

PHOTOGRAPHY AND TRAUMA IN PHOTO-FICTION: LITERARY MONTAGE IN  
THE WRITINGS OF JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER, ALEKSANDAR HEMON AND  
W. G. SEBALD

By

Romi Mikulinsky

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements

for the degree of Ph.D

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Photography and Trauma in Photo-Fiction: Literary Montage in the Writings of Jonathan Safran Foer, Aleksandar Hemon and W. G. Sebald

Romi Mikulinsky

Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
University of Toronto  
2009

ABSTRACT

Located on the interstice between Media Studies and Literary Theory, my dissertation explores the emerging genre of photo-fiction -- literary works that incorporate photographic images into the manuscripts -- and its impact on the commemoration of traumatic historical events. I argue that the way we represent and remember historical traumas is dependent on the media in which images emanating from these events are produced and circulated; put differently, the context of these images shapes our engagement with them. By examining literary works that incorporate photographs into their printed text, I explore textual and visual representations of historical trauma (such as the two World Wars, the Balkan wars of the Nineties, and 9/11).

The authors whose works I analyze (Jonathan Safran Foer, Aleksandar Hemon, W.G. Sebald) grant photography a new status: the inserted images transcend traditional “authentication strategies” and draw attention to the convergence of realism and indexicality featured by these photographs. These authors’ employment of photographs from various media (television, internet, printed press, encyclopedias and archives) questions not only the technical qualities of each medium but the veracity and accuracy of evidence. Photography’s capacity to secure and store information is put radically into

question, not only because the new contexts of these images, but because of the manipulations and reconfigurations the movement between media has brought about.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the literary montage, I suggest that literature provides an apt arena to examine the reception to images. By literary montage I mean the opening up of a new dimension in which visual and verbal elements are juxtaposed, and the disjunctions and gaps between them encourage readers to become active participants in the creation of narrative. Photo-fiction's interplay between images and texts therefore not only sheds light on the mechanics of representation, but demand from its audience to reflect on the way we interpret and respond to historical traumas in a society saturated with images.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Appendices	vii
Introduction	8
Chapter I: Sebald's Literary Montages	25
Chapter II: Aleksandar Hemon's History at a Glance: Between Mediation and Witnessing	81
Chapter III: Jonathan Safran Foer: The Roles of Visuality and Legibility in Mourning and Recovery	142
Conclusion	189
Appendices	197
Works Consulted	205

## LIST OF APPENDICES

1) The Hospital window, <u>Sebald's The Rings of Saturn</u>	196
2) The Labyrinth, Sebald's <u>The Rings of Saturn</u>	197
3) Blyth River, Sebald's <u>The Rings of Saturn</u>	198
4) Blyth River, Sebald's <u>The Rings of Saturn</u>	199
5) The Nazi Pamphlet, Sebald's <u>The Rings of Saturn</u>	200
6) Richard Sorge, from Hemon's <u>The Question of Bruno</u>	201
7) Richard Sorge's Passport, from Hemon's <u>The Question of Bruno</u>	202
8) Foer's "Falling Man," from <u>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</u>	203



## **Introduction**

### **I. Trauma – the Missed Event, Representing the Unrepresentable**

“There is no reaching the disaster”  
(Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, 1)

How to represent the unrepresentable? How can we speak of that which refuses to lend itself to words, that which no image can contain? Disasters, or large-scale traumatic events, are the starting point of this project: events so horrid that they cannot be described or articulated in either words or images. The ruin and destruction that are the consequence of disasters are echoed in the very structure of the horrific event; in Freud’s thought, traumatic experience cannot be fitted easily into a life story, not because it is ‘unspeakable’ but because it remains unknown, a ‘gap’ within consciousness and memory that defies narrativization.<sup>1</sup> Following Freud, contemporary trauma studies theorists consider traumatic experience too overwhelming to be registered fully in consciousness as it occurs, and thus unavailable to conscious recall (Robson 11). Drawing mainly on Freudian-based trauma theory, I consider trauma in terms of the inscription on the human psyche of, and the emotional reaction to an event so devastating that it cannot be contained, or consigned to the past. The sense of ineffable loss, at times referred to as the missed encounter with the real,<sup>2</sup> therefore haunts not only artistic and literary representations but also affects legal and political discourses that run parallel to

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<sup>1</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub assert that massive traumas preclude their registration: “the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (57).

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss identifies a notion of trauma in the arts in her essay about surrealism: a notion tied to a sense of loss in the future - a predetermined missed encounter. In other words, the future is anticipated by the image: “the structure of trauma, then, is not just that it initiates a compulsion to repeat but that it institutes the gap of the trauma itself – the missed encounter – as the always-already occupied meaning of that opening onto a spatial beyond that we think of as the determining character of vision” (72).

what postmodernist thinkers consider the destabilization of “Truth.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, as I elaborate in my discussion of the crises in testimony in chapter 3, veracity (or Truth) is even further problematized when it comes to the representation of traumas.

These missed encounters are events that are relived endlessly in the present because they cannot be assimilated, narrativized, and therefore brought to a close. In order to work through traumatic historical events - be they collective or personal ones - they need to be put into words, or transformed into a narrative so that the traumatic event can be put into the past.<sup>4</sup> This contrasts with the growing tendency in trauma studies described by theorist Leigh Gilmore as “something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way” (qtd. in Robson 6). Whereas violent events, particularly on a massive scale, are indeed often said to be ‘unrepresentable,’ I examine in this study literary attempts to grapple with challenges posed by singular catastrophic historical contingencies and their after-effects. An important distinction has to be made, however, between the content and structure of trauma; I take the idea of trauma as a structural one, relating to the very logic of experience as such (the inscription on the psyche, the gap between memory and experience): trauma is therefore a response, a symptom or after-effect to an event that can only be articulated through its symptoms or after-effects. The excess of event over articulation is one aspect of the attempt to capture historical events deemed too horrid to be controlled or tamed.

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<sup>3</sup> In his writing about photography’s centrality in Walter Benjamin’s thought, Edurado Cadava asserts that “what is at stake here are the questions of artificial memory and of the modern forms of archivization, which today affect, with a speed and dimension that have no common measure with those of the past, every aspect of our relation to the world” (xviii).

<sup>4</sup> For a more elaborate discussion, see Kathryn Robson’s Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life.

The authors I discuss contest the literary arena's traditional boundaries in order to conceptualize trauma, its complexity and paradoxical nature, since language per se and conventional literary devices seem to be no longer sufficient. The often startling incorporation of photos in literary manuscripts resonates with Freud's theorization of trauma as a disruption of memory and narrative, a notion that is echoed by all three authors whose works I analyze here. These three -- Jonathan Safran Foer, Aleksandar Hemon and W. G. Sebald -- have chosen as the crux of their fiction events that exceed the limits of knowledge and understanding. Aware that telling the story risks diluting the horror of traumatic experience, all three authors find ways to articulate trauma's refusal to be assimilated into consciousness through their use of disjunctions between the visual and verbal descriptions. The friction between words and images becomes the means to point to the limits of the literary medium, enabling these writers to deal with the imperative to document what refuses coherent, orderly representation. Their writings can be considered as a vehicle to advance a stronger sensitivity to historical catastrophes through the re-engagement with images and narratives of loss, war, and catastrophe.

The profusion of literary texts that include photographs within them motivated me to label this group as an emerging genre, which I refer to as "photo-fiction."<sup>5</sup> The fact that more and more authors are incorporating photographs into their manuscripts to meet the challenges that disastrous events introduce to both memory and representation can be read as parallel to a shift in narrative form identified by literary critic Anne Whitehead. In Trauma Fiction (2004), Whitehead asserts that in order to represent adequately the impact

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<sup>5</sup> My term photo-fiction refers specifically to literary texts that include reproduced photographs. These texts immediately become intermedial and this interweaving of images and narrative demands special attention. The related term "photo text" was first introduced by Jefferson Hunter in 1987, in his discussion of collaborative works of photographers and writers in the 1930s US (such as Dorothea Lange, Laurence Stallings, Frederick Barber, Margaret Bourke-White, and Archibald MacLeish).

of trauma, many novelists attempt to mimic its forms and symptoms “so that temporality and chronology collapse and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (4). Likewise, beyond the paradox of using what many think of as a “documentary” medium to destabilize truth, the insertion of photos into literary texts interrupts the flow of reading and threatens the narrative’s coherence, immediately producing an unsettling effect. The reproduced photographs and the way they frame and are framed by the text announce the presence of principles such as shuffle, reorder and de-formation<sup>6</sup> that are crucial for the reading experience this genre aspires to generate. It seems that with the juxtaposition of the two media, photo-fiction texts immediately become more self-reflexive, disjointed and fragmented, thereby amplifying readers’ agency, turning them into active interpreters of both narratives and images.

Even though not all photo-fictions are exclusively dedicated to catastrophic events, this genre lends itself to the mechanism of representing experiences that go beyond comprehension, as my strategically chosen texts demonstrate. There are several factors that determine the unique word and image dynamic in this genre: the mutual framing of the inserted photos and the surrounding text; the interaction between visual and verbal themes, patterns, and narratives -- the way they elaborate or expand upon, or contrast with one another; and the presence or absence of captions. Photo-fiction readers are asked to decipher both visual and verbal images, and to give them new meanings in a new context by being alert precisely to their recontextualization and to the manipulations performed on them. The reproduction of images within the fictional setting exposes the

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<sup>6</sup> The terms shuffle, re-order and de-formation are introduced in Richard Lane’s chapter on literary montage (specifically on pp. 152-163), in which he compares Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades’ Project* with Louis Aragon’s *Paris’ Peasants* and focuses specifically on the material aspects of the books in the light of the principle of montage and collecting.

need for self-reflexivity about our media-saturated culture's reception of images and, by extension, our recollection of wars and violent events.

The three texts I analyze demand that their audience reposition themselves in front of what we have come to know, to see, as history. These photo-fiction works require a mode of reading that stresses the visibility and materiality of literature, citation, and appropriation; they unmask representation, laying bare its constructedness and insufficiency by taking images out of their familiar contexts and reclaiming them. I argue that this mode promotes and necessitates a double vision, a form of perception that involves a re-reading of visual evidence: by placing the photos within a fictional literary manuscript, by appropriating images of real events and blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictive, these authors counter the mass media's rapid, incessant flow of images. Instead they call for an opening up to and an awareness of the ethical claims these images conjure up, and for a recognition of the images' capacity to convey, or at least to hint at, "what escapes the very possibility of experience," as Maurice Blanchot writes of disaster (7). The reproduced photographs thereby announce these works of photo-fiction as paradoxically offering an experience that is a non-experience, an experience of seeing and reading that go beyond the visible, a writing at "the limit of writing" (7).

The three representative photo-fiction works I analyze -- Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005), Hemon's The Question of Bruno (2000) and Sebald's The Rings of Saturn (1995; 1998) -- offer a new way to reflect upon the nature of collective and individual traumas. Taking catastrophic events such as wars and terror attacks as their pivot points, these texts help to chart a genre of a personal literary account that

melds subjectivity with public histories and political agendas in a manner similar to its blending of factual and fictional discourses. The insertion of photographic images, previously circulating in mass media, into the more private domain of literature fundamentally alters the reception of the image. Whether as readers we recognize the previous, original context or stumble upon opaque, obscure photos, we are confronted with the pressing need to deal with the widening gap between history and memory, and the factual and fictional elements that constitute both verbal and visual testimonies.<sup>7</sup> It is crucial to note that the authors do not question the events they write about, but the very possibility of representing historical traumas they deem incommensurable.

Paradox, indeed what we could call paradoxicality, is key for understanding the texts I explore in my project; each text evolves from a historical trauma, although one not directly experienced by the author. Instead of attempting an organized effort at comprehensive and complete testimony of that which refuses thematization, all three authors emphasise the way blind spots structure knowledge and expose the tensions between il/legibility and in/visibility, and their shared impact on memory and representation. These authors acknowledge the breaches between experience and memory, between event and its articulation, and face the impossibility of accurately representing, remembering, or understanding the traumatic past by offering a heightened awareness of the visual character of the literary medium per se. By making issues of vision and visuality central to the story itself, photo-fiction creates a space where the two media merge into one another. Thus, the embedding of photographs in a literary context

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<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth points out that testimonies of trauma not only necessitate their own language but involve fictional, literary elements: “trauma must be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies even as it claims our understanding” (*Trauma*, 5).

enables readers to experience second-hand and thus re-evaluate the representation of violence and war.

W. G. Sebald's work is situated at the confluence of several discourses, contexts and debates. His incorporation of photographs in detailed verbal narratives openly questions the role of visual memory, and his juxtaposition of the two media reveals that the traumatic past keeps coming back, permeating both collective and personal historical consciousness. Following Michael Rothberg's assertion that post-Holocaust history has a traumatic structure for Adorno and Blanchot, being "repetitive, discontinuous and characterized by traumatic returns to the past and the troubling of simple chronology" (24), I recognize that this principle of traumatic repetition predominates Sebald's writing. The eerie photographs and the meditative narrative bring about temporal and topographical dislocation resulting from the merging of the two modes, which together create a haunted, haunting, strange reading experience. Sebald's The Rings of Saturn (1999) invites readers to walk in the footsteps of a melancholic narrator who seems to mourn the entire modernist project, being simultaneously critical of and fascinated by its artifacts (be they aesthetic or technological, literary or natural). The photos Sebald inserts into the verbal narrative serve more as illustrations of the inability to access or comprehend the past than promoting to the text's comprehension; rather, they testify to the impossibility of achieving any kind of objective, accurate, or reliable knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Sebald's unique photo-text dramatizes that "the past is retrievable only in fragment form,

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<sup>8</sup> Sebald deliberately exploits (i.e, both uses and undermines) the link between taxonomies and photography, whereas, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau states, "photography was understood to be the agent par excellence for listing, knowing and possessing, as it were, of the things of the world" (155); his insertion of photos repeatedly thwarts such a move.

and can be perceived (only) through a hallucinatory state of mind in which the mediated fragments of a ruined culture repeat themselves endlessly” (Ward 62).

Aleksandar Hemon’s short stories also refuse the conventional chronicling of historical events in their deliberate sabotaging of his narratives’ truth value and his narrator’s credibility. His contrived, beautiful prose illuminates the fact that everything is fabricated, that the knowledge that reaches us is by no means objective or free of error. For Hemon history must be estranged: to do so, he casts doubt on the creation, transmission, and archivization of knowledge, highlighting that both verbal and visual evidence are repeatedly mediated and distorted. Turning presuppositions into obstacles, he bases his own mimetic system on a de-centered perspective of traditional historical accounts, and exposes the susceptibility of visual evidence to manipulation, thereby undoing even conventional literary traditions such as ekphrasis. Hemon’s The Question of Bruno (2000) presents alternative versions of European history, focalized through marginal points of view. Within the growing trend towards ever-increasing media coverage of virtually all forms of violence, Hemon emphasizes how numb we have become to testimonies of war and suffering, and argues that the incessant media flow must be slowed down, even estranged. He therefore rethinks our reception of images through literary representation, and returns us to the site of trauma in order to provoke further consideration of the limits of representation and of the ethical situation of the witness-bystander.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close (2005) explores the nature of grief and the difficulty of human connection through the dual prism of the 9/11 events and the World War II firebombing of Dresden. The interweaving of these two



historical traumas stages the rupturing of experience in the face of disaster: Foer conveys notions of mourning and loss both structurally and thematically. ELIC (as I shall refer to the novel for the sake of brevity) discusses the aftermath of 9/11 by centering on images that were considered too disturbing to circulate freely in the mainstream media, and were available almost exclusively on the internet at the time the novel was published. I refer specifically to “the falling man” photographs, a series of digital images that Foer incorporates into his novel several times. Planting these images enables him to raise questions about the impact of their circulation and of digitalization itself on the images’ authority and veracity as evidence, in addition to interrogating more general questions about the role legibility and visibility play in collective and private mourning. Foer uses these photos to counter the post-9/11 hegemonic discourse that seems to preclude certain episodes existing in American national memory of the events’ commemoration.

## **II. The Literary Montage**

"Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show."  
(Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project 460)

Montage, according to the Grove Art Dictionary, is the overlapping or joining of various materials or images to “form a new single picture.” The term derives from the French word “monter,” which means “to mount.” The compositional principle at work in montage form is what Richard Lane describes as “the philosophical play of distances, transitions and intersections, with its perceptually shifting contexts and ironic juxtapositions” (158). The interplay between the superimposed fragments reveals that the isolation from their original surrounding and positioning within a new context create new

meanings: it is the friction between these fragments and the intermingling of old and new contexts that render montage an apt arena in which to examine the mechanics of representation. For my purposes, I wish to introduce the technical concept of literary montage as the governing principle on which I hinge my analysis of word-image dynamics in photo-fiction. By literary montage I mean the opening up of a new dimension in which visual and verbal elements are juxtaposed, and the disjunctions and gaps between them encourage readers to become active participants in the creation of narratives.

The multifaceted levels of meaning created by the interweaving of media in photo-fictions illustrate the fact that the quotation of both visual and verbal representations and their insertion into literary frameworks implies disrupting both the old and the new surroundings. Adopting Walter Benjamin's view that "quoting a text implies interrupting its context" (Selected IV, 305), I regard quotation as interruption, an act entailing a severing of content, or an object, from its author's intention, as it becomes separated from its original environment. This mode of employment of narratives and images leads to a radical "shaking up" of both levels of the text. Photo-fiction therefore grants photography a new status: the inserted images transcend traditional "authentication strategies" and call attention to the convergence of realism and indexicality featured by these photographs. The unique word-image dynamic each author contrives clarifies for readers that the way we represent and remember historical disasters is dependent on the media in which images emanating from these events are produced and circulated, and that the context of these images shapes our engagement with them. The literary framework accords with the contemporary concern with the role of ideology

(in both sustaining and occluding trauma); hence the issue of countering the mass media, its circulation of images and flattening out of tragedies parallel to the audience's growing disinterest in the news, becomes more and more central. The selected texts can therefore be read as constituting an alternative, if not some kind of resistance, to the hegemonic order. These three examples deepen our understanding of the changes photographs undergo once they are recontextualized: the juxtaposed media give rise to a hybrid textual genre which brings to mind avant-garde art's hailing of montage as a means to involve the audience in the production of meaning. Put differently, these books straddle the line between truth and fiction, and call for a heightened awareness of issues of legibility and visibility and their political import. I therefore argue that the three authors employ modernist strategies in a postmodern age.<sup>9</sup>

Citation, appropriation and recontextualization are fundamental for understanding montage technique, be it in film, in visual art, or in literature.<sup>10</sup> I draw a parallel between the three authors' employment of photographs and the Benjaminian notion of "citing without quotations marks," which he describes as an art "intimately related to that of montage" (*Arcades* 458); in the case of photo-fiction, similar to modernist montage practice, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate appropriation, citation, borrowing and stealing (especially since all three writers omit captions). The blurring of distinctions

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<sup>9</sup> That postmodernism is both a break and a continuity with the modern is now a given in criticism (see Huyssen 1986). My chosen literary examples were written in the 90s and early 2000s and can therefore be labeled as historically postmodern, whereas I acknowledge that my analysis of these texts' formal strategies relies heavily upon the modernist configuration of issues such as reflexivity, fragmentation, and especially montage. Modernism provides a useful perspective for understanding the method in which these authors critique mass media; however the concerns raised by the authors can be considered as reflecting contemporary ways of constituting an alternative to mass media (reflecting hegemony's attempts to normalize and pacify, suppressing or obviating the need to process historical traumatic events in person).

<sup>10</sup> My theorization of montage is informed by Walter Benjamin who thought this technique can be performed in various media. According to his "Author as Producer" essay, there are five possible methods of montage: theatrical, filmic, literary, photographic and painted.

between these categories is another indication of the resemblance between photo-fictions and the avant-garde montages from the 1920s and '30s. The reproduction of photos in the manuscripts creates a heightened awareness of the text's materiality that enables the works to maintain a high degree of textual openness. These texts introduce a kind of double or triple montage: image next to image, text next to text (sometimes hopping over an image) and text next to image. One can highlight contrasts, trace similarities, analogize, generalize across modes, and reconsider the relationship between reality and representation, and between fictional and factual discourses, as an extension of the photographs' reproduction and placing within literary manuscripts. The relationship of the text and the images can be interpreted in terms of control, ownership, and authorship, and can be thought of as undoing the conventional hierarchies of reality and representation, truth and fiction. Nevertheless, I argue that this is not a matter of subversion of image by text and vice-versa, since the authors' strategies of employment of photographs signals to readers not to expect illustration or the dependence of the images on the text (or vice versa).<sup>11</sup> It is rather the collision of images and words, the gaps and disjunctions that simultaneously emphasize and embody the sense of rupture of meaning.

The embedding of visual fragments and their collision with text is reminiscent of Dadaist photomontages which according to Walter Benjamin sought to "test art for its authenticity" (229) by merging "authentic" fragments of life into the work of art. In his writing method (especially of The Arcades Project and "One-Way Street"), Benjamin tried to emulate the impact of montage, seeking not only to reflect and re-present reality

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<sup>11</sup> In photo-fictions it is no longer possible to consider photos merely as illustrations of the texts; instead their indexicality counters some of the texts' fictional features, and so they gain an (almost) autonomous status within the work.

but to reorganize it in writing by privileging disunity and de-formation, choosing the use of aphorisms, quotations and fragments as his representational mode. In Convolute N of The Arcades Project, Benjamin draws, as we have seen, a parallel between the “art of citation” and the literary montage, hailing it as means to “showing” instead of telling or describing. What Benjamin refers to as literary montage is therefore a technique capable of resisting progress, as well as the linearity that typifies not only ordered narratives, but the way history has been written and thought of. As I understand it, the concept of montage for Benjamin goes beyond its labeling as a technique or a metaphor. It can be interpreted as an ideological stance – one that entails both ruin and rebuilding, a recharging with meaning performed through the fragments’ estrangement and recontextualization.

Benjamin relies on the capacity of the montage’s components to offer meaning explicitly and self-reflexively, once placed in a constellation with other fragments. Drawing on his methodology in The Arcades Project, where montage becomes the means to show rather than describe this project’s components, I shall argue that the self-reflexive nature of photo-fiction is intensified by the transformation of media. Moreover, the space that opens up between these registers calls for a more conscious reading mode, as well as for author-audience interaction: the authors propose new ways to understand historical events through the amalgamation of fiction and documentary forms. Simultaneously exploiting and undoing the photos’ documentary status, these authors prompt readers to undertake a more active, creative engagement with the political (as well as aesthetic) sphere.

Photo-fiction is therefore comparable to the modernist conceptualization of montage in its appropriation of “fragments of reality” and the provocative use and abuse of their documentary status to disclose cultural meanings. Significantly, montage is perceived by Benjamin as an aesthetic transfiguration of vision that enables the work of art to emancipate itself from ties to the governing ideology by exposing and severing these links’ pre-determined meanings. Appropriated and recontextualized, the fragments are displaced: the work renders visible the means of production and readers must make sense of what is laid before their eyes, now fresh and severed from its original meaning. The literary montage can also be understood in the light of the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton's understanding of how trauma requires that repetition be disengaged; he writes "the insight begins with the shattering of prior forms. Because forms have to be shattered for there to be new insight. In that sense, it is a shattering of form but it is also a new dimension of experience" (7). These three photo-fictions employ traumatic symptoms such as repetition, fragmentation, and shattering to bring to a new understanding of our reception of images; all three works suggest the imperative to invent new formal languages for recovering fractured memories and for carving a path for commemoration and mourning separate from the one dictated by mass media.

Foer, Hemon and Sebald outline the transitions that images have gone through during the twentieth century: they map out progress by calling attention to technological change and explore the transformation from still images to video, from analogue to digital, thanks to the reproduction of photos – from moving images to still -- sometimes (but not always) accompanied by a translation of the visual into verbal descriptions (as in the case of ekphrasis). All these changes expose how images are altered and distorted as

they move between media. The mutual framing of both media signals the possibility of an alternative to traditional forms of historiography and conservation by offering a more intimate and critical way to reflect on and commemorate the past. The books become memorials in themselves by incorporating the historical materials, materials whose archivization -- and subsequent falsification or mummification -- they critique. (See Hemon's playful and subversive ekphrasis of the Yalta conference photo of the world leaders, which I discuss in chapter 3). The traits of photo-fiction -- the hermeneutic transition from medium to medium, the fictional setting, as well as the textual openness -- enable the montage's components to take new shapes and meanings. I explore the ways in which these three writers have appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured, and interrogated the past. For these authors literature becomes the principal vehicle to reflect and represent historical events whose accurate representation has been deemed impossible: the refusal to stabilize them and the estrangement of these materials enables the three case-studies to challenge us to go beyond the postmodern assumption that every representation of the past entails its reconstruction, and therefore its inevitable fictionalization.

The literary montage provides and enforces a kind of slow-motion reading that allows itself to unfold gradually, as readers pick up clues and make connections between themes, motifs and visual and verbal narrative threads. By interrupting the flow of the reading and calling attention to the materiality of the text and the viscosity of the reading, the imposed slowing down of the images' reception counters the rapid succession of images circulating in the mass media. In the intermediary zone that the literary montage opens up, where words and images are virtually superimposed on top of each other, the inserted images become "slow images" (Anderson 131), once planted in the fictional

framework of literature. These "slow images" delay and problematize audience response, and should lead to a reflection on, an abstraction or critical examination of the past and the ideological character of its representation (131-2).<sup>12</sup> This passage from the public sphere to the more intimate literary arena is also parallel to the movement from the political to the ethical: the slowing down of the flow, the isolation of images from their original context facilitates a renewed understanding of the images' reception, a new consciousness and opening up to these images, as well as a heightened sensitivity to their moral aspects. The structure of photo-fictions echoes that of trauma, once fragmentation and partiality are reconfigured visually, illustrating that the after-effects of trauma can enable access to it, and subsequently a renewed understanding can emerge and with it responsibility that emerges from proper mourning (once the trauma is processed). One concrete example of this slowing down is performed in Foer's novel where images from a video sequence are reproduced several times and scattered at various strategic points throughout the novel. Once separated from its position in the sequence, the digital image acquires additional meanings, motivating readers to disentangle the image from the familiar background, or even the iconic status it may have acquired.

Photo-fictions take images as a form of writing, just as their literary text aspires to a condition of visibility. We can see that the extended awareness of typography (Foer), and of the narrative structure, as well as the sophisticated employment of themes and motifs (that, for one, complicates labeling Sebald's and Hemon's texts according to

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<sup>12</sup> Photo-fictions not only asks readers to become more attentive in their reception of the inserted images: Marc Anderson suggests that Sebald's oeuvre is inspired by documentary literature that aspires to contrast Pop art's use of "fast" images in order to produce immediate, powerful, clashing impressions, seeking immediate ideological effects and making use of a readily identifiable political message (131). Another influence that Anderson traces is a modernist-inspired form of documentary literature that goes back to the Weimer experiments of Brecht and Döblin, among others.



existing generic paradigms) bestow upon these works a kind of modular, flexible quality. The simultaneous evocation of multiple narrative threads, the weaving together of visual and verbal elements, and the interplay between these two spheres challenge readers to question given concepts of the impossibility of representing or recuperating historical traumatic events. These three photo-fiction works ask us to reconsider processes of witnessing and the inevitability of mediation. The space that literary montage unfolds exposes the degree to which visual images come to replace (and displace) events, underscoring the extent to which, over time, secondary witnessing<sup>13</sup> has come to replace first-hand experience.

These three authors manage to avoid the impasse of attempting to represent disastrous events, insisting that collective trauma can be experienced only through their aftereffects, only by means of traumatic repetition, a circling around the missed events, but they nevertheless insist on recharging the visual evidence. Being aware of possible accusations of denying the existence of the events, they emphasize instead the inability to know, to ascertain, to return to the site of trauma, and offer their writings as vehicle for a critical reflection on history. Through literature, through the crises of testimony, the denigration of photography as evidence, and the collapse of “Truth,” Foer, Hemon and Sebald provide a means to commemorate incontestable historical reality, facilitating a work of mourning that is both private and public, both intimate and collective.

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<sup>13</sup> See Dora Apel’s Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing (2002).

## **Chapter I : Sebald's Literary Montages**

### **I. Deconstructing the Mimetic System: The Real, the Represented, the Ruined, the Remembered**

"The greater the distance, the clearer the view" (The Rings of Saturn 19).

The Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage, Sebald's third prose-fiction work, announces its preoccupation with travel already in its first line: "In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the country of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes over me whenever I have completed a long stint of work" (3). Given the text's title and this opening, it quickly becomes evident that Sebald does not limit himself to geographical travel, since his movement spreads over both space and time, and that his journey is directed both inwards and outwards. Stretching between England and Saturn, earth and outer space, the title marks the trajectory of this walking trip as a paradoxical, impossible one: it is an "English pilgrimage," taken by a German traveler who walks around the coastline of East Anglia; yet it is named after Saturn -- the second largest planet in the solar system.

Sebald's literary pursuit, as we shall see, is a pursuit of the past, one that is more about loss than discovery: as he walks in the trail of his subjects, he witnesses decay and encounters the path of destruction -- which seems to be synonymous with history.<sup>14</sup> For

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<sup>14</sup> For Sebald history, and by extension historiography, the writing of history, means the chronicling of wars, human-made and natural disasters, as well as other acts of violence; destruction therefore is immanent in history, but history is also constituted around destruction. This leads to his considering historiography as inherently suspect -- being based on and representative of the version of those who have

ruin lurks on every page, tainting the narrator's findings of both past and present times. The narrator's movement across space and time radically alters and destabilizes both and is accompanied by his fixation on excavating the mournful past(s). The omnipresence of desolation, which signifies the violence of the past, lends The Rings its elegiac tone: the narrator's alienation and despair, his repeated and failed attempts to represent the lost worlds upon which he continuously stumbles, come to the fore in his interweaving of personal and literary testimonies. The incomplete, self-erased nature of the incorporated mimetic depictions (be they textual or visual) create a heightened awareness of the surfacing of the uncanny; "the ghosts of repetition" (187) and the unease they instill in both readers and narrator<sup>15</sup> are articulated through the constant spatio-temporal displacements brought about by the numerous markers of erosion that point to humankind as an agent of destruction.

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conquered, thereby ensuring their story's survival. This approach evidently resonates with Walter Benjamin's notion of history, according to which every one of civilization's documents, every remnant of the past is "at the same time a document of barbarism, and just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" (Benjamin, "Theses" 258). Sebald's prose works seem to address the impossibility of filling the lacunae which replaces the suppressed tales of the losers: for Benjamin, as well as for Sebald, what is significant is that we cannot know what happened. Heavily relying on Benjamin's approach, Sebald's writing constantly points out those gaps that usually go unchallenged, and does so by highlighting the presence of the past in the present that often goes unnoticed.

<sup>15</sup> A prevalent quality in all of Sebald's writing is the fusion of the narrator and the authorial personas. The Rings further complicates this intricate situation by stressing the similarities the narrator/author shares with the translator Michael Hamburger. The multiple coincidences and parallels border on the uncanny and expose the narrator's attraction to the esoteric, to what goes beyond rationality: "no matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind occur far more often than we suspect, since we all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency" (187). The speaker's attraction to this kind of mysticism is also articulated in the physical reaction caused by this feeling of ghosting, "which sometimes lasts for several minutes and can be quite disconcerting, and is that of the peculiar numbness brought on by a heavy loss of blood, often resulting in a temporary inability to think, to speak or to move one's limbs, as though without being aware of it, one had suffered a stroke" (187). Whereas in The Rings there are several references to these spatio-temporal displacements and to the physical sensations that accompany them, these bizarre coincidences principally dominate Sebald's first prose-text, Vertigo, where the narrator's paranoia peaks in parallel to the accumulation of arbitrary, yet persistent chance happenings.

Mirroring humankind's destructive path, Sebald puts into question the mimetic accuracy of the textual and visual elements he incorporates into The Rings, for him, everything is already partial, damaged or lost, and the inserted murky photographs articulate this desolate state. Repeatedly placing obstacles before his readers, Sebald disrupts the flow of coherent reading with his abstruse, poorly reproduced photographs that confuse readers more than they illustrate the text. The incorporated photographs demonstrate that Sebald is concerned with questions of vision "in the mundane sense of optical perception as well as in the metaphorical sense of modes of discernment such as imagination, insight, and other special forms of awareness," as Judith Ryan puts it (227). His fascination with photography becomes the means to explore the relation between text and image, but also between distance and proximity, movement and immobility, and density and emptiness. These three tensions predominate in The Rings and are central to my analysis of Sebald's employment of photographs. The photos' dead-pan quality and the absence of captions radically destabilize the images and therefore force readers to figure out for themselves the relevance of the incorporated photos to the narrative. Further, I argue that the way photographs lend themselves, structurally and symbolically, to mourning heightens the text's elegiac quality by drawing attention to the process of reading. For me, Sebald's preoccupation with history as trauma marks the representation or comprehension of the horrors of the past as (an unavoidable) failure. The Rings is therefore a postmodern work that aspires to provide a way out of the modernist impasse, with its heightened awareness of the rupture between art and reality and the breakdown of representation. The experience of reading Sebald's Rings, the historical consciousness that he endeavors to bring to his readers, calls for a more attentive, more ethical

engagement with history through the archived materials that often reach us in the form of ruins, partial and damaged, and that are suspected of reflecting the governing ideology. Instead Sebald offers an alternative in his striving to constitute a more meaningful understanding of the past.

It is said that Sebald leads his readers astray with his technique of embedding photographs within the text; as Delia Falconer puts it, he “allows these fragments to surface in his flat prose, only to relinquish them without analysis, or to dismiss them with a gnomic and melancholy comment of his own” (1). My reading of Sebald’s technique concerns the meditative quality of the prose, the melancholic, eerie photos and the pessimistic outlook of the narrator as, together, determining the mood of the text; my central premise is that these modes dictate the atmosphere of this prose narrative and govern the simultaneous employment and disavowal of written and visual fragments insofar as they foreground visuality’s prominence in both the reading and remembering processes.<sup>16</sup> I call this dynamic between images and texts (and the spacing and gaps between them) “literary montage.” It is here that the agency of readers is augmented, and the text becomes an invitation to juxtapose and impose order upon the incorporated fragments; now readers bestow significance upon the inserted elements by creating chains of meaning. Hence, Sebald’s appropriation and de-contextualization of visual

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<sup>16</sup> Sebald conveys to his readers the dependence of historical collective consciousness on visual evidence by calling attention to the centrality of visuality in the process of reading and in the mnemonic faculty. By highlighting the unreliability of visual documents – taken as evidence – and stressing their inability to represent reality accurately, Sebald simultaneously casts doubt on historical material’s adequacy as such and implicitly calls on his audience to look for alternatives. Put differently, Sebald asks readers to take into account the ‘invisibilities’ latent in the visual field, a gesture comparable to that of the modernist avant-garde, according to Lyotard’s “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable”: “these painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable according to the legitimate construction. They begin to overturn the supposed ‘givens’ of the visible so as to make visible the fact that *the visual field hides and requires invisibilities*” (125, emphasis mine). Sebald stresses the crucial role of the invisible within the visible by means of highlighting the gaps, intervals, and disjunctions immanent in the visual field. He points out the limitations that restrict vision in general, but nevertheless help to formulate our historical recollection.

elements and textual quotations empower readers and endow them with a more creative, active engagement with the text.

The incorporated photographs that are scattered among the textual accounts of the narrator's wanderings haunt readers in their flatness and stillness, and appear to mimic the logic of collection and appropriation performed in the text as a whole. The photographs are not merely souvenirs from the journey: they are part of a larger collection of relics and remnants of literary, imaginary, and real pasts that Sebald created, found, or happened to come upon, be they in the form of verbal quotations or photographs. In addition, then, the photographs resonate with and amplify the melancholic tone of the text, whose somber atmosphere indicates that it was written under the influence of Saturn.<sup>17</sup> Both textual descriptions and photographic images are persistently detached and alienated from their original context; they reinforce the notion of the narrator as a collector, or an anthropologist, who maintains a distant perspective while performing a study, accumulating information on his research subjects. Naming the text after the rings that encircle Saturn, rings made up of rock fragments and tiny ice

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<sup>17</sup> In Roman religion and mythology, Saturn was the god of agriculture, identified in classical times with the Greek Chronos, who was deposed by his son Zeus (Jupiter) (OED). Little is known of the origins of Saturn's cult, but his reign was regarded as the Golden Age. It was said that after the fall of the Titans, Saturn fled to Italy, where he taught humankind the arts of agriculture. He is also the god of time and melancholy, and during late antiquity the planet named after him was considered to have a demonic influence. Beatrice Hanssen traces the conjunction of melancholia with the nefarious influence of the planet Saturn: she looks at the aesthetic and medical understanding of melancholia from late antiquity to modernity, and--fusing the myths of Saturn and Kronos, or Chronos--explains how the Saturnine was established as "the conflictual state of polarities, dualities, or extremes, [causing] the melancholic type being thrown between states of exultation and extreme despondency" (1001). In *The Rings* Sebald links the power of melancholy with the fatalism of history, especially with what has to do with those man-made disasters and the cruelty that serve to mark out the violence of humankind that will bring about, eventually, its termination. The hallucinatory nature of the narrative and the ambiguous temporality suggest that the wanderings of the narrator in this post-apocalyptic landscape take place in a time outside of time, or after the human race has ceased to exist. Sebald captures this notion of temporal displacement in *Vertigo*, where the narrator writes "how strange it is to be leaning against the current of time" (46).

crystals, has a double function.<sup>18</sup> First, the title implicitly suggests that the distant perspective sought by Sebald can be attained only from a great distance, from outer space - as if writing this travelogue-memoir<sup>19</sup> necessitates a removed outlook on the events, people, and landscapes he comes across. Second, as we have seen, throughout the narrative readers are introduced to additional heaps of rubble and ruin, which, like the rings, become the organizing metaphor for the ongoing process of ruin and decay that not only typifies what the narrator experiences in his voyage, but also signifies the interrogation of the relationship between progress and ruination -- a theme which Sebald sees as emblematic of the modernist project in its entirety.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Rings' second epigram is the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia's entry about the rings of Saturn, a quotation that also foregrounds the presence of destruction and degeneration: "in all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect." Hence, the book is named after the ruins of a former planet that circle around Saturn: seen in this light many parallels can be found with the way the narrator describes his encounters with ruin, where the everyday is infused with troubling, melancholic strangeness.

<sup>19</sup> Sebald's writing cannot be easily labeled in terms of genre: mixing as it does both fact and fiction and straddling the line between both in its employment of photographs and other forms of historical evidence. His books undermine conventions we have become familiar with when it comes to representation of historical events and testimony, and repeatedly problematize the incorporated materials' veracity. Moreover, despite borrowing many traits from travel literature, Sebald's four prose narratives heighten the confusion regarding their narrator's travels: Vertigo recounts the journeys of writers, interweaving "Sebald"'s own experiences on his trip with long quotations from Kafka's, Conrad's and Stendhal's diaries and letters, thus foregrounding repetition and ghostliness. In The Rings mobility becomes a master trope (Zilcosky 109) and the wandering of the narrator will eventually lead him to a near-total mental and physical immobility. Additionally, temporary disorientations and the sensation of getting lost intensify the predominance of the uncanny in Sebald's oeuvre, thereby enabling him to "overturn the formal expectations of the travel-writing genre" (Long, "Introduction" 12).

