What is the use of a book without pictures?
On the use W.G. Sebald makes of picture
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Conférence présentée par le groupe de recherche Médias et Mémoire.
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*Life A User’s Manual* of the OuLiPo author Georges Perec (1936 – 1982) has as a motto a quote from Jules Verne’s *Michel Strogoff*: “Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde” (Look while You May!). As far as I know up to now no one compared Perec and Sebald who might have more in common than the Chaplin comic that W.G. Sebald borrows for his *Austerlitz* from George Perec’s *W. or the Memory of Childhood*. The demand to look, to look while one may, is also addressed to Sebald’s readers.

Although there is no general answer to the question what the effect of the pictures in Sebald’s texts is, there is one thing those pictures have in common, they all appeal to the reader’s ability to look, to look closely. No less urgent than in the imperative of Jules Verne “Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde” the command to look lies in photos showing eyes. Like in the beginning of *Austerlitz*

the eyes of animals living by night and of his friend the painter Jan Peter Tripp and of Jean Améry.

Reflections on various kinds of pictures make a great deal of the books of W.G. Sebald. *Vertigo*, his first prosetext, comprises about 50 different terms for the word picture, common ones like fresco, engraving, mosaic, panoramic view, photography, seascape and test card, but also less common words such as lumberjack paintings, crucifixion paintings and the neologism “Weltwunderbild” for Tiepolos ceiling fresco in the Würzburg residence; also present is the realm of non-material images in terms such as hallucination, vision – and picture of memory.

For his literary reconstructions of biographies – of historic or fictional characters as well as of his own – pictures are crucial, especially photos: as media that bring on or bear memories, but also as objects that overlap or erase the original memories. In Sebald’s book *Austerlitz* the main character Austerlitz reveals within a description of his work in the darkroom “that he was always especially entranced (…) by the moment when the shadows of reality (…) emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night”.

In interviews Sebald remembered that he as a schoolboy spent hours in the darkroom to develop his photos and confessed that he always carries a cheap camera in order to be ready to take
pictures, to be able to prove what he has seen. Some of the photos Sebald assembled within his texts were taken by himself.

Although in the book it is Austerlitz who travels to Terezin and takes photos there, it is Sebald who is reflected in the shop window of “ANTIKOS BAZAR” while taking the picture. As we all know literary characters do not travel to real places; it is the author who is doing the research and the gathering of his material. With a twinkle in his eyes Sebald hints not to forget this fact. The photo proves: W.G. Sebald was here and took this picture. Sebald’s writing was partly documentary, but as he wrote literature he didn’t restrict himself to documentation. The photo which shows him makes his work as an author transparent and at the same time says something about the limits of literary writing: the work mirrors the author.

The opening of Sebald’s texts are often scenes in which the visual perception of the narrator is adjusted. The Rings of Saturn commences with the description and the photo of a “hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting”

This “black netting” divides the visible patch of sky in squares of the same size; this could be compared to the grating that a draughtsman puts before his piece of paper in order to get the proportions of and the perspective on his subject right. This window is not photographed at eye level or from the front, but from underneath and from the left hand side. The distortion, caused by the perspective of the camera, is emphasized by the black rectangle in which the light grey window seems to be suspended. The photo shows a window surrounded by the darkness of the room, a “colourless patch of sky” and the black netting with which the window is draped, but also – which seems to be the most important – it shows the distortion caused by the perspective of the camera.

The narrator describes his fear that “reality (…) had vanished forever”. As he, who can scarcely move, reaches the window and looks down on the city, the picture he sees seems to be unreal, it is as if he was “looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble”. The acoustic dimension is added to the description of the visual perception of the narrator; he allegedly cannot hear at his height the sound of the siren of an ambulance passing by, all he could hear is a
What Sebald describes here is a black and white photo or could also be a black and white movie, a silent movie. Sebald chooses the pictures he works with from the store of western European modern age (with very few exceptions), most of his pictures are black and white photos from the first half of the 20th century. Paintings he quotes are from early Renaissance – the time when perspective and optical instruments came into use – up to his own lifetime.

Sebald was familiar with the techniques of draftsmen and painters, not only because of his vital interest in painting but also through his friendship with the painter Jan Peter Tripp, who compares Sebald’s art of narration with the so-called manière noire or mezzo tint. I’m quoting a definition of this printing technique (in my own translation):

“The plate is roughened with special tools so that a proof of it would be velvety black. The image is brought out with a scraper or steel, the most intense brightness demands to be polished the most. (…) It reached its heights in connection with the English portrait painting in the 17th and 18th century.”

