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Austerlitz, W. G. Sebald's last book, is a profound meditation on history, memory, and loss. It also offers insights into the meaning of architecture in culture and society, past and present.

Architecture and memory in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Naomi Stead

Austerlitz was the German expatriate author W. G. Sebald's last book before his untimely death in 2001. Greeted with great critical acclaim, the novel is a profound meditation on history, memory, and loss. Sebald's larger attempt to represent and memorialise the lasting trauma of the Holocaust, in an oblique and understated rather than a literal way, led him to a new kind of literary expression described by Eric Homberger as 'part hybrid novel, part memoir and part travelogue'.[1] What is most interesting about *Austerlitz,* for the purposes of this article, is that it makes so much use of architecture. In this, it joins a tradition of literary works that treat architecture as a metaphor for human endeavour and artifice, social structures, and attempts to order and construct the world.[2] But, there is more to the buildings in *Austerlitz*. The book offers insights into the larger meaning – often, but not always, melancholy – of architecture in culture and society, past and present. This is elucidated at a personal level, in the way that surroundings and spatial atmospheres can affect the emotional life of an individual, and also at a collective level, in the way that buildings bear witness to, and last beyond, the trials and duration of a single human life.

'Amidst all Sebald's ambiguities, it is architecture in its massive and solid materiality, which acts as an anchor tying the fictional narrative to the material world.'

The ambiguity of Sebald's work has often been noted – his blurring of fact and fiction, his elusive use of uncaptioned photographs, and so on. But amidst all Sebald's ambiguities, it is architecture in its massive and solid materiality, which acts as an anchor tying the fictional narrative to the material world. Within the terms of literature, architecture here stands for the continuing, uneasy presence of history and the irreconcilable dislocation between past and present. Its empty spaces stand for the ineffable loneliness of characters tortured by memories only half-remembered. Architecture is a carrier of memory and site of mourning, but also a setting and device for fictional and quasi-fictional narrative.

An enormous critical literature has arisen around Sebald's writings, and within this several scholars have noted the central role of architecture, in *Austerlitz* in particular. However, the vast majority of these scholars come from a literary perspective, examining architecture as metaphor, allegory, and trope. Russell Kilbourn, for example, relates the buildings in *Austerlitz* to mnemonic techniques – the 'memory palaces' historically used to remember complex rhetorical speeches,[3] while Simon Ward reads Sebald's literary works as akin to architectural ruins.[4] Such critics have examined architecture as literary device, yet few have examined Sebald's *oeuvre* from the other direction: asking what it could reveal for architecture and architects, for architectural history and its criticism.

On one level, the presence of architecture in the novel is simple. The protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, is an architectural historian, and his professional work is central to the narrative. But the dream-like conversations in the book, composed of long monologues from Austerlitz retold by a self-effacing and unnamed narrator, take place in a series of carefully evoked real locations: a bar at Liverpool Street Station in London, the Le Havane café at number 70 on the Boulevard Auguste Blanqui in Paris, where they meet on three occasions, and various places in the city of Antwerp. While these places are not necessarily significant in themselves, and are often surprising in their ordinariness, I will return to the significance of locating the narrative in such specified locations. Furthermore, the stories that Austerlitz tells during these meetings are also about actual places, and in describing the Palace of Justice in Brussels, the military fortifications at Breendonk near Antwerp, the Nazi's 'showcase' concentration camp at Theresienstadt and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, he traces the allegorical significance of their architecture. But at another level, it is the less obvious ways in which architecture intrudes into the story, where it becomes both the site for and witness to past and imagined

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historical events, that are of more profound significance for the architectural discipline.

The essay that follows is structured around the specific buildings reflected upon in *Austerlitz*. After a summary of the book's plot and structure, it turns to one of the book's rare portrayals of a building (significantly, a house) as positive: as a remembered dreamspace. It then moves on to *Austerlitz's* more ominous accounts of buildings, and the metaphors they carry – architecture as premonition of disaster, as monument to barbarism, and as instrument of oppression. These are then gathered and considered together in light of *Austerlitz's* overriding aversion to architectural giganticism, linking this with the book's oblique approach to German history more broadly. The article closes with a speculation on how the book might contribute to an 'expanded field' of affective architectural history, as a result of this reading of architecture in *Austerlitz*.