<sup>20</sup> Some critics, such as Peter Morgan and Andreas Huyssen, have attacked Sebald for failing to take "'responsible ownership' of history" (Ward 183). In his analysis of Sebald's work in Past Presents: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, Huyssen writes that in Sebald's later writing and especially in his Air War and Literature, "the discourse of the natural history of destruction remains too closely tied to metaphysics and to the apocalyptic philosophy of history so prominent in the German tradition" (156). In Huyssen's eyes this attitude is irresponsible since it seems that Sebald makes recent historical developments and natural history parallel, regarding both manmade and natural disasters as unavoidable. The Rings in fact employs the walking trip as a starting point for an investigation of England's buried histories; his subsequent narratives destabilize England's aggrandized national past and repeatedly expose the links between the region's past wealth and colonial exploitation. In section VII, for example, Sebald draws a direct parallel between the history of the sugar trade and the history of art: "the capital amassed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through various forms of slave economy is still in circulation, says de Jong, still bearing interest, increasing many times over and continually burgeoning anew. One of the most tried and the most tested ways of legitimizing this kind of money has always been the patronage of the arts,

Sebald's textual and physical wanderings convey the impression that history is nothing "but a long account of calamities" (295); this notion is strengthened by the numerous encounters of the narrator with depressed people, desolate landscapes and deserted mansions that, together, work to create an eerie atmosphere in the text. As he passes by the gloomy, abandoned terrain of East Anglia, the narrator recounts the historical events that brought about the region's decline; but also, in his typically digressive style,<sup>21</sup> he interweaves historical episodes he reads about or happens to think about. The frequent references to wars, acts of violence and other atrocities show us time and again that history repeatedly inscribes itself in the present; indeed, the narrator's acute attentiveness to the horrors of past times and his sometime difficulty in demarcating the past and the present make melancholy the predominant tone (as well as the theme) of the book. As one critic suggests in her analysis of Austerlitz -- Sebald's last prose text -- "the random objects and events in Sebald's Austerlitz are manifestations of an underlying network of power and violence that has its origin in the long history of war, violence, and oppression that the novel also traces" (Ryan 797). This preoccupation with war and violence constitutes the morbid core of The Rings as well: Sebald insists that the past cannot be disentangled from the present, and so transforms both current reality and history into an uncanny world of "the undead" where history keeps coming back to us and reality is rendered as a nightmare.

The framing narrative to which we are introduced at the outset of the text warns us about the instability of the narratorial voice that permeates the text in its entirety,

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the purchase and exhibiting of paintings and sculptures, a practice that today, said de Jong, was leading to a relentless escalation of prices paid at major auctions" (194).

<sup>21</sup> Long argues that a text like The Rings "consists almost entirely of digressions": all of the components of the texts, all of the narrator's meditations "produce a repeated decentring of the tale of the thirty-mile walk from Somerleyton to Ditchingham that constitutes the so-called 'pilgrimage' itself" (137).



thereby instilling doubt regarding every bit of data given to us by the narrator. In the opening chapter of The Rings, Sebald's narrator becomes immobile and is admitted to a hospital in Norwich: "I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses that I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot" (4). The loss of mobility for the narrator results in the loss of the familiar world and the voiding of reality, where what is familiar becomes defamiliarized, blurring the border between reality and hallucination. Yet, this loss accentuates the nameless narrator's exceptional outlook: his growing estrangement enables him to adopt an alienating gaze which simultaneously shapes and feeds on reality, turning it into a liminal sphere. Feeling as if he sees the world from an extra-terrestrial distance, a notion accompanied by a paralyzing horror, the panic-stricken narrator constantly imagines that he looks at the world as if from the margins. The remoteness and stillness of the photos reinforce this notion of frozen time and immobility, countering traditional attitudes regarding photographs as living "slices of life." This sensation of looking from a precipice is emblematic of failures of both memory and representation, failures that enable the surfacing of numerous objects and moods that determine and disrupt the field of vision – in short, obstacles that Sebald wants us to acknowledge.

This cluster of tensions and failures is thematized by the first image inserted into The Rings, a photo of a window taken from a close distance (appendix 1). We do not know where this window is, or who took the photo, since there are no captions or any direct reference to it in the text. This window is likely to be or at least can be taken to be the same one described by the narrator in his textual account about his hospitalization due

to the physical and mental fatigue caused by the walking trip. This window is located at the center of the photo and occupies most of its frame, but its right side appears to be slanted, as if the photographer was not standing directly in front of it but was located on its right side. The window is draped with black netting through which we can see a pale overcast sky. The paleness of the clouds and the sky is accentuated by the dark surroundings of the window. The narrator notes that during the time he was in the hospital, “all that could be seen of the world from my bed was a colorless patch of sky framed in the window” (4). Both the angle from which the photo was taken and the net on the window emphasize the notion of entrapment, since both narrator and readers can only see a faded fragment of the outside world. The reader is immediately (dis)placed in the position of the speaker by literally adopting his point of view. The slanted angle from which the photo is taken serves as a reminder that the speaker is immobile and that we, as readers, are dependent upon his limited perspective. Put differently, we can only experience a mediated reality, brought to us by a melancholic narrator who openly admits his limitations (be they physical or mental) by confiding in us about his anxieties, malaise, melancholia and paranoia.

This example also emphasizes the centrality of the impediments placed before vision and the way Sebald calls attention to both the two-fold process of construction and obstruction of visuality in this intricate text. Within the larger framework of the novel the motif of the net<sup>22</sup> -- which is also a synecdoche for the obscuring of vision -- stands in opposition to the godlike, distanced perspective idealized by the narrator. “Always, the

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<sup>22</sup> The net is also foregrounded in a photograph of a quail inserted into section II, where the textual description states that the quail dementedly runs back and forth along the edge of its cage and that it has no comprehension of its own captive condition – a state that echoes the narrator’s own instability and helplessness.

world is veiled, seen through fog and mist,” writes critic Lynne Sharon Schwartz: “a ‘veil of rain,’ a ‘veil of ash,’ a ‘profusion of dusty glitter’” (16). The net is just another such obstacle, mediating and distancing the narrator from the outside world, indeed, even delimiting, distorting, blocking his field of vision. The pattern of the net is evoked by a diagram of a quincunx – which is reproduced in the first section; this is a diagram drawn by Thomas Browne who “identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter...” (20). Browne, a seventeenth-century physician and writer, interested in metaphysics and the spiritual life, considers this pattern to be ubiquitous and finds that “examples might be multiplied and without end” (21); Sebald offers a detailed description of such examples, concluding by quoting Browne that “one might demonstrate ad infinitum the elegant geometrical designs of Nature...” (21). In a gesture reminiscent of Browne’s, Sebald’s narrator implicitly suggests that the omnipresence of ruins and traces of destruction becomes the ubiquitous metaphor not for nature’s elegance this time, but for human kind’s frightening propensity to acts of destruction and annihilation. The obstacles placed before vision indeed interfere with obtaining an overarching, comprehensive view of history; the narrator’s employment of fragments (by calling attention to the way they can be isolated or accumulated and yet become part of a group or a network) and his own melancholic response together illustrate that the narrator considers history as trauma. Hence, the geographical terrain of Sebald’s walk in The Rings, the desolate flatness of the shores of East Anglia, becomes the stage on which the narrator meditates upon the destructive nature of humankind. Every walk is also a reading, and every terrain tread upon is also a page containing a palimpsest of history, both literary and non-literary.

Whereas The Rings' narrator obsessively seeks an "ultimate vantage point" (125) -- an external view that could only be obtained from a great distance -- both levels of the text repeatedly demonstrate that such a viewpoint does not, and could not, exist. His writing shows us over and over that not only is it impossible to see reality coherently, but that the very attempt to perceive it as a whole -- be it by looking at the past or the present -- brings about the fragmentation of the same reality. Sebald wants his readers to see that things are already broken up, that the past is irretrievably lost. It is tempting to label Sebald as a "Holocaust writer," since some aspects of his writing accord with the prevalent notion that in both art and literature, as well as in historiography, "post-Holocaust history has a traumatic structure -- it is repetitive, discontinuous, and characterized by obsessive returns to the past and the troubling of simple chronology," as Michael Rothberg puts it (19). Whereas it may be understood from critics such as Anne Whitehead and Rothberg that there exist accepted conventions of representing trauma, I take Sebald's writing as communicating that the past is irrecoverable and cannot be recuperated, a theme it enacts by its repeated reference to the inability to see reality clearly. Not only veils but storms, vapors, fogs and Turner-like mists, as well as burning smoke, wend their way through this book, continually showing how vision is obscured.

The thematization of the obscuring of vision, as I have been arguing, underlines the impossibility of seeing accurately, and therefore of representing and remembering the past. The narrator is preoccupied with representations and memorials of wars and repeatedly haunts archives, panoramas and museums where he carefully scrutinizes visual and textual descriptions of past eruptions of violence. In a section dedicated to seventeenth-century paintings of naval scenes, the narrator notes that "they fail to convey

any *true* impression of how it must have been to be on board one of these ships” (77, emphasis mine). He concludes that just as (written) accounts from the field are “unreliable” (76), pictorial representations are “without exception figments of imagination,” since the scene must have been shrouded with “smoke creeping across the entire bay and masking the combat from view” (77). The narrator may realize not only that the representation of past events fictionalizes and falsifies them but that is impossible to see -- and know for sure -- what actually happened in the first place. But this does not stop him from trying to find that perfect point of view. Neither is he frustrated by his failures to represent the past; on the contrary, the limitations and failures do not lead to eschewing representation, but instead motivate him to seek for more pieces of evidence, which he tries putting together so that they will become a key to a past he cannot comprehend or see clearly.

The frustrated attempts to attain a stable, reliable point of view are replaced either by what can be interpreted as excuses for the structural failure or by meditations on the conditions that affect the visual field. Sebald’s work is rich in references to perspective. His first-person narrator often offers a physical overview of areas or stands on high vantage points, sometimes in dreams, giving readers a bird’s eye view of the world; the temporal equivalent allows him to reveal its past and hinting at the future. Obsessed with his search for a perfect viewpoint, the narrator seems to privilege his own status as a foreigner, which -- in his fantasy -- enables him to improve his point of view, and to maintain a distant standpoint to view his (research) subjects. No wonder, then, that the photographs all seem to be removed from life’s contingencies and to depict a still, motionless reality; his landscapes and buildings are emptied of people, as if the narrator

brings them in to support his anthropological-archeological study of the relics of a ruined civilization. To sum up, the narrator therefore attempts to inhabit an impossible viewpoint, one which is disconnected from the present time. This ideal perspective is over-arching, therefore exposing dominant patterns in history, giving both narrator and readers the capacity to “dispel the darkness that encapsulates all knowledge.” But the more he delves into his research, or continues on his pilgrimage, the more he realizes that all he encounters are shadows, a growing darkness.

The quotation with which I opened this chapter becomes a metaphor for the narrator’s desired telescopic vision: “the greater the distance, the clearer the view” (19). It is a quotation of Thomas Browne, who figures prominently in The Rings, among other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers and philosophers whose writing Sebald’s digressive storytelling technique interweaves. The narrator, however, is unable to attain the distance needed for his research, on physical, temporal or emotional levels, no matter how much he tries, and he constantly finds himself lost, blinded, terrified. He is quite literally unable to see his way in the maze that exists on both the textual and the geographical terrain. The profusion of metaphors of light and darkness and the numerous references to the visual limits of certain times of day – dusk, dawn, fogs or dimming light – are complemented by quotations from Conrad’s diary in section V – quotations immediately evoking Heart of Darkness, a book whose bleak vision of humanity and progress looms large in The Rings. That the past cannot be disentangled from the present moment is also highlighted by the ways stories are set within stories, forming a concentric structure providing the narrative equivalent of the author’s wandering. The digressions, quotations, the intertextual allusions – all form a network of traces and

meanings showing that “the past is mediated through this telescoping of narrative perspective” (Hutchinson 172).

As we have seen, the pursuit of a perfect viewpoint is subverted by the narrator’s inability to see reality clearly or to provide an accurate representation. The framing narrative tells us that the narrator is recounting his memories of the walking-trip from the hospital where he is recovering from physical and mental distress. Clearly not trying to facilitate the reading experience of that recounting, his digressive style challenges the narrative relationship between space and time. He zigzags between the “now” time of the narrative and the many concentric circles and forking paths of memories about and meditations on books read and people met in past times. Avoiding an orderly organization of his memories, the narrator seems to avoid any attempt to produce a coherent account of his trip – he thereby further problematizes the geographical or temporal ordering of the materials. This blurring leads to the circular structure of The Rings where the past bleeds into the present, and belated instances of recognition of a fragment crystallize into a pattern or a larger meaning.

Additionally, readers are confronted time and again with the paranoia, anxieties, instability and melancholia of the narrator, all of which lend his writing a nightmarish, hallucinatory quality. The fact that the narrator is hospitalized due to mental and physical exhaustion casts doubt on his reminiscences of the walking trip. The nature and figuration of loss are thus reiterated in the circular structure of the narrator’s pilgrimage. “Sebald constantly seems on a quest for a relic modern man is no longer able to recognize,” writes Lise Patt (46). The ghostly remnants of “The European Grand Tour” underwrite and propel the narrative, as the narrator walks in the ruined landscapes of East Anglia. Both

photographs and textual descriptions negotiate the urge toward realism and another more intensified emotional realm, the latter permeating both textual and visual accounts. The reproduced photographs only augment the eeriness of the prose and the gap between them and the text intensifies the photos' strangeness. Never fully submissive to the authority of the text, the photographs seem to serve their own purposes, not playing off any kind of textual accompaniment, but rather themselves becoming the starting point of possible plotlines. The fiction we might create around the images alters our encounter with them, but the incorporated photographs paradoxically subvert the kind of realism they bestow.<sup>23</sup> The formal level of the prose account indicates that Sebald (technically) had to abandon his hope of finding an optimal viewpoint. This desire's fulfillment is then denied with the unfolding of the slowly evolving narrative, the interlacing of words and images, and the indirect evocation of linking threads that together create the spiraling, unusual narrative form that only advances scenes of devastation that work against reassuring us of the possibility of possessing a comprehensive view of the world. What we are left with is a ruined, broken-up world, revealed through a deliberately broken-up mimetic system; the two registers of reality and representation<sup>24</sup> therefore reflect each other, as the thematic and the formal are brought into parallel to provoke and enhance the reading experience.

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<sup>23</sup> Adrian Daub notes that Sebald's photographic images seem to irrupt "almost at random into its flow...the text attempts to smuggle these images as stowaways within its pages. Its 'documentary,' as been often noted, is a kind of camouflage" (310). For Daub Sebald's employment of photography underscores the false status of the document, precisely in order to be able to show these pictures at all. By juxtaposing the very concrete (in the shape of documentary material) and the ironic, or relativized, Sebald fulfills the task he inherited from Thomas Bernhard, which for Daub was "to remain melancholic in a self ironizing world" (309).

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that the reality that Sebald describes is the product of the limited, melancholic perspective of his narrator. This narrator himself, of course, is the creature of Sebald's literary imagination, but nevertheless we can see Sebald's prose narratives not only as inherently exploring the rift between art and life, but also as Sebald's striving to bring these two registers together as a mode of coming to terms with history in a more meaningful and responsible way.



Despite the ongoing underlining of the inability to see accurately and therefore to create a faithful representation of the world, it seems that at least textually, the narrator strives to produce precisely such representations. Yet the emphasis placed on the emotive dimension within the condensed descriptions undercuts what can be regarded as a positivist urge. This striving for realism is articulated through the narrator's attempts to provide accurate, realist representations that, alas, always seem to escape him. Lilian Furst considers Sebald's eloquent descriptions as exhibiting what she considers this narrative's "hyperrealism" in which "each object is described with a profusion of detail (that is nothing short of compulsive)" (222). Taking into account the underlying uncertainty regarding the borders of fact and fiction that impinges on these digressive descriptions, they also unavoidably express the narrator's "fear of reality vanishing" (4). The narrator's paranoia is also communicated by his fits of vertigo and the spatial-temporal displacements that the reproduced black-and-white photographs instill and resonate with. All these elements – the narrator's paranoia, the grainy photos, and the emotional tone that permeates the lengthy monologues of both the narrator and the voices he incorporates into the text (be they living people's voices or quotations from writers or literary characters) – increase the confusion regarding both Sebald's sense of literary realism and the narrator's grasp of reality.<sup>25</sup> Sebald's mimetic system works against itself through its straddling the line between literary realism and reality. A good example is, of course, the blurring of very distinction between the writer and his narrator; like Sebald,

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<sup>25</sup> I am using the term literary realism here to signal a mode of writing that seeks to give the impression of faithfully recording or reflecting an actual way of life. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, the term refers, "sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description (i.e. verisimilitude) and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favor of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life." Sebald repeatedly works to frustrate this urge to faithfully record reality by showing that his narrator/s cannot be relied upon, and at the same time, underlining the difficulty of accurately perceiving reality and the instability of representation in general.

the narrator is an externally uprooted, nomadic figure who steadily exposes the histories of suffering that lurk within every room and every landscape. The interchangeable identities of author and narrator, as well as the almost haptic verbal images that “travel the geographies of memory, history and imagination” (Kilbourn, “Kafka” 63), are added to the appropriation, transposition and distribution of fragments as strategies employed by Sebald to disorient his readers.

The Rings is therefore interested in destabilizing the very foundations on which it anchors its “paper universe” (8). Documents, be they historical texts, maps, or photographs, are all figured as simultaneously “means of destruction and materials of order” (Beck 80) with which Sebald both retraces and constructs his lost worlds. John Beck suggests that Sebald’s pursuit of a representational strategy consummate with historical contingency unavoidably conflates the real with its “textual doppelgänger” (80), the original with the copy, lost worlds with their attempted representation. The piling up of quotations, copies, visual and textual fragments, until the ground of the real is obliterated, reveals the inner mechanism of The Rings as fully aware of “the perils of such representational tyranny” (80). This text’s obsession with the visible universe, its representation and illusions, as well as its pursuit of truth and evidence, indicates that it is dismantling from the inside the representation of both the present and forgotten worlds conjured by the text.

The dissolution of the concept of factuality is characteristic of modernist literature, argues Hayden White in “The Modernist Event”; for him, the modernist event, described in either literature, film, or historiography, is typified by the collapse of the very notion of factuality that “threatens the distinction between realistic and imaginary

discourses” (67). Historical relativism, he notes, enables us to distinguish between facts and their meanings, but the undermining of the facts’ status – so typical of modernist thinking that resists the “inherent categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events” (70) – results in the undermining of the event in general (70). Whereas historical events’ effects and causes have been demarcated, any attempt to provide an “objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of details or by setting it within its context” (71) proves futile and radically delimits and therefore alters the historical event itself. What we are left with, says White, are documentary records whose inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and distortions “move to the fore as the principal object of investigation” (71). Sebald’s writing does exactly the same, in an attempt not to dissolve the tragic events he writes about: unable to escape representation’s shortcomings, yet calling readers’ attention to the fragmentation of the event, its repeated de- and re-chaining, and re- and de-contextualization, he demonstrates that “one cannot comprehend, only confront and object” to the tragedies he writes about, as Emile Fackheim puts it (qtd. in White 79).

To sum up, Sebald casts doubt on historiography as a whole, deliberately sabotaging his own mimetic system. He employs images and textual fragments that are inherently “broken” in order to convey his despair at humankind’s violence. By dealing with these fragments, with the text’s stylistic strategies, and the “telescoping of narrative perspective” to which I referred to earlier (see Hutchinson 172), readers are faced with the aftermath of destruction, with a world so broken up that it is endowed with spectral, post-apocalyptic qualities. That we cannot see the events themselves, that their descriptions are partial and incomplete signals the existence of the invisible within the

visible, the presence of blind-spots and repressed knowledge that go unnoticed. A good example of the narrator's radical skepticism towards representation is provided upon visiting the Waterloo panorama, where he observes that while the landscape and faces are "to all appearances authentic" (124), he is struck with terror once he realizes that "this ... is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective" (125). For Sebald, representation is ultimately flawed – it falsifies and distorts what is already ruined. As Anita McChesney puts it: "the selfsame cycle of destruction recurs in the representations of the events themselves: they obscure the ruins with new forms that are, however, mere ciphers and in and of themselves unreadable" (701). It is almost impossible to determine whether Sebald offers us more (or mere) simulacra or attempts to restore the representation of past events.

## **II. Movement, Time, Reading: Sebald's Challenge to the Travelogue Tradition**

"Like relics of an extinct civilization" (The Rings of Saturn 19).

Often, while reading Sebald, readers have a sense that they are not looking at things in themselves, but at the way literary language functions: it seems that Sebald's narratives spread beyond the literary field and become inquiries into the nature of vision and memory in their persistent challenging of representation's limits. By inserting photographs into his text, thereby intensifying his already digressive, dazed narrative style, Sebald paradoxically shows us the unavoidable gaps between representation and the thing in itself. This "terrible resemblance between things" forms, according to Daliah

Falconer, a kind of “palpable veil hanging across the real world” --a world, she continues, which is luminous with suffering, where “everything is fragile, prone to flux.” The inherent instability of representation and the tension between mutability and immobility are exposed by The Rings’ unique mimetic system. The reading’s flow is interrupted by the incorporated photographs that puzzle readers and disrupt the coherence and the linearity of the text. Moreover, unlike the recounter of more conventional travelogues, Sebald’s narrator seems often to emphasize stopping (like photographs that are ‘stills’<sup>26</sup>) rather than his movement across the landscape of East Anglia. In this vein, his associative crisscrossing of past travels (not necessarily taken by him, since he often refers to and quotes from travelogues of famous writers) takes the readers to regions and times far away from the East Anglia he visited during the early nineties.<sup>27</sup>

The plains of Suffolk become a metaphor of the gradual devolution of mankind: the nameless narrator lurks on these empty plains, as if documenting the last days of our civilization. As I have shown in the previous section, he adopts a distant, anthropologist-like point of view in order to report on a species whose days are numbered (or so he seems to think). The narrator insists on distancing himself from both history and humankind and is repeatedly described looking at the landscape from panoramas or

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<sup>26</sup> Ian Balfour pointed out that the deliberate, inventive placing of the photographs in Sebald’s manuscripts. For example, on p. 59 of the German edition (43 and 44 of the English), the sentence immediately preceding the photograph ends with the words “*still standen*” (describing the waves rolling into the shore that seemed motionless) and then we have the related photograph of a beach and waves which are “standing still” because the photograph stops time (nothing was moving... even the white waves rolling in to the sands seemed to me to be motionless”). The photograph shows literally what seemed to the narrator to be the case even though this is not the case in reality.

<sup>27</sup> The Rings commences with the exact time when Sebald’s narrator began his walking trip – August 1992. The second section also opens with the same reference to the time when the trip commenced, as if to ground the reader in the present time of the narrative, despite the previous section’s wandering to seventeenth-century England and Holland through Thomas Browne’s travels, and to other ancient and unknown destinations. This geographical and temporal zigzagging introduces both the labyrinthine style of Sebald’s prose and the themes that will come into play and will be developed later in The Rings’ winding and concentric paths.

looking outside windows. As we have seen, on the one hand, he seeks an ideal viewpoint, a perspective that is detached and god-like; yet his vision is always partial be it due to the weather that affects visibility conditions, or to other elements (both physical and mental) that delimit and impinge on his view. His habit of mounting towers or looking down from airplane windows also reveals the narrator's belief that by lifting himself off the ground, he will be able to disconnect himself from the flow of time and from reality's contingencies as experienced on the earth. Nevertheless, the narrator always seems to place himself on the periphery and to exist in the interstices of travel -- in moments in hotel rooms, planes and airports, parks, foyers, and deserted tourist sites or empty visitor-centers: all these sites are described with a peculiar intensity, filled with shadow memories.

This notion of desolation and self-willed exile -- not only a physical exile manifested in the narrator's wandering but also this desire to situate himself outside historical time -- resonates with another Sebaldian narrator, who in Vertigo writes: "how strange it is, to be standing leaning against the current of time" (46). The opening scene of The Rings evokes a similar experience of estrangement and wonder, with the narrator clinging to the hospital's window frame.<sup>28</sup> What he sees, looking down from his hospital room, is a landscape spreading out before him that marks the world described in The Rings as an intermediary zone, a realm cut off from the everyday, where there is no real life, real movement, where even sound is transformed. This barren world seems to be people-less, occupied by ghosts rather than humans, by silent phantoms and ruins instead

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<sup>28</sup> In Section VIII the narrator climbs up to the top of a castle in Orford "from where there is a view over the houses of the town, the green gardens and pallid fenlands, and the coastline to north and south, lost in the shimmering distance" (229). What he sees, however, goes beyond the physical traits of the region and has "an extraterritorial quality about it" (233).

of the cacophony of the everyday. This world is evidently constructed by the narrator's gaze and mindset and seems to follow a different set of rules than the one that governs reality as we know it. Already at the text's outset, we encounter the narrator's melancholic gaze, under which the familiar landscape has changed into "a completely alien place" (5).<sup>29</sup> The setting seems deserted and lifeless: "I could not believe that anything may be alive in that maze of buildings down there; rather, it was as if I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble, from which the tenebrous masses of multi-storey car parks rose up like immense boulders" (5). The narrator's alienation is both physical and psychological: that window-net is a metaphor not only for his entrapment but for his obstructed field of vision (as we have seen, this is the first of many obstacles that impede his vision throughout the narrative) from which the already "shrunk" world is experienced.

The narrator's melancholy alters not only his visual perception: his depression predominates and governs both his recollection of his walking trip and what he sees in the narrative's present-time. Claustrophobia and estrangement are reiterated, using both visual and verbal means: the spiraling narrative instills uncertainty in readers by the persistent annihilation of space and time, and the re-configuration of these absent coordinates does not produce a void of meaning but an excess that disorients the narrator time and again. The prose narrative exceeds its "paper-universe" status, and becomes a trap, a maze, in which readers wander. The notion of the maze, that is, the thematizing of

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<sup>29</sup> It is significant to note that the narrator likens himself and his perspective to Kafka's Gregor Samsa: "I could not help to thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs on the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (or so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him" (5). The narrator explicitly reduces himself to an inferior status and likens himself to a creature, while leaning against the glass and describing himself "in the tortured posture of a creature that has raised himself erect for the first time" (5); there is something primal in this scene, yet monstrous, and the morbid landscape only augments the peculiarity of the scene and of the framing narrative.

the labyrinth is made visually, structurally and verbally. Significantly, the first section incorporates only one photographic image – the reproduction of the hospital window. The rest of the images inserted into this section feature an image of a skull placed on a stack of books (which is probably a reproduction of a painting, even though it looks very realistic), a reproduction of Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson" and, on the next page, a detail from the painting, as well as a diagram of Thomas Browne's quincunx, and a page reproduced from an ancient manuscript.

The Rings' multiple displacements that are the outcome but also the cause of the narrator's disorientation, his sense of being lost in both space and time, further destabilize the narrator's mental condition. The narrator is terrified by what he sees, by what he remembers; "the almost complete and artificial silence" (5) in which he is "cocooned" (5) augments the depressing scene. From his room on the eighth floor he can see the ambulances' flashing lights but cannot hear their sirens; all he can hear is the wind buffeting the window, a sound that corresponds with "the never entirely ceasing murmur in my own ears" (5). Not only is the landscape inanimate, but the menacing murmur as well as the absence of noise amplify the disquiet of the narrator, who is trapped between the then and the now, in what feels like an everlasting present, stretching like a nightmare from which he cannot awaken. The blockage of sound is analogous to the muteness of the captionless photographs. The absence of humans corresponds to the way that the photographs always seem out of place. Instead of creating some sense of historicity, Sebald uses the photographs to disconcert the readers.

Sebald subverts mimetic realism with his black-and-white grainy photos, and creates uncertainty on formal and thematic levels (Furst 220); the disjunctions between



textual and visual descriptions call attention to the mental state and the weariness of the narrator whose “sense confusion” (172) deteriorates the more he loses himself in the labyrinths of his mind and of the walking trip. The muting of sound also enhances the instability of the visual realm. Moving around the deserted landscapes of East Anglia, the exhausted narrator confesses that “in the end I was overcome by a feeling of panic. The low, laden, sky; the sickly violent hue of the heath clouding my eyes the silence, which rushed in my ears like the sound of the sea in a shell... but I do remember that suddenly I stood on a country lane, beneath a mighty oak, and the horizon was spinning all around as if I had jumped off a merry-go-round” (172).<sup>30</sup> In this passage, the narrator employs a metaphor of sound – the noise of the sea we hear in a shell – to describe the troubling effect of silence. This metaphor evokes the themes of repetition and claustrophobia that are played out throughout The Rings both thematically and structurally—instilling a kind of hermeneutic vertigo in his readers. Sebald thereby creates in us an effect parallel to the one experienced by the narrator, as both readers and narrator are overwhelmed with the narrator’s making and immediate unmaking of the (textual and visual, real and imaginary) worlds he evokes.

This scene in which the panic attack is described occurs in a long paragraph in which the narrator finds himself lost on a path covered with heather, where struck by the hypnotizing colors of the flora and exhausted by the arduous walk, he becomes lost in “the thoughts that went round in my head incessantly, and numbed by the crazed flowering, I stuck to the sandy path until to my astonishment, not to say horror, I found myself back at the same thicket from which I had emerged about an hour before, or, as it

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<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Ian Balfour for pointing out that this passage seems very much indebted to Wordsworth’s The Prelude with its spinning horizons and sea shell.

now seemed to me, in some distant past” (171). This spatio-temporal displacement resonates with the confusion that the narrator of Vertigo, Sebald’s earliest prose narrative, complains of: his grasp of reality depends, he writes, on “the ever widening and contracting circles” of his thoughts (65). In The Rings, his head spinning, his senses numbed, and his thoughts gone astray, the narrator is unable to leave the meadow and finds himself retracing his own steps time and again. Even though he finally finds his way out, he is still tormented by this unpleasant –despairing even – sense of being lost.<sup>31</sup>

Months after this experience he finds himself again in the heath -- but now in a dream – where the demarcation between inside and outside, as well as the limits of his inner world and reality are even more blurred. The narrator is at once at the center of a maze built in Somerleyton, a deserted castle he frequented in the second section, and is situated “the topmost point of earth” (174). The heath – the same one that was spinning around him earlier like a merry-go-round -- is now merged with the unchanging sky. Possessing a viewpoint which could not be obtained from the earth, the narrator is “sitting transfixed with amazement in the Chinese pavilion, [and he] was at the same time out in the open, within a foot of the very edge, and knew how fearful it is to cast one’s eye so low” (174).

In his dream the narrator feels as if placed at the edge of an abyss, about to fall, or fly, but at the same time fixed to the earth: the Belgian villa “was already teetering above the precipice” (174). Looking down, he sees a “scene of devastation” (174) where there is nothing but silence, ruins and dead bodies. When the sun rises and the stars that surround

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Zilcosky refers to The Rings as being essentially a “lost and found” narrative. For him, Sebald’s prose narratives are about the impossibility of getting lost. Sebald unmasks, Zilcosky argues, getting lost as a fantasy: something we hope for while traveling but can no longer achieve. The traveler’s essential fear/desire--of losing his/her way in a foreign world--is frustrated in the uncanny world in which he follows in the footsteps of other travel writers.

him give place to the bright day sky, a montage encompassing elements to which we were introduced earlier appears before him, accompanied by the sound of a funeral march, “softly, barely audibly” (175). The surreal scene can therefore serve as a signpost for readers telling us of which themes and elements we should take heed. A literary montage is activated by the readers who become aware of the act of reading, once the dream scene thematically outlines and highlights elements that form this montage (thereby heightening the artifice). Sebald’s meta-literary inquiry is conducted precisely by the narrator’s creation of a liminal sphere where memory and literature, the visual and the textual are interwoven. The description is infused with the narrator’s lament, which simultaneously mourns the past’s destruction and clings to its traces in the present: “... where once the shoals of herrings spawned and earlier still, a long, long time ago, the delta of the Rhine flowed out into the sea and where green forests grew from silting sand” (175).

This dream scene can be considered as encapsulating the incentive for taking the walking trip in the first place, but it also reveals the *raison-d’être* of The Rings’ mimetic system. It exposes and deploys the notion of the literary montage as a form whose components are featured as if suspended in the air, circling in the floating field opened up between the narrator/author and the readers. The montage’s fragmented elements spiral and yet somehow arrested before us, trance-like, in their hypnotizing concentric movement that counters the linearity of historical time. The photos’ stillness enhances the alienation and strangeness of The Rings’ reality; fragmented into both textual and visual description, the world is not only “dissected,”<sup>32</sup> but is deconstructed, its particles

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<sup>32</sup> The taxonomy of The Rings’ broken-down world’s elements and the documenting of its disintegration are comparable to a post-mortem dissection, in which organs are taken out of the dead body to be closely

reorganized in a constellation that indeed accords with the author's/narrator's melancholic mindset. It is significant that the notions of mourning and ruin are explicitly evoked during a dream scene. According to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholy," both states named in the title arise from the loss of an object the subject has invested with a sufficiently strong emotional cathexis. In melancholia, the normal working through of loss is turned into a destructive process of self-deprecation, and the ambivalence of the emotions felt toward the loved one, or the lost object, becomes central. The loss of the external object is therefore replicated in an internal destructive dynamic: the ego of the mourner identifies with the lost person or object, but in a negative way; the superego's vicious attack on the ego mirrors the destructive external event, as "the shadow of the object falls upon the ego" (249). In this way, Freud concludes, an object loss is "transformed into an ego loss..." (249). Whereas in "Mourning and Melancholy" melancholia is the failure of mourning, in "On Transience" (1916) mourning is, on the contrary, considered a creative process – where the subject learns to come to terms with loss and overcomes the fantasy of permanence.

Not only is mourning endowed with conflicting, even opposite, interpretations in Freud's inquiry into the coming to terms with loss, but the concept of repetition is figured as key for both processes of mourning and melancholia, despite the ambivalence surrounding repetition. It is indeed questionable whether repetition is an expression of shock, where the grieving subject is locked in repetition compulsion, or, rather an effort

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examined. Sebald's method of analysis is therefore alluded to in the reproduction of Rembrandt's painting "Dr. Tulp's Anatomy Lesson" in the first section. Lise Patt calls attention to the metaphor of the pilgrimage, and furthermore to its physical aspect. She defines a pilgrimage as "a fantasized encounter with a body maimed and stripped apart in religious zeal, a body in bits and pieces that is the saintly relics – also penetrates the book at the level of the form" (50). Sebald's journey thus marks the attempt to retrieve, restore the experience of the trip to his readers who try to make sense "of the patches of gray lying on the page as we visually bump up against the creases, dimples, dirt, and scars" (50) that form the text's body.

to heal by dramatizing acts of remembrance and recuperation. This ambivalence is what has made repetition the nexus of many inquiries. For example, Eric Santner notes in Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany (1990), “the shock of mortal loss, which is the shock of definitive separateness, therefore necessarily recapitulates the more fundamental task of re-establishing the boundaries of the self” (3). Acts of repetition may be considered as attempts to fix these boundaries that, as we constantly see in Sebald’s writing, are amorphous and in constant flux. In his prose narratives, not only is the blurring of boundaries between author and narrator important, but the identity of the lost object is also unclear and remains unknown throughout his entire oeuvre. The author/narrator keeps retracing his own steps, and those of others, in an attempt to find an object whose identity is never revealed. What he does find in his circular wanderings are markers of destruction and loss that seem to be omnipresent in The Rings’ depressing landscapes. The ubiquity of destruction therefore announces that for the narrator, everywhere he turns, every community or town he passes by, in fact, civilization in its entirety is in mourning. Unable to disconnect himself from the spell that these sites of decay and loneliness cast on him, the narrator is mesmerized (and often paralyzed) by what seems to him “like relics of an extinct civilization” (30).

Sebald’s writing enables us to examine the effects of both personal and public mourning, specifically of the Holocaust, the traumatic event that ghost walks its way through his fictions. In Sebald’s writings there is an ongoing investigation about whether it is at all possible to work through historical trauma (and especially one of such magnitude as the Holocaust). Instead of pointing to a resolution, Sebald privileges notions of suspense and rupture that he conveys by textual, visual, thematic, and

structural means. His montage reinforces (and is constituted by) themes of fragmentation and suspension -- hinting perhaps that psychic breakdown is forestalled only temporarily. As the narrator travels through the ruined landscapes, and scenes of destruction appear on every path he takes, loss is clearly evoked; according to Eluned Summers-Bremner, the circular structure entailed by mourning the unnamed lost object indicates that the object is “the subject itself once its affections fail to save it: a lost cause” (308). Even though the lost object is never pinned down and disclosed to the readers, it is undeniable that Sebald’s writing is endowed with an elegiac tone: we can assume that the Holocaust, which is only obliquely and peripherally referred to, is the possible event that the narrator mourns. Mourning is therefore key in The Rings’ world and the process of writing itself has an important role, as we can see in an essay Sebald wrote on the work of Peter Weiss: “the artistic self engages personally in [...] a reconstitution, pledging itself... to set up a memorial” (qtd. in Schwartz 17). If literature (and all art) is a means to reconstitute the self, or to recuperate the subject, Sebald’s insistence on commemoration, despite the absence of a specific lost object, becomes clearer. Melancholia predominates in Sebald’s ongoing lament for the Holocaust, possibly because of the inability to mourn what has disappeared and left almost no traces behind it. The ubiquity of destruction attests to the fact that Sebald regards “progress” as parallel to ruin, and through the allusions to the Holocaust we gather that this trauma may be the ultimate consequence of man’s destructive nature.

Returning to section IV of The Rings, with its blurring of past and present, reality and hallucination, within the (textual) dream-scene description, a visual image of a labyrinth is incorporated (appendix 2); it is unclear whether it is a painting or a

photograph of the maze, but the pavilion at its center and its physical insertion, right at the middle of the dream scene's (textual) description, suggest to the reader that it may be the maze in Somerlyton. Despite the physical obstacles – the almost pitch black dark, the contour hedges taller than a man (173) -- the narrator knows “with absolute certainty” that this image represents “a cross-section of ... [his] brain” (173). This image therefore acquires additional importance by being considered by the narrator as a metaphorical extension of his troubled mind. The haunting, menacing atmosphere of The Rings' world that the narrator experiences is conveyed to the readers who are now confronting a double, since the maze indeed resembles the shape of a brain section. Readers are therefore required to synthesize the dazed narration, the obscure visual descriptions, and the image in order to make sense of the information given to them.