The very essence of the mezzo tint is the fact that the proof of the plate before the portrayal is worked out would be completely black. That fits into the scheme that Sebald’s narration mostly starts in the dark. The beginning of The Rings of Saturn deals with the difficulty of perceiving reality undistorted. But there is something else the reader should not skim through, the narrator for the first time manages to look out of the window “when dusk fell”. As in other texts by Sebald his narrator got caught in darkness. But it is not the darkness of the night, not the velvety black of the manière noire, but the twilight of dusk – or of dim lighting.

As the narrator in Max Ferber – a young man who reached Manchester a few months before, flying by night – for the first time comes into the studio of the painter Max Ferber “it was a good while before (his) eyes adjusted to the curious light, and, as (he) began to see again, it seemed as if everything in that space, (…) was impenetrable to the gaze, was slowly but surely moving in upon the middle (…) millimetre by millimetre, upon the central space where Ferber had set up his easel in the grey light that entered through a high north-facing window layered with the dust of decades”.

In sharp contrast to the twilight of the studio, the other room where the narrator meets the painter,
the so-called transport cafe Wadi Halfa, is lit “at any hour of the day and night by a flickering
 glaringly bright neonlight, that permitted not the slightest shadow”. There, Ferber was “always
 sitting in the same place in front of a fresco painted by an unknown hand that showed a caravan
 moving forward from the remotest depth of the picture (...) straight towards the beholder”. Because
 of a wrong perspective the fresco is distorted in a way that with half closed eyes one has the impression “especially on days when Ferber had been working with charcoal, and the fine
 powdery dust had given his skin a metallic sheen (...) (that he) just emerged from the desert
 scene or belong to it”.

The impression that Ferber in his blackness mingles with the fresco of the cafe – its staff, by the
 way, seems to be as unreal as the painted caravan – gets Ferber to tell an anecdote connected
to photography. In the thirties there was a man in Manchester working in a photographic
laboratory “whose body had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life
that he had turned into a photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact (...) that the man’s
face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed”.

In both cases – Ferber’s mingling with the fresco and the intoxication of the man working in the
lab – the men undergo a metamorphosis that turns them into the media they are working with.
The painter becomes part of a painting, the laboratory assistant turns into a photographic plate.
Sebald’s motivation and inspiration in his writing were photos, anonymous photos he found in flea
markets, at antique shops and sometimes in antiquarian books. Sebald explained in an interview
the impact those photos had on him: they “demand the viewer to tell or to imagine, what could be
told implied by those pictures. (...) While writing you make out the possibilities to set in with those
pictures, to go into those pictures by narrating, to subplant a passage by a picture and so forth.”
The fact that Sebald’s writing was inspired by photos the way he described it, essentially
influenced or constituted his perceiving and memorizing of reality, material and immaterial
pictures, and his developing and fixating of memorized or imaginary pictures can be seen as
analogue to the photographic process.

His being fascinated by pictures dates back to his early childhood in a remote Bavarian village
after World War II. The viewing of photos, Sebald said in an interview, “effects me in a way that is
familiar to me from my childhood. There were these viewmasters (English in the original), you
could look into. You had that feeling: With your body you’re still in your normal bourgeois reality.
But with your eyes you are somewhere else: in Rio de Janeiro or at the Oberammergau passion
play or whatever was to be seen”. Sebald’s perception of reality was – from the beginning –
closely connected to pictures. In part four of Vertigo he describes a pack of cards with photos of
the German cities, of a “Germany still undivided (...) and intact (...) the uniformly dark-brown
pictures gave (him) at an early age the idea of a dark fatherland”. That Cities Quartet marked the
beginning of Sebald’s career as a reader. Another childhood memory is concerned with the first
time he saw films; during the first years after the War the Sebald family lived in a country inn. The
hall was used as a cinema showing movies and the so-called “tönende Wochenschau”, a weekly
news show preceding the daily news on TV. Apart from that he remembers the collection of
postcards from all over the world of their landlady, pictures and maps in an old geography book
and the lumber jack paintings by Josef Hengge and the paintings of crucifixion in the nearby
churches and chapels.