The plot and structure of *Austerlitz*

To set out the plot and structure of *Austerlitz* first requires an explanation of the role of the narrator – a self-effacing figure present in each of Sebald's books, one who shares many characteristics with the author, but who reveals very little of himself, instead taking the role of bearing witness: faithfully recounting the stories 'told' to him by the book's characters. In *Austerlitz* this leads to a double structure, where the ostensible plot belongs to this shadowy 'narrator-witness-listener' (as Eric Santner puts it),[5] but this is built around the more substantive story told by Austerlitz, the book's protagonist.

The first story, of the narrator and Austerlitz meeting by chance, takes place over two periods twenty years apart. They first meet in a waiting room at Antwerp's central railway station in 1967. There follows a series of chance meetings in Belgium and all over Europe, each characterised by Austerlitz's digressive and wide-ranging speeches, very often about architecture and architectural history. They continue to meet periodically until 1975, but then there is a long pause, during which both the narrator and Austerlitz suffer from mental illness and melancholy. The two meet again by chance in December 1996 in London, by which time Austerlitz's childhood story and identity has been revealed and he is looking for someone to whom he can tell it, and for someone to take the role of faithful listener, just as the narrator had been to him some twenty years before. The book as a whole can thus be seen as a report on these conversations – both the early period, which is highly digressive and very much concerned with buildings, and the later narrative about Austerlitz's recovered past.

The story Austerlitz has discovered is that he is not British, but a Czech Jew who as a child of four had been placed by his mother on a *kindertransport*, leaving Prague to seek refuge from the Nazis at the beginning of the Second World War. On arrival he was adopted by a Welsh minister and his wife, who gave him a new name and brought him up in complete ignorance of his true identity. After completing school, he studies at Oxford to be an architectural historian, then continues into professional life, working in a London University – but is periodically stricken with unexplained sorrow and an ineffable sense of absence. This continues until his late middle age when, after suffering a breakdown, abandoning his life's work on the architecture of the bourgeois age, and taking to wandering the streets of London at night, he chances on the abandoned 'Ladies Waiting Room' at Liverpool Street station, the very place where he had arrived as a four year old, and the memories he has repressed and denied for almost his whole life come rushing back.

There follows a long period of mental collapse and crisis, as Austerlitz attempts to trace what happened to his mother and father. Discovering the truth about his childhood does not set him free, but rather burdens him further with belated sorrow and grief, and the book ends as he sets out as a broken man, on a last journey to trace his father's fate, bequeathing his photographs and papers to the narrator, who uses them to prepare the manuscript for the book, *Austerlitz*.

The overriding theme in *Austerlitz* is thus memory: individual and collective, forgotten and retrieved, the fragility of human memory in the face of the crushing forces of history. Sebald's intense focus on memory lost and returned invites associations with Marcel Proust, but while Proust's flood of memory was provoked by a taste, Austerlitz has his repressed memories set free by an architectural space. This is memory served by and held in buildings.

Architecture as dreamspace

For Sebald (and in contrast with Proust), the past is not a magical or pleasurable presence, but rather a crippling burden. As Richard Elder writes, Sebald's 'madeleine is poisoned. His works could collectively be titled 'Remembrance of Things by No Means Past'.[6] Sebald himself, in the final interview recorded before his death, described the question of memory as 'the moral backbone of literature'.[7] Yet, Sebald's evocations of memory, and architecture, are not always melancholy. This can be seen in a comparison of Austerlitz's account of two different houses recalled from his childhood. The manse where he was raised by his adoptive parents, for example, is described as both literally and metaphorically freezing – an 'unhappy house' equally static, silent, and loveless, and populated with individuals blighted with the same qualities. The rooms, '[f]urnished sparsely with a bed or a chest of drawers, curtains drawn even during the day [...] drowsed in a twilight that soon extinguished every sense of self-awareness in me'.[8] (p. 61)