The coupling of text and image and the menacing atmosphere together create a sense of the uncanny. The uncanny derives precisely from the narrator's experience of being lost and his sense of compulsive repetition, augmented by his belief that he is disconnected from time and space (being capable of looking at his own location as if detached from its own body). The ghastly dream scene and the spectral images (both textual and visual) initiate a movement in the text which is similar to the one the readers are asked to perform. The narrator for the first time asks us not only to follow his footsteps as he retraces his past walking trip, but also to invoke the shadow of memory and come up with a gaze similar to his. The audience is asked to employ this alienating gaze and to fill in the gaps in knowledge by creating a montage resembling the one the narrator dreamt about. This montage-hallucination becomes even more confusing when the narrator sees a “solitary old man” leaning beside his dead daughter, “both of them so

tiny, as if on a stage a mile off” (174). Readers are literally transformed into an audience watching King Lear (which they are supposed to recognize by the quotation that follows). The dreadful scene is intensified by the lament of the old king in this mirage or phantom play, where the words of the old man are muted and yet hover over the frozen scene: “No last sigh, no last words were to be heard, nor the last despairing plea: Lend me a looking-glass; if that her breath will mist or stain the stone, why then she lives. No, nothing. Nothing but dead silence” (174-5). The last words of the phantom play not only underline the morbidity of the scene (and the significance of mourning in The Rings world) but they also recall the stillness and muteness of the photographs. Similar to the muting of sound that encompasses the narrator upon looking down from his hospital window, the silence here is the expression of a lament too deep to articulate in words. The reproduced photographs share this frozen quality and instill a similar disquiet in readers.

The circularity of the narrative and the sense of entrapment are reinforced by the recurring image of the labyrinth. Together they signal that the narrator’s instability leads to his laying a heavy emphasis on the present time of the narrative, which reinforce the claustrophobia and ghostliness of the narrative. Sebald historical and literary investigation stresses the recurrence of destruction, which for him demonstrates how the past keeps coming back and how traumatic historical events re-inscribe themselves in both mental and physical landscape and haunt the narrator and with him the readers. A concept used by Walter Benjamin that facilitates our understanding of the peculiar world of “the undead” of The Rings is that of “petrified unrest.” Benjamin borrows this concept from Baudelaire’s writing and attributes it, further, to Louis Auguste Blanqui. The logic of “petrified unrest” becomes, in Benjamin’s eyes, an “interpretation of the status of the



cosmos itself.” Edouardo Cadava links this concept of “petrified unrest” to the image of the medusa head that petrifies and “freezes a moment in history into an image” (41). Both terms – the medusa head and the “petrified unrest” -- mark history as a history of arrest, which, camera-like, captures the past and freezes it into an image that indeed signifies its own nonbeing. To be more precise, the image’s ceasing to be in the present (since it has been captured and frozen, it belongs to the past) is announced by the photograph. Eric Santner notes that the concept of “petrified unrest” pertains for Benjamin “to the dynamic of the repetition compulsion, the psychic aspect of the eternal recurrence of the same” (Creaturely 115). Santner asserts that for Benjamin, repetition compulsion defines the world of commodity production and consumption. Sebald's scattered photographs therefore remind us that they are both the product of mechanical reproduction and the expression of a documentary impulse, always imbued, nonetheless, with the subjectivity of the photographer, straddling the personal and public, just as this medium straddles the line between movement and its arresting.

The emphasis that Sebald places on flow -- on the interchange of stasis and movement for both narrator and reading process -- initiates a meta-literary interrogation of both seeing and reading. Embedding photographs within the text unsettles both the images and the words that surround them and is intended, I suggest, to provoke readers and to estrange and de-familiarize what we have grown accustomed to, so that in this meta-literary journey, the present moment of reading effectively yields to a suspended present. The surfacing of the spectral, the amplified eeriness of Sebald’s prose, the recurrent presence of the uncanny, all testify to the concept of “petrified unrest” as being of special significance to The Rings. The disquiet that incites the narrator to continue

walking until he collapses also taints the documentary status of the photos we assume the narrator took himself. We learn to recognize that the incorporated murky images of ruins are themselves already a ruin. The inserted images manifest therefore their own nonbeing: once they are incorporated into Sebald's quirky fiction, not only their veracity but also their fundamental condition of "having been there" (to draw on Barthes' terms) are threatened. As I will shortly explain, beholding Sebald's images requires a reading experience comparable to being in a trance-like state. The readers have to follow the narrator's footsteps as they too traverse this land of the "undead," where they uncover a past that cannot be recovered or redeemed.

Significantly, the incorporated photographs show how movement and temporality are bound up together for Sebald. The phantom, ghastly atmosphere that characterizes the opening scene is evoked throughout the narrative wherever the narrator, time and again, colors the scene with spectral qualities, underlining the haunted, frozen feeling that his melancholy and the photographs' estrangement generate. A good example of Sebald's employment of photographs in this way is in his calling attention to the gaps between the visual and verbal descriptions in, for example, his decision to depict the landscapes of East Anglia as empty of human presence. The reproduced photographs (that we can only assume depict locations in East Anglia) heighten the confusion of readers looking at the grainy images in the hope of finding some sort of clue. In their resistance to functioning as indices, the photos do not offer a key to the excessive narrative, but rather become another thread in the multifaceted texture woven by Sebald. To illustrate the freedom Sebald takes by problematizing both fictionalized and realistic representations in his insertion of photographs into his texts, I shall look closely at the word-and-image

dynamic featured in Section IV. This particular employment of photos and the interaction between the visual and the verbal registers also resonates with that already discussed tension between movement and immobility. Section IV opens with the narrator's arrival at the river Blyth "where a long time ago ships heavily laden with wool made their way seaward" (137). A very dark, poorly reproduced image is incorporated (appendix 3), and we see a bridge hanging horizontally across the photograph, dividing it into thirds: the photo's surface is split with the sky above, the water, and the bank of the river in the foreground, where indistinct objects are scattered. Due to the image's poor reproduction quality, both sky and land seem still and almost frozen, and this hinders us from figuring out what is to be seen on the ground, in the photo's lower part.

It is also impossible to determine when the photo was taken. Underneath the iron bridge we can vaguely see an urban landscape, but the buildings are barely visible. The overall impression is of a bleak, deserted setting. On the photograph's surface there are two or three lines that suggest that the photo was doctored, or, to be more precise, photocopied – but, again, we do not know if this photo was taken by the author, or whether it was found in a book and then appropriated. Either way, the photograph does not seem to belong to any specific time: it lacks the bluntness deriving from the "here and now" that is quintessential of photography (and especially of snapshots) since both locale and time are indistinct. There are no signs indicating the time of day, time of the year, or even the era in which the photo was taken. That the river has no ships on it is supported by the narrator's statement that "today there is next to no traffic on the river, which is largely silted up" (137). Yet this information does not assist readers in fixing the image with specific time coordinates.

When we turn the page we are confronted with another image (appendix 4), but this time it is so bright that the city stretching on the opposite bank is even less visible. All we see is one bank of the river, which is covered with moss or grass, the still water, where the overexposure of the photograph, or some other kind of manipulation, has erased any trace of waves or movement. There are some objects sticking out of the water, maybe pieces of wood pointing towards the sky, or rubble, but, as with the previous photo we cannot know for sure what they are. Both the murky photograph and the overexposed, bright one convey the narrator's feeling that "there is nothing but grey water, mudflats and emptiness" (138). Readers' attempts to gather more information about the objects in the photos are frustrated, although a closer examination of the images -- in the hope of seeing specific details of objects, people, buildings, ships or even waves or clouds -- reveals that this may be the same landscape photographed from two different angles. The poor reproduction quality indeed denies us any final confident determining that this can be the same setting, but these two photos can function as more than mirror-images, and together signal that even if we choose to depict a landscape or an object from different angles, we cannot reach any more stable and comprehensive understanding of that reality.

My next section ("Silk and Ruins – Sebald's Appropriation of Fragments and Networks of Meaning") deals further with Sebald's technique of literary montage. My earlier discussion of the interplay of tensions (proximity-distance, movement-immobility) and the way they are communicated thematically and visually sheds light on the dizzying "vortex of time" that The Rings unfolds, a temporal constellation in which the suspension and floating of fragments are privileged over linearity. As I have showed earlier, Sebald's

writing is not only comparable to a labyrinth, but itself becomes a way to entrap his readers, who are now part of this “broken” representation system. The inability to see, the inadequacy of representation, the omnipresence of ruin, all culminate in the inescapable conclusion that for Sebald, history in its entirety is a disaster and one therefore needs to create a new way to commemorate its victims. Repeatedly calling attention to the notion of entrapment (both visually and verbally), as well as to the impossibility of accurately seeing, he demonstrates to readers that it is something in the very mechanism itself (of history, of time, of memory) that is damaged, beyond repair. “The ghosts of repetition” (187) that stubbornly appear on the narrator’s voyage inspire a metaphor that convincingly depicts the uncanny and déjà-vu experiences that overwhelm him: “perhaps there is in this yet unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication some kind of an anticipation of an end, a venture into the void, a sort of disengagement, which, like a gramophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes, has less to do with damage to the machine itself than with an irreparable defect in its programme” (187-8).

Author, narrator and readers are all therefore forced to hear those sounds over and over again, as they, we -- in a desperate attempt to (re)charge with meaning what has been forgotten -- together haunt (and are haunted by) relics. These relics can be historical documents taken from archives and encyclopedias, from ruined houses and desolate regions, or they can be personal testimonies (the stories of the people whom the narrator meets in his voyage, whom he reads about and quotes from, or even whom he encounters through television and personal diaries – as in Roger Casement life-story that is recounted in Section V).

### **III Silk and Ruins – Sebald's Appropriation of Fragments and his Networks of**

#### **Meaning**

“Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life” (The Rings of Saturn 255).

What is literary montage's purpose if not to unhinge the terms of linear connection, to unravel the literary text's mimetic system, to pose the question of its gaps, and to call attention to the interstitial space between images and words? Sebald's politically invested aspiration is exposed precisely by his use of this in the reconstruction of the past: his selection and re-contextualization of the fragments he incorporates in his oeuvre radically shake up these visual and textual images. Weaving motifs together, he highlights certain themes by repeatedly pointing -- directly and implicitly -- to specific elements, a technique that gives his prose its contrived and condensed nature. The predominance of these interwoven networks is conveyed both visually and literally, both structurally and thematically; Sebald's appropriation of these multiple elements seeks to challenge the conventional way we perceive historical occurrences.

I wish to draw an analogy between Sebald's appropriation of fragments and his ambiguous attitude towards memory, as seen in the epigraph above. For Sebald, memory fragments lie dormant within our psyche until they are suddenly, somewhat arbitrarily, roused, “woken by some trifle.” However, once they have surfaced, after years of

“proliferating,”<sup>33</sup> these memories “blind us to life.” Contrary perhaps to the common belief that memories mediate between the present and the past, Sebald asserts that they actually breach the two, and in fact distance the subject from “life.” If we take the book’s inserted citations (both visual and textual) as memory bits, or memory aids (since the photos too are, in a way, pieces of memory), as elements from the past ruptured from their original context and embedded into a new one, where they “proliferate,” or rather are woven into new networks of meanings, we can see they are decoded differently once isolated from their previous context. In other words, disconnecting the fragments from their original surroundings is comparable to the process memories undergo. Detached from their “natural” surroundings, both memories and the reproduced fragments acquire some autonomous traits and therefore the encounter with them potentially carries an explosive, even destructive agency that Sebald mobilizes in his prose works.

In this section, I look at the parallel created between Sebald’s employment of fragments, his attitude towards memories, and their potentially “explosive” impact on readers. I focus on the tensions between a fragment and a collection, and through this perspective I will tease out the interaction between themes of isolation and density, played out by Sebald’s employment of recurrence and repetition. Put differently, how do these fragmented elements counter, block, or obstruct reality (i.e., our understanding of both the present moment and past times)? How does their positioning in a collection render, or contest, the meaning of the “now” – the “now” of reading, the “now” of

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<sup>33</sup> “Proliferate” is indeed a curious word choice. Does Sebald mean that latent memories still possess some kind of capacity to multiply without their “host”’s or “owner”’s awareness? If so, are memories comparable to parasites, working beneath the surface while their carriers are oblivious? What is the implication of the “blockage” that their “blinding” effect entails? The suggestion that memories can reproduce, regardless of their carrier’s cooperation, is also peculiar, and in a way attributes volition, or at least agency or speed, to memory.

writing, as well as the “now” from which they themselves emanate? What effect does Sebald’s “curatorial” impulse have on reader-viewers? And what is his attitude towards writing, weaving, and recollecting as articulated by the appropriation of fragments?

Sebald’s reluctance to fix all the incorporated elements in one stable, coherent meaning is conveyed in several ways. For one, he enables the visual fragments to maintain their incomplete, fleeting essence by avoiding captions, leaving most of his images unexplained, obtuse. Additionally, Sebald underlines the ambiguity of the fragments’ origin through inadequate or partial citation and by habitually avoiding direct reference to them.<sup>34</sup> Many times, the images are simply there, silent, still, indecipherable, until meaning is bestowed upon them by the reader. The photographs seem to break down reality into elementary, fundamental components; following the principle of agglomeration, they display their materials, often in a cluttered mass, thereby conveying not only the appropriation of these represented objects, but their agglomeration, a strategy which becomes key as the reading progresses. The insertion of photos operates simultaneously on (at least) three levels: the concrete or material (the incorporation of the images creates an effect on readers), the thematic (the subject matter of the photos resonates and intersects with that of the written narrative), as well as the metaphorical (as a literary motif that is consequently developed).

The arrangement of the incorporated visual materials highlights the importance of reiteration and repetition in Sebald’s mimetic system; agglomeration is key both in the formal organization of the reproduced images and, inherently, in the composition of the

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<sup>34</sup> “The ‘logic of the caption’ is the *act* of reposition, of artificial fossilization, a *cultus*, that unfolds before a primarily ethical horizon,” writes Daub on Sebald’s unique word and image dynamic. “At its most basic, this logic responds to the problem posed in the preceding chapters: the photograph that cannot mean, but *must* mean (both in the sense of mere signification and in the sense of indexicality)” (312).



surface of the image. Put differently, The Rings' preoccupation with destruction and disintegration corresponds to the formal organization of images that are repeated, hinted at, or evoked by resonating with or referring to one another. The images thereby form patterns by repeating themes both within the image's frame, and throughout the book in general, where they call attention to the physicality of reading, to the materiality of the book, and moreover, to the creation of networks of meaning. A telling example of the complex interplay of the verbal and visual is the photograph reproduced in section III, depicting a group of tents set up by the beach and the textual description: "they are strung out in a long line on the margin of the sea, at regular intervals" (51), writes the narrator, who adds that "it is as if the last stragglers of some nomadic people had settled there, at the outermost limit of the earth" (51-2). The recurrence of one motif from the photo is of importance here, but so too is the interpretation that the narrator gives to this image and the post-apocalyptic, menacing mood it inspires. The cluster of tents indeed unsettles readers once the textual description is added; the composition of the photo, however, with its slanting lines and blurring of the edges, creates the illusion that this group of tents extends beyond the photo's scope, far into the void, alluding to some future catastrophe.

The Rings calls attention to the omnipresence of destruction on the level of both content and form. The disjunctions between the two registers, like the subject matter itself, reflect on the disastrous legacy of the history of human destructiveness and aggression: the ruins depicted in the photographs are refigured structurally by the discrepancies between visual and verbal descriptions. Sebald does not promote any romantic cult of ruins, but his focus on ruination echoes Tim Edensor's attribution of an 'alternative aesthetics' to ruination in his work on industrial ruins. In his words, this

‘alternative aesthetics’ that ruins generate “has no sanctions on how they might be used or interpreted.... Ruins offer an aesthetic experience that bypasses the normal designs....” The materiality of objects becomes foregrounded when appearances become deceptive, and for Edensor ruins incite us to experience an alternative awareness of odors and tactility "as glass and mortar crunches underfoot, plaster and bricks crumble to the touch, and dampness creeps through all permeable substances."

Drawing a parallel between the industrial ruins and the decay that typifies the landscapes in which the Sebaldian narrator passes, I would argue that The Rings’ mimetic system advances just such an alternative aesthetic, where the formal register announces the text as a ruined, run-down artifact in itself. Sebald’s refusal to fix the images’ meaning by avoiding captions or, often, direct references underlines the gaps between the photographed ruins (and the photographs that are ruins) and the palimpsestic text, as well as the lacunae created by way of overlapping and intersecting fragments. The dynamic between images and text attempts to provoke a different assessment of these ruined spaces, and stimulate a critique of past times that are brought to (and are in themselves a form of) disintegration, since for Sebald decay is both an ongoing process and the aftermath of history.

Moreover, recurrence and agglomeration are emblematic of Sebald’s historical outlook as a whole. Using repetition as a conceptual and structural device enables him to parallel the thematic and formal registers of the text. In an interview given to Joseph Cuomo in 2001, Sebald acknowledges the risk of trivializing historical occurrences by their representation; his writing, according to Cuomo, resists the “tendency to reduce the world to some theme that this then becomes proof of” (97). Sebald pursues a different

kind of history, one that is “not in the history books” (106). Following half-erased traces and creating a new historiography, a chronicling of what is unknown, Sebald suggests that the traditional historical disciplines “failed to deal with the ethical consequences of the history of human mastery and intervention” (Fuchs 168). He criticizes the conventional historical narrative that “offers a top-down perspective on the historical events which obliterates the emotional experience of history in the lives of its victims” (Fuchs 168). The ubiquity of traces of destruction in The Rings prompts readers to investigate the relationship between trauma and memory through photography’s peculiar relation to its referents. The photographs of the deserted, ruined landscapes are traces of former lives and are therefore ‘after-images’ of man’s exploitation of nature. The barren, people-less world the narrator sees from his hospital window, at the very beginning of the book, as discussed earlier, demonstrates the predominance of ruin, in both rural and urban terrains.

Moreover, “the maze of buildings” that he believes are “looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble” and the “tenebrous masses of multi-storey car parks [that] rose up like immense boulders” (5) render the entire scene ghostly and menacing. The described ghost world introduces the theme of recurrence in which elements reappear and are ordered in patterns or work according to a principle of accumulation or agglomeration. The narrator, hiding fearfully in his room, is terrified by habitual, every-day objects; his referring to the masses of cars and buildings as if they were a field of rubble, or boulders, reveals that these harmless objects terrify him. The world around him, which we can assume is exhibited in the incorporated photos, seems

mundane enough, yet for the narrator reality has transformed into a “world of the undead,” occupied by phantoms, not only of people, but of objects.

As we see, the isolation of fragments, their amassing or piling up together, and subsequently their labeling as ruins<sup>35</sup> indicate that the past is still present in the present in its desolate state. Rummaging around Ordford’s seashore, the narrator encounters “a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations” (236-7). Two photographs of these pagodas are reproduced on page 236; the top one is taken from a distance, from which these awkward buildings seem strange and uninviting, and like the tents erected on the beach, they seem to spread, at regular intervals, and to extend beyond the horizon. The second, lower image depicts a pagoda from up close and we can see that it was built on a hill. Due to the poor reproduction quality once again, we do not know the location of the depicted building, but it generates a melancholic atmosphere (whether it be built right above the beach or set in the middle of a barren field). Either way, the landscape is depressing and melancholic. The narrator confesses that the closer he came to these ruins, “the more any notions of a mysterious isle of the dead receded” (237) and the more he imagined himself “amidst the remains of our civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe” (237).

The narrator sees more and more evidence of violence and desolation and creates links between various forms of ruination as he roams around the coastline of East Anglia.<sup>36</sup> Whether or not the narrator exaggerates, given his morbid outlook on reality

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<sup>35</sup> As in Tim Edensor’s definition of ruins: “detached from their use, class and category, objects standing in odd assemblages or becoming isolated.”

<sup>36</sup> Sebald is primarily interested in “different kinds of history lessons”(106), those that are not included in the history books. The narrator refers to his research as a project that is performed in a “random, haphazard fashion” (94); the discovery process is comparable to a walking trip where things are found in the sideways (94) or to a “dog running in the field” (95). The readers, just like the author, have to strain their imagination “in order to create the connection between the two things” (95).

(and thus whether desolation is physically present or imagined), is of no significance, as for him, ruin is omnipresent, and like Sebald himself, the narrator connects heterogeneous events, seeks evidence of destruction, and then links all of them together in his tale of the culture of mourning, "slotting" (Schwartz 96) these events (be they visual or verbal descriptions, photographs, maps, his own memories of his walking trip, or quotations from other people's journals) into the text, as it were. This tendency is in accord with John Beck's observation that The Rings "does not just allude to or quote from its own sources, it lifts lines and phrases verbatim, binding its precursors into its own structure" (83).

Greg Bond refers to the notion of the network as essentially paranoid (41); he asserts that the narrator's melancholic gaze "has to be upheld at all costs" (34).<sup>37</sup> The photographs could be argued to reinforce the paranoid outlook, since all of the photos resonate with the notion that time is out of joint and increase the text's eeriness. Only one photograph is actually reproduced in The Rings' first section (the window image, the first image the readers encounter), but the drawings and other visual elements reproduced in this opening section work to alert readers to the fact that looking does not always lead to enlightenment. The first section, however, is laden with both visual and verbal images, which introduce themes and motifs that are then repeatedly encountered throughout the winding narrative. Significantly, in section I, the narrator is meditating on Thomas Browne, whose father was a silk merchant (11), and introduces the (structural and thematic) motif of net-like grids through the inserted images (the window on page 4 and

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<sup>37</sup> Bond suggests that the book's title can be read as "after the end of nature," signalling that all is destroyed (34). The melancholic gaze of the narrator is of interest to him; unlike the Romantics, "Sebald is not projecting human sentiment onto the landscape... [T]his is a Baroque metaphysics of landscape, wherein there is nothing behind the scenes but the empty grin of death" (34).

Browne's diagram on page 20), calling attention to the entrapment that the paranoid mind of the narrator senses upon seeing the omnipresence of destruction and ruin ("sea of stone or a field of rubble," as he describes it on page 5).

Ruins predominate in other sections of The Rings as well, such as in the description of the narrator's friend Janine and her chaotic office. Janine, like the narrator, is a scholar who specializes in Flaubert's writing, in which images of dust and sand are prominent motifs. Janine's world is, however, characterized by an overflowing of paper. Her office, the amazed narrator reveals, is like a "paper universe" (8), where "there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper. On the desk, which was both the origin of and the focal point of this amazing profusion of paper, a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys" (8). The narrator likens Janine to Dürer's *Melancholia* image: "sitting there amidst her papers she resembled the angel to Dürer's *Melancholia*, steadfast among the instruments of destruction" (9).<sup>38</sup> From the narrator's description it seems that the ever-increasing masses of paper that compile this "paper universe" are out of control; Janine, however, considers the apparent chaos of her study as amalgamating all into a "perfect kind of order" (9), an order tending "towards perfection" (9).

It is unclear whether the palimpsestic logic that characterizes decay in Sebald's Rings, the way that historical traumas surface in the present through the desolate landscape, is emblematic of order or of chaos, but nevertheless the notion of agglomeration, and the heaps of rubble, paper and dust (and as my final example will

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<sup>38</sup> Sebald makes an interesting parallel here between "elements and destructions" and the tools of geometry (such as scales and compasses) scattered around the angel in the Dürer's engraving, once again, associating progress or science and destruction, critiquing the failure of modernism to "progress."

show, piles of corpses as well) feature as a pattern that governs the text both visually and thematically. It is indeed debatable whether the (thematic as well as graphic) patterns that this dynamic produces hint at a certain possibility of order, not to mention perfection, but Sebald clearly takes the liberty of mobilizing the tension between fragments and their collection, between the isolation and density of the incorporated elements in order to point out that destruction is central for his mimetic system. The aesthetic choice to use the form of fragments inspires the literary montage which is activated by the networks of meaning interpreted and generated by readers.

Drawing on Alexander Kluge's theory of montage,<sup>39</sup> Deane Blackler develops another interpretation of Sebald's writing. Her principal thesis is straightforward enough: "Sebald's texts elicit what I term a 'disobedient reader,' namely a reader who exercises his or her own imagination in a manner typical of postmodern reading that blurs the boundaries of traditional academic literary discourse and other kinds of writing, and engages historical referents and other references in imaginative and poetic ways, making creative links for him or herself" (2). Sebaldian readers are active and adventurous, she continues; they are asked to make connections and see the hidden correspondence between diverse things. Blackler, like myself, is concerned with how Sebald's works operate on readers, but she maintains that Sebald's prose narratives succeed in liberating readers by encouraging them to "disobey." I understand Blackler's theory to be somewhat self-contradictory: she asserts that the (disobedient) readers are essentially forced to

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<sup>39</sup> According to Michelle Langford, Alexander Kluge sought to theorize and put into practice in his films a new conception of montage distinct from both Hollywood's "invisible" editing strategies and Eisenstein's and Russian filmmakers' "dialectical" montage. Kluge's theory of montage hinges on his conception of the "cut," the break in the flow between images. Langford argues that placing an emphasis on the interval between the images opens up a space for the spectator to enact her or his own imagination, or what Kluge calls *Phantasie*. This is the starting point for Blackler's theory of the "disobedient reader," on which I elaborate in this section.

question the narrator, to puzzle over pictures, and otherwise interact with the text rather than dutifully absorb it. For her, readers are capable of "drawing a little away from the narrator's voice," and then they "can't help but see these connections in the textual fabric" (105). I believe that the agency of the readers is indeed augmented, but it seems to me that Sebald maintains a close watch on the interaction he hopes to sustain between readers and text.

In my reading, Sebald's literary enterprise is directed towards not the liberation of his readers, but the liberation of the fragments he incorporates and their de-coding. Pessimism governs his appropriation of visual and textual fragments, evincing that for him, the past always haunts the present, and thus he calls for a heightened awareness of the wrongs of the past. Subsequently, his archival desire is mobilized towards advancing his critique of modernity, and prepares the ground for an alternative critical practice. As Schwartz puts it: "if the reader is willing to submit, the author's sensibility will carry him toward ever more tangled and distressing tales of decay, entropy and destruction" (12). Following the narrator's walking tour, The Rings takes readers on paths unknown, making time into a "panoramic view" (13), giving it an elastic quality. Historical time for Sebald is a tidal temporal construction, moving according to "the ever widening and contracting circles" of his thoughts (Vertigo 65). By casting doubt on time's fundamental qualities, Sebald critiques history's attempt to present itself (and by extension, the reigning ideology) as a natural, invisible system.

Trying to avoid becoming complicit with the unavoidable fictionalization or reduction of historical "facts" to an inaccurate "chronology," Sebald privileges suspension. In fact, suspension is doubly employed: formally - in the historical narrative



style -- and thematically -- through the employment of images. Together these make "things stop in space" (83). Suspension is one means for Sebald to signal that both his textual materials and history in general should be approached not directly but peripatetically. "The past is retrievable only in fragmentary form," Simon Ward suggests, "and can be perceived only through a hallucinatory state of mind in which the mediated fragments of a ruined culture repeat themselves endlessly" (62). This is a grounding metaphor in The Rings' circular, labyrinthine structure, in which both author/narrator and readers are entrapped. Nevertheless, the use of those narrative modes of deferral, recurrence and suspension is what enables Sebald to organize his ordered networks into a looser structure, where the gaps and disjunctions, as well as the fragments' incomplete, partial form render the work open to multiple interpretations. Sebald seems to privilege the indirect mode in which history is approached (that is, both represented and comprehended), making a formal and thematic parallel in order to communicate the insight that any attempt to recoup the past directly, non-dialectically, is not only to concede its authority but to enter into paralyzing complicity with it.

We can see this parallel at work in the way the motif of silk is deployed throughout The Rings as it reveals how this book stages the interplay between silk and weaving, writing and reading. Silk and weaving are at once a metaphor for the networks of meanings Sebald has devised and also a thematic device, a metaphoric undercurrent that runs throughout the text as a whole. As we read along, and disentangle the densely woven narrative threads, we become active participants in the unfolding of this book. For example, we are invited to follow the path of silk, beginning with the fact that Browne's father (as already mentioned) was a silk merchant, and moving onward to the last chapter,

in which the habits of the silkworm and the history of sericulture are outlined. The silkworm, or the act of spinning, suggests critic Roberta Silman, "is an emblem of the very process you [readers] and the author have been engaged in."

The silk motif appears time and again through the constant references to silk commerce, or in the underscoring of (black) silk's relation to mourning and violence.<sup>40</sup> Tracing the conflicting attitudes towards silkworm cultivation in China and Europe in the course of the Enlightenment and Modernity, Sebald demonstrates why he considers "progress" to be degeneration. One of the last images reproduced in the final section is a Nazi pamphlet from 1939, produced by the Reich Federation of German Breeders of Small Animals (appendix 5). Astounded readers are suddenly made aware of the atrocities with which silk production can be associated. The planting of the image in the text at once taints this narrative thread and exposes this seemingly aesthetic occupation's relation with Fascism and the horrors the Nazis committed. For Schwarz, the account of the Third Reich's promotion of the silk industry "becomes a metaphor for the unspeakable" (12). Revealing to readers how beauty and culture can conceal violence and affliction, Sebald delineates an aesthetic, self-referential configuration of disintegration in this doubled section: the Nazi pamphlet is both visually reproduced and also quoted in the text. The quotations detail the benefits that silk worms offer to the Nazi economy and war machine: silk can participate in the "aerial airfare" and in the "formation of a self-sufficient economy of national defense" (293). Other than the worms' use value, they are "an almost ideal object lesson for the classroom" (294). The experiments for which silkworms are suitable echo Nazi ideology and are infused with the racist and violent

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<sup>40</sup> Sebald quotes Browne's reference to a Dutch mourning custom of draping black mourning ribbons over mirrors and canvasses (296), as well as referring to certain black silk garments as "the only appropriate expression of profound grief" (296).

discourse typical of Nazi official documents. Phrases such as "retrogressive mutation" and "extermination to preempt racial degeneration" (294) are especially appalling, even when they refer to silkworms and not to human beings. Whereas the Holocaust is not referred to directly throughout the entire prose narrative, The Rings' ending (just like section III's interweaving of the herring fishery and Bergen-Belsen, which I will discuss shortly), is shocking in its implicit parallel between silk cultivation and the crematoria: "when a batch is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business is complete" (294).

The disinterested, distant tone in which Sebald describes the method of destroying the cocoons shocks readers when they realize the gap between the clean, sterile language and the brutality of the described acts, a combination which is simultaneously puzzling and horrifying. The juxtaposition of writers' block, or the general melancholy that writing entails, and the tortures weavers underwent is figured both visually and textually.

Drawing a direct, meta-literary link between writing, weaving and melancholy (which is the grounding metaphor of the mimetic system where silk and threads predominate), the narrator confesses: "that weavers in particular, together with scholars and writers with whom they had much in common, tended to suffer from melancholia and all the evils associated with it, is understandable given the nature of the work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created" (283). The final section of The Rings includes a reproduction of a loom "reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages" (282). The man who sits beside the loom and appears to be chained to this instrument of torture is a black man, possibly a slave from one of the colonies. The origin of this image, however, remains unknown, and

readers have to speculate about its meaning and origin. Sebald, however, makes a direct parallel here not only between colonialism and exploitation,<sup>41</sup> but also between writing and melancholy, by describing the despair and anxiety of the tortured weavers, who, like writers and scholars, are prone to mental illness (283). This narrative thread exemplifies how, by bringing together several motifs -- silk, writing and melancholy -- Sebald critiques the colonialist project, in part by outlining the atrocities that took place in the colonies and that, for Sebald, are inseparable from the way western civilization acquired its wealth.

Whereas Sebald offers an alternative approach to history, chronology and literature's role altogether, for André Aciman The Rings is not "just about history or about memory or about time or even about depression. Nor is it about intertextuality or, for that matter, silk commerce and herring routes." Aciman takes the text as "perplexing, turgid, and *unreadable*" (emphasis mine) and considers its fundamental concern to be "the subject of displacement, from one's times, one's society, and ultimately—this is the hardest to articulate—from oneself." The concept of dislodged identity is conveyed through the uncertainty about how many narrative strands Sebald is really pursuing and through the spiraling of the self-referential theme of silk, which "twists its way through the novel, from China to modern Europe, down to its emblematic representation of the act of writing," as Aciman puts it. Whereas Aciman acknowledges the innovation in Sebald's writing, he criticizes Sebald's view (and use) of recurrence. For him this principle is problematic and limited, interesting as an idea only: "it is conveyed intellectually, not

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<sup>41</sup> The explicit reference to torture and bodily mutilation is conveyed through Roger Casement tragic life-story, brought up on section V, as well as by integrating sections from Conrad's diary and quoting from his Heart of Darkness, to explicitly connect the colonial project to the exploitation and inflicting of violence upon the natives of the colonies.

aesthetically; it is not experienced, it is merely worded.” This is where I differ from Aciman, who sees recurrence falling short because it is “drawn from the content of the author's life, not worked into the form of the book about that life.” Aciman asserts that Sebald should have “nudge[d] his argument a bit further, perhaps even into an unknown void, in the hope of unearthing something.”

For me, the greatest achievement of Sebald's mimetic system lies in the fragile networks of meanings and the culminating effect on readers who are gradually made aware of the double bind of aesthetics and ethics. It is in the elegant weaving of data together, the suspension of clear knowledge, and the narrator's contrived, meditative manner that Sebald unmask the interdependence of beauty and cruelty. I disagree with Aciman's reading, which interprets Sebald's preoccupation with the way texts and images impart meaning as diluting his voice, his words, to “a sense of something ultimately sterile.” Aciman recognizes the pressing need for a form “where every sentence upholds and meditates on the story being told,” but I would argue that literary montage with its implicit way of conveying meaning, does precisely that. My final example deals with the way Sebald's implied networks gradually unfold to create meaning by forming visual threads and patterns. I concur with Ruth Franklin who reads the entire prose work as tainted by the Holocaust (even though this text actually touches only briefly on the Holocaust in its final pages, and once again in the example I will discuss shortly): “it is the looming knowledge of the Holocaust which seems to unite and animate these fragments. This awareness, which lurks on every page, translates the world into a realm of violence and decay” (2).

I wish to draw attention to the workings of the principle of recurrence in section III, where Sebald's mimetic system not only foregrounds the reiteration and repetition of specific themes but also organizes itself around the interstices between fragments and the patterns they create. The swirling paths of the book seem to stop and start with "the erratic spasms of the mind, of memory" (Schwatz 14), rendering past and present concurrent. Austerlitz, the protagonist of Sebald's last prose narrative, rightly asks, why we can't have "appointments to keep in the past" in the same way we do it in the future (257)? The disorienting incongruence between words and images, the delicate web of leitmotifs -- composed as a series of improbable associations and coincidences -- render history and the landscape fragile, composed of tenuous elements, constantly on the brink of disintegration (Darby 268). Darby accentuates the strong connection between landscape and history; section III, in particular conveys the notion that Sebald renounces the possibility that the landscape and its stories "can be recovered, recorded, and passed down to posterity, whole, rounded, cohesive" (268).

In this section the Sebaldian narrator wanders around the Lowestoft coastline, where he mourns the process of dissolution that both the landscape and the people of the region have suffered as a result of the decline of the fishing industry. He nostalgically describes the old ways of the local fishing community, while walking around in a disintegrating landscape of the past (both near and far). The walk reveals a world that is "a world of the past, an end-time world, falling apart, a post-economic world of ravaged nature, broken, decaying buildings, ruined gardens, scarred nature, a landscape collapsing slowly but surely into the oblivion of the rising sea" (Darby 275). Thus, the huge slaughters of the North Sea herring fishery -- referred to as "the truly catastrophic glut of

herring” (55) -- is accompanied by a reproduction of a postcard of local fisherman showing off their bountiful catch, and precedes a story about a World War II veteran (Major Le Strange) who participated in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

Le Strange’s story is brought to us in three modes: through its narration, through a facsimile of an article from the Eastern Daily Press (incorporated into the book), and lastly through an image of corpses found by the Allies outside of the Bergen-Belsen camp (reproduced on two pages, though any reference to the image, its producers or copyright holders is omitted). The slotting of the Bergen-Belsen image right after the postcard of the herring fishermen may suggest implicitly that the fishery is comparable with the Holocaust. Both acts of war and fishing, J. J. Long points out, have material effects in the world, “and are not reducible to their representations” (Archive 66). Whereas postcards, Long notes, overwhelm the readers by “transforming space into spectacle” (66), the employment of the Bergen-Belsen image in this context intensifies its already shocking impact on readers. Readers are not prepared to confront such a horrific image, since they are not given any warning,<sup>42</sup> and furthermore, due to the enlargement of the image and its grainy composition, they cannot be sure what they actually are witnessing; therefore a kind of belated recognition of the image occurs. Furthermore, the coupling of the reproduced images with the dry, almost sterile narration indicates that there’s more beyond the spectacle, even when we cannot fathom what is in front of us.

The sixty billion dead herring recall Sebald’s preoccupation with the Holocaust, and the number of the dead fish invokes Germany's upwards of six million murdered

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<sup>42</sup> The English edition of The Rings mentions Bergen-Belsen and then provides a picture of the corpses found by the liberated forces. The narration in the German edition, however, does not explicitly refer to Bergen-Belsen. We are told on page 79 that Major Le Strange served in the Second World War. But the narration breaks and the readers have to witness the photograph of the dead bodies, before they learn that Le Strange was part of a regiment, which on April 1945 liberated the camp.

Jews during World War II. Sebald's daring juxtaposition of the slaughtered herring and the corpses of Buchenwald underlines the common denominator of both stories of destruction. It is the outcome of "cold and objectified bio-politics which disregards the value of life by means of a reductive interpretation of nature," Fuchs concludes (173). The narrator is at pains to describe every little detail in the suffering of the herring, and the text is full of horrid descriptions, which consequently function to make the link to the brutality of the Nazi regime. But since we are still in the earlier parts of the prose narrative, readers are probably overwhelmed by the abundance of details and cannot make all the connections themselves. Nevertheless the implicit reference to Nazi ideology, to the torturing and mutilating,<sup>43</sup> delineates the same thread linking science and torture, aesthetics and cruelty that will culminate later in the reading process.

The relationship to the Holocaust is not developed or explicitly emphasized throughout this section. Rather it is revealed to readers through a fabricated newspaper article (see Daub) and a two-page uncaptioned photo of corpses strewn across a forest floor, outside the concentration camp. Not only does Sebald startle his readers by integrating this image without providing any warning or explanation, but he also implicitly, and polemically, appears to present the excesses of the herring trade as comparable to those of the Holocaust, as we have seen. His attempted representations therefore not only misrepresent the facts, or rather the realities they derive from, but threaten the very claim that talk of facts is warranted. Sebald's skeptical view of photography and memory unsettles conventional historiography, calling on his readers to

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<sup>43</sup> Long notes that the narrators of *Vertigo* and *The Rings* are "obsessed with pre-modern methods of exercising power" (*Archive* 71). In *The Rings* the narrator records the bodily mutilation and summary executions carried out to maintain discipline in Belgian Congo, "while his narrative of nineteenth-century China thematizes that empire's dependency on meticulous ceremonial and spectacular displays of wealth and opulence combined with equally spectacular forms of corporal punishment" (71).



resist institutionalized forms of commemoration, and to seek their own understanding of history, possibly by admitting that it exceeds comprehension.

This admitting, this failure to make connections, and this tendency to point out only nature's destructive exploitation, the traces of past violence, and the omnipresent ruin -- all these highlight the theme of suspension as crucial for achieving a more ethical, more honest engagement with our history. As Schwartz puts it, “instead of feeling crushed by the image[s] we feel oddly sustained. It is the sustenance offered by truth, however sombre” (16). Perhaps this is the type of cultural engagement that Sebald envisages that requires a particular form of perceptiveness on the part of readers. Sebald advances a new form of memory, one in which blind spots and erased traces elucidate meaning. If we take his prose narratives as a new form of historiography, we must understand that they demand attentiveness, patience and acute sensitivity of their readers. Only thus can we perceive the unfolding of patterns in which the fragments collapse and displace one another until they are strewn into multiple networks of meanings that consequently fold and unfold, like memory.