In Ritorno in Patria, the fourth part of Vertigo, the narrator travels to the village W., where he had
spent the first years of his childhood. On the last part of his route, he walks through a region of
the Alps between Austria and Bavaria (Allgäu). His inner voyage back to the realms of childhood
starts – in an all white setting –, when, during the fall of snow, he seeks shelter in a chapel and
contemplates the fourteen stations of the Cross which were almost invisible because of their
being destroyed by mold. By the time he reaches W. it’s almost dark, in a distance from the first
houses of the village he stops for a long while on the bridge over the Ach “listening to the steady
murmur of the river and looking into the blackness”. While contemplating his surroundings, he
remembers that, “on a piece of waste land beside the bridge (...) there had always been a gypsy
camp in the summer months after the war”. The question of how the gypsies managed to survive
war times makes him mention the photo album his father gave to his mother as a present “for the so-called Kriegsweihnacht”. Some of the photos, “all neatly captioned in white ink” are showing gypsies “who had been rounded up and put in detention”, who, as Sebald writes, “are looking out, smiling, from a barbed wire”. In the text we see the detail of one page of this album:

A black and white photo focussing on a laughing woman standing behind a barbed wire with, it seems, a baby in her arms; she looks into the camera of a man who, supposedly, is standing next to Sebald’s father, and is visible on the left margin of the picture. The photo is thus a document of the situation in which it was shot: a man aims his lens at a woman behind a barbed wire – as did Sebald’s father. Written with white ink on the black page of the album is the word “Zigeuner”. The categorization “Zigeuner” turns the photographed woman into an object without name, without gender. The photo as well as the written categorization express the same enabling. The given information “somewhere in a far corner of the Slovakia” historically classifies the photo. The historical context is as follows: On March 14th 1939 Slovakia got independent under the pressure of Germany and thus became a satellite state of the Reich. That means that the so-called “Grunderlass” (basic edict) from the 8th of December 1938, Himmler’s law of regulation of the “Zigeunerfrage” according to the very nature of this race, was used to legitimate the deportation of gypsies. We do not know what the destiny of the women photographed by Sebald’s father was. Half a million of Sinti and Roma became victims of Nazi racial fanaticism; they died in massacres, in ghettos and concentration camps of malnutrition, epidemics, tortures and medical experiments - or in the gas chambers. The photographic view of Sebald’s father and the categorization he made by writing “Zigeuner” – both is shown by the picture in the book – executes Nazi racial fanaticism in the realm of the personnel and private. The seemingly harmless gesture of taking a photo and labelling it brings forth Nazi ideology. This picture tells – white on black – that it was not an anonymous apparatus that pursued annihilation, but “good fathers and dutiful sons (...) who, when they came off duty” did bring a photo album “to their loved ones at home”.

This quote is taken from Sebald's book Austerlitz. While visiting the fortress Breendonk in Belgium the narrator concedes that he cannot imagine the agony of the prisoners (Jean Améry was one of them.), but he can imagine those “good fathers and dutiful sons (...) writing letters to their loved ones at home”. That is the initial perspective of the narrator, who is not able to remember what he has seen during his first visit in Breendonk, “the outlines seemed to merge in a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs, and cut off for ever from the light of nature”.

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The photo leads into darkness, the little lamps grow smaller and smaller in the vanishing line. A tiny spot of light is visible at the bottom of the dark passage, right in the center of the picture. In an inversion of the photo, an inversion of the point of view this tiny spot could be the little hole, the lense, through which light falls into the camera – the picture would emerge on the opposite side. Is it the necessity of inverting one's perspective which Sebald wants to show with this picture? In the beginning of Austerlitz the narrator visits the Nocturama of the Antwerp zoo. At the twilight hour after a bright and sunny day in early summer he enters the house of animals living by night. "It was some time before my eyes became used to its artificial dusk and I could make out different animals leading their sombrious lives behind the glass by the light of a pale moon (...) all I can remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking".

Immediately after he adjusted his visual perception the narrator meets his main character for the first time in the "subterranean twilight" of the Salle des pas perdus in the Antwerp train station. Austerlitz then is taking photos of the “mirrors which were now quite dark”.

Sebald’s narrator is provided with a special ability to perceive. To see what is scarcely visible, scarcely imaginable, he needs special lighting. The bright light of the sun would destroy the fragile pictures from the past. Sensitive to light like a photographic plate, pictures emerge before his inner eye. Sebald’s writing develops and fixates those pictures in a technique that is based on different ways of producing pictures. The mezzo tint, as his friend Tripp says, may be one of them, photography seems to be the prevailing one. Therefore the reproductions of pictures in his texts are not coming from outside the text, they are not added to the text, but are inherent in his writing.

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1 The title is borrowed from Lewis Carrol, Alice in Wonderland
4 W.G. Sebald, An Attempt at Restitution, The New Yorker, December 20 & 27, 2004