The account of this profoundly unhomely house stands in contrast with that of Andromeda Lodge – the childhood home of Austerlitz's school friend Gerard. Here the luminous and lengthy descriptions of the seaside gardens and views, wildlife and pets, and household furnishings and collections are as warm and eclectic as the accounts of the human inhabitants and events taking place there. As a

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holiday refuge from boarding school, in this place, 'I could wish now, said Austerlitz, to have vanished without trace in the peace which always reigned there.'(p. 111) Later, he describes how he, 'often felt as if I were dreaming during those weeks and months I spent at the Fitzpatrick's house', (p. 134) and the dreamlike intensity of the description is clearly also associated with an emotional connection with the mother of the house, Adela.[119]

It is in the account of these two houses early in the book that *Austerlitz's* use of architecture powerfully emerges. Buildings are depicted as dreamspace, ambiguous and allusive settings for narrative that evoke both individual and collective memory. But most often the accounts are more sanguine. In interview, Sebald explained that:

> *Places seem to me to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them* [...] *It's an old notion – this isn't a good house because bad things have happened in it. Where I grew up, in a remote village at the back of a valley, the old still thought the dead needed attending to – a notion so universal it's enscribed in all religions. If you didn't, they might exact revenge upon the living. Such notions were not alien to me as a child.*[10]

In this way, buildings themselves become the unquiet ghosts that Sebald describes, just as it is the role of buildings to also 'attend' to the human dead. But the buildings described in *Austerlitz* are rarely domestic. Typically they are public places, and thus expressions of collective memory more than of personal memory.

Architecture as premonition of disaster

Buildings can also be seen as premonitions of disaster, of mortality, and of catastrophe. As Austerlitz claims, 'the whole history of the architecture and civilisation of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadow before them at the time'. (p. 197) This is particularly so in buildings designed to protect and defend, namely military fortifications, on which Austerlitz makes a long disquisition early in the book, arguing that 'the frequent result [...] of resorting to measures of fortification marked in general by a tendency towards paranoid elaboration was that you drew attention to your weakest point, practically inviting the enemy to attack it'. (pp. 19–20)

History has shown that, despite extraordinary elaboration in design, fortifications do not only fail to protect the people who build them, but also draw the very destruction that they seem to resist: as Santner puts it, 'such structures inevitably *solicit* the force of violence upon them'.[11] Austerlitz uses the example of Breendonk, part of the outer ring of defences around Antwerp, described in the book as 'a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence', (p. 26) to demonstrate that such fortifications are destined to fail, to be overrun again and again, then inevitably used by the invaders as a prison and execution place – its stronghold quality turned directly back against its makers. As Austerlitz says, 'the largest fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy forces'. (p. 19)

There is a clear sense of uncanny reversal here, where the seemingly most safe and secure constructions turn into the most nightmarish places of oppression; as Austerlitz says, 'It is often our mightiest projects which betray the degree of our insecurity.'(pp. 16–17) This same reversal is also identified in another gigantic building, also described as an 'architectural monstrosity', and discussed at length – the Palais de Justice in Brussels.

Architecture as barbarism

The narrator and Austerlitz have their third meeting, quite by chance, on the steps of this edifice at the top of 'gallows hill' in Brussels, whereupon Austerlitz launches into a condemnation of 'this huge pile of over seven hundred thousand cubic metres', an illogical, poorly planned building that 'contains corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority.'(p.39) Again the fine symbolism of justice and civic life is transformed into its obverse – a blind labyrinth signifying only state power and its inscrutable bureaucratic processes, an oppressive 'mountain range of stone.'(p. 39) In this case, as for Breendonk, Austerlitz identifies that the rational procedures of Enlightenment thought hold within them the very seed of inhuman domination.

> Austerlitz states this idea quite directly, describing, *[T]he way in which, during the nineteenth century, the vision of model towns for workers entertained by philanthropic entrepreneurs had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks – just as our best-laid plans, said Austerlitz* [...] *always turn into the exact opposite when they are put into practice.* (pp. 37–8)

This implicit critique of the utopian aspirations of architectural reform is a reminder to architects that the obverse of awe is fear, the obverse of grandeur is oppression, and that utopian schemes, when put into practice, almost always decay into dystopian nightmares.