## **Chapter II: Aleksandar Hemon's History at a Glance: Between Mediation and Witnessing**

### **I. Introduction: On Paradoxical Witnessing**

“Allow me to step out of my worn-out *historian* shoes and become a *witness* for an instant” (Hemon 102, emphasis mine), says the gregarious nameless narrator of the story “Exchange of Pleasant Words.” Throughout the short story collection, The Question of Bruno (2000), Aleksandar Hemon repeatedly casts doubt on history’s ability to conceal its ideological impulse under the guise of objectivity. In a dazzling and dizzying gesture that throws off balance both geographical and chronological coordinates, Hemon underlines the central role both mediation and secondary witnessing play in our understanding of the world around us. Hemon’s stories reconstruct and reconstitute categories such as perception, reality and visibility by stripping away the surface of representation precisely through the heightening of artifice.

By highlighting the interchange between history and fiction, Hemon explores the mechanics of representation, storytelling, and documentation. He does this primarily through foregrounding the crucial place the image holds in the process of narrative construction, be it in fiction-writing or historiography (the writing of history). Calling attention to the parallels between history and fiction, Hemon shows his readers that the interstices between these two realms determine our identity, on both the personal and the national level. Moreover, in our media-saturated society, experiencing in first person the events that shape history has become increasingly rare. For Hemon, traditional debates about the representation’s veracity and accuracy have become less relevant – he shifts the

focus to the dynamics of witnessing, and secondary witnessing in particular, in both the mass-media and literary fields. Parallel to secondary witnessing's replacing (and displacing) of first-hand experience, the status of that experience as a unique and originary phenomenon decreases. Secondary witnessing involves the cultural resources of visual representation and reproduction through which images of atrocity circulate. The assumption that these are the modes through which discursive and symbolic management of historical and present traumas occur sheds light on the mimetic system that Hemon devised in The Question of Bruno.

Significantly, Hemon's stories demonstrate the blurring of any distinction between fictionality and factuality, a blurring which he articulates through his visual representations and verbal descriptions that thematize the mass media's own obfuscation of the boundary between the personal and the political. The collection's stories repeatedly challenge both historical and literary representation by bringing together the fictive and the "real," subsequently questioning the demarcation between bearing witnessing and chronicling historical events.

Although Hemon openly separates historians and witnesses (as the opening quotation indicates), throughout The Question of Bruno he insists on erasing distinctions not only between historians and witnesses, but also between storytellers and listeners, authors and narrators, as well as viewers and readers. The audience is required to transcend its traditional, passive role in order to partake in and occasionally work to produce the reading experience Hemon desires. The audience therefore finds itself in the midst of the described action, be it as implied readers, lurking behind the narrator's correspondence with his friend Aida, caught in the siege of Sarajevo during the early

nineties (“A Coin”), or more explicitly, receiving orders from the narrator-turned-film-director, who demands at one point that the readers document his search for evidence (“The Sorge Spy Ring”). Hemon asks his audience to participate actively in his inquiry about visuality’s place in the narratives that shape both self-perception and historical consciousness; he thereby not only challenges the conventions of secondary witnessing and thus the way history is habitually encountered, but initiates a radical inquiry of the customary methods of gathering and organizing (and thereby generating) knowledge. Significantly, Hemon casts doubt on such dichotomies as fact and fiction, esoteric and central, collective and individual, by deliberately straddling the line between witnessing, bearing witness, and chronicling history. Put differently, Hemon’s mimetic system relentlessly asserts that there is no such thing as a “passive participant” – we all take part in the making of history, even when we consider ourselves merely viewers, observers.

Hemon’s stories scrutinize the significance of the image on both individual and public levels by permitting his readers visual access to the described scenes, be they fictional or historical.<sup>44</sup> Hemon’s literary montage is part of a mimetic system in which a visual plane is constituted not only by incorporating photographs into the manuscript and thus through their interaction with the verbal text, but also through the emphasis he places on ekphrasis, and on the destabilizing and undermining of the immediacy and

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<sup>44</sup> Most of Hemon’s stories amalgamate historical events with fictional descriptions. This method of storytelling that deliberately and self-reflexively presents the past in a subjective form of retelling, is typical of postmodernist writing and is often referred to as “historiographic metafiction” a term coined by Linda Hutcheon. By placing the individual at the centre of the narrative and drawing attention to the limitations imposed on the narrative merely by the event’s telling (or rather retelling, a doubling also immanent in the term *representation*, which connotes the event’s shadowing by its representation, and therefore the inevitability of distortion and incongruence): “In historiographic metafiction the very process of turning events into facts through the interpretation of archival evidence is shown to be a process of turning the traces of the past (our only access to those events today) into historical representation. In so doing, such postmodern fiction underlines the realization that ‘the past is not an “it” in the sense of an objectified entity that may either be neutrally represented in and for itself or projectively reprocessed in terms of our own narrowly “presentist” interests”’ (Hutcheon, *Politics* 57-8).

veracity of images (be they textual or verbal). Hemon repeatedly underlines both visual and verbal descriptions' susceptibility to manipulation and distortion, thereby displaying to his audience the extent to which what is considered true and factual has been filtered, modified, or framed, and is actually molded by and imbued with ideology. Subsequently, Hemon seems to assert that obviously we, the audience that is "commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules" (de Certeau, Writing xi), reinforce and perpetuate these ideological or political structures by complying with them.

In this chapter I discuss five instances in which Hemon destabilizes the mimetic system; together these examples demonstrate how crucial it is for him to alter audience's reception of images of suffering and testimonies about wars and atrocities.

Hemon's use of literary montage teaches that both visual and literary fields need to be modified so that the force of images will be reignited and thereby counter the audience's growing indifference in the political arena. The expansion of the visual and literary realms occurs by means of the images themselves being modified, once isolated from their previous surrounding and planted in a new, literary context. That we gather most of our knowledge of political and historical reality as secondary witnesses seems to be a presupposition for Hemon. Despite being unable to avoid mediation (and therefore distortion) we, Hemon suggests, should rigorously interpret the data that reaches us and constantly position ourselves vis-à-vis the images that surround us in such a way that we respond more empathically and ethically to the events from which these images emanate.

I commence my discussion with an exploration of the concept of the archive and map out some of the predominant concerns that have marked debates about the truth claims and status of testimonies in order to explain why I find Hemon's disavowal of

these concerns so radical. I then move to examine his use (or rather ab-use) of ekphrasis which becomes a key strategy for showing that gaps in knowledge unavoidably taint evidence and subsequently modify and determine our understanding of both past and present times (Section II). In this section I also discuss Hemon's employment of the theme of espionage which neatly demonstrates the blurring of fact and fiction in historical documents that brought testimony to a crisis point, a topic to which I return at the end as well, as part of my analysis of surveillance. The next section considers Hemon's alternative to the traditional vantage point on history as represented by his repeated de-centering of perspective through focusing on the imagination rather than on facts, and on the marginal instead of the conformist and the familiar. I then return to the theme of surveillance by looking at its apparent ubiquity in both communist and democratic regimes and address the way the visual field is affected by the plethora of cameras. Throughout this chapter I use the concept of literary montage to explain how Hemon's thematization of photography – through his playful ekphrasis technique, his incorporation of actual photographs, and the profusion in the work of what I refer to as “the photographic trope” – enables him to critique the circulation of images in the mass media and to turn his audience into active interpreters rather than passive readers/recipients of these images.

Hemon's writing is clearly informed by postmodern questioning of traditional forms of knowledge. Inspired by both Roland Barthes' seminal article, “The Historical Discourse,” in which the distinction between historical narration and fictional discourse is collapsed,<sup>45</sup> and Michel de Certeau's claim that “it is impossible to eliminate from the

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<sup>45</sup> Possibly one of Barthes' most familiar passages from this article is his explicit comparison of historical and literary narratives, a comparison that exposes the former's constructedness: “the narration of past

labor of historiography the ideologies that inform it” (de Certeau, Writing 28), I interpret Hemon’s stories as setting out to disturb the process of chronicling history by calling attention to its inherent fabulation (in which it is already immersed, according to both thinkers, despite historical discourse’s insistence on its truthfulness). Going back to the split between historians and witnesses in opening quotation of this chapter, one wonders what witnessing entails for Hemon. If the historian “is the one who collects not so much facts as signifiers” (Barthes, “Discourse” 137) and historiography is suspect for concealing its blind collaboration with politics, what does it mean to be a witness?<sup>46</sup> That witnessing is problematized by Hemon is evident from his fiction’s straddling the line between fact and fable. Hemon’s half-imagined, half-remembered history signals the possibility of undoing the canonized historical narrative, and of turning the literary field, both fiction writing and reading, into a political arena, where ethical, not only aesthetic questions are dealt with. Secondary witnessing is therefore challenged as well, thanks to the destabilizing of veracity and accuracy that is considered truism in critical theory today.

Hemon’s stories indeed verge on the hyperbolic and improbable, but they nevertheless derive from reality and “true” historical events. In an interview given to Bomb magazine, Hemon talks about the intimate relationship of history and literature: “both history and fiction have to be narrated, and it matters a lot who the narrators are and what the conditions of narration are. The way to put it is that history and fiction are

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events, commonly subject in our culture, since the Greeks, to the sanction of historical ‘science,’ placed under the imperious warrant of the ‘real,’ justified by the principles of ‘rational’ exposition –does this narration truly differ... from imaginary narrative such as one finds in the epic, the novel and the drama?”(Barthes, “Discourse” 127).

<sup>46</sup> Another question that rises from complicating the relationship between history and testimony by casting doubt on one’s capacity to maintain objectivity and stressing the diminishing status of truth claim is whether it is at all possible to escape implicit political constraints. I will address these challenges in my discussion of the archive.

continuous, they flow into each other, and the overlapping zone – the exchange zone – is the most interesting and the most dangerous” (Berman).<sup>47</sup> Like a memory, which changes every time it is recounted, in The Question of Bruno history is retold, re-(de)scribed, and therefore postulated not as a unified linear entity safeguarded in history books, but as a narrative in flux, one that requires imagination. The extent to which fictionalization and narrativization are intrinsic to both history and testimony is addressed in this chapter, together with an inquiry into the impact secondary witnessing has on both experience and consciousness (individual and national), especially in relation to photography’s status as evidence, a challenge which is revealed through Hemon’s witty usage of this medium.<sup>48</sup>

Let us now go back to the quotation from “Exchange of Pleasant Words” which illustrates Hemon’s understanding of the delicate relationship between history and testimony. “Allow me to step out of my worn-out historian shoes and become a witness for an instant,” says the narrator, in his description of the festive family gathering, entitled “The Hemoniad,”<sup>49</sup> in order to signify the event’s immense importance for the extended Hemon family: “I can attest that there was a moment of comprehensive silence – a fly was heard buzzing stubbornly against the window pane, fire was cracking in the stove, someone’s bowels disrespectfully grumbled – a moment when everyone looked

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<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Berman, “Interview with Aleksandar Hemon,” Bomb Magazine 72 (Summer 2000), accessed on October 6th, 2006. <<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/72/articles/2328>>

<sup>48</sup> The deconstruction of knowledge and the understanding that history is laden with ideology and not at all an objective science are especially important for this chapter; however, issues of witnessing, secondary witnessing, and photography’s privileged relationship with reality (and its supposed truth claims) are problematized by all three authors whose works I analyze and will be dealt with in other chapters as well.

<sup>49</sup> The opening lines of this section underline the event’s singularity and its celebration as an event of such magnitude that not only can it take place only once, but from its very conception, it is considered ‘epic.’ The resonance of the family gathering’s name with Homer’s Iliad also contributes to the event’s idealization: “Inspired by the success of the Sarajevo Olympiad and the newly established ancient history, the family council, headed righteously by my father, decided to have an epic get-together, which was to be held only once, and was to be recorded as the Hemoniad” (102).



into the future marked by the Hemoniad, the event that would make even our Homeric cousins envious” (102).

Homeric cousins notwithstanding, for Hemon, becoming a witness rather than a historian entails even more inconsistencies and self-contradictory statements. Like Sebald (and Foer, who will be discussed in the following chapter), Hemon demonstrates to his audience that he chose to employ a deliberately flawed mimetic system, spearheaded by an incompatible narrator. Hemon’s narrator,<sup>50</sup> who repeatedly presents himself as “the designated though inept historian” (100), attests to a moment of quiet that erupted in the chaotic event – a moment of supposed insignificance, one that is not quite the expected subject matter or first choice material for historians. Paradoxically, despite insisting on “a comprehensive silence,” the narrator brings three examples of noise heard during that profound moment – a fly struggling against a window pane; fire cracking in the stove; and a family member’s inner bowel sounds. Nevertheless, the significance of this moment of (almost) utter silence lies in the promise it holds of a collective, bright future intensified by a mutual awareness of importance. A collective awareness that this moment is about to be (or already is) idealized and consequently turn into myth is shared by the family. Hemon’s narrator gives his full attention to an instance that cannot be fully articulated, understood, or quantified in a verifiable way. Witnessing, it is implied, has to do with speculations, feelings, thoughts and sensations, all projected towards the future. Hemon ironically situates witnessing at the threshold between past and future instead of following the more traditional view that considers testimony as grounded in the past. This

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<sup>50</sup> Because *The Question of Bruno* is a short story collection it is not evident that all of the stories are told from the perspective of a single narrator. One can, however, assume that thanks to the stylistic and thematic overlaps, the stories are likely recounted by one narrator, who also shares much with the author (for one, his last name is Hemon and their biography is similar, being both born in Sarajevo and immigrating to the US before the war broke in 1992).

principle of openness accords with the shifting, unstable nature of the text and the interrelations between the stories. Together with the invitation to the readers to become participants in the fabulation of the narrative(s), the interstices between the stories, the play between the visual and the verbal layers of the text, and the heightened awareness of the artifice – are all constitutive parts of Hemon’s literary montage.

As I will soon show, the way Hemon interweaves themes and interconnects his stories through the predominance of a visual layer in the text enables him to inquire into the differences between history and fiction by repeatedly showing the shortcomings and limitations of both. Meanwhile, it is important to keep in mind that testimony and witnessing are already profoundly problematic terms: as a consequence of the post-structuralist radical challenge to notions such as objectivity and truth, witnesses’ credibility and coherence are immediately questioned. The reliance on memory, which is intrinsically unstable, further problematizes testimony’s status and as a result ethical issues enter. In Testimony: Crises in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History, Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub examine the relationship among testimony, witnessing and memory in both literary texts and Holocaust survivors’ testimonials,<sup>51</sup> offering insights into “how issues of biography and history are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are re-inscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text” (xv). Acknowledging the crisis in witnessing that genocide and the Holocaust in particular brought, due to the elimination of their victims,

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<sup>51</sup> Felman and Laub’s research moves from the written page (starting with nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers and theorists who foreground trauma, such as Dostoevsky, Freud and Mallarmé) to videotaped Holocaust testimonials and concludes with Claude Lanzman’s documentary film *Shoah*. Facing the Holocaust as “an event eliminating its own witness,” which brought forth a radical crisis of witnessing, Felman and Laub meditate on the status of trauma in history vis-à-vis the acts of writing and reading, speech and survival, literature and evidence.

Giorgio Agamben's term "the aporia of historical knowledge" elucidates the subsequent problematizing of the authority of testimony as evidence.<sup>52</sup> Agamben recognizes the rift separating knowledge and understanding from the unimaginable, unquantifiable character of some historical events, and also the paradox that consists in their description – a paradox immanent in testimony's structure.<sup>53</sup> He refers to the lacunae of history, to the impossibility for survivors to bear witness that can be contained in language. This testimony, in Agamben's terms, in its radicality is both unsayable and unarchivable, and therefore transcends the already complicated categories of forgetting and remembering: "Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority in respect to the archive – that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting" (158).

In this chapter we shall see how the problematizing of the status of factual discourse and truth, vis-à-vis the destabilizing of witnessing (by being more aware of testimony's complicated relationship with fiction) brought witnessing to a crisis. Felman and Laub felt it was urgent to redefine the terms of testifying and of bearing witness that are closely bound up (as Agamben also notes) with issues of truth, ethics and responsibility:

To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth... . To testify ... is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and

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<sup>52</sup> Post-structuralism's continuous attempt to strip away from the historical narrative its semblance of independence and omniscience is further complicated by the challenges deconstructionist thinking posed to both memory and testimony, and to the relationship between them. Questions regarding the reliability of witnessing as a basis for historical truth arise especially in relation to concerns stemming from the decreasing number of survivors, the possible inaccuracies and discrepancies in the details of testimonies, and, significantly, memory's inherent unreliability and instability.

<sup>53</sup> According to Agamben, the attempt to understand and contain the horror of the camps and the "Final Solution" is destined to fail: "we can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them" (12).

remembered... .To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences (204).

But for Hemon, bearing witness” does not necessarily entail taking “responsibility... for truth.” In The Question of Bruno, his narrator keeps reminding readers about his unreliability and of the circumstances that prevent him from being an appropriate historiographer: he is tired, drunk, inept, or the technological equipment is to blame. Whatever the reason, he thereby elucidates the fact that both written and visual kinds of evidence are not to be trusted and that he is far from being an ideal candidate for recording past events for the sake of future generations.

Hemon takes the categories of narrative, memory, fiction and history and stirs them up, committing himself to their hybrid mixing in his book which indeed inscribes a historical passage, a decentralized historical journey, through the twentieth century. Yet this account is one of absence, incompleteness and uncertainty, since most of the described events were not directly experienced by Hemon. Images -- be they photographs reproduced in an encyclopedia or in the printed press, or moving images captured on films or brought into our living-room via news television -- unavoidably mediate and thereby block our access to direct knowledge and experience of the world around us. Secondary witnessing<sup>54</sup> is now dominating our understanding of our reality, of its politics and history. Hemon delineates the technological advent of the visual apparatus to underscore the omnipresence of the image in our media-saturated culture and our

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<sup>54</sup> In her book, Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing (2002), Dora Apel theorizes the problem that both artists and scholars encounter when they address the effects of the Holocaust and related historical events on a generation that did not witness them in person, but, instead, had to encounter them by reading or listening to narratives. Thus, writes the critic Liliane Weissberg in her review of Apel’s book, “the demand to remember the Holocaust has turned into the question of how to decipher the verbal, psychological, material residue with which all of us still live” (488).

inability to think of reality without these images that not only represent the historical narrative but also shape it.

A related concept that requires discussion is the archive - “the general system of the formation and the transformation of statements.”<sup>55</sup> The term “archive” stands for the process of conservation, selection, and ordering, but also of destruction, and therefore inescapably results in memory’s politicization. Jacques Derrida draws attention precisely to this aporia of the archive, revealing the inseparability of the past and the future: “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (Archive 16). From a different angle, Agamben considers the archive to be the “storehouse that catalogues the traces of what has been said, to consign them for future memory” (143). He shifts the weight to the act of utterance, the possibility of language, or rather, the sayability or unsayability of experience (which for him also entails the enunciation of the subject). The act of utterance is the foundation of Agamben’s theory of testimony in The Remnants of Auschwitz, as much as it is a crucial component in Derrida’s philosophy. It is evident, therefore, that future generations’ historical consciousness – their memory of the past – is determined by the archive’s contents. Hemon’s The Question of Bruno addresses the artificiality and insufficiency of archiving: Hemon estranges both textual and visual evidence and incessantly ridicules his narrator’s/narrators’ attempt to document and preserve the past. Any trace of nostalgia for

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<sup>55</sup> See Foucault’s The Order of Things 130.

a past where materials were supposedly organized in a coherent and complete manner is thwarted, mocked as a desire that is impossible to fulfill.<sup>56</sup>

This fantasy of keeping the past safe as a whole, comprehensive entity, is marked in the etymology of the word *archive*. Deriving from the Greek word *arche* which signifies “beginning” (among other possible meanings), *archive* later stood for, not only the beginning of knowledge, but for the pre-Socratic philosophers for “the fundamental, underlying source of the being of all things” (according to the definition in the The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy goes). It is thus, for Agamben, precisely because of its liminal position between the said and unsaid, “the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech...” (157). Hemon does not directly address the possibility of language and testimony after the Holocaust the way that Agamben, or Felman and Laub, do. For him the archive is what frames everyday life and the myths that surround and shape it. Hemon’s ambitious prose seems to take pleasure in deliberately sabotaging acceptable modes of historical narration. In The Question of Bruno he vehemently resists the archive and shakes its foundations. Hemon lays bare how stories and narratives are created and recreated every time they are told, thereby dictating how and what will be remembered. His fiction resonates with a cynical Yugoslav remark, quoted by Geoffrey Hartman in his Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity: “to influence us, it does not matter whether something is true or false, it must only be clear” (29). The political sphere’s consistent lies have taught the Yugoslav people not to trust media-

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<sup>56</sup> A good example of the narrator’s sober gaze and lack of nostalgia for the past can be seen in the following lines: “I have had doubts, however, along with some of my younger cousins and a very close relative. I have had doubts and fears that indeed we could have committed the terrible sin of sniggering at someone else’s suffering. Perhaps that’s why we emigrated, again, in the 1990s, from Bosnia to the United States. Perhaps this is the punishment: we have to live these half-lives of people who cannot forget what they used to be and who are afraid of being addressed in a foreign language, not being able any longer to utter anything truly meaningful” (101).

disseminated propaganda. The Question of Bruno sets out to demonstrate how both family stories and collective history are made and unmade by memory's elasticity. Hemon's literary montage repeatedly exposes the intimate relationship between memory and images, revealing the crucial place that visibility holds in culture, be it that of a democratic or communist society.<sup>57</sup> By underscoring the disjunctions, improbabilities and constructed nature of historiography's mechanics, Hemon prompts his readers to break free of the archive's limiting influence and to reinvent their own myths, their own version of history.

Hemon's obsession with the constructedness of knowledge is articulated in his repeated attempts to de-naturalize history and to emphasize the place of the individual. His account is therefore one of transience and contingency, highlighting the uncertain and the imprecise. His account works against the archive, by showing the impossibility of eliminating the witnesses' subjectivity, their point of view and their alleged circumstances. In their introduction Felman and Laub discuss the way testimonies are usually encountered, a way which shapes not only their reception, but how each culture and society articulates its sense of truth:<sup>58</sup> "It is the most familiar notion of the testimony, the one which we encounter daily through its usage by the media and are thus the most prepared for. ... [W]e came first to believe... that the essence of testimony is historical, and that its function is to record events and to report the facts of a historical occurrence" (8).

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<sup>57</sup> In my next section I will elaborate on the relationship between visibility and history and on the ways in which Hemon seeks to reconfigure it.

<sup>58</sup> Felman and Laub contest this familiar notion of testimony by showing the complicated dynamic between language and truth and witnessing and surviving.

Hemon's stories thus draw on and simultaneously resist the demarcation between witnessing and documenting (considering the latter as the task of the historiographer), signaling to readers that both historians and witnesses interpret and recreate their materials. Hemon's mimetic system promotes, and yet cautions against, the lure of images and the immediacy with which they are taken as providing a "privileged historical viewpoint that gives us a better way of knowing, better than earlier observers could" (Roskill and Carrier xiii).

Throughout the short story collection Hemon underscores the unavoidability of mediation, demonstrating time and again that living in the twentieth century involves becoming (at least) twice removed from the events that make history. Despite and maybe because of this growing divide between experience and memory, Hemon investigates what are usually considered binary oppositions -- passivity and activity, participation and observation -- illustrating how deeply these terms run in our culture. For Hemon these dichotomies are not so obvious. His mimetic system sets out to exhibit to his audience that there is no such thing as passivity. Even if everything is mediated, even if our historical understanding is partial and depends on manipulated and distorted materials, we must repeatedly place ourselves actively in the political arena for being passive means compliance with hegemony.

## **II. Visuality and History – Calling Attention to Images' Presence within Narratives**

Encyclopedias can be regarded as useful tools for detecting traces of a culture's governing ideology. Lynn Hunt writes in her article "Where Have All the Theories



Gone?” that current encyclopedias are no longer governed by “the encyclopedic impulse that Diderot’s 18th-century Encyclopédie [expressed], which announced its aim to mobilize all of human knowledge as an arm of social criticism.” Instead, she continues, “they usually represent therefore a summing up of what has been accomplished rather than a forging forward.” “The Sorge Spy Ring”<sup>59</sup> is the only story in Hemon’s collection that reproduces photographs and includes them as an integral part of the narrative. This story plays with the conventions of documentation and with the concept of the archive on both thematic and formal levels, challenging both by the employment of photography. Hemon’s insertion of photographs enables him to unsettle the indexicality and the truth claims traditionally attributed to photographs.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas a similar gesture can be attributed to Sebald’s and Foer’s montages, the number of photographs physically inserted into Hemon’s short story collection is significantly smaller. This is one of the reasons why Hemon’s literary montage works somewhat differently than those of the two other authors whose works I analyze. Most of the word and image dynamic in Hemon’s text relies on the verbal evocation of images (since photos are physically present only in the one story) whereas the literary montages of Foer and Sebald really depend on the actual incorporation of photographs and the way the text refers to, avoids, undermines, or elaborates upon the visual layer as well as on the interaction the inserted images engage with other reproduced images. Literary montages incite new meanings by new juxtapositions: they set in motion what is implied, hinted at,

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<sup>59</sup> From here on I shall refer to the story “The Sorge Spy Ring” as “SSR.”

<sup>60</sup> Charles Sanders Pierce considers photographs as “very instructive” because “we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. . . . [T]hey were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection” (105) which he refers to as indices. What is most striking about Pierce’s discussion of the photograph is his rhetoric that reflects his positivist attitude and certitude regarding photography’s ability to represent reality accurately.

or almost erased, igniting interplay between memory and vision by superimposing themes and details, thereby, signaling the possibility of creating new narrative threads. Readers therefore become aware of the compositional principle of the work, through the openness of the montage form “with its philosophical play of distances, transitions and intersections, its perpetually shifting contexts and ironic juxtapositions” (Lane 155). What is also significant in “SSR,” and what becomes evident right from the story’s opening paragraph, is that Hemon employs both ekphrasis and the incorporated photographs to foreground the narrator’s subjective perception of reality, thereby radically destabilizing photography’s supposed truth claim. In other words, the freedom the narrator takes in describing photos enables readers to discern the disjunction between reality and his understanding of it. The narrator constantly returns to and widens the gap between what he actually sees in his encyclopedia entitled The Spies of WWII and his interpretation of both its images and reality. The growing fissure between reality and the way the narrator perceives it is accelerated as the story progresses and is fueled by the narrator’s imaginative use of ekphrasis. As I will show in this section, some aspects of Hemon’s literary montage depend on the contradiction between the narrator’s perception of reality or his vivid imagination (narrative-creating images) and the playful ekphrasis (a verbal description of, or meditation upon, visual representation) that exposes the limits of the photographic medium.

The unique structure of “SSR” illustrates to readers how the interstices between words and images can confuse our meaning-making process: they expose the degree to which subjectivity (and specifically in this story, imagination) determines our understanding of the world around us. The story contains two narratives in one: on the

top of the page is what seems to be a semi-autobiographical account brought to us by a child narrator we assume to be the author, specifying Hemon's own childhood suspicions that his father was a Soviet agent.<sup>61</sup> The second narrative literally takes place in the margins, that is, physically in the footnotes: it is a series of historical footnotes in which unfolds the story of Richard Sorge, a German diplomat in Japan, who is said to have passed on Nazi secrets to Moscow only to have his warnings of imminent invasion disregarded by Stalin.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the double story line, and to add to the readers' confusion, the narrative incorporates photographs, reproduced in black and white and without captions, physically located in between the two narratives.<sup>63</sup> The photographs are separated from the body of the text by a broken line, just like the one separating the two storylines, so it is therefore almost impossible to determine to which of the narratives they belong. Yet, I would argue that the photos cannot be considered as standing independently, forming an autonomous narrative (a tendency that I trace in both Sebald's and Foer's literary works). Rather, they operate in a mode that marks their subordination to the textual narrative: the photos therefore seem to function as illustrations of either the autobiographical or the historical narrative. Potentially, the photographs may be even

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<sup>61</sup> In an interview with Hemon published in *The Guardian*, Julian Borger adds that the first narrative is "fictionalized by a *dénouement* in which the poor man [the father – R.M.] is actually carted off to jail."

<sup>62</sup> Even without consulting additional resources, we can see that Hemon's description of Sorge's life differs from the accepted version. Hemon incorporates imaginary and improbable events and interweaves them with biographical details. In addition he revisits themes and motifs brought up in other stories and integrates some of his fictive characters, describing (or quoting) historical figures in impossible, or at least, improbable situations relating to their relationship with Sorge. See, for example, the reference to Sorge in "The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders": Alphonse Kauders said to Richard Sorge: 'I doubt there exists an emptiness greater than that of empty streets. Therefore, it is better to have some tanks or bodies on the streets, if nothing else is possible. Because anything is better than nothing'" (33).

<sup>63</sup> As we have seen, the planting of photographic images within a work that can be easily considered as "postmodern" (paradoxically, the employment of images immediately renders these texts as postmodern) is shared by all the texts that I analyze in my dissertation. Incorporating the images not only renders these books meta-literary – due to the authors' deliberate interruption of the reading experience-- but invites an interrogation of the relationship between narrative and images and a closer examination of visuality as such, by looking at the different ways it is constituted by text and images.

linked to both narratives, thanks to the ambiguity of their placement in the literal midst of the personal narrative and the historical one.

Unlike Sebald's employment of photographs, where the ambiguity of the reproduced photographs is maintained by the deliberate attempt to maintain their elusiveness (retaining the difficulty of fixing their meaning), Hemon's insertion of photos works differently. It seems that the photos we find reproduced in "SSR" are suitable for both narratives, and yet we know that because of photography's indexicality, there can be only one "right" context for the photographs. Their insertion questions the conventional hierarchy -- photographs' traditional subordination to texts. That the photos do not function according to the logic of illustrations (in being suitable to both narratives) neatly demonstrates the elasticity of knowledge and of historical evidence. Since "SSR" is dedicated to spying games, but is essentially a retelling of the child's fantasy, Hemon openly juxtaposes the careful gathering of data (performed by readers, historians and spies) with the fancy of the imagination (that has impinged on the child's perception of reality and further destabilizes the meaning-making process and the narrator's reliability).

It can be argued that the idea of (and desire for) a "legend" -- a spy's story of his imaginary identity, "the complete cover story developed for an operative" (Bennett 162) - resonates with the sense of loss experienced by both Hemon and his gregarious narrator, since both their lives were abruptly cut off when the war broke out in Yugoslavia in the autumn of 1991. The irretrievability of life before the war may have inspired the structuring of the story which suggests that a permanent split is inherent not only in one's identity but also between images and words, history and reality. The two storylines of

“SSR” fuse the very private and speculative with verifiable historical details.<sup>64</sup> They intersect and interconnect with each other but also unmistakably convey a sense of rupture by impeding the story’s coherence and interrupting the reading process.<sup>65</sup> The reproduced photographs do not contribute to the grounding of the stories in a specific historical setting, but rather highlight the fantastical elements immanent in ‘facts.’ By bringing the fictional and the factual into play, Hemon collapses his stories’ “reality effect,”<sup>66</sup> literature’s semblance of truth or reality, which is further destabilized through his strategy of ekphrasis. It is interesting to note that perhaps Hemon follows the tradition of ekphrastic description that Barthes describes in his essay: the concept of history during Antiquity could involve gross anachronisms and fantastic elements as part of its conventions, its point being aesthetic pleasure and not verisimilitude.<sup>67</sup> Choosing

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<sup>64</sup> In the interview given to *The Guardian*’s Julian Borger, Hemon says that “my previous life was my ‘legend’. I could say anything about my life, and no one would know it wasn’t true. I didn’t do it, because I was worried I would get out of control.”

<sup>65</sup> Hemon articulates this sense of immanent doubling that visibility initiates, a split which is further strengthened by one’s feelings of dislocation and displacement – be they those of an immigrant or a spy – in a short monologue supposedly spoken by Sorge: “when you’re being watched, you assume a role and play it, even when you sleep – even when you dream. Most of my life I played Richard Sorge, and I was someone else, somewhere else. The ubiquitous surveillance makes everything look differently – you see things through someone else’s eyes. Everything is more present – more real – because you see nothing alone” (55).

<sup>66</sup> The dividing line between fiction and facts is also at the centre of Barthes’ article “The Reality Effect” (1968), where he points out that the description from Antiquity to the Middle Ages did not serve to report truths at all: “description in this period is constrained by no realism; its truth is unimportant (or even its verisimilitude)” (144). In his essay Barthes analyses the function of detailed accounts in realistic novels. Antiquity, Barthes points out, believed that the real had no chance to meet the probable, i.e., representation. He argues that Modernity revises this view by creating new rules of representation. A specific detail in a description becomes a sign reduced to but two functions -- the reference and the signified. The sole reason a given object is mentioned in an account is that object itself. Barthes calls this the referential illusion, which produces the reality effect.

<sup>67</sup> In *Spectacle and Society in Livy’s History*, Andrew Feldherr evokes a tradition eminent in Hellenistic times that regarded visibility as particularly significant for historiography (5). He names both Cicero, Thucydides and Plutarch as examples of historians calling on historians to arouse emotionally their audience’s feelings, thereby arousing their pleasure, by making their “narrative an image, as though it were a painting” (5). The need for “imaginative recreation and inferential elaboration from the facts” (Fornara 134) enticed historians to overlook issues of historical responsibility and to place a strong emphasis on inclusion of “marvels ‘worthy of relation’ and it was regarded as proper to the genre to retail fabulous reports and fictions if they were the authentic expressions of learned informants” (121). Fornara adds that “fabulous reports” and “fictions” were exploited specifically to evoke pleasure (121).

espionage and fantasy as his subject matter, Hemon revisits this ekphrastic tradition to widen the rift between historical truth and literature, and between images and “Truth,” unmasking the fictional elements in history, and thereby contesting hegemony.<sup>68</sup>

The interrelations between fiction and history are a recurring concern in postmodernist thought. In “Is History a Form of Fiction?” Jacques Rancière compares the logic of facts to that of fiction and “the modes of intelligibility specific to the construction of stories” (35) to modes used for understanding historical phenomena. For him, “writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth” (38): “History” therefore is not simply made up of the stories we tell ourselves, but reflects the bond between “the logic of the stories and the ability to act as historical agents” (39). Rancière insists on the importance of the visual, but only insofar as the visible goes with the categories of the thinkable and the possible in their reconfiguration of the sensible, which “breaks down categories that define what is considered to be obvious” (40). To me, Hemon’s fiction does precisely this by deploying the visual to undermine both the transparency of hegemony and the immediacy of the image. His word and image dynamic and especially his repeated employment of ekphrasis – which clearly does not correspond to the laws of physics or reason -- seek to deconstruct the relationship between visuality and history, thereby subverting the image’s indexicality, and as a consequence, its linkage to truth.

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<sup>68</sup> See Hemon’s answer to Laura Miller in “More Spilled Spaghetti”: “It’s remarkable how much spying is done in the light of the day and doesn’t have to be surreptitious. A lot of the information Sorge got was from the newspapers and conversations, accessible to anyone who would pay attention. It was information anyone could get; it was just a question of how to organize it, which is a process remarkably similar to fiction.”

Whereas the child narrator describes five photographs that are included in The Spies of WWII, only one image from this group seems to be reproduced in the manuscript we actually read. Of course, readers do not have access to the original book and therefore have to rely on the narrator's description of the missing images and on his statement that the reproduced image is indeed included in the encyclopedia. The younger narrator's voice moves quickly from one image to another, interpreting the photographs he sees, his commentary differing from the picture's actual, physical details, by focusing on what cannot be seen, on emotions and speculations. The voice of the mature narrator constantly undercuts the storyline and interferes with the reading process, lamenting his (lost) naivety. The power that images once had over him is now gone, and he considers himself to be immune to images' lure. This scene is evocative of the fascination of the young Marlowe, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, with maps and the lure that a snake-like river winding its way into the Belgian Congo had for him.<sup>69</sup>

Like Marlowe whose imagination colors the information the map provides, Hemon's narrator does not limit his ekphrasis to a "plain" description of what is actually included in the photographs before him. Rather, he refers to what is outside their frames and adds

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<sup>69</sup> "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration... but there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (22). In this passage Conrad sets up two of his novel's predominant motifs: he introduces to the readers the notion of darkness, through which he illustrates how easily one can lose him or herself in the realms of imagination. The more mature and sober Marlowe, just like the nameless narrator of "SSR," reveals his premonition of being trapped. Marlowe's fantasy world is a dangerous place, a place of darkness, which poses a threat to him by clouding his vision even before he physically visits there. The readers are told, warned, from the novella's outset that his perception of reality is questionable to begin with. Thanks to Garry Leonard for pointing out this passage and drawing a parallel between maps and photographs and the way these visual props are tools for both authors to demonstrate their characters' faulty judgment.

details concerning the physical sensations, moods, and supposed thoughts of the one photographed.

Reaching out of the photos' physical boundaries, the young narrator not only transcends the photographs' limits, but also goes beyond what is visible, by adapting his vision and consequently the photographs' details to a narrative he makes up. For example, once he narrows his eyes, the narrator sees the resemblance between a group of armed soldiers and "black-and-white butterflies" (43). He imagines that the leader of the "Rote Kappelle" (The Red Orchestra),<sup>70</sup> is handcuffed, although his hands are not included in the photo ["I just knew from his face that his hands (swollen wrists, bloody, burning trenches under the cuffs) were handcuffed" (44)]. Finally, his remark on the "doppelgänger" of General Montgomery also demonstrates the impact of the narrator's imagination on his understanding of reality. The double's photograph includes "just the head, looking at me with odd pensiveness, as if painfully aware that he could never be General Montgomery" (44).

The phrase "as if," repeated twice in this paragraph, is of importance here, explicitly marking the child's imagination's active role and the pleasure he derives from it. This preference for seeing more than what actually appears in the photograph is echoed later when the narrator demands his audience abandon their safe and passive position as readers and visualize actively the events described in the narrative. Positioned between the visual and verbal descriptions, the latter containing inconsistencies and improbabilities in themselves, readers are invited to compare the photographs with both storylines and actively participate in the construction of the stories' visuality. The

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<sup>70</sup> The "Rote Kappelle" or "Red Orchestra" was a German resistance group, led by Leonard Trepper, which opposed the Third Reich and was mislabeled as Communist spies by the Gestapo (Bennett 189).



materiality of the reading process highlights the book as a surface on which images are superimposed: the opening of a visual field and the hyperboles and disjunctions featured in the verbal narrative enable concepts “to double back on each other, so that chronological divisions in no way correspond to [a] thematic one” (Lane 157). The principle of montage is activated once the visual field is expanded (through the text as well as through the insertion of photos) to include the readers, in a *mise-en-abyme* gesture. Coined by André Gide, the *mise-en-abyme*, the placing into infinity or into an abyss, denotes an internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work. A good example is the Chinese-box effect that often suggests an infinite regress, i.e., an endless succession of internal duplications. In this scene, readers visualize the child looking at photographs, but since they actually have some of the photographs in front of them, the word and image disjunctions reveal the narrativization and subsequent fictionalization of images, exposing this medium’s susceptibility to distortion and the relinquishing of photography’s reality effect.<sup>71</sup>

The photograph of the spy Sorge (appendix 6), on whom the second storyline focuses, is described in elaborate detail and therefore offers a good case-study for understanding the story’s complex word and image dynamics. Interestingly, Richard

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<sup>71</sup> “SSR” clearly goes against photography’s indexical logic: most of the photographs exceed their limited reference frame (emanating from a specific reality for which it serves as proof or grounding). Being reproduced physically between the two narratives they belong to both or neither of the storylines, thereby triggering (and exposing) the work of imagination that is at play in the conjunction of text and images. In *On Photography* Susan Sontag discusses the problematics photographic images pose, being both an extension of a certain reality and an artifact that invites narrativization, and therefore fictionalization: “a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (154). The two examples that Sontag chooses are evocative and heavily theorized concepts. The death mask stands for the relationship between death, art and the work of memory, and the footprint in the sand from *Robinson Crusoe* becomes a springboard for Jacques Lacan for his discussion of signifiers, traces and being in his ninth Seminar.

