (415), which the frame narrator mentions on the novel’s last page, is Sebald’s birth date.
13. If, as Charles L. Griswold observes in *Forgiveness*, “forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured” (xvi), the conversations between the frame narrator and Austerlitz reveal, as I argue in a different essay (“Forgiveness, History, Narrative,”), elements of such reciprocity, which simultaneously highlight the need for forgiveness and demonstrate the problems or limitations of forgiveness. In the narrative dynamics of *Austerlitz* these elements are blended with, and thus in one sense qualified by, friendship, trust, and a melancholic sensation of the past’s pervasive present.

**Works Cited**