There is perhaps also another admonition of architects here, in the demonstration of the sometimes Sisyphean nature of their schemes, that architectural logics can follow rationalism beyond sense, can be extended maniacally and excessively beyond the point where they actually work, at which point architectural projects become inhuman ends in themselves. It is in this sense that Austerlitz sets out, in the early part of the book, a theory concerning what he calls:

> *[T]he architectural style of the capitalist era* [...]

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> *speaking in particular of the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in lawcourts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labour force.* (p. 44)

The great monumental buildings that are generally seen and intended as symbols of the collective, of civilisation and enlightenment, can in this conception be equally seen as documents of barbarism, and this is the 'family resemblance' (p. 44) that Austerlitz observes between all these building types. But Austerlitz is sanguine on this point, as much as critical, and his conception the folly of architects could equally be a matter of simple human frailty and error:

> *It is amazing,* [*says*] *Austerlitz, to see the persistence with which generations of masters of the art of military architecture, for all their undoubtedly outstanding gifts, clung to what we see today was a fundamentally wrong-headed idea.* (p. 17)

The history of architecture is presented as evidence that humans are very bad at learning from their mistakes.

Architecture as oppression

Towards the end of *Austerlitz* comes one of the most curious passages concerning architecture. It is most unusual in literary fiction in that it comes close to direct architectural critique. It also summarises a consistent motif through the text – the aversion to gigantic and dominating monumental buildings. The passage is a detailed description and condemnation of Domique Perrault's design for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France on the banks of the Seine in Paris, announced in 1988 as a Grand Projet by then-president Francois Mitterand and opened in 1995. This enormous modern building expanded the capacity of Henri Labrouste's much-loved late nineteenth-century library on the Rue de Richelieu. Although Austerlitz has previously undertaken architectural research in the Richelieu library and describes it warmly, this is not enough to explain the almost violent aversion with which he condemns the new building, in a long passage worth quoting at length:

> *Once you have climbed the steps, at least four dozen in number and as closely set as they are steep, a venture not entirely without its dangers even for younger visitors, said Austerlitz, you are standing on an esplanade which positively overwhelms the eye, built of the same grooved wood as the steps, and extending over an area about the size of nine football pitches between the four corner towers of the library which thrust their way twenty-two floors up into the air. You might think, especially on days when the wind drives rain over this totally exposed platform, as it quite often does, said Austerlitz, that by some mistake you had found your way onto the deck of the Berengaria or one of the other oceangoing giants, and you would not in the least be surprised if, to the sound of a wailing foghorn, the horizon of the city of Paris suddenly began rising and falling against the gauge of the towers as the great steamer pounded onward through mountainous waves, or if one of the tiny figures, having unwisely ventured onto the deck, were swept over the rail by a gust of wind and carried far out into the wastes of the Atlantic waters. The four glazed towers* [...] *make a positively Babylonian impression on anyone who looks up at their facades and wonders about the still largely empty space behind their closed blinds. When I first stood on the promenade deck of the new Bibliothèque Nationale, said Austerlitz, it took me a little while to find the place where the visitor is carried down on a conveyor belt to what appears to be a basement storey but, in reality, is the ground floor. This downwards journey, when you have just laboriously ascended to the plateau, struck me as an utter absurdity, something that must have been devised – I can think of no other explanation, said Austerlitz – on purpose to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers, especially as it ends in front of a sliding door of makeshift appearance which had a chain across it on the day of my first visit, and where you have to let yourself be searched by semi-uniformed security men.* (pp. 267–8)

'This apparent bureaucratisation and rationalisation of even the library *– that most sacred symbol of intellectual freedom, knowledge and enlightenment, … – is the ultimate evidence that architecture contains within itself the seeds of oppression and imprisonment.'*