Sorge's first name is not mentioned even once throughout the biographical storyline,<sup>72</sup> but this omission is easily missed due to the story's sophisticated structure and the plethora of details, some fictive, others historically accurate, provided by the narrator. It seems that most of the photographs incorporated into the story belong to the Sorge narrative, but their positioning at the page's centre (while the Sorge narrative is developed in the lower margins, in the footnotes) is deliberately meant to confuse readers. The reproduced photographs highlight the overlapping of the two storylines: the way that each narrative interacts with the incorporated images sheds light on the interplay between words and images and on the ease with which images are politically employed, perpetuating hegemony by reinforcing canonized narratives.

Going back to the child's reading of the Sorge image that dramatizes his unique perspective and fascination with spy games, we realize that the older narrator's distrust of historical documents' accuracy undermines his younger self's naivety (since the story is written in retrospect). The child reads anxiety in the somber face of Sorge and insists that the image was cropped: "The picture was obviously retouched: Sorge's anxiety was burdened with someone else's curtained body. One could see the sharp cut at the verge of his collar, where his head, guillotined in a shadowy laboratory, was attached to a headless trenchcoat - plus an inexplicable excess of neck-flesh on the left side" (45). The narrator's description and word-choice reveal his enthusiasm for the violence and

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<sup>72</sup> Yet, Sorge's reproduced passport (appendix 7) that features his picture and a signature is, together with the first picture of Sorge, and these not only ground the narrative by attesting to Sorge's being a historical, actual figure and not a fictive one, but are also the place where the two narratives explicitly come together. However, the reproduction quality is so poor and the photograph is so grainy, that the contrast between the clear signature and beautiful handwriting, and the erased face, whose features are barely distinct, is striking. The inclusion of the passport page is evocative of Sebald's first prose-fiction *Vertigo* (*Gefühle.Schwindel*), where the author's passport is also reproduced. Sebald's passport has been cancelled, and its reproduction appears with a line that voids the passport and covers parts of Sebald's face. Both examples complicate the relationship between fact and fiction and challenge the status of photography as validating one's existence, due to the obstructing of visual details/visuality that both passport photographs bring about.

mystery inherent in espionage. In a story obsessed with visuality and the little details that construct reality, it is interesting that no physical features are described and the child only refers to Sorge's clothes (or those of the man whose body is attached to Sorge's face). It is not at all obvious, however, that the man wears a trench coat: he might simply be wearing a suit. Another possible slippage is the impossibility of determining whether the image was in fact retouched – the color differences could be attributed to the reproduction quality or to the lighting conditions. The manipulation or distortion of the photograph becomes insignificant here; readers have already encountered several examples where the child's imagination permeated the photographs' descriptions. Clearly, the child narrator privileges his own interpretation of the images over what is unquestionably present and included within the photographs' frames.

The paragraph ends with the adult narrator's sober voice that undercuts the eagerness of the child's imagination: "but I believed that Sorge was in that trenchcoat."<sup>73</sup> I believed that he was about to enter the door-aparition behind his back. I believed in the totality of that photograph, I believed in the apparent, and I trusted books. I was ten" (45). The mature narrator's disappointment and his repeating of the phrase "I believed" (that stands in contrast to his present set of beliefs, as we can gather from his bitter tone) reflect his disillusionment about the supposed certitude of both photographs and documents. By widening the gaps between reality and the "SSR" narrator's perception, Hemon continues his investigation of the interrelations between visuality, fictionalization, and narrativization. Two strategies that work together to deconstruct the immediate, almost compulsive linkage of text and images reveal this fissure: the playful

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<sup>73</sup> Trench coats, of course, are a signifier of both spies and detectives, and are immediately associated with the attempt to hide oneself and merge within the one's surroundings.

ekphrasis and the confusion resulting from the insertion of photographs. The interplay of images and narratives unsettles the bond between fiction and historiography: we can deduce that in Hemon's literary montage, reporting on or recording events *and* their fictionalization are tantamount to the same thing, a proposition that consequently problematizes both historiography and bearing witness, as I have argued in the previous section. Espionage becomes a trope of the problematic double bind between fictionalization and documentation since spying, which demands the highest accuracy possible, is rendered a creative task, comparable with storytelling. Unfolded in the footnotes of the story, Richard Sorge's life story parallels spies and writers through the narrator's assertion that "Sorge's spying meant patiently collecting diverse, and sometime ostensibly trite, information" (48).

A paragraph supposedly written in an article published in a literary journal - Literaturnaya Gazeta<sup>74</sup> - by one Viktor Venykov<sup>75</sup> nicely conflates spying with fiction writing:

a spy is above all a man of politics, who must be able to grasp, analyze and connect in his mind events which seemingly have no connection. He must have the breadth of the historian, the meticulous powers of observation, the spirit and the mind of Tolstoy. Espionage is a continuous and demanding labour and the spy must create himself in that process. (49)

The readers cannot know for a fact whether the article's writer is an actual person, and if this article, named "The Man Who Never Knew Enough," was actually published.<sup>76</sup> The

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<sup>74</sup> Literaturnaya Gazeta is one of Russia's longest running literary journals whose first issue came out on 1830. Literaturnaya Gazeta was the first to publish Gogol's work.

<sup>75</sup> Venykov is most likely another extension of both narrator and author: a man of the same name happens to visit the father in the main storyline, an episode that reinforces my suspicion that Venykov does not really exist outside of the story's fictional world, and did not happen to publish articles on a real-life literary journal, such as the Literaturnaya Gazeta.

<sup>76</sup> The doubling of the letter V, which appears in both first and last names of Viktor Venykov, is evocative of Humbert Humbert, Lolita's sardonic narrator, who is famous for making up multiple witty pseudonyms for himself.

analogy made between spies and authors implies that both take materials from life and reorganize them, molding them into a narrative. Like writers who find their identity through their writing (one becomes an author by writing, and therefore his or her identity is necessarily determined by his or her occupation), spies have to fabricate their own identity, their own legend. Knowing that he is constantly being watched and that being exposed to surveillance, he is aware that one wrong action is sufficient to bring about his demise: for the spy visuality plays a chief role in espionage. Spy-work is therefore comparable with performance, or with theatre in general, where one assumes a role and plays it [as Sorge's supposed monologue quoted in footnote 13 suggests (55)]. Venykov's definition of the spy as amalgamating an historian, a keen observer, and Tolstoy is appended to a scene where photography fuels the child's spy fantasy. By drawing on this medium's indexicality, Hemon juxtaposes the inventiveness and creativity of both spies and authors in order to demonstrate the degree to which both photography and documentation play in the margins of truth and fiction.

The main storyline, where the child's elaborate spy fantasy unfolds, is complicated by the use of parentheses that enable the narrator to invite the readers to join him. Describing his father's supposed actions, the child, and the readers with him, shadow the father:

I was imagining my father being somewhere else, in a black trenchcoat, stealthily walking down a dark hall... entering the room (my dreamy gaze passing, like a camera, through the wall, following him), finding the desk drawer in the darkness...taking the matchbox out of his pocket, taking the file out, photographing the documents. (48)

Hemon invokes the scene, placing a strong emphasis on the visual realm, following the conventions of detective novels or spy films: the father carries an advanced spying device

(the matchbox) but the child's gaze (comparable with the narrator's omniscience) surpasses the power of his father's equipment. The child's eyes too are presented as a camera, one so technologically advanced that it can go through walls and see beyond them. The readers' gaze is aligned with the child's, who encourages readers to follow him, thus dramatizing and intensifying the scene. For example, the documents that the father supposedly photographs have "blurred headings"<sup>77</sup> and the child's actions are accompanied by the imaginary sounds the camera/matchbox produces— "(whose snapping I attempted to reproduce: 'slt slt') " (49). The details conveyed through the parenthesis liven up the scene by making it more vivid, instilling in the narrative suspense and excitement.

Hemon's spy fantasy signals to readers that nothing can be trusted: what we see is modified, the documents we may encounter are either trite or inaccurate, and above all, they not only are prone to falsification but also serve as a tool for propaganda.<sup>78</sup> In his use of ekphrasis, Hemon foregrounds transient and esoteric elements to contest the assumed coherence of the archive. Instead Hemon mocks photographs' constructed nature which he regards as resulting from both the cameraman's subjectivity and the self-consciousness of the people posing for the camera.<sup>79</sup> A good example of an ekphrasis that mocks the self-importance projected by historical visual documents, especially photographs of visually historical significance, is Hemon's description of a photograph

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<sup>77</sup> I would suggest that the documents' blurred headings reflect the child's idealized image of spy films, where the film's quality affected the visibility of the letters appearing on the screen.

<sup>78</sup> In footnote no. 13, Hemon quotes Brezin, possibly one of Sorge's information officers who tells him: "the only thing you should trust and rely upon is the omnipresence of surveillance. There'll be eyes everywhere and nowhere" (55). The ironic tone highlights the elusive nature of surveillance -- one cannot really know whether it is present, or whether or not s/he is being watched, but can only assume s/he is under the gaze of an all seeing eye.

<sup>79</sup> "Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself into an image." (Barthes, *Camera* 10).

taken during the Yalta Conference. In February 1945, the Allied leaders Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met in Yalta, a Crimean port on the Black Sea, to plan the final stages of the Second World War. The famous photograph in question now signifies the Allied forces' victory over the Nazis, but Hemon ridicules it altogether, poking fun at the arbitrary way in which the three leaders have negotiated the terms of surrender. The elaborate ekphrasis of the Yalta photo ends with the narrator confessing that when he was thirteen he "thought that the picture was taken right after their lunch... I thought that behind their dim grins they were trying to get out last bits of food from between their teeth" (40). The bitter tone unmasks these three leaders' smugness, attributing their appearance to more corporeal matters rather than to the conference's outcomes: "the three heads of the free world had something like a dim grin on their round faces, as though they had done a good hard work ('Have some Germany')" (40).

The Yalta photograph description is another incident in which the narrator inserts himself into the scene, by means of calling attention to the subjectivization of the political, that is, the way in which politics reaches out to the individual's everyday life. The leaders' complacency is undercut by the narrator's self-consciousness; he breaks from the air of relaxation that the photograph produces and hurries to include himself, and the readers with him, in the visual field unfolded by his writing: "They gaze at me, full of borscht, sweet Crimean wine, and plans for the world. Within a few moments Churchill will be asleep, and I'll be old, lacking significance, but not memories. Now keep reading the book" (40). The story's final lines interweave the readers' supposed gaze with that of the narrator, who plainly admits his historical insignificance. The readers are implicated in this proposition: it is more likely that Hemon's audience too will

end up like him, old and insignificant. Nevertheless, since memories are highlighted in this sentence, set in opposition to historical evidence, this passage can be read as suggesting that memory, despite its inconsistencies and structured unreliability, is more valuable than historical proof. Hemon not only undoes the demarcation between individual and collective memory, but he clearly privileges what escapes documentation and cannot be quantified or stabilized. The spatial dimension of fiction is repeatedly asserted by stretching its own limits – once readers are asked to participate in viewing materials that are not present in front of them, they take part in the process of fabulation, and subsequently release his prose from the weight of questions such as historical accuracy that have haunted traditional literary representation.

The story ends with an order, or advice, to the audience to continue reading. Reminding readers that their presence is acknowledged in this way also communicates the messages that their actions are anticipated, even predetermined. Hemon sends his audience a meta-literary wink, alluding to the “interactive fiction” genre (“choose your own adventure”) where the reader is the main character in the story and determines the course of the reading by deciding between different narrative possibilities. Directly addressing readers dissolves the distance between author and audience and is also a playful gesture that interrupts the flow of the reading in a manner parallel to the heightening of the artifice more generally. Another example of Hemon’s cynicism and skeptical attitude towards history can be found in “The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders,” the story before this one, where he deconstructs and parodies both historiography and life-writing. The story is composed of a series of disjointed, biographical statements, or pseudo-facts and quotations, through which Alphonse



Kauders, a forestry bibliographer and lover of pornography, is presented. Intersecting Kauders' fictive life with those of some of the real-life villains of the twentieth century -- Hitler, Goebbels, Stalin, Tito -- produces absurd situations that ridicule history by putting along side one another real and improbable occurrences and by the story's structure that mimics historiography's obsession with order and coherence. Hemon's preoccupation with chronology is revealed in his citation of the Encyclopaedia Britannica first edition's (1769-1771) definition of history at the outset of the next story. This entry reflects historiography's earlier obsession with progress and causality, an obsession that reveals the confidence historians once had in their capacity to report accurately on events: "the description or recital of things as they are, or have been, in a continued orderly narration of the principal facts and circumstances thereof..." (50).

To sum up, Hemon's ambitious fiction compels his audience to become active readers. By assigning his readers the task of resisting the canonized historical narrative, it can be argued that Hemon follows the distinction Michel de Certeau makes between tactics and strategies in The Practice of Everyday Life. De Certeau borrows these two terms from military discourse to show how a momentary escape from the dominant order (represented by strategy) can be performed by creating a transitory form of power (tactics). De Certeau defines strategies as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (35-6). He envisions tactics as a sort of trespassing, a way for people to develop meaning in the face of an overwhelmingly pre-determined situation. Tactics resist hegemony by operating in isolated actions, blow by blow, and are comparable with guerrilla action, considered by

de Certeau as “the art of the weak” (37). Hemon’s writing dares to concentrate on the esoteric and imaginative by dislocating and de-centering canonized versions of history. The short stories’ implicit but consistent attack on hegemony also promotes a visual mode that calls attention to what is usually taken as invisible and exists on society’s margins.

De Certeau configures tactics and strategy spatially: whereas tactics are postulated as “a *place* that can be delimited as its own” and are comparable with the actions of guerrilla units, strategies are the work of those in power, the targets of threats. Strategy is

the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment.’ A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and this serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clienteles,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects’ of research). (xix)

Inspired by Foucault’s notion of the gaze and the coupling of subjectivity and knowledge, de Certeau lists “the mastery of places through sites” (36) as one of the effects of space appropriation. De Certeau considers the inclusion of objects or “foreign forces” in the scope of vision as one locus where strategy and tactics are juxtaposed. Whereas strategy, and hegemony by extension, aspire to control and contain these foreign objects (modifying them by making them more similar) I suggest that tactics seek to highlight differences and consequently render the visual space incoherent. This movement can be seen in Hemon’s striving towards the inclusion of what is not captured in the photographs’ frames and in his imaginary ekphrases. In this mimetic system, word and image dynamic and the playful use of ekphrasis repeatedly resist the familiar historical

narrative and explicitly fuel distrust in its supporting documents (such as photographs), as we can see in the Yalta photograph example.<sup>80</sup>

### **III. Ideology and Visuality in “The Accordion”**

Setting out to sabotage the double-bind linking visuality and ideology, “The Accordion” is a retelling of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, the event that precipitated the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s declaration of war on Serbia. Hemon’s story deliberately diverges from the historical event; not only does the narrator plant one of his ancestors at the scene, in a gesture evocative of Woody Allen’s film “Zelig” (1983), but he purposefully includes several inaccurate details that differ from the event’s canonized description. For example, here the royal party traveled in cars and did not ride on horses; both the Archduke and his wife, the Duchess Sophie, actually died at the Governor’s residence and not in a car, as the story suggests; even the relationship between the two is known to be more intimate and warm than the story’s version, and so on. In addition to these variations, the story centers on a speculative account of the Archduke’s train of thought instead of hinging on the dry, familiar, “objective” report. Moreover, from the opening lines the narrator gives prominence to the visual realm and the readers follow the Archduke’s gaze that views the streets of Sarajevo on the morning of June 10th, 1914.

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<sup>80</sup> According to de Certeau, another possible effect of space appropriation that both strategies and tactics seek is the “ability to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36). Both strategies and tactics attempt to render their agendas visible, but he argues that “it would be more correct to recognize in these ‘strategies’ a specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one’s own place” (36). I wish to complicate this assertion and to question the extent to which historiography (as sustaining and reinforcing the archive) permits the individual to seize a space, using Hemon’s fiction as a springboard for this inquiry.

All three techniques – the divergence from the facts, the privileging of the imaginative, and the foregrounding of the visual realm – enable Hemon to articulate his own vision and to counter the way history is usually presented. Hemon's literary montage not only de-familiarizes what presents itself as transparent by drawing attention to the mechanics of the lens through which we are accustomed to "seeing" the world, but tries to promote a new mode of representation. This mimetic system is one which does not conceal the way it operates and openly celebrates its constructedness as a field of vision. Hemon invites his readers to partake in the aesthetic experience he produces by highlighting the degree to which visibility determines our understanding of the world. In other words, for Hemon, heightening the artifice is the means to showing mediation's inevitability and to collapsing the usual distinction between participants and observers. We are not only made aware of the fact that we are secondary witnesses of the events that make collective history, but his literary montage and the unfolding of a visual field openly invite us to occupy the position of active interpreters, instead of impartial viewers or passive receivers.

As I explained earlier, Hemon's visual field is created by both visual and verbal descriptions. Since only one story includes reproduced photographs, his literary montage relies heavily on the description of images and on exaggerated, improbable ekphrases. Photography is not merely a structural motif, or a theme that is randomly picked up, but it is a recurring thematic concern. I shall refer here to the textual exploration of the photographic medium as "the photographic trope." I consider it one of the grounding principles around which Hemon structures his literary montage as well as a means to delineate a visual field and turn readers into viewers. W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of

“the family of images” from Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (1987) enables us to better understand the role played by the visual field and the photographic trope in The Question of Bruno. My analysis of Hemon’s playful employment of imagery will centre on three of Mitchell’s categories -- perceptual, mental and verbal images – focusing on the way Hemon undermines and conflates “real” and imaginary images to destabilize the conventions of both literature and historiography.<sup>81</sup>

Mitchell distinguishes between physical and mental images, considering the latter as images “only in a doubtful, metaphoric sense. People may report experiencing images in their heads, while reading or dreaming, but we have only their word for this” (10). Mitchell is frustrated by the lack of an objective criterion to examine images that are neither purely visual nor as stable and permanent as “real images” are (because they vary from one person to the next and are not quantifiable). However, for Hemon this limitation becomes a springboard into a world where fantasy is mixed in with facts and the private and singular vantage point is celebrated as a means to explore collective history. Mitchell seems to propagate a hierarchy that values physical images over mental ones, because of the hybrid sources of the latter. He appears to have difficulties with the challenges mental images pose, but at the same time acknowledges that images “proper” are not really stable, static or permanent.<sup>82</sup> Juxtaposing photographs (deemed by Mitchell as “real,” physical images) with Hemon’s descriptions of photos that are either reproduced or merely referred to in the text gives us insights into Hemon’s mimetic system.

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<sup>81</sup> Mitchell divides the “family of images” into five groups, each central to a certain intellectual discourse: mental imagery (psychology and epistemology); optical imagery (physics); graphic imagery which includes pictures, statues and designs, such as architectural designs (art history); verbal imagery (literary criticism); and finally perceptual images, (of interest to researchers from several fields: psychology, physiology, art history, neurology, optics, etc.) (10).

<sup>82</sup> Mitchell notes that mental images “are not perceived in the same way by viewers any more than are dream images; and they are not exclusively visual in any important way, but involve multi-sensory apprehension and interpretation” (14).

Since only a few photographs are incorporated into the book (and so are “graphic” images in Mitchell’s terminology), the thrust of Hemon’s representation system in most of the collection’s stories lies in the fusing together of verbal and mental imagery with perceptual images. Using these three categories of images, Hemon gives memory visibility, even tangibility. He reinvigorates and gives new life to conventional chronology by presenting it from angles usually omitted from the dry reports, highlighting the visual and haptic, as we can see in the alternative retelling of the Sarajevo assassination in “The Accordion.” Moreover, Hemon conflates his own memories, and those of his family members, with speculations about what historical figures (Franz Ferdinand, Richard Sorge, etc.) may remember about certain events. Hemon’s inquiry into the connections between visuality and memory points to his fascination with photography’s twofold capacity: memory’s dependence on visual objects like photos can make or break it, and certainly shape it, but at the same time bring to it distortion or falsification. Cameras are therefore of immense importance for Hemon, and their depiction is varied and evocative, often performed in anthropomorphic terms. A dark television studio in Sarajevo where Aida, the protagonist of the story “A Coin,” lives, exemplifies Hemon’s basic distrust of cameras, but at the same time reflects the fact that for him they have almost mythical qualities, far exceeding their technical features:

There are still several cameras in the studio, with their lenses turned to the floor, looking between their wheels, as if ashamed... . [W]e move around the studio as if blind, having a memory of the studio as the map in our heads. We never move cameras, lest we run into them and get hurt. But somehow they always get in our way, as if they’re moving silently behind our backs, like ghosts, recording us. (126-7)

Cameras are endowed with anthropomorphic self-consciousness in this passage, their lenses comparable to faces, tilted down to the floor, embarrassed. Like ghosts they haunt the people around them, either with the disturbing footage of war they bring from the outside world, or by their unexplainable autonomy that enables them to miraculously change their location, and to trick the people working (and living) in the studio. Memory, compared to a map in one's head, is rendered inadequate, insufficient, a mental note of reality, in this case, of the studio's setting that has to be repeatedly readjusted.

Perceptual and verbal images, and the way the perceptual is channeled into language, are at the heart of Hemon's creation of a visual field. Through his representation system, Hemon attempts to revolutionize, or at least to flesh out, literature's (as well as history's) complex relationship with, or dependence on, images (visual and verbal). "The Accordion" displays some of the elements out of which Hemon's visual field is made up. For one, by calling attention to several elements in the unfolding scene, visual metaphors are extended merely by interconnecting them with similar details that were woven into the scene's description (and to other scenes in the book as well). Hemon's complex visual-verbal networks are dependent on metaphors that hinge on the visual realm (but also on other senses – for example, the olfactory and the aural, by referring to smells and noises); these elements reappear, mostly unexpectedly, being either directly mentioned or implicitly invoked in various locations throughout the collection.

The story's opening paragraph introduces an important motif to readers, displaying both his employment of the photographic trope and his reinforcement of the interconnections between the visual metaphors, two elements that enable Hemon to

foreground the visual field his stories open up. From the story's outset, Hemon maps out what the Archduke sees from the carriage: the horse's tail is "embarrassingly similar to the tussock on the Archduke's resplendent helmet" (92). This precedes the presentation of a photographic metaphor, which is conveyed from the same viewpoint, in which the narrator likens the horse's anus to a camera: once the tail moves, "the Archduke can see the horse's anus slowly opening, like a camera aperture" (89).

This metaphor shows one way in which Hemon employs photography: here, photography works as a metaphor, consisting simply of a reference to the camera aperture. It does not seem to be developing the narrative further, but serves mainly an aesthetic, stylistic function. The consistent weaving of these photographic metaphors into the text reinforces the links between various tales; these interrelations function as a unifying device that binds them together, offering a gesture by which the interplay between the stories somewhat, at least stylistically, can resemble that of a novel through the reiteration of themes, details and elements. Aligned with the Archduke's stare, the readers' gaze virtually travels from one object to another in the visual plane of the story. The camera aperture is evocative of an eye and Hemon thereby democratically interweaves the archduke's viewpoint, the horse's anus and the eye of his readers. The optical aperture also hints at the level of inevitable filtering and delimiting that the representation of history entails (as postmodern theory has taught us). Implicitly reminding readers that historical narratives are always constructed and thus controlled, the aperture too controls of the amount of light admitted.

Relying on both such metaphors and the interconnecting of visual motifs, Hemon performs a meta-literary exercise which is simultaneously meta-visual in its exploration



of the nature of both visual and verbal elements, as well as the interstices between them. Another important technique Hemon employs is the alignment of the readers' gaze with that of his characters, be it that of a sniper, a pedestrian in Sarajevo trying to evade this sniper, a cockroach, or (or as we have seen) the Archduke himself. This mode enables Hemon to critique traditional chronicling, in which the visual field privileges royals and military men and omits the common man's place in history.<sup>83</sup> Channeling here the aristocrat's thoughts, but focusing on trifles, enables Hemon to convey that history has more layers than those highlighted in history books. In addition, the immediacy of the visual field is transmitted even when images are constructed solely through the text: Hemon demonstrates that his audience is nevertheless susceptible to the lure of images. Slowing down and deconstructing the visual realm's supposedly inherently unmediated immediacy via his verbal descriptions, Hemon warns his readers of the tendency to identify with perspectives (or political agendas) that are imposed on them.

Concentrating on the archduke's viewpoint enables Hemon to trace literally what has disappeared from history by foregrounding what is speculative, tentative, and possibly never took place, but could have. Instead of trying to explain the circumstances and the means by which what did happen came into being, he looks at the potentiality of certain scenes. He privileges not only what is forgotten but the existence of what is permanently lost and irrecoverable – for example, the hypothesized last thoughts of the Archduke, or a meeting that never took place (but certainly could have, if we follow the

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<sup>83</sup> This view of history is inspired by both Nietzsche's and Benjamin's criticism of historians reflecting hegemony's interests. See, for example, Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in which he identifies history and culture as barbarism, evidence of subjugation that further perpetuates the injustice done to the weak, be they individuals or defeated nations of whom no trace is present: "the nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (258).

logic of his book, where royals and clochards are equal). Hemon therefore marks the possibility of description and the transcendence not only of what is known and familiar to historiography but also of what is probable or known, by exposing the extent to which knowledge is structured and constructed.

Another means through which visuality is emphasized is the movement of the Archduke's gaze: the narrator vividly, almost cinematically, describes the facial expressions of the Archduke's wife, the outfits of their entourage, and the faces surrounding them.<sup>84</sup> The motif of the tussock and the horsetail is revisited and is further elaborated: "In the coach ahead, the Archduke can see only the top of General Potiorek's ceremonial helmet: the elaborate tussock is fluttering annoyingly. He decides to get rid of Potiorek as soon as he assumes the throne" (89). This departure from the conventional narrative signals yet another such deviation from probability, and readers - lurking behind the Archduke, their gaze aligned with his - are soon introduced to the narrator's, or the author's, great-grandfather, once the Archduke notices a man carrying an accordion:

The archduke then sees a man with an accordion stretched over his chest. The man is smiling, sincerely, it appears – he may even be delighted. He doesn't seem to be playing the accordion, just holding it. The Archduke's gaze then breaks through the crowd and he can see the man's strong arms and the accordion's belts squeezing the man's strong forearms. (90)

The accordion, which appears in the story's title, is also described with close attention to detail, but its primary role is to allow Hemon to de-centralize his narrative by focusing on the marginal, rather than bringing to the fore once again the familiar, evident, or important, which by now has become somewhat banal. By accentuating a marginal

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<sup>84</sup> This story supposedly mimics the pathos of historical films and novels that romanticize their subject matter. Additionally Hemon also illuminates the close rapport between history and spectacle and goes against the presentation of any assumed luxury of the royal party by focusing on the crowd in the streets and especially on his immigrant great-grandfather.

object whose actual presence at the scene is questionable (it is probable that the Archduke would have never noticed it), and by following the thoughts of the Archduke rather than actual occurrences, the author consciously diverges from the conventional recounting of historical events.

Hemon's stories not only examine the distance between impressions, feelings, or thoughts and their literal description but are also fixated on what is lost and cannot be documented, substantiating the gap between event and representation and stressing the distortion or failure resulting from, for instance, the transition between languages. The Question of Bruno hangs its vision of twentieth-century history on the phenomena of immigration. The movement from country to country and from language to language is a crucial one for Hemon. The structured lack, the inability to express oneself fully, the sense of having no roots – all this is fundamental for him, providing another reason to consider his fiction as a work of dis-appearance, dis-accordance, dis-quiet. The collection's stories form therefore an interrupted narrative that is out of joint, chronologically, geographically, textually, marking the rupture of immigration as one of the most important phenomena of the twentieth century for Hemon.

The story's title, "The Accordion," accords with Hemon's questioning of the accepted narrative's accuracy, a questioning which constantly reminds his audience of the impossibility of telling a story independently of ideologies and political regimes. This inquiry is performed in multiple ways, all underlining the presence of the marginal, the invisible even within the collective narrative: as we have seen, he calls attention to immigration (his great-grandfather has supposedly just arrived in Sarajevo from Ukraine) as a defining event in the last century; highlights his family's and home-country's place

by channeling historical events through their individual experience, and by repeatedly heightening the artifice through his gregarious narrator (who does not for a minute allow readers to forget that he controls the prose's emotional impact). The simple title communicates these issues by metaphorically directing the gaze to an object that belongs to an immigrant, a gesture privileging the presence of the writer's ancestor, a common man, rather than the royal couple, or, more significantly, the political consequences of the assassination.

Hemon's story indeed ends with the death of both the Archduke and his wife, but in "The Accordion" they both die while still in the coach, whereas in reality they were shot while still in the car and did not die immediately. The narrator does not limit himself to the probable or the truthful description of what really happened, but does not hesitate to change the historical event in order to dramatize it even further. He also turns the assassination into a framing device, thereby redoing or undoing the conventional hierarchy.

In this alternative version of the June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1914 events, the shooting's description is marginalized in comparison to the speculated encounter between two people. Whereas readers probably anticipate Franz Ferdinand's assassination, once they discover that the story describes his visit to Sarajevo, the assassination is merely a frame, told merely in a few lines from the Archduke's viewpoint:

"There's a man with an accordion," announces the Archduke into the ear... . He leans toward her: "there's a man..." But then he sees a pistol and a straight tense arm behind it, and a young, scrawny man at the end of the arm with a thin mustache and fiery eyes. He sees the pistol retching and bursts of light at the pistol's mouth. He feels something pushing him against the seat and then it pushes him. (91)

This paragraph underscores the visual and its translation into emotions, in its gradual unfolding of the Archduke's field of vision. The next few lines, however, depart from the story's present moment and go back to the Archduke's memories of a quiet evening he spent with his wife, when she played the piano for him. Whereas music is the link that connects the immigrant and the aristocrat, the bond between them is performed mainly visually – since no music is heard – and they merely see each other.

The narrator's confession of the changes he introduced into the familiar description open the second part of "The Accordion." The story's concluding paragraph nicely conveys the freedom the narrator takes in presenting historical occurrences. He openly emphasizes the schism between his own imagination and employment of historical data by drawing both in a photographic metaphor, which underlines the unreliability of history books and points to his own unique mode of storytelling. The result is a de-familiarizing of conventional chronology: "Most of this story is a consequence of irresponsible imagination and shameless speculation... [P]arts of it, however, washed against my shores having floated on the sea of history books, dotted with islands of black and white photographs" (91). The comparison of photographs to islands suggests that the former do not merely illustrate the historical events described in the chronicles, but that they are self-contained objects that have only a partial relation to the familiar authorized narrative. That history was washed against the narrator's "shores" is a paradoxical statement that renders him a passive messenger of the events. However, as he declares on this paragraph's opening line, it is his "irresponsible imagination and shameless speculation" that determine the story's narrative and structure.

The second part of the story brings in the narrator's family history and elaborates on the circumstances that brought his ancestors to Sarajevo on the day of the Archduke's visit and on the now "famous" accordion's whereabouts. It is most likely that the anecdotes about the great-grandfather were passed on within the family, and like other stories, were idealized and distorted in their retelling. The details' accuracy is therefore questionable to begin with and furthermore, the ancestors' history is sprinkled with improbable details that enliven the account, but are probably not verifiable. We are told that the accordion was supposedly bought by the great-grandfather from a gypsy for an outrageous amount, but endured for more than fifty years, until meeting "its demise with a discordant accordion sigh, after my blind uncle Theodor (a hand grenade had exploded in his hands when he was six) threw himself on the bed where the accordion helplessly lay" (92). Whether or not this dramatic description is realistic, it is undercut with a sharp change of tone in the story's last lines that reveal the narrator's despair about his current situation and the difficulties that his family faced: "Uncle Theodor is now stuck in the Serb part of Bosnia. Most of my family is scattered across Canada. This story was written in Chicago (where I live) on the subway, after a long day of arduous work as a parking assistant, A.D. 1996" (92).

The overlap between the narrator and the author's biographical details invite the readers' sympathy, as it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the voices of the two. Given the stories' inconsistencies and the narrator's tendency to exaggerate and to weave together improbable historical characters and events, readers are encouraged to seek connections between the stories, and to become active in their fabulation. The emphasis placed on the visual field and the disavowal of accuracy and

veracity can work to create a strong impact on readers, who can become through these means more sympathetic to the described events and the suffering of the characters. Even though a cynical tone predominates in “The Accordion,” I read these last lines as effectively going against the irony of the narrator and the safe distance readers were allowed to assume earlier. The narrative now seems to exceed its fictional space, once its fictionality becomes questionable (due to the overlap between author and narrator), and it straddles the line between fiction and reality, coloring the narrator’s humorous tone with a realistic, even somewhat bitter, tinge.

#### **IV. Surveillance and Identity in the US and Communist Yugoslavia**

Moving to Chicago from Yugoslavia, where he lived most of his life, and writing solely in English after resolving to write prose no longer in his native Serbian, Hemon positions his stories in the interstices between Eastern Europe and the West. The Question of Bruno juxtaposes notions of capitalism and democracy predominant in America with the writer’s own childhood memories of communist Europe, noting the similarities and differences in the deployment of visual media in the two regions. Preoccupied with visuality and the immense importance of the visual realm in contemporary society, he makes surveillance a key visual metaphor for expressing the differences and links between North America and Europe. Whereas in Yugoslavia “Big Brother” is always watching,<sup>85</sup> in America this threatening all-seeing eye is replaced with

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<sup>85</sup> In “SSR” the narrator describes life lived under omnipresent of the leader Tito and his police, highlighting the imaginary dimension of this absent, yet supposedly omniscient, presence: “it was soothing

security video-cameras that spy on passer-by and customers to prevent potential crime.<sup>86</sup>

Surveillance becomes another means for Hemon to construct the visual field and to strengthen the visual component of reading. Hemon's literary montage informs his audience of the visual networks surrounding them, networks which they (or rather, we) tend to be either indifferent to or oblivious of. By foregrounding the extent to which one is exposed to an omnipresent scrutinizing gaze, Hemon thematizes alienation and isolation as notions immanent in contemporary western society, a theme that runs parallel with the unfolding of the spatial dimension of the fiction in which immigration greatly determined life in the twentieth century.

The constant presence of surveillance in both democratic and communist regimes (be it for ideological or commercial reasons) is undercut by the ironic sense that no one actually watches the footage. This form of indifference further intensifies the anonymity and isolation immigrants experience in the host culture, in which, according to The Question of Bruno, they not only are often taken to be verbally incomprehensible but are also labeled invisible. The stories' extended viscosity and heightened sensitivity to the visual apparatus' presence in and impact on the everyday demonstrates to readers that history is simultaneously channeled and shaped by the mass media. My discussion in this section focuses specifically on the way the mimetic system of The Question of Bruno

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to know, however, that I was being monitored, when I was all by myself, that if someone came to abduct me (the police or the devil himself) it would have been seen and I would have been doubtless retrieved from the sneaky villains. It also meant that I had to wash my hands after using the bathroom. Couldn't pick my nose and stick the snot to the underside of the chair, nor could I belch like a hog. I tried to locate the cameras that must have been transmitting images from our home to Tito's residence." (56)

<sup>86</sup> Pronk's attempts to evade the surveillance camera in the museum shop are described in a humorous tone in "Blind Jozef Pronk & Dead Souls." Pronk, who is Hemon's double and the protagonist of Hemon's novel Nowhere Man (2002), mimics the video cameras by spying on his girlfriend, trying to be as invisible as the cameras while lurking behind her, in the corner of a store: "once he located all the cameras in the store, disinterested little eyes gazing from distant upper corners, and tried to find a spot not covered by a camera, and find none. Sometimes he would just find an inconspicuous position in the store, hiding behind a curtain of posters, or pretending to be reading a book, and would watch Andrea smiling at the customers..." (164).



elucidates the crucial role of the mass-media in shaping the general audience's understanding of war vis-à-vis the inherent difficulties of actually representing war. Another issue upon which I shall elaborate in this section is photography's inherent qualities that render this medium particularly appropriate for representing loss, mourning, and finally, disappearance. Drawing on what has become commonplace for photo-theorists since Barthes' Camera Lucida, I shall explore Hemon's dramatizing of "the paradoxes of materiality and loss, the simultaneity of presence and absence" (Burnett, "Camera"). I look specifically at the material aspect of the photographic medium (through the themes of disappearance and deterioration) and the way they affect both memory and photography's status as evidence.

As I explained earlier, it is through the media that war is transmitted to those who are not directly, physically, tied to it. The media's coverage of conflicts is performed in most cases through secondary witnessing that determines both the personal and the collective reception and understanding of living through warfare. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag notes that "being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience.... [W]ars are now also living room sights and sounds" (18). Hemon's stories are structured around different forms of witnessing, offering readers a model of a witnessing process that highlights the inherent limitations of representation. Hemon's mimetic system stresses that bearing witness is performed because of and in spite of the shortcomings and pitfalls inherent in the (mediated) representation of war and its after-effects. It is the structural impossibility of producing a comprehensive, stable, coherent representation of a first-hand experience of war.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> It is important to note that neither Hemon nor the other writers whose texts I analyze in this work have experienced war first-hand. However, they all engage the problems that the representation of catastrophe

Paradoxically, precisely by widening the gap between those who physically endure war and those not directly tied to it, between the representation of violence and social injustice and the limits of our understanding of these devastating experiences, the readers' empathy and compassion are called upon.

Hemon criticizes the obsession with documentation shared by both his family and contemporary society, but does so in order to warn his readers away from over-investment in images, simultaneously signaling that through writing and its inherent instabilities, it is still possible to reach out to an audience rendered indifferent to the lure of images. Locating the Sarajevan immigrant Jozeph Pronek in the US among numerous television sets and surveillance cameras enables Hemon to describe his sense of isolation and loneliness effectively. The plethora of screens and cameras leads to the sense of paranoia Hemon's characters experience. Interestingly, the ubiquity of surveillance cameras, and the self-consciousness deriving from one's knowledge that he or she is being watched, result in the characters' awareness of their own insignificance and invisibility. Whereas the attitude of "SSR"'s narrator towards Tito and his secret police is surprisingly warm (despite the potential threat they pose to him), the presence of cameras everywhere in the US is deemed terrifying. Afraid that spy cameras are employed to duplicate the contents of his coat's pockets, Pronek fears that the coat-check may cause him to lose both his identity and memory:

"How can you ever know that you're getting the right coat? Maybe everything you have is replaced by something else. I think, maybe they're going through your pockets. They're photographing what's in there, making keys, and changing everything. So when you get out, everything is different, and your memories don't

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poses to collective and individual memory and to experience in general. These authors tackle issues of responsibility and compassion emanating from the mediation of knowledge, and through the incorporation of photographs point to difficulties in providing evidence for events that cannot be fully contained in either language or image.

look right, so you change them... I cannot even know that this is my real, old coat, but I must wear it anyway, because there's no other coat, and I must make memories about it." (167)

Pronek trusts neither his memory nor his vision: the abundance of the manifestations of the visual apparatus casts an anxiety of erasure over him. Through this paranoid monologue, Hemon suggests that physical objects come to stand for contradictions immanent in vision: physical objects are invested with their owners' subjectivity, externally manifesting, even if partially, both the presence and essence of their owners. Moreover, while they ground us in reality, these objects are also prone to manipulation, damage and loss. Is it any wonder then that in his Yalta photograph's ekphrasis (discussed earlier), Hemon privileges memory (even if it is fabricated or imagined) over any other quality that has external bearing? The complex relationship images (both still and moving) have with memory is repeatedly re-inscribed and challenged by exposing the fragility of these images. Photography and videotaping loom large in the story "A Coin," which is about an exchange of letters between the narrator and his friend Aida. She lives in besieged Sarajevo and works in a foreign news agency, she has an American boyfriend, Kevin, who is a photographer. In the story, photographs are repeatedly described and referred to, their physical ruin analogous to the growing destruction of the city. Despite Hemon's distrust of this medium, and of its short-comings at documenting reality "as it really was," Hemon uses precisely these limitations to reinforce the impact of his writing.

Moreover, it seems that Hemon takes special pleasure in describing the falling apart of the visual apparatus: references to photographs and videotapes in the process of ruination are scattered throughout the entire short story collection. A daguerreotype that

supposedly melted when one of his ancestors swam in the Danube after the First World War is one example, as are references to the loss of quality in videotapes after being watched repeatedly. Elsewhere, the physical disintegration of videotapes reiterates the vulnerability of visual memorabilia and the danger that lies in relying too much on visual objects for mnemonic purposes. Significantly, Hemon employs visual objects to articulate the multiple functions photography has in the process of personal or collective commemoration. The visual field that unfolds draws attention to the limitations and falling apart of the visual apparatus; in this way, Hemon shows that memory's reliance on visual artifacts is also problematic in terms of accuracy. If everything is already mediated and impinged upon by ideology, what is important (in order not to fall into nihilism) is to position ourselves morally when we confront images (or their residues), to recognize their context, be attentive to that and to try to interpret them, considering things well beyond the facts that they may or may not present.

In his essay "Mechanical Arts and the Promotion of the Anonymous," Jacques Rancière locates a shift in representation system (which according to him can be traced back to nineteenth-century realist literature [Hugo, Balzac]) in the nexus of the aesthetic and the political realms. For Rancière the capacity of the technological arts to confer visibility on the masses illustrates the linkage between mechanical progress and the "birth of new history" (31). Together they announce the anonymous as "the subject matter of art" and demonstrate that "the act of recording such a subject matter can be art" (32). Hemon plays with this notion of anonymity and dramatizes his characters' loneliness through social indifference heightened by the unease created by the omnipresence of television screens and surveillance cameras. Furthermore, by repeatedly calling attention

to the presence of the visual apparatus and to representation's inherent distortion and incompleteness, Hemon strips the visual image of both its immediacy and traditional status as proof, revealing the unreliability of the visual record. I would like to draw on this observation to suggest that for Hemon, the technological advent of photography, presented in the trajectory of the image from its first daguerrotype days to the broadcasting of images on television and film,<sup>88</sup> reveals the crucial role of media and mediation (and subsequently, of secondary witnessing) in contemporary society.

"Exchange of Pleasant Words"s' opening scene outlines items located in a deserted street in Sarajevo, as seen from a sniper's point of view. Among the scattered and bullet-holed items, a videocassette, whose description evokes a wounded human body, stands out: the tape case is "dismembered, several of its pieces still connected with a dark writhing tape" (119). Like the photographs of ruined buildings that not only record the city's ruin, but also physically participate in the same desolate state of being, the ruined, dismembered videotape brings together all the violence that the city suffers. A walking tour Aida and Kevin take around the bombed city reveals the past's disappearance in a sober, non-nostalgic tone: "we both knew, for instance, that the places on our tour were between being a memory and being reduced to nothing but a pile of rubble. The camera was recording the process of disappearance" (131). The photograph is a physical bearer of the interpretive gap between image and reality: since the ruined city is destined to deteriorate further, enduring more wreckage (thereby going through "the process of disappearance" that the camera can document but cannot arrest), the photograph is proof merely of the present moment, the present state of the landscape, the

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<sup>88</sup> Hemon's stories do not deal with the presence of digital images in our lives; a more comprehensive discussion of the Internet and digital photography is included in my chapter dealing with individual and collective memory and loss vis-à-vis 9/11 in Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

current degree of destruction, the existing presence of debris. Readers are invited to experience the state of devastation not only through the textual description of the profusion of ruin but also structurally through what is not there. In other words, Hemon's literary montage implicitly invokes but also reflects in its own form the state of destruction through the superimposition of details as well as through its structural elements (the interchange between the two narratives, the crisscrossing between the narratives, the ellipses).

Shock and rupture have become commonplace theorized responses in photo-theory, as many critics take these two traits as emblematic of photography in general. Ron Burnett polemically claims that photographs are rarely about anything new. "They can startle, shock, inform, but," he continues, "they only offer a hint of what can be done to them" (Cultures 34). For him, images represent the activities of human intervention and interpretation, being an amalgam of both photographic intentions and subjective placement. The subversion of photographs' capacity to serve as objective evidence is accompanied by a heightened awareness of the forms in which these images reach us and their consequent impact on viewers. Photographs' capacity to reach viewers emotionally is dwindling, in parallel to their audience's growing indifference to constant images of suffering. Hemon seems to agree with Sontag's assertion that photography's unique temporality renders visual records as always after the fact, and therefore their moral claim on their audience weakens. Sontag laments photography's diminishing effect, arguing that the audience is now callous to images of atrocity: "in the end, such images make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked" (Sontag, "Looking"). Sontag is not convinced that visual records can "shrivel sympathy" or that "our culture of

spectatorship” neutralizes their “moral force” (Sontag, Regarding 105). These assertions about the viewers’ indifference can be juxtaposed with similar claims she made some thirty years earlier; in On Photography, for example, she proposed that images cannot create a moral position, but rather only amplify, or reinforce, notions that were there beforehand (17).

Hemon’s response to Sontag’s concern about spectators impassively turning away from the pain of others, is implied in his criticism of the US, conveyed through Pronek’s despair at being an immigrant in America during the Balkan Wars. His surroundings’ lack of interest in his and his family’s wellbeing shows that Hemon is convinced that given today’s media and the form in which information circulates, indifference is unavoidable, that knowledge of war is not only mediated but is framed and reframed by its context, thereby diminishing the images’ potential to have an emotional impact on viewers. Secondary witnessing can indeed invoke compassion – but, as Hemon seems to suggest, empathy is most likely to be induced only within those who willingly allow themselves to be engulfed by such images of atrocity. He thereby designs his fiction to make readers more attentive to the moral demand these images place on their beholders precisely by eliminating these actual images, and limiting himself to their textual description and impact on his characters (as in the example I will soon turn to of the man from the Serbian concentration camp photo).

Valentin Groebner provides another interesting perspective on this topic in his book Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages, where he explores the connection between images of extreme violence and the unrecognizability of the victims in both current and medieval representations of horrific scenes. He makes use

of a German word *ungestalt*, literally meaning formless or defaced,<sup>89</sup> in order to elaborate on the relationship between anonymity, recognition and identification. In a way, Groebner's research on the ways violence was made visible in an earlier period brings together Ranciere's and Sontag's theories, which directly tie photography's trajectory with anonymity and, subsequently, indifference. Hemon's stories take this concept a step further: his inquiry into the media's dynamic is conducted parallel to his de-centering of perspective by bringing us immigrants' viewpoints that work to enable readers to isolate one image of suffering from the images surrounding it. In other words, Hemon's literary montage makes evident the fact that the reception of images is determined by their circulation, but also that the flow of images (the manner in which these images reach us) modifies and alters their content by their media-ation.<sup>90</sup> Moving to a different medium, and undermining the familiar conventions enable Hemon to critique our engagement with images, and to possibly signal that there are other ways to interact with these images (even if they are physically absent, that is, further mediated, further removed by their evocation through text).

Pronek's roommates' television viewing habits and commentary on the Balkan wars reveal some of the problematics of both war reportage and secondary witnessing:

Occasionally, between virtual football games and porn flicks, Pronek got to watch *Headline News* and learn that the paramilitary ("Pornomilitary" punned Chad) units were entering Bosnia from Serbia. Carwin and Cahd watched images of men in fatigues and a woman talking about massacres of Muslims in the eastern parts of Bosnia.

"This is depressing," Carwin said.

"What's with you people," Chad asked. "Can't you chill out?" (170)

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<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere Groebner translates *ungestalt* also as inhuman or indescribable.

<sup>90</sup> I borrow the term media-tion from Ron Burnett, who uses it to signify storytelling in the media: "the relationship between viewer and image *begins* within an already established context of mediation. The truth is at best only one part of a complex and interwoven constellation of meanings, the outcome of which can rarely be judged simply by referring to the representation at hand" (130-1).



Nevertheless, Hemon's criticism encompasses also his protagonist, who is indeed devastated by the war and is anxious about his family's safety; but he too seems to blur the distinctions between life-defining tragedies and events of smaller significance:

"Pronek got fired the day he saw a picture, framed with the red edges of the *Time* magazine front page, of a man in a Serbian concentration camp" (185). The demarcation between the everyday and images of atrocity crudely shows that even if one is directly influenced by war, events of smaller significance can outweigh crucial political and ethical issues. Groebner asserts that through the subject of violence, the status of visual images (in opposition to mental images, for one) is questioned: for viewers who did not experience physical abuse, the violence displayed by these images is violence inflicted on others. Such images, according to Groebner, are intended to convey real pain and extreme terror and therefore "must use visual and literary set pieces familiar to the beholder" (14). The employment of such motifs, on the one hand, creates new bonds and new levels of meaning between familiar and new visual records of violence, but may also inevitably contribute to such images' dwindling power over their audience. Hemon therefore deliberately dramatizes his photograph's ekphrasis, and contrasts it with the banality of the everyday life, as a means to articulate the horror of the image. The verbal description spells out for readers the painful details, shedding light on the reality behind the image, on what it stands for: [in the concentration camp] "the man stood behind three thin lines of barbed wire, skin tautly stretched across the rib cage, facial hair eating his face away. He was not looking at the camera and the reader behind it, Pronek thought, not knowing whether being in the picture would save him or kill him" (185-6).

Photographs' capacity to embody more than what they physically contain within their frames is displayed through Hemon's ekphrasis of photographs of ruined buildings from Sarajevo. The physical fragmentation of Sarajevo and the falling apart of the world Hemon knew and was part of -- the pre-war reality -- is reflected in the attempts of Aida, "A Coin's" narrator, to identify some of the damaged buildings in Sarajevo: "...they were unidentifiable as far as I was concerned. They all looked the same: they all had shattered windows -- black holes, as if their eyes had been gouged; there were rings of debris carved out of whole buildings; there were no people in the pictures..." (128). These photographs evince absence rather than presence in their depiction of the receding and persistent disappearance not only of physical objects, of buildings turned into ruins, but of life ("there were no people in the pictures"). This process of disappearance that cannot be adequately documented can be considered to impede the audience's understanding of the consequences of war. Sarajevo during the war seems to be resistant to documentation -- its photographs cannot contain either past or present, but only point to their own limits, to what they cannot attest. These photographs are regarded -- other than as becoming witnesses to the disappearance of what once was -- as capable of predicting a predestined path. It is the unavoidability of further ruin that is the buildings' future that marks their coming to be visual records of the future rather than of a vanished past whose traces have become illegible: "What was in the pictures were not buildings -- let alone the buildings I could've come in or out of: the pictures recorded the very end of the process of disappearing, the nothingness itself" (128).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> The photographs of ruined Sarajevo are evocative of W. G. Sebald's grainy images reproduced in Rings of Saturn, depicting the deserted landscape and abandoned houses of England's eastern seacoast. As I explained in the first chapter, Sebald's desolate buildings testify to the life that once existed in this lonely, decaying stretch of North Sea coast; in their marginality and forsaken state, they point to the absence of

“A Coin” is therefore dedicated to the documentation of what is lost, what is irrevocable and is about to have no physical reminder. Foregrounding that which resists representation, the story consciously confronts its own failure, and representation’s failure in general, to encompass disappearance, turning these limitations into its driving force. Drawing on photo-theorists such as Barthes, Cadava and Baer,<sup>92</sup> who have argued that photography is the most suitable medium to document loss because it is positioned simultaneously on the verge of presence and absence, memory and tangibility, I consider these photographs as reflecting this medium’s temporal and physical negotiation of the moment in which the photo was taken, and the viewers’ encounter with the image. Nevertheless, through the deliberate omission of photographs from Sarajevo and the repeated employment of ekphrasis, Hemon’s present-absent images haunt readers. In these images’ absence and in their failure to predict the future, readers rely on Hemon’s ekphrasis, which through its careful word choice echoes the brutality of war just as much as the metaphors employed reiterate the extent of the devastation.

## **Conclusion**

Similarly to Jonathan Safran Foer’s attempts to create a more personal form of witnessing through his incorporation of “forbidden,” censored 9/11 images into his novel

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human action and intensify the already eerie atmosphere of The Rings. Both Hemon and Sebald can be regarded as working against the tendency to idealize ruins that peaked during the eighteenth century – Hemon in his use of deliberately violent language to describe photographs of ruin (which are not reproduced in the text), and Sebald in his conscious attempts to reduce the quality of the photographs he incorporated into his book.

<sup>92</sup> Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida delves into photography’s ghostly character by directly linking it with death; Edouardo Cadava’s seminal analysis of Walter Benjamin’s writings on photography – Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History – beautifully analyzes the morbid elements immanent in this medium, paying close attention to early photography; Ulrich Baer’s Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma attempts to address the nexus of trauma, madness and death from his research on photographs taken at the Salpêtrière hospital and Holocaust photographs taken either by the perpetrators or by post-war photographers.

(which I discussed earlier and will return to shortly), Hemon's omission of photographs works against the theory of the diminishing ethical claim images have on contemporary audiences. Hemon not only underlines the difference between encountering images visually or verbally, collectively (watching an image on television) or individually (in solitude), but also stresses that context both determines the reception of war representation, and mobilizes the gap between understanding and seeing, thus further destabilizing both images and words. The unavoidable failure to represent the tragedy of war and the omission of the described photographs allow Hemon to foreground the limitations of both witnessing and documenting. The crisis in witnessing therefore enables him to create a stronger emotional effect in the viewers/readers, aided by the activation of literary montage and the subsequent heightening of readers' agency. Following the repeated undermining of evidence's truth status, it seems that Hemon suggests that verbal images are stronger than visual ones.<sup>93</sup> The impossibility of really understanding the devastating experience of war may have inspired him to isolate images, and by means of literal description (mainly photographic metaphors and ekphrasis) to study this gap between witnessing and interpreting, understanding and empathizing. The insistence on leaving this fissure open consequently transforms the limitations of visual and verbal representations into a call to go beyond indifference by becoming more attentive to records of violence. Hemon therefore seems to call on his readers to bring

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<sup>93</sup> Groeber notes the paradox implicit in the representation and commemoration of the Holocaust: "the more the historical event is studied, portrayed in the media, and replicated, the more present the individual names of its victims have become on monuments devoted to its remembrance, the more people insist on the fundamental unportayability of the destruction of the European Jewry" (20). Groeber's analogy connects visual and textual commemoration, but widens the gap between what can be understood and what can be represented. I consider Hemon's story, "A Coin," an attempt to signal that neither visual nor verbal descriptions can contain the horror of the civil war in Sarajevo, but through the constant undermining of the visual apparatus, Hemon also signals the radical impoverishment of the visual field. Another indication of his privileging of verbal descriptions is, of course, his decision to write prose.

back to the image its power to reach the beholder in a world saturated, even hyper-saturated, with images.<sup>94</sup>

Hemon's innovative prose can be regarded as destabilizing both text and visual images; taking history and visuality as its subject matter, Hemon's work simultaneously relies on the archive but also contests its ordering as a linear, coherent narrative which conforms to the political agendas of the governing regimes. By unmasking the illusion of transparency of both history and visuality, and undoing their immediate reception by their deconstruction, Hemon reveals to his readers that historiography should not be trusted, that vision is easily modified, and that memory too is unstable. He encourages the destabilizing of visuality side by side with underscoring the dwindling effect of images' and documents' truth claims in order to unfold a visual field based on disjunctions, inconsistencies and improbabilities. Nevertheless, by unsettling physical and geographical boundaries, Hemon succeeds in negating the shortcomings of images that once pushed beyond their limit, exhibit their margins, initiating a self-reflexive exploration on the part of readers/viewers. The constant heightening of the artifice is performed parallel to the marking of its fragility, thereby repeatedly illustrating how easily physical objects and mementos are distorted and ruined. All this functions as means for Hemon to urge his audience to resist and challenge preconceived categories of knowledge. The Question of Bruno reveals Hemon's faith in the written word as the means to reach out effectively to his audience turning them into active interpreters rather

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<sup>94</sup> Hemon seems to echo Sontag's description of the visual media's callous dynamics in his brief outline of the last months of the war: "the TV screen became saturated, oversaturated, undersaturated, and then exactly-opposite-of-saturated with images from Bosnia: several more broadcast massacres in the city; the mauling and massacre of Srebrenica; some more Western muscle fleshing; friends shot by snipers or killed by shrapnel; rape camps; starvation stories; burning villages; Karadzic, Mladic, Milosevic shaking hands with someone; the end of the siege of Sarajevo and the war; talking to his parents once a month or so. Pronek went through all this in an aching daze..." (199).

than passive, disengaged observers. For him there is no such thing as passivity, there is only compliance. His project aspires to challenge our understanding not only of violent events, but also of their mediation and their reception. By critiquing visual media such as photographs and television, but at the same time by constantly foregrounding images' crucial place in shaping both collective and individual memory and historical consciousness, Hemon reminds his readers that reading too is a visual experience through which one may feel more compassion and attempt to gain a better understanding of the suffering brought by war, as "truth" becomes another vehicle for this writer to strengthen the impact of his prose on readers.

### **Chapter III: Jonathan Safran Foer's: The Roles of Visuality and Legibility in Mourning and Recovery**

#### **I. Introduction: Between Verbal and Visual Language**

Jonathan Safran Foer's second novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (hereafter ELIC), is an ambitious attempt to represent September 11's after-effects in both the urban and psychological spheres. Drawing on an elaborate intertextual net that borrows from J. D. Salinger, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Günter Grass, to name only a few,<sup>95</sup> the novel presents its protagonist, 9-year-old Oskar Schell, as a sensitive, intelligent, somewhat quirky child, whose father died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. The novel unfolds as Oskar attempts to recuperate from the loss of his father, and readers follow him through New York City in his search for the owner of a key found among his dead father's belongings.

Using experimental narrative techniques, Foer constantly draws his readers' attention to issues of visuality, legibility and mediation, topics that he deems crucial to both memory and representation, especially of loss and mourning. Foer's formal emphasis on the visual realm is innovative – not only does he reproduce photographs in his novel, but he employs playful typography,<sup>96</sup> through his inclusion of blank pages, red

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<sup>95</sup> Oskar Schell is modeled on several literary children: Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of JD Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951) and the Glass family children influenced Oskar's characterization, together with Gunter Grass' The Tin Drum's (1959) protagonist, Oskar Matzerath. Hamlet too is a significant inspiration for the protagonist's character, for the play is evoked several times throughout the narrative, and through the direct references to Hamlet, central themes such as commemoration and loss and especially mourning (and possibly the inability to work through the death of a beloved father) are dramatized, as will show in my discussion in section III.

<sup>96</sup> One can argue that Foer's playfulness is inspired by the work of other postmodernist writers, specifically William Gass's Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife in which Gass employs colored paper, typeface changes, images, to name a few. Another source of inspiration may be Donald Barthelme who inserts drawings into his books. Foer's short story "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease," published in The New

markings, and pages filled with numbers instead of letters (269-71). Additionally, some pages are so laden with densely printed text that reading becomes impossible (281-4). Foer integrates images from a plethora of media: film and television stills, internet and printed press images, as well as photographs that Oskar supposedly took himself, and others whose source is not apparent.

In ELIC, Foer uses visual language to express the artificiality and insufficiency of representation; he pushes both visual and the verbal layers to their limits in order to convey the rift between memory and experience, the unavoidable gap between what has been lost (on both private and public levels) and what is left, and what can be articulated of this breach. The 9/11 events are experienced simultaneously through Oskar's insistence on solving the mystery of the key (and thereby coming to terms with the tragedy of his father's death) and through the attacks' impact on the city as a whole. Foer depicts post-9/11 New York as an extremely lonely place, somewhat ghostly even, a city that seems to be emptied of the masses who live and work there. The photographs of New York City contain mainly objects (such as door knobs, buildings), and bridges, and in the few photos where people appear, they do so with their backs to the camera, or are presented through deliberate lack of focus and superimposition techniques, so that their features are almost indistinct. Possibly because the novel was written shortly after 9/11, all of Foer's characters are deeply engaged with mourning, not yet capable of moving towards healing. This 9/11 aftermath is mirrored in the secondary storyline that follows Oskar's grandparents, both survivors of the Dresden bombings in the Second World War (February 1945). The rupture between memory and experience that trauma brings forth is communicated on both structural and content levels. Foer tries to breach the unsayability

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Yorker's June 10, 2002 edition, also incorporates icons and symbols into standard text.



of what (he feels) must be said: his employment of innovative graphics and the reproduction of photographs in the novel enable him to mobilize the spacing, gaps and disjunctions that the literary montage underscores. Foer thereby explores not only the nature of visibility and legibility but interrogates their role in mourning and recovery.

Foer's heightened awareness of representation's shortcomings and mediation's inevitability – realities that subsequently underline the inability to contain and fully represent the disaster - is reiterated throughout the novel. Foer insists on bringing words and images closer together by obstructing<sup>97</sup> both visibility and legibility. Put differently, Foer employs a double movement: the dialectic set up between words and images makes words look more like images, while at the same time Foer's usage of images calls for a new way of reading. Foer demands that his readers, independently, decipher the incorporated photographs' meaning by being attentive to the interrelations among them. The demand to take heed of the principle of literary montage consequently draws attention to ELIC's physicality and requires from readers an active engagement in the reading process. Readers have to disentangle the photos' significance, to figure out on their own what was the original context of each image and to reveal (and create, or sometimes, guess) the networks of meaning in which the image participates in the book. Like Sebald, only rarely does Foer explain his images or provide information about their producers or origins. His text is meant at some points, it seems, to resemble a sketchbook, with its loose organization and overtly associative, digressive quality. The task that Foer

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<sup>97</sup> Similarly to Sebald, Foer attempts to show that the trauma cannot be contained in words. To do so he employs a plethora of visual devices and, as I will show in this chapter, draws attention to the limits of both visibility and legibility. Juxtaposing blank pages with pages typed so densely that one cannot read the text, and interweaving photographs that complement themes evoked by the text go beyond merely calling attention to language's insufficiency in representing trauma, and invite a more attentive, careful mode of reading that enables the literary montage to be activated and carves a path for a more personal form of mourning, potentially a "working through."

took upon himself is therefore an ambitious one: in order to make fiction once again a suitable tool for the representation of trauma and the immeasurability of a loss, he tries to expand literature's boundaries. The stakes are therefore high and Foer employs a plethora of devices (some familiar, others are new) to draw attention to the visual experience of reading ELIC: the interplay between visual and verbal languages, the flow of the narrative that is constantly disturbed, the flickering of certain motifs, the reiteration of loss, and so on. The interchange between the two narratives and between visual and verbal language shows that the formatting of the novel's two parts becomes crucial to the readers' interpretive processes. In a way, Foer aspires to adapt his literary text to the reception mode of today's readers—a mode modified by other media forms in which images and words are inseparable from each other (for example, the newspapers, the internet, as well as television).

The integration of images makes the novel more like a newspaper or a magazine, prompting readers' eyes to wander to the images and then back to the text. But the photographs interfere with the narrative's coherence and flow, and complement Foer's attempts to go against easy comprehension and legibility. A photograph of Stephen Hawking, one of the first images reproduced in the manuscript, is a good example of this hermeneutic double-bind. A blurred, almost indistinct figure is situated at the right side of the photo, whereas a mini video-camera screen is located in the foreground, displaying Stephen Hawking's profile (54). The photographer focuses only on the screen, with Hawking's face on it; however the physicist's "actual" body is indistinct and barely recognizable, despite the fact that the blurred figure occupies most of the photograph's surface. The foregrounding of representation's contrived and mediated nature is

articulated also through the graphic options that appear on the DV camera's viewfinder flip-out screen, superimposed right on top of Hawkins' image. Additionally, Foer reproduced the image vertically, whereas it should be looked at horizontally, a decision that further impedes the easy beholding of the image. This photo, then, with its dark backdrop and the smaller image of Hawking surrounded with text on the small screen, goes against facile visuality in frustrating the viewers' gaze. I read this image as emblematic of Foer's attempt to challenge his readers and to urge them to rethink how altering visibility and legibility can create meaning, and how the two interact once obstructed.

In an interview given to the Village Voice, Foer explains his decision to accentuate the novel's visual realm: "to speak about what happened on September 11 requires a visual language. My singular motivation was to create the most powerful book I could." Is Foer suggesting that visual elements are more powerful than words because of their immediacy? And if so, what are the possible consequences of such a statement? Does being an author today entail an extended sensitivity not only to verbal expression but also to images? Or does he mean that some topics require more than words in order for their representation to be more accurate, or at least closer to their impact on reality? This chapter examines the way Foer deploys images and graphic text, focusing on the way he brings these two elements together. The interaction between the visual and the textual realms created through the interplay between text-image friction and spacing therefore enables Foer to express the shattering of experience and the tremendous loss suffered both collectively and individually. In this chapter I examine the way Foer employs images as a critical tool through which readers are encouraged to challenge their

relationship with the mass media (through which we generally learn about the political realm). The tragedies on which Foer writes lend themselves to be axis points of the difficulties representation face, and offer radical examples through which we can study the role of the visual realm within which the work of mourning is carried out. For Foer this role is investigated through the relationship between text and images: specifically, the interchange between visual and verbal narratives, the experimental narrative techniques and the employment of visual language that together work to signify the insufficiency and constructed nature of representation. These strategies will be examined through the prism of the literary montage activated by a more attentive, interpretive reading mode, which I trace through four major discussions. The first section maps out the unique linkage between 9/11 and photography (both journalistic and “vernacular”); the second section deals with the thematization of suspension on both textual and visual levels; digital manipulation as a way to expose both the mechanics of images’ reception and the ease with which they can be distorted is the subject of section III; section IV delves into typography and the prominence of visual languages in ELIC. I conclude my discussion with an analysis of the importance of reversal and repetition as intrinsic qualities of both photography and the work of mourning and further examine the way these themes are enacted in the novel, thereby making links to the other works discussed in this study.

The technique of the literary montage, with its privileging of gaps, disjunctions and its refusal to fix meaning, enables Foer to go beyond rather than merely illustrating the text with his inserted images. Rather, through their interaction with the print text and their relations among themselves they challenge the conventional form of the novel and

pose difficulties for readers both thematically and structurally. Not only do they convey the notion of rupture by literally disrupting the reading process, but in addition, they also enable Foer to reiterate and reinforce notions communicated on the textual level. The incorporation of images suggests that ELIC considers language incapable of fulfilling the task of representation, and images therefore come to its aid. If language, then, is lacking, images are required to fill some kind of a gap; yet, they do so, paradoxically, precisely by underscoring this gap, the place where language falls short. Foer constitutes his readers not merely as viewers, but as active interpreters through the relationship he sets up between visibility and legibility, challenging his audience to interrogate the links between the visual and the verbal through the way he makes words look more like images, and images more like words. Through the spacing of words and images and the disjunctions between the two, Foer comes closer to materializing the impossibility of fully grasping the disaster. The emphasis Foer places on language's breakdown accords with that of other postmodern writers who engage with the representation of trauma that cannot be thematized,<sup>98</sup> but also reminds his audience that reading is a visual process, and that trauma does not easily yield to meaning, or even to articulation, be it through visual or verbal means.

Foer juxtaposes two historical traumas, experienced both collectively and individually, giving voice to two expressions of loss. This is not to suggest that the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers and the consequent loss of life is necessarily similar to the destruction of the city of Dresden, but I believe that through this

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<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, the literary theorist Anne Whitehead claims in Trauma Fiction that “novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (5).

parallel Foer signals that for him (and perhaps for his generation) the 9/11 events wounded New York so drastically that the sense of shock and incomprehensibility of the disaster is comparable to that of the German destruction, despite the radically different circumstances and number of casualties.<sup>99</sup> Structuring ELIC's two framing narratives around 9/11 and the Dresden bombings,<sup>100</sup> the novel directly concerns the representation of death, mourning, and trauma – topics that clearly pose many difficulties for communication, be it verbal or visual. The breakdown of traditional forms of literary representations may have motivated Foer to reach out to the visual realm not only to challenge the adequacy of verbal representation for commemorating disaster, but also to question the role played by the visual field in the recollection of the disastrous event. Is

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<sup>99</sup> Is a disaster considered more terrible as the number of casualties goes up? Is a hierarchy of disasters based on the number of deaths at all required? The number of casualties in the Dresden bombings is unknown – ranging between 35,000 to 250,000; the “official” number of casualties in the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre is 2819 (based on “Death, destruction, charity, salvation, war, money, real estate, spouses, babies, and other September 11 statistics.” [New York Magazine. [www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm](http://www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm). July 1st, 2006]. It is important to note the many differences between these two tragedies, and to examine the way literature has dealt with the two events. In the United States, shortly after the 9/11 terror attacks, dozens of photographic remembrances and non-fiction books were published, but novels dealing with 9/11 appeared only a few years after the tragedy. Foer's ELIC was published at the same time as with Ian McEwan's Saturday (that doesn't directly deal with 9/11 but focuses on the impact of 9/11 events on a British doctor) and the translation into English of Frederic Beigbeder's Windows on the World that centres on a family breakfast in the Northern Tower's restaurant on the morning of the attacks. In June 2006, John Updike published Terrorist that dwelling on an American Muslim's turning into an Islamic extremist and terrorist. The literary responses to the Allied bombings in post-World War II Germany were extremely different. Geoff Eley writes about the continuing efforts at “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” ('coming to terms with the past') that, urged by the left, translated only into a debilitating “guilt obsession” that set the premise for the emergence of German fiction and non-fiction books dealing with German suffering during the Second World War. Most notable are W. G. Sebald's Luftkrieg und Literatur (1999) (translated into English in 2002 as A Natural History of Destruction) in which he discusses German literature's avoidance of the German cities' devastation by the Allied bombing offensive during the Second World War. In Crabwalk (2003; 2002), Günter Grass describes the sinking by a Soviet submarine of the refugee-filled cruise ship Wilhelm Gustloff in 1945, where some 9,000 people died. In the context of American literature, Kurt Vonnegut's novel Slaughterhouse Five (1969) also addresses the Dresden bombings.

<sup>100</sup> Another horrendous historical episode through which Foer explores the nature of testimony, representation and mediation is the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Foer includes an elaborate description of a videotape that Oskar screens to his classmates during science class (187-9). Our reading of a verbal account of a Japanese witness of Hiroshima's bombing, an account that was originally taped, edited, and subsequently translated (either using captions or voice-over) draws readers' attention not only to the role of mediation, but also to the difficulties of testimony as well as to language's inability to penetrate and accurately depict the events.

Foer suggesting that images are more suitable for “storing” memories and inquiring into the ways in which visual language gives us more opportunities for “working through”<sup>101</sup> loss? To me, it is precisely the blocking and impeding of visuality, in tandem with the deliberate undermining of the narrative’s progression (by constantly underscoring representation’s failure and interfering with the reading process’ flow by repeatedly marking the physical limits of legibility and visuality), that serve as a means for expressing the trauma’s incomprehensibility.<sup>102</sup> ELIC therefore gives readers the opportunity to become viewers, to experience once again images that were not accessible shortly after 9/11, and to do so through a meditation on visuality’s intricate bond with mourning.

## II. Photography and 9/11

Photography has an important place in Foer’s articulation of trauma. The majority of the images Foer reproduces in ELIC are photographs, and while some of them seem to

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<sup>101</sup> In his book Representing History Representing Trauma, (1994), the historian and theorist Dominick LaCapra holds that there are two fundamental forms of remembering traumatic events: “working through” and “acting out.” LaCapra differentiates between “working through,” the positive engagement with trauma that can lead to a resolution, closure, or event to healing, and “acting out” or compulsively repeating the past. There are, however, difficulties entailed in working through trauma, which always brings with it some degree of “acting-out.” The difficulty of working through a traumatic historical past that defies attempts at mastery is one of the challenges that postmodern art and theory sought to address by finding a suitable mimetic system, one fragmented and self-conscious enough, to articulate this impasse.

<sup>102</sup> It is of importance to note that what I refer to as Foer’s attempts to stretch the novel’s limits were often attacked by the critics, who considered them gimmicks or proof of Foer’s taking advantage of the 9/11 tragedy for profit-making. Lawrence Goodman of JBooks.com wrote that “Foer’s use of photos though seem mainly intended to stake his claim as a genuinely experimental writer, which is to say that from the reader’s point-of-view they come across as largely gratuitous.... Mostly, it serves to give post-modernism a bad name.” John Updike is less hostile to what he refers to as “the book’s hyperactive visual surface,” but concludes his overall enthusiastic review for The New Yorker suggesting that “a little more silence, a few fewer messages, less graphic apparatus might let Foer’s excellent empathy, imagination, and good will resonate all the louder.” Many critics, including Goodman, consider Foer’s incorporation of photos as a mere copying of W. G. Sebald. Foer’s gimmicks have made Harry Siegel of the New York Press so angry that in his review, entitled “Extremely Cloying & Incredibly False,” he openly declares: “having ‘read’ Foer’s latest—if that’s what one does to this cut-and-paste assemblage of words, pictures, blank pages and pages where the text runs together and becomes illegible—it’s time for bad form. Foer isn’t just a bad author, he’s a vile one.”

be taken from the print press, others have a close relationship to the narrative and were probably commissioned by Foer.<sup>103</sup> As I will show in this chapter, I consider the photographs imperative for the making-meaning process of ELIC, due to the interaction of the visual elements with the (verbal) narrative(s). The association of photography with memory and death began early in photography's first days and has been theorized by many critics.<sup>104</sup> However, recently researchers such as Ulrich Baer and Georges Didi-Huberman have further argued the structural similarity between photography and trauma, a parallel crucial for my theorization of photo-texts' capacity to convey the crisis that experience and memory undergo in the face of disaster. Baer elaborates Freud's famous linkage of the camera and the workings of the unconscious, rendering the latter as "the place where bits of memory are stored until they are developed, like prints from black and white negatives, into consciously accessible recollections" (8). Baer argues that the structure of photography, with its inherent belatedness and its recording of events that does not necessarily "process" them, is parallel to trauma's blockage of routine mental processes that convert an experience into memory and thus enable forgetting (9). Emphasizing the affinities between trauma and photography "by insisting that they both mark crises not of truth but of reference" (181), Baer sees photography's complex connection to remembering or forgetting as structurally similar to the Freudian term

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<sup>103</sup> We are told by the grandmother that the grandfather obsessively took photos of everything in their apartment, including of the doorknobs (177). Readers can therefore assume that the numerous images of doorknobs inserted into the manuscript were supposedly taken by the grandfather.

<sup>104</sup> In "Photography" (1927), Siegfried Kracauer referred to photographs as an "an image [that] wanders ghostlike through the present. . . . [I]t annihilates the person by portraying him, and were he to converge with it, he would not exist" (56). Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida openly states that photography conjures death, identifying a certain horror in the image: "it certifies that the corpse is still alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing" (79). More recently, Edouardo Cadava, in his analysis of Walter Benjamin's writing on photography, has written that "the conjunction of death and the photographed is in fact the very principle of photographic certitude: the photograph is a cemetery, a small funerary moment, the photograph is a grave for the living dead" (10).



*Nachträglichkeit* – belatedness – and to the understanding that some events attain full meaning only in retrospect (181).

Marianne Hirsch strengthens the rapport between the structured belatedness of both photography and trauma, asserting that still photography is the visual genre that best captures the trauma and loss associated with September 2001. Photography's unique temporality, she proposes, is consonant with the sense of monumental, irrevocable change experienced after an event such as 9/11: "To photograph, we might say, is to look in a different way -- to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. This deferral is as inherent to photography and as it is to trauma, enabling photography to help us understand the traumatic events of September." The special significance that photography traditionally acquired in relation to trauma and its belatedness is challenged with the change in technology; the move to pixels therefore raises the question of whether there is a change in the photographic relation to the processes of mourning and recovery as well. Coupling the predominance of photographic representation in Foer's novel with the theories discussed in this section illuminates why photography became a medium appropriate for coming to terms with the tragedy, once the audience was capable of engaging with images independently from the press. Photography thereby signaled the possibility of consolation and healing to those who successfully established a personal response to the collective, overwhelming tragedy.

There are several explanations for the fact that photography<sup>105</sup> held such an important place in the public experience of 9/11: not only did its unique temporal construction enable viewers to comprehend what they saw and experienced with

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<sup>105</sup> My discussion focuses on still photography, and so I refer to video images and to the live TV broadcasting of the tragic events only peripherally, to explain the employment of digital photography in comparison to analog images.

hindsight, but significantly, this medium acquired new meanings in the days following the overwhelming events of September 2001. Peter Lucas writes, in his article “The Missing Person Pictures,” that picture-taking has “became an event in and of itself, and everything about 9/11 was worth photographing.” If everything around New York City seemed so emotionally charged, photography provided not only a therapeutic relief but also some kind of interpretative action. Lucas quotes a photo editor at Time Magazine who said she had never seen so many submissions for a single event: in addition to bystanders who sent pictures, firemen, policemen, and rescue workers were also trying to sell their photographs. Hirsch too points out that after the terror attacks, it seemed that everywhere around the city people carried cameras with them, and felt compelled to take photographs of Ground Zero, despite Mayor Guiliani’s request to avoid photographing the site of destruction.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claims that photography was a means for many New Yorkers to mediate and distance, and thereby reach some understanding of the tragedy they went through: “to be so close to the disaster and yet so insulated from it meant that we too knew it from photographs rather than from direct experience of ruin” (12). According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, many New Yorkers felt that their world “ha[d] turned into a museum of itself” (15) and photography therefore enabled them to discover the concrete consequences of the attack in order to “let the reality of the catastrophe sink in” (19). Shrines and memorials appeared all around the city; the photographs of the missing and the presumed dead, she continues, “became the only tangible address to which mourners could bring their prayers” (19). Photography, it seems, became a medium for New Yorkers to absorb and process the event’s effect on them and to deal

with the images of the tragedy in a more private, independent manner, different than the one offered by the public press. The engagement with photography took many expressions: people seemed to be compelled to take photographs and document the tragedy's aftermath, to bring photos of the victims, and to build these spontaneous shrines. All provided opportunities to use different images from those circulating in the media and thereby to offer less mediated,<sup>106</sup> more private, and possibly more emotional levels of engagement with the tragedy.