The passage continues, criticising the organisation, architectural expression, and dysfunctionality of the building as a library, and culminating with an account of the death of those birds that crash into the glass walls of the reading room, tricked by the reflection of trees. Here we see the apotheosis of everything that Austerlitz finds desperately dehumanising about large buildings, both modern and historic. He makes reference to the capricious absurdity, in the library, where one must climb laboriously and dangerously upward, only to be conveyed down on a 'conveyor belt', that piece of industrial equipment so sinister when it transports human beings. The constant references to overwhelming scale, which were no doubt intended by the architect to signify grandeur and inspire awe, are taken by Austerlitz as registers of all that is oppressive and authoritarian. This apparent bureaucratisation and rationalisation of even the *library* – that most sacred symbol of intellectual freedom, knowledge and enlightenment, archive for the preservation of memory – such that even the library becomes an instrument of state domination and control, the 'humiliation' and processing of the 'poor readers', is the ultimate evidence that architecture contains within itself the seeds of oppression and imprisonment.

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Architecture and 'Giganticism': Oblique approaches to German history

There is, as James Cowan notes, a 'broad polemic against architectural giganticism that runs throughout the book',[12] and it is explicitly stated by Austerlitz early in the text:

> *Someone* [...] *ought to draw up a catalogue of types of building, listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of* less *than normal size – the little cottage in the fields, the hermitage, the lock-keeper's lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children's bothy in the garden – are those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right mind could truthfully say that he liked a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice* [...] *At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which is in itself a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.* (pp. 23–4)

In this last line is a clear echo of the Nazi architect Albert Speer's 'theory of ruin value', which dictated that Nazi state architecture be constructed using materials and techniques that would ensure it decayed into 'classical' ruins.[13]

In light of Speer's association with the Nazi programme of giganticised monumental architecture as an explicit form of propaganda, Sebald's advocacy of the miniature and the humble, the architectural value of 'modesty and primitiveness', takes on a particular critical flavour. As Peter Blundell Jones has written, 'Hitler and Speer were fascinated by monumental architecture – the architecture of death – because such architecture stresses the totality, the whole party, the whole people'.[14] This subsumption of the individual into the mass is precisely counter to Sebald's empathetic, individual stories of lost individuals caught up and crushed by the forces of history. But this also reveals the specifically architectural problem of how to refigure and retrieve architectural monumentality after the Second World War, and especially after the abuses it suffered in what Siegfried Giedion described as the 'pseudomonumentality' of National Socialism.[15] And it is here that we can observe a crucial intersection: between the politics of memory in architecture, literature, and German history more broadly.

Sebald himself took a critical stance on the perceived inability of German postwar writers, and society more broadly, to take adequate account of the events of the Second World War. In this sense his work must be taken in the context of the second and third-generation response, concerned less with the primary events and experiences of the war than their after-effects and repercussions later – in private and collective memory.[16] His narratives are already one step removed from the events at their core, and his work has thus been described as a work of post-memory. But in *Austerlitz* in particular, it is frequently through architecture that the book steps away from a direct approach to its ostensible subject, and instead approaches it tangentially, or contextually.

In the final interview recorded before his death, in discussing this oblique approach particularly to the Holocaust, Sebald said:

> *I knew that writing about the subject, particularly for people of German origin, is fraught with dangers and difficulties. Tactless lapses, moral and aesthetic, can easily be committed. It was also clear you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So you would have to approach it from an angle, and by intimating to the reader that these subjects are constant company; their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes. If one can make that credible, then one can begin to defend writing about these subjects at all.*[17]

This also provides one explanation for the digressiveness of Sebald's books – they wander over vast and far-flung terrains, with consistent departures into topics apparently quite peripheral to the narrative. *Austerlitz* in particular, as Laura Miller describes, is full of 'digressions on the architecture of train stations [...]; the history of fortifications [...]; the behaviour of homing pigeons; the sad lives of moths; Austerlitz's contempt for watches and clocks and his love of photography'.[18] In the early part of the book in particular, we can see that the discussion of buildings provides Austerlitz with a distraction – a means to avoid the gaping absences in his own memories and identity.