For Lucas, the missing person photos that were publicly posted throughout New York City stood out as the tragedy's visual focal point. The photographs were rapidly printed as posters,<sup>107</sup> placed everywhere around the city, most of them clustered in strategic locations – outside hospitals and victims' information centers, public parks. They even formed spontaneous grieving locations, when assembled together as a kind of mural. Started spontaneously by anxious families and friends in order to gather information about their loved ones, these were initially called “Walls of Hope,” but with the realization that there was little hope of finding survivors, the murals soon became known as the “Walls of Prayers.” Lucas writes that “families continued to post pictures but the desperate messages for help were changed into visual memorials.” According to Lucas, these walls, and especially the one located in Union Square, all began to shift into shrines and formed sacred congregation sites, thereby enabling New Yorkers “to see

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<sup>106</sup> By “less mediated” I mean that the act of taking photographs and the profusion of homemade photos (as opposed to the more polished photos circulating in the media), the “shrines” and the spontaneous public gathering around the photos show us that photography augmented the agency of the public in coming to terms with the tragedy. In a way New Yorkers took back the event from the press and were able to mourn collectively, but nevertheless, in a very authentic and genuine way, and to thereby create their own path to acknowledging their loss.

<sup>107</sup> Because there were many flyers, the pictures were mostly color Xeroxes and black and white photocopies.

something in person and move beyond the televised coverage that was quickly shifting from the spectacular inferno footage to analysis and debate.”

Foer, too, is mindful of the complexities evolving around the missing people photographs. A scene in ELIC describes a confrontation between Oskar’s mother and grandmother, taking place on 9/11’s afternoon, shortly after the buildings have collapsed. Oskar is in the apartment together with his mother and grandmother. The latter is this chapter’s narrator: “Your mom closed the windows but we can still smell the smoke. She asked me if I thought we should make posters” (229). The scene is presented from the standpoint of the grandmother, who is very passive in comparison with the mother who has called the police, the fire department and the newspapers in order to find out what happened to her husband and only then decided to create the missing person poster. Whereas the grandmother appears rather collected, the mother seems to be less in control of her feelings. The two soon start debating over the photograph chosen by the mother: “She used the picture from your vacation. From only two weeks before. It was you and your father. When I saw it I told her she shouldn’t use a picture that had your face in it. She said she wasn’t going to use the whole picture. Only your father’s face. I told her, Still, [sic] it isn’t a good idea” (229).

The conversation between the two highlights the confusion victims’ families felt. The general sense of helplessness and shock is reflected in the random logic that guides the content of some of these missing persons’ posters. Lucas writes that these spontaneous posters “slipped outside of the dominant aesthetic code which dominates media representations,” thanks to their plain and unpolished quality that “offered an improvisational and vernacular counterpoint to all of the other pictures.” The spontaneity

and hurriedness that typified the missing person posters signaled the possibility of a less mediated relationship with the tragedy for those who did not directly experience loss; in sharp contrast, the grandmother in ELIC cannot avoid protesting against the reducing of a beloved person to a photograph. She describes the items the mother took with her upon leaving the house, on her way to hang the posters, and bitterly comments: “the paper, the stapler, the staples, the tape. It makes me sick. Physical things. Forty years of loving someone becomes staples and tape” (229-30).

For the grandmother, the loss of beloved family members is amplified by their replacement by objects: loss is therefore magnified when presence becomes (or is displaced by) a memory, and especially a memory object. This can explain the grandmother’s resistance to the “missing person poster” that she could not associate with her son, not only because of the shock she has experienced but because of her refusal to see her son reduced to a photograph, and subsequently to a poster, hung around town. To sum up, Foer’s decision to incorporate photographs into his novel reflects the centrality that photography acquired in the experience of post-9/11 New-York. The compulsion many people felt to make their own images of the event, striving, perhaps to counter the media’s employment (meaning the reruns and the overuse) of the same images, is crucial to my theorization of the workings of literary montage. The controversies that surrounded certain aspects of photography are magnified by the ambiguous status of the photos in the book: since we don’t know their producers, origin or their intended significance, I conclude that Foer intentionally planted them, so that their meaning would remain open for analysis and debate, to strengthen the readers’ involvement in the novel’s unfolding.

### III. Suspension

One of the means through which Foer highlights the rupture between event and representation is by calling attention to the notion of suspension. He integrates several images that compel his readers to reconsider the relation between two of photography's fundamental qualities, indexicality and belatedness. Photographs depicting a cat falling to the ground, a flock of birds flying, a rollercoaster descending a hill, and, most significantly, photographs of a man falling from the World Trade Centre, all directly engage with the suspension of time and the arresting of movement. Furthermore, these photographs echo the disruption in the reading process that the integration of images creates. All the photographs incorporated into the novel are black and white and printed on a full page, inevitably stopping the narrative's flow. This group of images, where objects are suspended in mid-air, figuratively manifests the role of the spacing in the reading experience. Moreover, the lack of any inscription that might directly explain the linkage between images and narrative confirms that the photographs are more than mere illustrations; the confused readers have to work independently in order to establish a connection between words and images. The physical ordering of the images is also of interest and does not yield to coherent narrativization. The photographs of the falling man, and especially the flipbook placed at the end of the novel, are fundamental to our understanding of ELIC. I will analyze shortly the deployment of the falling man images at length, but I must first discuss the generic difficulties and thematic tensions raised with the insertion of photographs and their dispersion in the novel.

In ELIC, photographs are scattered throughout the novel in a manner which contrasts with Hemon's and Sebald's methods. For example, Foer inserts black and white

images reproduced on the entire page, whereas both Hemon and Sebald tend to insert images within a page and surround them with text. In addition, we find in ELIC groups or clusters of photographs, such as the group of photographs at the book's opening (which makes the manuscript comparable to a sketchbook), or the sequence of photographs located at the end of the novel (which may be its most famous or infamous, rather, feature), in which video images of a man falling from the burning towers is reproduced in reverse order. The falling man images (see Appendix 8) hover over the whole manuscript: for example, the group of "suspended in mid-air" images mentioned above can be regarded as complementing the non-photographic, visual elements Foer deploys, and together the visual and verbal threads underscore the fact that themes of loss and mourning are fundamental to the novel. Like the pages filled with numbers or letters typed together so tightly that the page seems soaked with ink, these images interrupt the flow of the reading. Even more, they resonate with the blank pages, scattered throughout the novel, in numerous locations. To me, these blank pages, or their mirror images -- those pages that are overcrowded with textual or numerical elements that go against coherent meaning -- operate as a form of shock, disrupting and interrupting the narrative flow, they therefore serve to register the incomprehensible nature of trauma. In the novel, the suspension of the narrative would be interpreted as similar to the impeding of vision that enables Foer to investigate questions of visibility and memory. The incorporation of photographs also induces another form of suspension, one that addresses questions of genre; the question of the photographs' indexicality seems to work against, but at the same time to reinforce the veracity of Foer's pseudo-documentary fiction. Photography's privileged relationship to reality derives from an indexical relationship the photos have

with the situations they document; here, this relationship, however, is doubly problematic. First, ELIC is obviously a work of fiction and therefore the reproduced photos cannot actually belong to, or be taken by, the novel's characters. Additionally, these photographs emanate from a certain reality, one that corresponds to the readers' reality.<sup>108</sup> The photographs' presence within the novel creates an overlap between the literary space and the world of the readers, and one of the possible consequences of this overlap is the strengthening of the narrative's credibility and of its impact on readers (even though this blurring of real and fictional worlds can also lead to the confusing of readers and thus further destabilize the truth claims of the novel).

Foer, however, seems to be interested in creating a different kind of impact on his readers: it is not the reality effect that he seeks to strengthen but rather it is the reinforcement of questions of memory, time and mourning already raised textually, that he wishes to explore through the visual layer. The photographs, therefore, frame the novel in a way that increases its potential impact on readers: by planting groups of images, be they physically adjacent or belonging to a thematic group, Foer gives up some of his control over his viewers' imagination, and allows them, like him and like Oskar, the pleasure of inventing. Readers are therefore invited to decipher the photos' meaning in their new context and are required to take an active role in the novel's unfolding.

A good example of the way Foer employs photographs to complement the textual level can be seen in his invoking of themes of loss with the insertion of the film still from

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<sup>108</sup> This reality is distinguished, of course, from the "deictic" events of the narrative. The events included in the novel's narrative have only a limited degree of correspondence with the "real world." Postmodern writing often sets out to complicate the distinction between the "outside" reality and the events depicted in the novel. For example, E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime (1975) and Philip Roth's semi-fictional autobiography The Plot Against America (2004) exemplify the difficulties postmodern authors place before their readers in terms of differentiating between these two realms.



Laurence Olivier's Hamlet (55) as well as the photo of the "Towers of Light" memorial for the WTC (253). Both images announce the novel's preoccupation with themes of death and mourning. Whereas the reading process is constantly interrupted, the readers are invited to create visual threads between the inserted images by becoming more attentive to the visual language of the novel. The literary montage is activated once readers take heed of the interplay between the images, and of the way the photographs and the graphic elements interact to invoke visually themes raised by the prose narrative. For one, even though Foer does not include captions, the relationship the still from the Hamlet film sustains with the narrative is relatively self-evident: Oskar plays Yorik in the school production of the play, and also, since he is in deep mourning for his father, Hamlet clearly becomes a significant intertext.

The film still signals that similarly to Hamlet's preoccupation with grief and inability to move on towards a resolution and a "working through" of his pain and melancholy, Oskar hasn't come to terms with the death of his father and is haunted by guilt and remorse. Another allusion to the play is made when one of the messages Oskar's father left on the answering machine, while trapped in the burning towers, ends in a way that is evocative of King Hamlet's last words – "Remember..." (69). The fragmented messages, the line that was continuously cut off, and the voice of the father choking on smoke, are all conveyed textually, thereby formally echoing the spacing created by the insertion of photographs into the narrative. The relationship the film still maintains with the images surrounding it is less evident, and here readers are asked to operate on their own and draw their own conclusions. Each of the inserted images proposes numerous narrative possibilities, and without captions or direct reference in the

text, readers are invited to explore independently, on their own, these multiple relationships and networks of meaning delineated in the space between words and images.

“Every relationship in the book is built around silence and distance,” Foer says in an interview given to the New York Times. “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is what no two people are to one another.” The relationship between silence and distance, as well as the tension between expression (or representation in general) and its proximity to reality, are reiterated by the photographs, as I mentioned earlier. The absence of captions and the clustering of images, groups of photographs in no particular order or apparent thematic connection signal to readers that Foer seeks to produce a different reading experience -- one, I argue, that resembles leafing through a scrapbook, rather than the linear reading of a novel, in which readers follow the advancement of a plot and the progress of its characters. Two groups of images - the one set at the beginning of the novel and the series of fifteen images at the end of the novel -- are the strongest indication that the manuscript may be Oskar’s scrapbook. No text is included among the various photographs that seem to be reproduced and randomly chosen; the significance and sources of several of these images are revealed only during later stages of the narrative. Foer also employs images from this group elsewhere in the novel, taking them out of the sequence and planting them in numerous locations to convey Oskar’s interest in them as well as to demonstrate certain self-reflexive notions and to lend a more meditative atmosphere to the text. Images from the falling man series appear then several times before the group is reproduced at the novel’s end. Foer placed in the novel’s final

pages a flip book<sup>109</sup> containing fifteen video images, organized in reverse order – so that instead of seeing a man falling to his death, we see a figure ascending, its movement evocative of flying.<sup>110</sup> Two reproductions from this video sequence are included among the series of images clustered together on pages 53-67; another image from this series is incorporated in the midst of a conversation between Oskar’s mother and his therapist (205). Foer reproduces at least two different images of the falling man before their integration into the flip book, as can be seen from the difference in the man’s positioning in the photographs. The body is positioned at the top of the picture on the first time the image is reproduced, and lower, closer to the bottom of the photo, in the later image. We do not know why the images depict different positions of the man falling down, nor can we understand, only hypothesize about, Foer’s (and by extension, Oskar’s) supposed intentions. Readers can deduce, however, that the repeated reproduction of these images indicates that they are meant to draw our attention to a point Foer is trying to make. Moreover, suspension (literal and structural) enables Foer to hint at the potential for a radically different conception of time altogether, possibly alluding to his belief that a different conceptualization of time is needed for mourning, for comprehension, and finally for coming to terms with the tragic event. Whereas we can only hypothesize the reason why Foer repeatedly deploys the falling man images, we can consider them as a

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<sup>109</sup> Flip books, invented in the late 1860s, have a close relationship with both painting and cinema – the images’ ordering simulates movement and thereby the figures appear animated when the pages are rapidly turned. The images’ movement here yields to the creation of a narrative, and the integration of a flip book therefore not only reflects Foer’s aspiration to stretch literature’s boundaries (by bringing it closer to comics, which is another medium that amalgamates words and images), but also marks the images’ legibility (once a visual narrative is explicitly delineated), thereby promoting a new way of reading.

<sup>110</sup> After her work “Falling,” an installation commemorating 9/11’s falling victims, was taken down from the windows of the Jamaica Center for the Arts & Learning, being considered too disturbing, the artist Sharon Paz wrote: “my interest was to explore the moment of falling to bring the psychological human side of the event.” Paz’s “Falling” also refers to the resemblance between falling and flying that these images propose, as she writes in her website, “the moment between life and death. Falling is one of the basic fears of humans but, at the same time, we dream to fly.”

manifestation of the inability to articulate loss accurately. Like Oskar, readers too are compelled to repeat, and are bound to look at these images without being able to understand what we actually see.

Of special importance is the enlargement of one image from this series (67); this photograph is enlarged to the degree that its pixels hinder the desire of readers-turned-viewers to see more, to know more. I find that Foer problematizes the traditional coupling of knowledge with visuality, and their mutual linkage with truth values.<sup>111</sup> The frustrated attempt to “penetrate” the visual and the subsequent blockage of the gaze suggest that some things are beyond comprehension, be it on the visual level or the textual one. For Roland Barthes, photographs always demand a spacing of vision and knowledge, and therefore a suspension of the viewers’ comprehension of what they see: “whatever it [a photograph] grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (6). “A secondary action of knowledge or of reflection” is required in order to distinguish a specific photograph from its referent (from what it represents, the photograph’s signifier), Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (5). The photographs of the victims who fell or jumped are immediately recognizable as emblematic of 9/11, despite their rarity in the media (during the first years following the tragedy). However, identifying the “jumpers” proves to be problematic: since the photos were taken from the ground, it is almost impossible to discern the victims’ facial features. Consequently, each of these victims does not stand on his or her own, but rather they symbolize a collective

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<sup>111</sup> Martin Jay writes that paradoxically the camera did not solve the problem of objectivity, but rather entered into the debate about the truth value of photographic evidence, a debate that became even more acute with the introduction of digital photography. Jay points out that the development of the camera “the most remarkable technological extension of the human capacity to see, at least since the microscope and the telescope in the seventeenth century, helped ultimately to undermine confidence in the very sense whose powers it so extended” (qtd. in Grimshaw 25).

fate, the tragedy of 9/11. The inability to distinguish the men and women photographed does not hinder the immediate recognition of the photographs and the tragedy they represent. Hence, the singularity of the victims is diminished in a move parallel to the media's condensation of the 9/11 events into one tragic phenomenon.<sup>112</sup>

The photographs of the falling bodies have been referred to as "the WTC jumpers."<sup>113</sup> They were quickly considered "too disturbing," and disappeared almost immediately from mainstream media. At the time of ELIC's publication they were accessible almost exclusively on the internet. These photographs contain no violence, but it is their context -- readers' immediate association of the images with 9/11 and their knowledge that the photographed will shortly reach the ground and meet their death -- that creates their chilling effect. Claire Kahane writes that these photographs go beyond the limits of what we can see: "the images of live people becoming falling bodies were too real, opening the viewer to a mimetic identification with trauma that was intolerable" (113). The falling bodies photographs counter the spectacle quality the majority of 9/11 images possess. Visual culture theorist Barbie Zelizer writes that "the trauma of 9/11 was a public trauma, constructed as a televised spectacular event whose events were meant to

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<sup>112</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell comments that the news coverage of the 9/11 cluster of events had "condensed an entire event into a single image, to the exclusion of the Pentagon or the hijacked plane crashing in Pennsylvania" (568). This condensation created a unified set of images and a unified discourse that in a way emphasizes the national grief rather than that of the individual (to the diminishment of the possibility of mourning individually in a discourse that focuses on the collective loss and the national sense of shattering).

<sup>113</sup> The term "WTC Jumpers" or "Jumpers" indicates the lack of a more appropriate term and the presence of collective blind spots, resulting from the lack of a comprehensive discourse evolving around the terror attacks. Tom Junod notes in his Esquire article that the falling men and women were called "jumpers" or "the jumpers," as though they represented "a new lemminglike class." Junod describes the reaction of the crowd standing on the ground, and the trial they endured witnessing the falling casualties (a trial, obviously, incomparable to that of the victims): "No one ever got used to it; no one who saw it wished to see it again, although, of course, many saw it again. Each jumper, no matter how many there were, brought fresh horror, elicited shock, tested the spirit, struck a lasting blow. Those tumbling through the air remained, by all accounts, eerily silent; those on the ground screamed." The reference to these photos as "the falling bodies" is no less disturbing and surrenders the inclination to reduce the people, who are still alive in their fall to the ground, to dead bodies.

be witnessed, photographed, and filmed” (49).<sup>114</sup> Jenny Edkins adds that the attack produced a spectacle whose coverage was incessantly and instantaneously transmitted worldwide “by a [sic] media so thrown by events that it had little control of what it was broadcasting” (224).

The almost immediate disappearance of these images from the mainstream media is also addressed by Mikita Brottman, in her article “The Fascination of Abomination: The Censored Images of 9/11.” Brottman notes that after September 12, a general agreement developed in the American press that any images containing human beings falling from the towers were inappropriate and distasteful. Junod further describes the disturbance and resistance that the circulation of the falling bodies’ images faced in that Esquire article. From the beginning, Junod writes, “the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption.” Junod’s article reveals that the victims’ families reacted with hostility to journalists’ attempts to trace the identity of victims who jumped or fell to their death from the burning towers. He suggests that one of the reasons why families refuse to associate their beloved ones with the falling victims derives from a climate (that may result from the nationalistic and religious wave that washed over the US after 9/11) in which the act of jumping, suicide, is considered as morally questionable and “non-Christian.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> The collective shock and confusion were clear in the events’ coverage: without being able to explain what was happening, television stations were reduced to playing and replaying images. These images could be divided into two groups: images that were broadcasted and were later incessantly repeated, such as the planes hitting the buildings, people fleeing from the scene, and the buildings’ collapse; but also images that were so troubling that the press avoided replaying them. Such was the case with the images of the falling bodies that do not contain any graphic violence and yet had to be repressed.

<sup>115</sup> Drawing distinctions among the victims (and thus ranking their degree of martyrdom) is possibly one of the reasons for foregrounding the coverage of the firemen who died on their rescue mission when the towers collapsed.

Despite the difficulty of accessing these images, Brottman maintains that they are among the most haunting and memorable part of the tragedy. While they are still scarce in the mainstream media, they can be found on shady internet websites, where they are surrounded with photographs and video streams of “snuff” quality.<sup>116</sup> The disturbance that the falling bodies’ images create is augmented by their new surroundings. Possibly, their location contributes to the shame and moral indignation that some of the victims families express in Junod’s article. Foer’s reproduction of these images supplements the internet’s important role as a repository of these repressed memories, deemed (at the time) too dangerous or too disturbing by mainstream media.<sup>117</sup>

These photographs’ chilling effect is amplified by the temporal conundrum they incite (as do other photos of people in their last moments): once viewers realize that these people are among the 9/11 victims, they too, like the falling men captured in the image, are petrified. Due to the camera’s capacity to arrest movement and to seize a moment from the flux of time, the photographs seem to hold the victims in life, frozen, endowing the readers-viewers’ gaze with the magical capacity to prevent the fall, and to allow them to transcend gravity and avoid hitting the ground, a gesture similar to Szymborska’s deliberate avoidance of the last line in her poem “A Photograph from 9/11”.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> In his interview for the New York Times Foer describes what he found on the websites featuring the falling bodies’ images and their possible effect on the children who, like Oskar, ELIC’s protagonist, encounter them: “I couldn’t believe what I was looking at -- beheadings, C-sections, shark attacks, people jumping from planes with broken parachutes. It made me wonder what it must be like to be young right now. Kids are subjected to images that adults aren’t because a) their curiosity for the grotesque is greater and b) their ability to access it is greater.”

<sup>117</sup> Junod writes that the 9/11 families requested television executives before the first anniversary of the attacks to avoid the most disturbing footage—including the footage of the jumpers—in their memorial broadcasts.

<sup>118</sup> The Polish Poet Laureate (and Nobel-prize winner) Wislawa Szymborska commemorates the anonymous victims precisely by highlighting this sense of suspension of hanging between earth and the sky, right before the inevitable end. Szymborska encapsulates the fascination, the desire, mixed with fear and horror, to know more, intensified by the audience’s inability to avert their gaze from these men and women falling to their death. The poem’s last lines are: “They’re still within the air’s reach,/ within the

Foer's integration of these banished images in the novel stirred many critics, and generated many angry responses.<sup>119</sup> Not only does Foer confront his readers with images that at the time were denied them elsewhere, but many reviewers were irritated by the incorporation of the video images' in reverse order. Some critics, however, compared the ordering of the sequence to a soul's ascendance in the sky – a reading that is supported by a photograph of birds flying reproduced on the novel's opening page,<sup>120</sup> right before the title page. While I acknowledge that Foer's employment of the falling bodies' photographs can be seen as disrespectful of the victims' memory, I find that these images' inclusion in the novel (as opposed to their presence on the internet) redeems them from their repressed status and their internet connotations of snuff. The presence of the falling bodies images on websites that cross the normative threshold of what can (and should?) be shown, has prevented the development of a discourse that would gradually bring to light what some prefer to overlook. I argue that Foer's incorporation of the falling man's photographs into his novel opens up a space for mourning that is not national but private. Foer underscores our failure to penetrate the visual surface by manipulating these images, emphasizing the victims' singularity and the private aspects of the event. He thereby goes against 9/11's representation as a spectacle. By focusing on one man rather than on the collective tragedy, Foer's novel enables an alternative work of

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compass of places/ that have just now opened./ I can do only two things for them –/ describe this flight/ and not add a last line"

<sup>119</sup> ELIC received a mediocre reception – many reviewers considered the novel as a pretentious (and possibly premature) attempt to write about the September 11 aftermath. Almost all of the reviews discussed Foer's experiments with the visual aspects of the novel; most of them deemed this experiment a gimmick. The most corrosive reviewers, such as Lawrence Goodman, condemned Foer for integrating the falling men photographs, which they deemed disrespectful to the victims' memory: "Foer has taken the ineffable horror of that day and made it tangible in a way that violates the event's sanctity."

<sup>120</sup> The photograph of the birds is incorporated once again on a double page in the middle of the book – on pages 168-9 – where it is reproduced from a closer angle, and therefore only the lower half of the photograph is included.



mourning, one that departs from the mythical, overly general (or symbolical) coverage that the tragedy has received by the American media.

#### **IV. Digital Manipulation**

Foer's deployment of the falling man images calls attention not only to suspension but also to the image's susceptibility to manipulation. The pixelization of the blown-up photograph attests to the images' digital origin, and consequently, to its openness to possible manipulation, which exceeds that of analogue photographs. Oskar tells the readers that he found the video (from which he took the images) on the internet, on foreign websites that feature such off-limits scenes:

I found a bunch of videos on the internet of bodies falling, they were on a Portuguese site, where there were all sorts of stuff they weren't showing here. Whenever I want to learn something about how dad dies I have to go to a translator program, and find out how to say things in different languages... then I google words. It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can't, because it happened here, and happened to me, so shouldn't it be mine? (256)

Issues of possession and accessibility intermingle here. Oskar is frustrated by being denied access to information that directly relates to him, that is, to his father's death. The desired information and images on English-speaking websites demonstrate that even the medium considered to be enjoying the largest amount of freedom is restricted by censorship. It is well known that the internet is not prone to the same kind of monitoring as are other media. Clearly, the distribution of information and the circulation of troubling images have ethical implications. The effectiveness of censorship, of certain nations' capacity to keep information away from their citizens, is both depended on and

threatened by the internet's diffusion of territorial differences.<sup>121</sup> Oskar's success in accessing images that are banned in the US evinces the internet's resistance to limits posed by geographical distance or language barriers. In conclusion, the internet and its complicated politics of information and dissemination further destabilize those already grey zones that affect our memory and knowledge of events.

Oskar describes not only the efforts he went through in order to find the images but also what he hoped to find *in* them: "I print out the frames from the Portuguese video and examined them extremely closely. There's one body that could be him. It's dressed like he was and when I magnified it until the pixels are so big that it stops looking like a person, sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can't it's just me wanting it to be him" (257). He is aware of the photographs' reluctance to lend themselves to viewer comprehension, of their resistance to the inquiring gaze that seeks more information about the victims. Oskar himself is conscious of the limited access he is allowed to the image – indeed, he knows how to find the images, and is capable of bypassing language barriers (with the help of translation and foreign search engines) – but there is just so much information the image itself discloses.

The image's limits motivate Oskar to investigate it further. Even though the pixels prevent him from seeing the photograph's details more precisely, Oskar fictionalizes what he sees and finds a resemblance between the falling man and his father, speculating that one man is wearing glasses. The digital image enables Foer to stress the blocking of visuality and to highlight the boundaries that both vision and memory face. The enlarged

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<sup>121</sup> China's tightening of its internet control is a prominent example of a nation's monitoring and censoring of its citizens' internet use. However, the kind of censorship employed in regard to the images of the falling bodies demonstrates a form of censorship derived from social codes: it is instigated as an attempt to protect the audience's feelings, rather than because of a governmental delimiting of information circulation.

image is integrated on page 62, only three pages after the first reproduction of a falling man photograph, and it appears that its shock value is reduced because of the image's digital enlargement. The readers no longer see the towers, only the blurry figure of the man with his arms open. Without the towers, and with the deterioration of the reproduction's quality, the photograph's circumstances are less immediately revealed. The enlarged image is reproduced right after a photograph of New York, which has been edited in such a way that the space where Central Park is located is hollowed out. The editing-out of one of New York's most recognizable features and the voiding of this space can be understood as a visual metaphor of the interchange between presence and absence after the towers' destruction. The hollow space of Central Park resonates not only with the vacuum left in "Ground Zero,"<sup>122</sup> but also with the reproduction of the "Towers of Light" monument (reproduced on p. 253) and with Andreas Huyssen's assertion that "no ruins are allowed in the American imagination" (159).<sup>123</sup>

Another image that dramatizes digital images' susceptibility to manipulation and alteration features a close-up on an elephant's eye (95). The photo is displayed in the kitchen of Abby Black, one of the people Oskar meets in his search for the owner of the key found among his father's belongings. The elephant looks away from the camera but its eye and the creased skin around it create the impression that there is a tear in his eye: "It looks like the elephant in that photograph is crying." I got extremely close to the

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<sup>122</sup> Richard Stamelman recognizes the hybridity in naming "Ground Zero" the site where the World Trade Center stood: "the fact that ground zero contains at its very center a remembrance of an earlier event (Hiroshima), which it automatically calls to mind, makes the expression into what French historian Pierre Nora called a 'memory site.' Such *lieux de mémoire*, he writes, are "moments of history torn away from the movement of history then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (14).

<sup>123</sup> According to Huyssen, the urge to rebuild "Ground Zero" as quickly as possible, with preferably even bigger towers than those that were destroyed, and at the same time to create a permanent monument is "as absurd as it is intriguing in its logic: the rebuilt twin towers as a monument to forgetting, an erasure of history, an emblem of global capital in a different sense from that of the terrorist imaginary" (158-9).

picture and it was true. “‘It was probably manipulated by Photoshop,’ I said, ‘But just in case, can I take a picture of your picture?’” (96). The photograph’s emotional impact, however, is undercut by Oskar’s comment that it has gone through Photoshop manipulation. Nevertheless, the text works against this remark and maintains the melancholic mood with its re-engagement of memory and mourning. Oskar tells Abbey about an experiment conducted to examine the elephants’ memories, where a researcher taped and played calls the elephants heard several years before the experiment: “‘Because what’s *really* fascinating is that she’d play the call of a dead elephant to its family members.’ ‘And?’ ‘They remembered.’ ‘What did they do?’ ‘They approached the speaker’” (96).<sup>124</sup>

Interestingly, Photoshop -- or the employment of more advanced software applications that allow the modification of images -- plays an important role in the American people’s attitude to the events. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the digital removal of the Twin Towers from TV and cinema segments shot before September 2001 in order to avoid distracting or traumatizing the viewers by the sight of the towers (12). Additionally, Russell Frank suggests, in his article about digital manipulation and 9/11 “newslore,”<sup>125</sup> that digitally altering images was a means to underwrite the news coverage of the tragedy, considered by Frank as the “most exhaustive journalism that the world has ever seen” (634). Photoshop predominated the 9/11 “newslore” and enabled Americans to counter the disaster’s coverage’s “muting effect,” created by the inevitable

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<sup>124</sup> This sentimental passage exemplifies one of Foer’s weaknesses: the simplistic writing style (that of a 9-year old) and the themes of mourning and death that are explicitly underlined here result in an effect of kitsch.

<sup>125</sup> Frank observes that there is a tradition in folklore studies of “coining neologisms for subfields: netlore, jokelore, faxlore, ghostlore,” etc. The “newslore” on which Frank focuses circulated mainly via email (but was also posted on humorous or nationalistic websites). Frank regards it as a “direct response to current events... but it also ‘recycles’ images and punchlines applied to earlier events” (634).

framing and reducing of the disaster to the small screen (640). Hence, digital alteration or manipulation can be seen as a legitimate way to respond to the disaster story as well as to the media's narrative of the disaster. In "Kodak Moments Flashbulb Memories: Reflections on 9/11," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett tells of several satiric reactions that were posted on humorous websites or circulated on email, but notes that, in general, "humour was slow to appear after 9/11" (13). Indeed, digitally altered images appeared only at a later stage, after the shock was beginning to wear off; but the re-touched photos display yet another aspect of photography's significance in these traumatic events' aftermath.

The photograph featuring New York City without Central Park (that Foer incorporates on page 66) echoes the notion that after 9/11 the city has turned into a ghostly city, hollowed out by the towers' destruction. Foer illustrates this idea both visually and textually: a photo reproduced on page 246 creates an eerie effect by superimposing the Empire State Building's observation deck on a diner's interior. The faded people in the photograph and the absence of a gaze to return that of the viewers announce a paradox embedded in photography: on the one hand, the images' alteration demonstrates this medium's instability and vulnerability to manipulation; but, simultaneously, the readers are reminded of photography's ability to capture disappearance and to bear witness to absence. In addition to this visual thread thematizing New York's turning into a phantom city, other intertext are employed both visually and textually to echo this sense of ghosting. As I mentioned earlier, Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, becomes a central intertext which is foregrounded through the narrative. And as we have seen, Foer makes the theme of loss apparent explicitly by Oskar's playing Yorick in his school production, as well as through a film still of Laurence

Olivier holding a skull in the famous graveyard scene. The ghostly melancholy that the Hamlet film still inspires is enhanced by the impact of photographs directly addressing 9/11 – such as the falling man images and the “Towers of Light” monument – as well as by photographs whose subject matter is death, such as the skeletal hand reproduced on page 155, and a screen shot of the CNN’s reportage on the Staten Ferry Island accident from October 2003, in which ten people met their death (135).

## **V. Typography and Photography**

Another strategy Foer uses to challenge the novel’s conventions involves his experiments with trick graphics that complement his employment of images. The typographical play takes many forms: Foer incorporates into the novel some pages containing colorful signatures that mimic pads found in stationary stores (where customers try out pens), pages with only one line printed on them, and ones with red markings on the text (creating the impression that the novel was already read by another, or that it is still in the process of being edited – underscoring its incompleteness). Other pages contain lists, reproductions of visiting cards, fragments of copied conversations, sequences of numbers instead of letters, and other elements that emphasize the visuality of the reading process, an element that is often overlooked or taken for granted by both critics and readers.

What further complicates Foer’s experimental graphics are his attempts to physically erase the text – an effort that can be understood as expressing Maurice Blanchot’s statement that the “disaster de-scribes” (7). The effacement of the text mirrors the impossibility of containing the disaster in writing and conveys Foer’s conscious

efforts to underscore the breakdown of language and representation. The innovative use of graphics and of narrative techniques such as reverse mode (paralleling the sequence of the falling man photographs) suggest that the writing is erasing itself at the moment of its inscription. The self-destructive essence of Foer's writing is conveyed in gestures that mimic the editing of a text (lines crossing out words and titles, red markings scattered through a letter). Such gestures, on the one hand, heighten the text's physicality but at the same time undercut its comprehensibility, and make it illegible. This mode of self-erasure comes to a culmination in one of the grandfather's unsent letters where the text is so crowded with words that the letters are no longer recognizable (284).

This condensation of the text peaks when legibility is suspended: the words are no longer identifiable and what readers see are only the ink blots filling the page. The written page's purpose has been displaced – it is no longer meant to be read but to be looked at. The page now resembles a painting more than a writing paper, and its particular composition is evocative of the burning tower from which the man falls.<sup>126</sup> The blank pages that are interspersed in the novel are another expression of language's insufficiency in the disaster's aftermath. These pages stand for the grandmother's literary attempts and their emptiness articulates the failure to represent the disastrous event (119). These two incidents - that literally turn the text into images - occur when the grandparents try to contain their experience of loss in writing; both have lost their families in the Dresden bombings, and Foer repeatedly demonstrates trauma's refusal to surrender itself to language.

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<sup>126</sup> Another image that is suggestive of the tower's composition and of the texture of the densely printed text on page 284 is a photograph of the starry night (reproduced on 262).

The grandmother's attempt to write her life story fills the grandfather with the hope of finding "the exhilaration of building the world anew" (120). The grandfather's enthusiasm is surprising especially since he lost the capacity to speak after the bombings in Dresden, and the optimism he expresses about the grandmother's memoir seems somewhat out of place. However, his expectation is frustrated when all he sees are blank pages: "I wanted to cry but I didn't cry, I probably should have cried, I should have drowned us there in the room, ended our suffering, they would have found us face down in two thousand white pages" (124). The grandfather only now realizes that his wife too is incapable of uttering her pain: "but worse – it is unspeakable, write it! – I realized that your mother couldn't see the emptiness, she couldn't see anything" (124).<sup>127</sup> The muteness, together with the empty pages, together reveal the disaster's unsayability. It appears that for Foer the rupture of language is conveyed more effectively through visual devices that, once juxtaposed with the text, convey the realization that excess may be one means to articulate silence, failure. The blank pages and their counterpart, the ink-covered pages, are two extremities of representation's breakdown, but, at the same time, can be understood as self-reflexive gestures, symbolic of the two ends or extremes of the writing process.

In the short story "Emptiness," published in Playboy in 2004, Foer describes his own collection of blank pages that once belonged to famous authors. The blank page for Foer is not only the promise of writing not yet inscribed, but "the blank sheet of paper was at once empty and infinite... it was free to echo and change..." (149). Foer is aware not only of the promise that lies in the emptiness, but also that the blank page turns into a

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<sup>127</sup> The grandfather's paradoxical insistence on writing what is unspeakable is puzzling, especially in comparison with his later failure to express what is unspeakable.



mirror, a mise-en-abyme, where he sees his own reflection as a young author struggling with writing.<sup>128</sup> The blank pages and the overfilled, densely printed sheets dramatize a tension immanent in writing: whether to fill the page or to leave it empty. Consequently, the relationship between emptiness and surplus, potential and finitude, reverberates with language's inadequacy in articulating the breakdown of experience and memory that trauma instigates.

Foer's innovative employment of typography is hence emblematic of one's powerlessness and the impossibility of comprehension in the face of disaster. The heightening of the text's physicality plays an important role in stretching the text's limits: the playful typography is analogue to the insertion of photographs and also indicates the requisiteness of visual language. Complementing the verbal register is necessary for Foer not only to show the inability of language to express what is incomprehensible but also as a vehicle that reflects Oskar's inventive, curious mind. The blank pages and their mirror image, the pages so full with digits or text typed so closely together, visually reiterate the theme of absence/presence so crucial to the novel and to mourning and loss in particular.

## **VI. Reversal and Repetition**

One of the symptoms of a crisis or a breakdown is the disruption of a linear narrative. Anne Whitehead writes, in Trauma Fiction, that trauma resists thematization and unsettles the relation between experience and the event. Trauma's resistance to traditional narrative structure and linear temporalities is reflected in the way Foer awards

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<sup>128</sup> "And it was also a mirror. As a young writer--I was then contemplating how to move forward after my first effort--I felt so enthusiastically and agonizingly aware of the blank pages in front of me. How could I fill them? Did I even want to fill them? Was I becoming a writer because I wanted to become a writer or because I was becoming a writer? I stared into the empty pages day after day, looking, like Narcissus, for myself" (150).

primacy not only to notions of suspension and alteration (or image manipulation) but also to modes of reversal and repetition conveyed both visually and textually. I have already discussed the incorporated images' ability to complement the narrative by reiterating themes previously raised by the text, stressing thereby the significance of the reordering of the falling man photographs. In this section I concentrate on the narrative techniques that complement the photographs' invoking of repetition and reversal. These two modes, exemplified by both narrative and photographs, shed light on the dynamics of television in crisis moments and on the way its repetitive structure affects the memory of the traumatic event.<sup>129</sup>

Ulrich Baer's definition of trauma as a "disorder of memory and time" (9) is an elaboration of Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as a missed encounter, or misrecognition of an unassimilated event. "What is assimilated in the miss itself" (3), writes Gene Ray; the after-affects of the traumatic event, which was not fully experienced, surface in fragmented form and therefore re-enact and repeat the trauma in their incompleteness. Foer's description of the attacks' broadcasting is itself fragmented and lacks coherence, mimicking in its form the television networks' panicked reportage of the events. Except for Oskar, who learned about the attack through the messages his father left on the answering machine, all other family members learned about the 9/11 events through the television. Foer goes back to the moments of terror and helplessness of watching a disaster broadcast live, knowing that there is nothing to be done other than

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<sup>129</sup> There are evident parallels between the broadcasting of a public disaster and the structure of the compulsion to repeat. Bassel A. van der Kolk suggests, in "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism," that "many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma.... Freud thought that the aim of repetition was to gain mastery, but clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens; instead, repetition causes further suffering for the victims or for people in their surroundings."

to become a witness, a viewer, and to some extent, possibly a voyeur. The live reportage possibly triggers a sense of guilt, a “what if” mode – that is later paralleled with Oskar’s attempts to undo the tragedy and to bring back his dead father, a wish explicitly articulated in the novel’s final pages.

The possibility of reversal, of stretching temporality’s coordinates, is featured more than once. Before Oskar rips out and reorders the photographs of the falling man from his scrap book, his grandmother dreams about the undoing of the Dresden bombing, where her entire family was killed: “in my dream, all the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward, like the second hand of clocks across Dresden, only faster” (306). But not only the disaster is undone in this dream. Everything goes backwards: “the alphabet went z, y, x, w... the clocks went tock-tick, tock-tick... lovers pulled up each other’s underwear, buttoned each other’s shirts, and dressed and dressed and dressed” (311).<sup>130</sup> The overturning of time, however, leads to its annihilation. Again, readers encounter a self-erasing gesture, one that is so total that it seizes history in its entirety: “at the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling, which became a seed. God brought together the land and the water, the sky and the water, the water and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing. He said let there be light. And there was darkness” (313). The godly creation of the universe is nullified in the grandmother’s reversed account of the book of Genesis and all that is left is the darkness – the nothing.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow or The Nature of the Offence* (1991) comes to mind as a possible intertext for this passage, because of the reverse chronology reflecting the desire to turn back time.

<sup>131</sup> Could the page filled with ink markings (284) be a visual manifestation of this darkness?

The grandmother's dream blends several sources: biblical narrative and the historical event of the Dresden bombing frame her testimony of what she saw after the event and of the secret she shares with the grandfather. The grandmother interweaves in her letter another narrative thread dominated by the reverse mode, often creating humorous images -- lovers' dressing each other, painters separating green from yellow and blue (308). Clearly, both the comic tone of these descriptions and the redemptive stance attached to the reverse mode, which culminates with the redeployment of the falling man photographs, stand in contrast with the irreversibility of the actual events in which thousands have died.

Each of the four chapters narrated by the grandmother is entitled "My Feelings." They all interweave the present moment with memories from her childhood and with a retelling of her failed marriage to Oskar's grandfather. These letters are addressed to Oskar but it seems that she also confronts her husband and other people who are absent-present in her life -- in particular, deceased family members like her parents and sister, who perished in Dresden, and her son Thomas, Oskar's father. These chapters are ordered chronologically but interweave accounts about Dresden with later episodes from the grandmother's life. The first chapter narrated by the grandmother presents her childhood memories and meeting with her husband in the United States after the war; the second details her marriage and pregnancy, but includes more memories from Dresden. The structure of the third and the fourth accounts is of special importance to my argument, given their thematization of movement. The third chapter offers the grandmother's report of the 9/11 events. I have already discussed this chapter in relation to the missing people

photos, but here I wish to focus on the mode of repetition that is significant for my discussion of photography and mourning.

This third chapter directly juxtaposes the grandmother's description of the 9/11 events with the Dresden bombings, which she was the only member of her family to survive. Her story is written in the first person and the frequent departures from the main narrative lines, together with the ambiguity of the addressee, impede the letter's coherence. These digressions that obstruct the narrative's coherence and flow are strengthened by the mechanical nature of the writing: most of the sentences are short, and structurally, there is a physical spacing between the sentences that accentuates the grandmother's fragmentary speech. Her monologue often repeats memories and thoughts that were previously articulated, and some of the details she includes are insignificant, adding to the monologue's dry and monotonous effect (e.g., "she called the police. It was busy. She called again. It was busy" [229]). Do the repetition and dry tone of narration serve as means to control trauma and to contain it in language? Possibly, using a dull and monotonous tone and narrative style, Foer hints that the speaker has no faith in the words' capacity to communicate even the faintest hint of the feeling of shattering loss.

The chapter opens with the grandmother's announcement that she was "at home when *it* happened" (224, emphasis mine). She was watching an interview with the father of a missing girl, a situation that will soon parallel her own – as her son will soon vanish in the debris of the towers.<sup>132</sup> "Maybe it sounds strange, but I didn't feel anything when they showed the burning towers," says the grandmother; "I wasn't even surprised" (224-

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<sup>132</sup> Oskar comments several times on the inverted logic of burying an empty coffin. The grandmother too in her letter to Oskar points out the awkwardness of the insistence on burying an empty coffin: "your mother wanted to have a funeral, even though there was no body....they shoveled dirt into your father's grave. Onto my son's empty coffin. There was nothing there" (232-3).

5). And yet the destruction of the towers, and their accompanying smoke and fire that covered the city, have an unsettling effect on the grandmother and evoke traumatic memories. Initially, the smoke billowing from the buildings and the papers spread in the sky remind her of a fire, or a storm, she witnessed in her childhood, an event which functions here as a precursor to the fire from the bombings that killed her entire family:

I remember the worst storm of my childhood. From my window I saw the books pulled from my father's shelves. They flew. A tree that was older than any person tipped away from our house. But it could have been the other way. When the second plane hit, the woman who was giving the news started to scream. A ball of fire rolled out of the building and up. One million pieces of paper filled the sky. They stayed there, like a ring around the building. Like the rings of Saturn. The rings of coffee staining my father's desk. The ring Thomas told me he didn't need. Next morning my father had us carve our names into the stump of the tree that fell away from our house. We were giving thanks (225)

The grandmother's description of the events is fragmentary and associative. Like the images Foer incorporates into the novel, her memories seem to work in a pattern that weaves visual threads among the images – the fire of the towers is evocative of the fire lit by the storm; the papers flying out of the towers' windows remind her of her father's library books. Then rings become a key metaphor and she links coffee stains with jewelry, and compares trees with stars. Similarly to the way that visual threads and patterns are created between the incorporated images, the described images also yield new meanings and suggest the creation of visual patterns. This is another means for Foer to convey the Grandmother's pain and sense of helplessness in the face of the tragedy in which she lost her son. It is no wonder that the trauma collapsed demarcation between her son's death in 9/11 and the loss of her family in the Dresden bombings. The textual form marks the traumatic temporality as a chaotic network of textual fragments that do not form a coherent whole.

What the repetitive, disordered, yet claustrophobic textual description conveys is the grandmother's inability to separate what she sees on television and her own reaction, as if perception and data processing are inseparable. Throughout, she returns to anecdotes and memories from her life before Dresden was bombed, but keeps referring to Oskar, thereby intermingling at least three different time periods.<sup>133</sup> The structure of her monologue is similar to Saul Friedlander's description of Holocaust survivors' testimonies included in Claude Lanzman's film Shoah: "Each individual testimony remains a story unresolved. The overall narration is neither linear nor circular; it is a spiral recoiling unto itself, then moving into new territory through a succession of forays" (255).

The Grandmother's constant returns to these memories of her former life point to her understanding that, once again, nothing will be the same; yet this is countered by the emphasis placed on the television loops and the narration that becomes more and more repetitive: "I lowered the volume until it was silent. The same pictures over and over again. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. People waving shirts out of the high windows. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. Planes going into buildings. People covered in grey dust. Bodies falling. Buildings falling. Planes going into buildings. Planes going into buildings... (230). The account is interrupted by questions she directs to her missing husband, to her grandchild, to herself: "Remember when we went skating a few months ago and I turned around because I told you that watching people skate gave me a headache? I saw rows of bodies on the ice" (231). The grandmother cannot escape her traumatic childhood memories that surface after the loss of her son on September

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<sup>133</sup> The grandmother describes her life before the Second World War, the bombings of 1945, and September 2001. Since the letter was written sometime after the attacks, possibly in September 2003, as the date of the first letter indicates (75), readers can presume that the 9/11 events are also referred to.

2001. Her letter, which was presumably written in September 2003, is a discontinuous message, with its confused time frames and vague addressee.

The repetitive structure of the television report is underscored once again after the grandmother goes back to her own apartment where she continues to watch the news:

Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. Planes going into buildings. Planes going into buildings. Planes going into buildings. When I no longer had to be strong in front of you, I became very weak. I brought myself to the ground which was where I belonged. I hit the floor with my fists. I wanted to break my hands, but when it hurt too much, I stopped. I was too selfish to break my hands for my only child. Bodies falling. Staples and tape. I didn't feel empty. I wished I felt empty, people waving shirts out of high windows. I wanted to be empty like an overturned pitcher. But I was full like a stone. Planes going into buildings. (231)

The narration evidently mimics the cyclic structure of the television coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center: the grandmother's self-loathing is possibly an indication of her guilt at once again outliving beloved family members. The tension between emptiness and fullness is brought to the fore, paralleling the repetition of the traumatic images. What is also significant here is that the first sentences of this passage parallel images of the planes and those of the victims leaping or falling out of the burning towers. Yet, the next sentence and the one closing this passage underscore the importance of the planes, as if omitting the falling victims, mentioned only once again, in proximity to the grandmother's reference to staples and tapes, the same objects Oskar's mother used for the "missing person poster" she produced for her husband.

Many media theorists have drawn a parallel between the repetitive structure of television (and especially news coverage) and Freud's theorization of trauma in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Patricia Mellencamp writes that television reruns and remakes illustrate Freud's "repetition compulsion" (241). In its ubiquity and live global coverage of public disasters, television turns viewers into eye-witnesses. Due to the medium's self-



absorbed nature and to its self-referentiality, the events depicted often become somewhat minor in their televised version – it is the spectacle that becomes central: “TV triggers memories of TV in an endless chain of TV referentiality” (242), argues Mellencamp. The emphasis placed on the spectacular quality of the attacks, as well as the understanding that the contemporary media are key to shaping Western society’s ‘image-bank,’ are both articulated through the recurring expressions of disbelief in the face of the attacks and the constant comparison of footage from 9/11 with that of disaster films.

Mellencamp notes television’s capacity to exacerbate shock and anxiety “by ‘staying on the air,’ eradicating the regularly scheduled entertainment, a narrative catastrophe” (128). Significantly, television is simultaneously shock and therapy, since it both produces and discharges anxiety: “TV administers shock and ameliorates the collective affects, imagined as shared, perhaps uniform, via repetition, information and constant coverage” (246). Paradoxically, television is both the source of and the solution to the anxiety and shock. As we clearly saw in the 9/11 broadcasts, catastrophic television, like no other medium or activity, relies on repetition (or on the compulsion to repeat). Mellencamp argues that the sheer repetition of coverage “serves a hypothetical purpose of ‘as if’— operating on the pretense ‘that the danger situation still existed’” (247).

Foer’s innovative storytelling techniques can be read as taking issue with some of the problems Mellencamp recognizes in her analysis of catastrophic television. Going back to ELIC’s narrative, we realize that the hypothetical “as if” mode is not experienced in the grandmother’s watching of television. The repetitive broadcast does not render the events more realistic or less shocking, just as the supposed distance between the

catastrophe and the viewer does not make the grandmother feel any safer. On the contrary, the surfacing of the grandmother's traumatic childhood memories and the images' cyclical signal that witnessing today has radically changed with the diminishing of television response time (which undercuts the sense of the events' mediation).

Nevertheless the notion of 'as if' is central in ELIC, even if it is played out in a different way than in Mellencamp's analysis of television. Not only does Oskar's obsessive inventing derive from his wish to "save" his father -- "What about skyscrapers made with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middle for planes to fly through?" (259) -- but the reordering of the falling man sequence resonates with his desire to undo time. The novel ends with Oskar's outlining his father's actions on the morning of 9/11, but backwards, simulating a rewinding of video footage: "And if I had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. Dad would've left his messages backward, until the machine was empty, the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston" (325). Oskar not only envisages his father's rescue, but like his grandmother whose backward dream brings time to its origin, the mode of rewinding is crucial for Oskar precisely because of its potential to undo the tragedy.

The movement from the physical reordering of the images to rescuing his father from the burning tower actually demonstrates the failure to reverse reality (unlike representation that allows such manipulations) and exposes the similarities between repetition and these two modes of reversal and conjecture (expressed through the

recurrence of the “as if”). On the narrative level, I find that both the hypothetical stance and the attempt to rewind the events are mere repetitions of the constitutive trauma. Whereas both modes may appear as if they enable Oskar to escape from the compulsive repetition inspired by his loss, both the textual and the visual realms -- through the reversed literal description of his father’s last hours and the reordering of the falling man images – confirm the past’s irretrievability that is re-enacted by Oskar. These repetitions indeed differ from each other and from the presentation of the original event in the most accurate manner. They are all tainted with the failure to overcome trauma – be it implicit or explicit. But another parallel is revealed here: Oskar’s endeavors are analogous to Freud’s grandson’s “Fort-Da” game that enabled him to compensate for his mother’s absence by simulating her “disappearance and return” (15). However, Oskar’s reversal mode can be seen as a mirror-image of the “Fort-Da” game; unlike Freud’s grandson who staged the disappearance of objects around him in order to come to terms with his mother’s disappearance, Oskar is not yet able to accept his father’s death and his repetition of the events mark his inability to integrate the trauma, psychically, visually or textually as ELIC’s highlighting of failure repeatedly demonstrates.<sup>134</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

As Foer’s deeming conventional literary devices insufficient -- if not inappropriate -- for the representation of trauma may have provoked his employment of innovative visual strategies. Foer repeatedly reminds his audience that reading and recollection are both largely determined by the visual realm and insists on addressing a

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<sup>134</sup> Van der Kolk notes that “trauma permanently disturbed the capacity to deal with other challenges,” and the victim who did not integrate the trauma was doomed to “repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead or . . . remembering it as something belonging to the past.”

collectively repressed issue by polemically and provocatively iconizing the same images that were banished from mainstream media. Foer not only disregards the status quo by circulating images that are missing from the mass media and therefore from hegemonic discourse, but he also presents the images in a different medium than the one in which they originally appeared, using them to divert and expand the dominant discourse.

Turning the falling man images into icons simultaneously parallels and draws attention to the ease with which digital images can be manipulated, pixelized or enlarged, encouraging readers to question the relationship between images' circulation and memory (both private and collective).

Put differently, we have seen that Hemon asks us to inquire into the question of images' appearance, reappearance and disappearance and the way they affect memory and discourse. Whereas for me, the overload of structural devices and visual strategies that Foer's uses to convey loss does risk rendering them into some kind of gimmick. But I read the insertion of photographs and the playful typography as reinforcing his novel's emotional impact. His insertion of the falling man images enables us to study the ways Foer re-invokes and intensifies themes already articulated in the narrative, but this time through visual innovations. Foer therefore dramatizes notions of suspension, reversal and repetition that are crucial for the novel's unfolding as well as for the activation of the literary montage set in motion by attentive readers. Visual and thematic elements are woven into new networks of meanings as a way of expressing Foer's urgent desire to renew the conventions of literature so that his book will become more effective in conveying the ghostly atmosphere of post 9/11 New York.

However, Foer's greatest contribution seems to go beyond the literary field: it is in the legitimizing of the falling man photographs, and the confronting of readers with an aspect of the 9/11 tragedy that was collectively repressed and avoided. To me, the significance of the flip book at the novel's ending featuring the photographic sequence in reverse order goes beyond the controversy Foer envisioned: once inserted into a new, markedly fictional context, these images are released from the constraints of the suffocating national post-9/11 discourse. The reproduction of the falling man images therefore revivifies visual evidence emanating from the overexposed event. Precisely by isolating these images and embedding them in the literary field, readers are invited to begin their own work of mourning, and to reconnect with their own singular tragedies and the memory of individuals who are part of the collective tragedy. ELIC succeeds, then, in transcending the gimmick status precisely by using gimmicks. Another paradox of the novel is that despite admitting literature's shortcomings by using so many visual, photographic and typographic devices, Foer uses the literary context to redeem these banished images. To summarize, Foer redeems the personal from a collectively manufactured memory: he reanimates the anonymous (turned into symbolic) figures by reaching out to images repressed by hegemonic discourse, and giving them new life by reproducing them in a new non-documentary medium, literature.

## Conclusion

At the heart of the Israeli film “Waltz with Bashir” (2008) lies a paradox similar to the one fundamental to photo-fiction. This paradox derives, this time, from the juxtaposing of animation and documentary, but also from the movie’s treatment of national and private history, repression and memory, imagination and reality. For Ari Folman (the film’s director and protagonist), all of these last elements complement each other, to the point where he often presents them as interchangeable. Moreover, the relationship between past and present -- the way we think about the past and behave in the present -- is shown to be bound to the structure of memory and to the very possibility of witnessing, bearing witness, as well as to the act of representation. Similar to the emergence of new hybrid genres in the literary field, the film’s blurring of the line between truth and fiction is indicative of the cinematic realm’s striving to answer the urgent need to deal with questions of accuracy and fidelity versus artistic license. Put differently, the net of paradoxes and questions that Folman's film raises is evocative of the way the photo-fiction texts I analyzed here challenges documentary practices and indeed casts new light upon them.

This polemical, autobiographical film, “Waltz with Bashir,” provides an apt example of the tensions immanent in the representation of traumatic memories. In fact, and this is my reason for concluding my study with it, I consider the final scene of the film to be comparable to photo-fiction’s employment of photographic images to problematize the audience’s understanding of issues of evidence, truth, representation and memory. Folman’s repeated destabilization of memory’s reliability undermines the

traditional hierarchy between the factual -- perceived as true, objective or “real” -- and the imagined, mental experience. In his attempt to discover what really happened in Beirut in 1982, Folman emphasizes the fact that hallucinatory, imaginary elements are essential components of traumatic memory, and that they are crucial for understanding the atmosphere and the general chaos that governed his military service in Lebanon.

The starting point of “Waltz with Bashir” is the protagonist-director’s almost complete lack of memories from the first Lebanon war. It becomes clear that the reason for this void is that these memories are of events so traumatic that they were inadvertently blocked out, unavailable for conscious recall.<sup>135</sup> Folman sets about gathering testimonials from friends who were also soldiers in Lebanon in order to retrieve his own memory, thereby interconnecting the personal and collective, the individual and the national. The film is structured around nine interviews, and viewers are invited on a voyage of discovery into Folman’s and his friends’ subconscious experiences, nightmares and hallucinations. These fragmented recollections eventually lead up to a reconstruction of the “Sabra and Shatila” massacre of Palestinian refugees by a Christian Phalangist militia in August 1982. Folman could not rely on the familiar conventions of the documentary film to represent the repressed memories from the Lebanon war, to fuse together dreams, fears and hard-boiled facts. He therefore chose “animated documentary”:<sup>136</sup> the film was first made as a real video film and then turned into an animation, although it was always meant to be animated.

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<sup>135</sup> “Lebanon was not in my system,” says the protagonist-director at the movie’s outset: “I never think about it.” Of course, this statement is soon to be undermined, since a conversation with his friend unleashes the search for those lost memories and Lebanon becomes, redefines in fact, Folman’s system.

<sup>136</sup> In an interview given to an Australian TV show, Folman explains why he deems documented animation the suitable genre for his film: “the reason to use animation documentary was that, in my belief, if you look at the fragments that hold ‘Waltz with Bashir,’ you see that there is a memory, lost memory, dreams,

Parallel to its blurring of imagination and recollection, “Waltz” foregrounds memory’s elasticity: “memory is a dynamic thing, it is alive,” says the director’s best friend in the movie. He continues: “if there are gaps, it reconstructs itself to full recollection even though the given event was never part of its experience.” Folman is preoccupied with recovering his lost memory of the war, particularly those three days of the “Sabra and Shatila” massacre. He is haunted by a nightmare, in which he sees himself rising naked out of the sea and somnolently drifting onto Beirut streets, where he is surrounded by a swarm of women dressed in black. This dream scene is repeated three times but its meaning and significance remain obscure -- the director-protagonist cannot come to terms with it. Nor can he recall where he was, what he was doing, or who was with him during those three days. The nightmare about the sea and the mourning women becomes his lead, or clue, to the past but it is also a kind of screen memory<sup>137</sup> – covering the traumatic memory that is too painful, too charged, for him to face. Finally, close to the end of the film, Folman finds out more about his actions during the massacre and confronts the guilt he feels for being implicated in the murder of thousands, be it as a

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subconscious, war, drugs, lost love. I mean all those things. I wouldn't have a clue how to do it differently. So for me it was rather do it animated or don't do it at all” (Stratton). In a different interview Folman elaborates on the complex relations between realism and animation: “I wanted it to be very realistic, so the audience is attracted to the characters. I also wanted a free non-realistic style to create the hallucinations” (Badt).

<sup>137</sup> In Freudian terms, the screen memory is a childhood memory that is either entirely fantastical or seemingly insignificant in its content. The screen memory acts as a cover for analogous but repressed memories, and a process of meaning displacement occurs. Freud characterized screen memories as “mnemic residues” which take on a compulsive quality as they act to protect the subject from repressed trauma or desire. In his account the screen memory may have little or no correspondence to external reality and may in fact leave the subject in complete opposition to reality. Freud recognizes two conflicting psychic forces at work in the construction of screen memories: “one of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other -- a resistance -- tries to prevent any such preference from being shown” (307) He emphasizes that these two opposing forces do not cancel each other out; instead a compromise is created “... What is recorded as a mnemic image is not the relevant experience itself - in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychic element closely associated with the objectionable one - and in this respect the first principle shows its strength, the principle which endeavours to fix important impressions by establishing reproducible mnemic images” (307).



bystander or an accomplice of the events. Folman's guilt, however, also straddles the line between the private and the collective, for he interweaves his individual understanding of the war and confrontation of his own memories and actions with his inquiry into the relationship between seeing and understanding, and the possible gaps between them. Folman calls into question (and by extension, holds himself and everyone else responsible for) the very act of watching, of being a witness, and its later translation into bearing witness. Highlighting his awareness that every testimony is forever mediated and partial, he stresses the unavoidability of secondary witnessing and delineates several circles of knowledge and guilt. The difference between these circles, however, is soon to be collapsed, and Folman provocatively demands from viewers, be they soldiers or moviegoers, to position themselves morally and reach an understanding of what they, we, see.

What Folman finds out is indeed shocking: not only was he in Beirut during the massacre but his unit provided the requisite lighting for the Phalangist militia by shooting off flares into the sky over the camp. Folman and his division did not know what happened in the camps during the days of the massacre, for they were positioned outside, on one of the roofs, but they were obviously assisting the murderers nonetheless. Folman incorporates testimonies of an IDF officer (Dror Harazi) and an Israeli journalist (Ron Ben-Yeshai) that describe their actions during these three days. Both Harazi and Ben-Yeshai emphasize the gradual, delayed understanding of the carnage in the refugee camps and their attempts to report the killings to their superiors. Significantly, their reports were repeatedly received with an interrogation: "but did you see it? Did you see it with your own eyes?"

Folman therefore persistently interweaves seeing with understanding, and inquires about responsibility on both the personal and collective levels. His insistence on understanding what happened and what his part was during these three days leads him to parallel documentation and illumination provocatively, exposing his guilt about his (and by extension the IDF's and the state of Israel's) compliance in the massacre. In the dynamic of the film, "to shed light" on the event translates into, and is equal to, participation in and responsibility for war crimes. The concept of light therefore receives a new meaning in the film, one different from the Platonic configuration of light as knowledge and beauty. It means to facilitate, to be guilty of something you did not prevent, something so awful that it cannot be assimilated into consciousness. Shedding light on the events of the massacre -- be it as a soldier in 1982 Beirut or two decades centuries later as a filmmaker in Tel-Aviv -- leads Folman to make a parallel between compliance in a war crime and artistic representation. Does Folman suggest that the unavoidable failure to represent catastrophic events is comparable to being an accomplice to the crime?

This question haunts the film and comes to a head in its aesthetic discourse, especially in its final scene that turns its entire mimetic system upside-down. In order to go beyond this impasse, Folman departs from the domain of animation and integrates actual video footage taken by foreign news agencies (BBC World and ITN). It is a shock when the animated images give way to real footage, documenting the massacre's aftermath, the bodies of men, women and children piled up around the refugee camps. The same corpses that were shown in animation earlier now invite a different response from viewers, their impact on audience radically altered with the transformation of the

medium. Audiences may have become inured to the power of news footage and descriptions of atrocities, but Folman's usage of these news images jars audience out of their comfort zone. Significantly, it is the new context of the images of carnage that counters Roland Barthes' theorization of shocking photographs that "fill the sight by force" because nothing can be refused or transformed (Camera 91). For Barthes, shock images therefore stop language and defeat imagination, because they are so horrific. Folman's eerie animation stretches the laws of reality with its disavowal of the distinction between reality and hallucination, but the photographic images in the film's final scene force viewers to confront the horror and to face the demand to position themselves morally in front of the massacre's reality. Not only is Folman's position questioned once aesthetic distance is erased, but the deliberate undoing of mediation, the sabotaging of the established (animated) mimetic system advanced throughout the entire film, unsettles viewers completely. By having the protective filter of animation taken away, the audience becomes helpless in front of these images of atrocity and is forced to admit the horror of war, 25 years after the massacre.

That these images were broadcasted on television also calls into question the ethics of watching the news and the degree of culpability of the audience as viewers, as witnesses, even if it is 'merely' as secondary witnesses. Folman demands that we, like his character throughout the film, ask ourselves what is the meaning of testimony, what is the value of truth, and how do the circles of witnessing implicate bystanders. The sudden juxtaposition of animation and "truth," the transformation into images that are less mediated intensifies the film's protest. The re-ignition of the horror of these images (by planting them in an animated film) exposes the fact that there is no escape from the

traumatic past, and that mediation, or secondary witnessing, does not release viewers (and definitely not soldiers) from the responsibility of ethically positioning ourselves in front of these images and the atrocities they represent.

The strange animated beauty of “Waltz” is reinforced by the collapsing of the barrier between animation and horror. The film’s paradoxicality augments its impact on viewers who are completely thrown by the inserted video sequence. Folman’s manipulation of images and disavowal of the familiar truth/fiction hierarchy dramatize for the audience how much responsibility is tied to visibility and emphasizes that even though seeing does not necessarily lead to knowing or understanding, it is our duty as viewers to inquire about what we see, until we reach some understanding. The film opens up these questions, enabling individual and collective traumatic memories to surface and inspiring debates about guilt, witnessing, documentation and mediation that are only some of the after-effects of this film. To me, it seems that this film’s most valuable contribution is bringing back into the public sphere events that were marginalized, and calling into question the relationship between seeing and knowing, acting and understanding. Setting up a new arena for these questions of what is moral conduct, and what is the responsibility entailed in viewing, documenting and representing are additional achievements of this brave and provocative film. Its effect on the Israeli audience, its relentless destabilization of the 25 years of repression, and its casting doubt on the conventions of representation and narration, show that Folman seeks to promote a new visual ethic, as well as aesthetic.

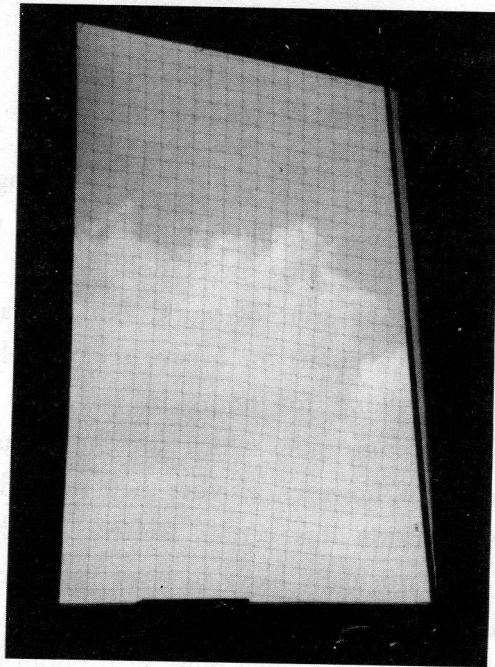
Folman’s ethical stance asserts that there is no such thing as being a “passive” bystander in the face of historical traumatic event. He too prompts viewers into action, as

do Sebald, Hemon and Foer with their insertion of photographic images into their manuscripts and their repeated exposing of the artificiality and limitations of documentary representation. Incorporating multiple media formations and constructions, these various projects navigate a complex terrain between politics, historiography, and the mass media, highlighting the necessity of “recharging” those shock images. The renewed confrontation with such images demands that the audience members ethically position themselves in relation to what has been suppressed, banned or marginalized. The transformation of media, the isolation of photographic images from their original context, and their planting within a new medium enables both photo-fiction and animated-documentary to disturb, unsettle, and to re-inscribe these images into the collective memory. The literary montage, similar to the startling transformation from animation to video, thereby facilitate a move toward a new collective reclamation of memory and history, as well as offering a personal way to commemorate and mourn tragedy.

## APPENDICES

### 1) The Hospital Window

to write these pages. I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window.



Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting, and as dusk fell the wish became so strong that, contriving to slip over the edge of the bed to the floor, half on my belly and half sideways, and then to reach the wall on all

From: Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn

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## 2) The Labyrinth

experience, which I still cannot explain, I was on Dunwich Heath once more in a dream, walking the endlessly winding paths again, and again I could not find my way out of the maze which I was convinced had been created solely for me. Dead tired and ready to lie down anywhere, as dusk fell I gained a raised area where a little Chinese pavilion had been built, as in the middle of the yew maze at Somerleyton. And when I looked down from this vantage point I saw the labyrinth, the light sandy ground, the sharply delineated contours of hedges taller than a man and almost pitch-black now – a pattern simple in comparison with the tortuous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain.



Beyond the maze, shadows were drifting across the brume of the heath, and then, one by one, the stars came out from the depths of space. Night, the astonishing, the stranger to all that is human,

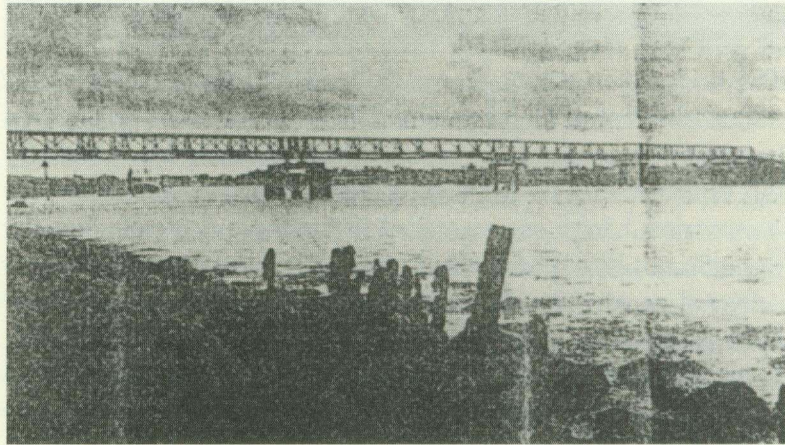
173

From: Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn

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### 3) Blyth River

Not far from the coast, between Southwold and Walberswick, a narrow iron bridge crosses the river Blyth where a long



time ago ships heavily laden with wool made their way seaward. Today there is next to no traffic on the river, which is largely silted up. At best one might see a sailing boat or two moored in

137

From: Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn

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#### 4) Blyth River

the lower reaches amidst an assortment of rotting barges. To landward, there is nothing but grey water, mudflats and emptiness.



The bridge over the Blyth was built in 1875 for a narrow-gauge railway that linked Halesworth and Southwold. According to local historians, the train that ran on it had originally been built for the Emperor of China. Precisely which emperor had given this commission I have not succeeded in finding out, despite lengthy research; nor have I been able to discover why the order was never delivered or why this diminutive imperial train, which may have been intended to connect the Palace in Peking, then still surrounded by pinewoods, to one of the summer residences, ended up in service on a branch line of the Great Eastern Railway. The only thing the uncertain sources agree on is that the outlines of the imperial heraldic dragon, complete with a tail and somewhat clouded over by its own breath, could clearly be made out beneath the black paintwork of the carriages, which were used mainly by

From: Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn

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## 5) The Nazi Pamphlet

which had been shown to us in primary school, I happened upon a film on German silk cultivation, evidently made for the same series. In contrast to the dark, almost midnight tonalities of the herring film, the film on sericulture was of a truly dazzling brightness. Men and women in white coats, in whitewashed rooms flooded with light, were busy at snow-white spinning frames, snow-white sheets of paper, snow-white protective gauze, snow-white cocoons and snow-white canvas mailing sacks. The whole film promised the best and cleanest of all possible worlds, an impression that was confirmed when I read the accompanying booklet, which was intended for our teachers. Citing



the Führer's pronouncement, at the 1936 party rally, that Germany must become self-sufficient within four years in all the materials it lay in the nation's power to produce itself, the author of the booklet observed that this self-evidently included silk cultivation.

292

From: Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn

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## 6) Richard Sorge

a purse or a camera case; and his head: fiendish ears, large and ill-shaped; lips shut tight, as if his teeth were biting the inside of his lower lip; the wide base triangle of his nose, its top angle connected, by two deep furrows, with two dark dots in the corners of his mouth; lightless twin-holes, at the bottom of which were his eyes; and the black-inked helmet of hair.

The picture was obviously retouched: Sorge's anxiety was burdened with someone else's curtained body. One could see the sharp cut at the verge of his collar, where his head, guillotined in a shadowy laboratory, was attached to a headless trenchcoat—plus an inexplicable excess of neck-flesh on the left side.<sup>3</sup> But I believed that Sorge was in that trenchcoat. I believed that he was about to enter the door-apparition behind his back. I believed in the totality of that picture, I believed in the apparent, and I trusted books. I was ten.

champagne and lobster, with particles of undigested food thawing on the soles of their shoes. Some of them were proud of German air-industry and reliability, some of them were happy to be alive.



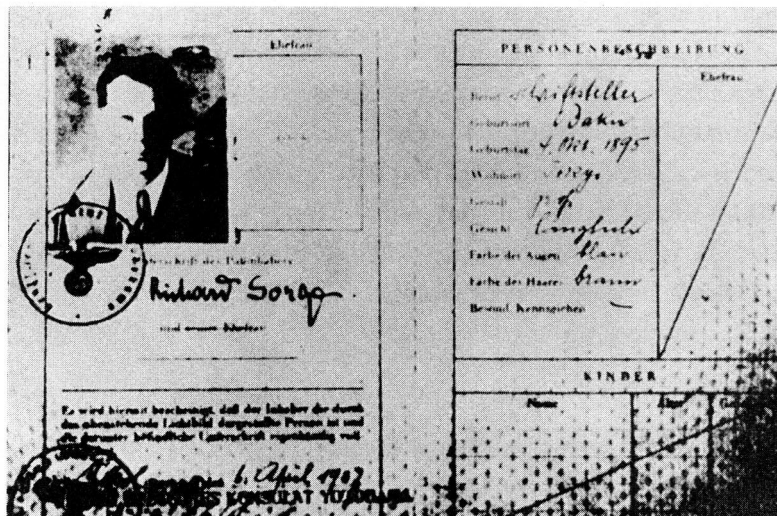
<sup>3</sup> In the early sixties, in the de-Stalinized Soviet Union, the campaign of Sorge's glorification was set on course and a number of books that contained Sorge's pictures and previously unrevealed documents from Soviet archives were published. Most of the books were embellished (if not embroidered) with, so to speak, fictitious additions. At the same time, a street in Moscow and a tanker were named after Sorge. In the spring of 1965, the Soviet authorities issued a postage stamp, at the value of 4 kopecks, in his honor. The commemorative stamp showed Sorge full face on a scarlet background together with a reproduction of the medal of the Hero of the Soviet Union.

From: Hemon's The Question of Bruno

© Random House, New York: Vintage, 2000

## 7) Richard Sorge's Passport

for Brezhnev!"); going to movies<sup>25</sup> (*You Only Live Twice*, *From Russia with Love*, *True Stories VI*); talking to my father behind the closed doors. We'd watch his Volga, before going to sleep, seeing flashes of flesh as he was putting on his crimson pajamas. Near the end of the third week, at the end of the day that included a movie (*Arabian Nights*), a dinner (Bosnian cuisine),

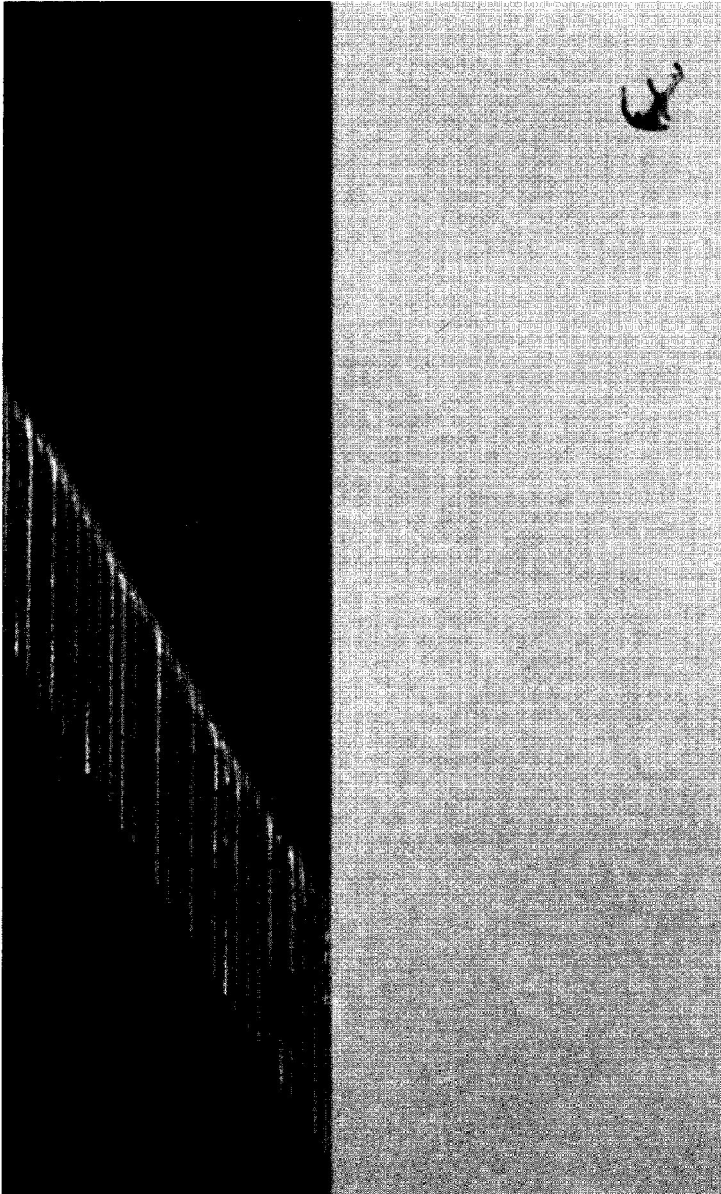


<sup>25</sup> In the files of the Frankfurt Police, dating from 1927, there is a vague and unconfirmed report showing that a Dr. Richard Sorge left for the United States on January 24, 1926, and spent some time in California, working in Hollywood film studios. The only admission, however, made by Sorge of visiting America was on his way to Japan. Herr Alexander Hemon, a researcher at the German Foreign Office Archives, claims that there is a possibility that Dr. Richard Sorge, identified by the police as being in Frankfurt in 1925 and 1926, was "not the Soviet spy who was working in Tokyo and on mysterious missions abroad, but someone else, of whom we know nothing."

From: Hemon's The Question of Bruno

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9. Foer's "Falling Man"



59

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

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