This oblique and decentralised approach to representing the Holocaust and its after-effects can perhaps also be seen in the book's emphasis on contingency – the role of apparent coincidence, for instance in the improbably frequent chance meetings of the narrator and Austerlitz all over Europe, an improbability that calls into question the 'realism' of the literary conceit. Likewise, Sebald's emphasis on the circumstantial, and on the material situations in which events take place, is another way of looking just to one side of that which can not be looked upon directly. Much of the text of *Austerlitz* is concerned with describing places and objects, the settings and things that surrounded and contained historic occurrences, while only alluding to those actual occurrences in the most glancing way.[19] This gives architecture a particular prominence. As the spaces and settings where human lives unfold, buildings emerge as not impervious containers, but rather as permeable. They both absorb and exude the events that have taken place within them. That historic events and human emotions should appear latent in the very walls around us brings a powerful sense of atmosphere to Sebald's descriptions of places, and the reveries within them.

Austerlitz and the expanded field of architectural history

Throughout his career, and the early part of the book, Austerlitz uses the obsessive pursuit of knowledge about historic buildings to avoid his own past and to distract himself from shadowy, half-

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remembered truths. Yet one of the book's most powerful lessons for historians, as for others, is that the past is never past. History lives on in the present in profound ways, and it lives on in buildings.

In his practice as an architectural historian, Austerlitz reminds us that the *reception* of buildings, their social life in use, over time, as the stage for human drama and human tragedy, is often of far greater interest than the accounts of architectural *production* that dominate the architectural discipline. In this sense, *Austerlitz* can be taken as a sustained argument that architectural history as the study of styles and motifs (as indeed it is practiced by the character Austerlitz) is too narrow. A truer history of architecture would encompass everyday people, their stories and imaginings in and of buildings, and the ever-present ghosts of history. This would be architectural history as a branch of the history of ideas, of politics and sociology and economics, of myth and heraldry, of fiction. The character Austerlitz says as much quite explicitly, early in the book, when he reveals (presciently, it turns out) that he is 'obsessed' with railway stations, not only because of their privileged place at the intersection of architecture and modernity, but because: 'In his studies of railway architecture, [...] he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places, although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper.'(p. 16) This idea of 'architectural history proper', as a dry and fact-based enumeration of details that are past and dead, is the converse of the rich and dense architectural history, peopled by fictions and living in the present, that Sebald advocates. This can perhaps be seen most powerfully in his unusual, even perverse, use of historic evidence as material for literary invention.

'One of the book's most powerful lessons ... is that the past is never past. History lives on in the present in profound ways and it lives on in buildings.'

The unique 'facticity' of Sebald's prose, its frequent description as 'documentary fiction', is one of its most remarked characteristics.[20] *Austerlitz* is generally acknowledged as Sebald's most 'fictional' novel-like work, but all his works contain detailed accounts of real places, events, and people delicately interwoven with fictional plots and motifs. This anchoring to the actual world is underscored by an unusual level of specificity. Sebald stipulates actual addresses, complete with street and number and the names of people currently living, even where the particular significance of these details is not clear. This apparent appeal to evidence, a 'realism' authenticated by fragments of the real, works in contrast to an otherworldliness that haunts Sebald's work. As Andreas Huyssen remarks, '[o]ne cannot read Austerlitz as a realistic novel, even though it produces the effect of the real more powerfully that many historic novels.'[21]

This 'effect of the real' is underlined by Sebald's famous use of un-captioned images throughout the text. Most often these are poor-quality, vaguely blurry black and white photographs, but there are also drawings, ephemera, and excerpts from documents including architectural plans. The relation of these images to the text is ambiguous. Unanchored by the normal 'conventions of captioning'[22] that would usually frame the image and explain how it is to be interpreted, these images float free. They sometimes appear to be snapshots taken by the narrator to substantiate events in the narrative, and sometimes 'found' or historic photographs, for instance those images Austerlitz eventually tracks down of his own lost mother and of himself as an unremembered small boy in Prague many years before. They are often of buildings, and even as their meaning and role in the text remains unclear, they pin the fictional narrative to the material evidence of history in the 'real' built environment. Architecture becomes the hinge between the actual and fictional worlds – the events described may or may not be 'real', but the buildings certainly are, and thus the fiction is anchored by a kind of architectural verisimilitude.

Sebald's use of images has been linked to a key theme in the theory of photography, where the medium has often been associated with trauma, loss, and death, and the individual image seen as a marker of mortality and premonition of disaster. Carolin Duttlinger writes that 'Susan Sontag claims that "all photographs are *memento mori*", and both Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes have been particularly drawn to photographs in which they believe they discern the anticipation of an impending misfortune, accident or catastrophe.'[23] Barthes in particular distinguished between the dry documentary or evidential character of photographs, what he called the *studium*, and the *punctum* – the strong emotional identification with a pictured subject, and the sense of personal loss at the sure knowledge of their mortality. 'The photograph is handsome as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. [...] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.'[24]

We might say that where architectural history is often thought of as the cool interrogation of evidence that is the *studium*, for Austerlitz this same history is also the *punctum* that pins the past painfully to the present, in ways that are deeply personal and affecting. This extends to an awareness of the ephemeral ways in which past events endure into present buildings. Reflecting on Liverpool Street station, which is built on the site of 'Bedlam', the historic hospital for the insane, Austerlitz, 'often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries has ever ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we passed through.'(pp. 129–30) For Austerlitz, history is always material, and architectural – told through the places and objects that witnessed it, and yet architectural history is

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'For Austerlitz, history is always material, and architectural … but architectural history is always only human, since buildings, and objects, have no memory and can never speak. Buildings, and photographs, provide a kind of material and visual residue that remains after history has passed.'

always only human, since buildings and objects have no memory and can never speak. Buildings and photographs provide a kind of material and visual residue that remains after history has passed.

Austerlitz's insights about architecture might be divided into four categories. First, the book makes powerful links between specific buildings and grand philosophical themes – that works of civilisation are equally an index of barbarity and manifestations of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Second, the book addresses the broader place of architecture in culture and society. Third, *Austerlitz* reveals the practice of architectural history in a new light, expanding the field of what is, or could be, included under the term, partly by re-reading architectural history as tragedy. But fourth and finally and beneath all of these more commonsensical readings of architecture in *Austerlitz,* is a more profound idea of architecture as the mute physical trace that remains after the people and events of history have passed.

This is an architecture conceived as haunted: by every incident and moment, good or bad, great or small, that occurred within its walls. This is architecture understood as container – but a container that is strangely porous, that absorbs and then breathes back the memory of what has occurred within it. In this conception, architecture works as a witness – a material, mute, inhuman observer of human events. This bearing of silent witness is revealed only later, when time has passed, and these same spaces are revealed as never empty but rather always full of shades and shadows. In this sense the role of architecture in *Austerlitz*, and in Sebald's work more broadly, must ultimately be related to the impossibility of directly representing, in literature or any other form, the horrors of the Second World War. As Martin Swales puts it, Sebald,

> *[G]ives us the circumstantial account of places, buildings, persons, all of them marked by the archaeology of human suffering. He gives us the circumstances: the sayable things that stand around the centre of pain, the material traces of the psychological condition of blight, deprivation, and hurt. He avoids confessional overtness because at the heart of that overtness would be the scream that would be neither aesthetically nor morally endurable.*[25]

This might be described as an affective understanding of architecture – of buildings acting within the register of human emotions, whether loved and hated, feared or exhalted, haunted by ghosts both friendly and malign. This is an understanding of architecture that stands outside the techno-rational framework of modernism, but yet avoids some of the nostalgia and essentialism that attend the dominant alternative, metaphysical or mytho-poetic strand of architectural thought. Sebald instead walks a middle path – writing about architecture in a way that foregrounds its real, solid materiality, its specific and contingent 'thingliness', its role in and witness to human lives, and thus both its fallenness and its inevitable descent into obsolescence, oblivion, and dust.

Notes

1. Eric Homberger, 'Obituary: WG Sebald', *The Guardian* (7 December 2001), available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/dec/17/guardianobituaries.books1> (accessed 18 September 2010).
2. To give just two examples, in *Life: A User's Manual,* a Parisian apartment building provides the setting and also the structure for an account of individual and social life at a particular moment, on 23 June 1975. Georges Perec, *Life, a User's Manual,* trans. by David Bellos (Boston: David R. Godine, 1987). Likewise, albeit in more dystopian mode, *High-Rise,* first published in 1975, sets out a microcosm of society set in a modernist high-rise apartment tower. J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).
3. Russell Kilbourn, 'Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz', in J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 140–54.
4. Simon Ward, 'Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W. G. Sebald', in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion,* pp. 58–71.
5. Eric. L Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 138.
6. Richard Eder, '"Austerlitz": Excavating a Life', *New York Times Review of Books* (28 October 2001), available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/books/review/28EDERLT.html> (accessed 27 September 2010).
7. Maya Jaggi, 'The last word' [edited transcript of an interview with W. G. Sebald], *The Guardian* (21 December 2001), available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation> (accessed 7 October 2010).
8. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London, Penguin Books, 2002 [2001]). Page numbers in the text from here on in are references to *Austerlitz*.
9. See in particular: the account of playing badminton in the ballroom in the evening, where 'I could have sworn that Adela often hovered in the air just above the parquet floor for much longer than the force of gravity allowed'. (p. 158)
10. Maya Jaggi, 'Recovered Memories', *The Guardian* (22 September 2001), available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/22/

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artsandhumanities.highereducation> (accessed 27 September 2010).

11. Santner, *On Creaturely Life,* p. 108.
12. James L. Cowan, 'W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz and the Great Library: History, Fiction, Memory: Part I', in *Monatshefte*, 102:1 (2010), p. 197.
13. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 96–9, 224–5. See also: Robert Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in the National Socialist Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) and Eric Michaud, 'National Socialist Architecture as an Acceleration of Time', *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (Winter 1993), pp. 220–33.
14. Peter Blundell Jones, 'Architecture and Political Legitimation', *The Architectural Review*, 200:1193 (July 1996), p. 68.
15. See: Siegfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 28, and also Siegfried Giedion, 'Nine Points on Monumentality', in Joan Ockman and Edward Eigen (eds.), *ArchitectureCulture 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), pp. 27–30.
16. Critical acclaim for Sebald's work was almost universal in the English-speaking world. In Germany, however, the reception was sometimes more muted. Thomas Steinfeld for instance, writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* accused Sebald of setting himself up as 'absolute sovereign in the dark chambers of [German] memory', the 'Grand Inquisitor' in a world where 'all roads lead to Theresienstadt'. Likewise, an interview in *Der Spiegel* published in 2001 posed the question, 'Does a German author have the moral right to use real Jewish biographies for his own aesthetic games?' See: Thomas Steinfeld, 'Die Wünschelrute in der Tasche eines Nibelungen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (20 March 2001), p. 4, as cited in Mark M. Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald', in *October*, 106 (Fall 2003), p. 104, and 'Ich fürchte das Melodramatische', *Der Spiegel* (12 March 2001), as cited in Mark M. Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald', in *October*, 106 (Fall 2003), pp. 102–21 (p. 104).
17. Jaggi, 'The last word'.
18. Laura Miller, 'Austerlitz', by W. G. Sebald (review), Salon.com, available online: <http://dir.salon.com/books/review/2001/12/06/sebald/index.html> (accessed 21 September 2010).
19. On the circumstantial, see: Martin Swales, 'Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy? On Reading W. G. Sebald', in Rüdiger Görner (ed.), *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W. G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium, 2005), p. 86.
20. Mark R. McCulloch, 'Introduction', in *Understanding W. G. Sebald,* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. xvii.
21. Andreas Huyssen, 'Grey Zones of Remembrance', in David E. Welbery and Judith Ryan (eds.), *A New History of German Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 972–3, as cited in Cowan, 'W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz and the Great Library', p. 54.
22. Elizabeth Chaplin, 'The Convention of Captioning: W. G. Sebald and the Release of the Captive Image', *Visual Studies*, 21:1 (2006), pp. 42–53.
23. Carolin Duttlinger, 'Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W.G Sebald's *Austerlitz*,' in J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W.G. Sebald: a Critical Companion* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2004), p.155.
24. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 96, as cited in Michael Mack, 'Between Elias Canetti and Jacques Derrida: Satire and the Role of Fortifications in the Work of W. G. Sebald', in Gerhard Fischer (ed.), *W. G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate Writings* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2009), p. 242, fn. 18.
25. Swales, 'Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy?', p. 86.

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