NEGATIVE SEEING: BENJAMIN’S DIALECTICAL IMAGE IN W.G. SEBALD’S
AUSTERLITZ

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the aesthetic properties of the photographic negative as a means for thinking about Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image. I begin the thesis by re-defining the encounter with the dialectical image as an act of successful “negative seeing,” an act of ignoring that which is traditionally given substance and instead looking for meaning in the margins or in that which is no longer present. Using W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz to put this notion into practice, I argue that, despite the apolitical characterization of the novel, the narrative structure of the text, particularly its use of interruptive pictures, aligns quite nicely with Benjamin’s more revolutionary understanding of aesthetics because it reverses our understanding of narrator-reader positions. Ultimately, the result of what I call Sebald’s “negative” aesthetics and narrative structure is a text that pulls readers away from the passive position of an outside bystander. By offering readers fragments and voids where they might usually find an organizing narrator, the text forces readers to start seeking substance and order beyond the text itself, much like Benjamin encourages audiences to fight political passivity by remaining actively alert to the traces of history that lay behind the present scene.
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INTRODUCTION

“Our concern with history, so Hilary’s thesis ran, is a concern with performed images that are already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered”—W.G. Sebald, Austerlitz

On the opening page of Austerlitz, Sebald’s unnamed narrator begins his story by taking us through the Belgian landscape of his memory. At first, our journey into Antwerp is a gradual one. As our narrator takes us from the train station to the city streets, and eventually to Astrid Square, we enter into a familiar experience of literary space, one where a landscape begins to take shape in our “mind’s eye” as we progress through each individual line. The narrator’s attention to light and dark even invests this vision with a sense of motion. It becomes easy to forget that we are simply moving our eyes repeatedly from left to right across a block of text as the landscape in our mind not only builds, but undergoes gradations from the light of a “glorious early summer day,” to a “dark station concourse,” and a bench in the “dappled shade.” But then, when the narrator takes us into a Nocturama at the zoo, the visual experience to which we are accustomed comes to an abrupt halt (3).

Upon entering the Nocturama, the narrator recalls, “It was some time before my eyes became used to its artificial dusk and I could make out different animals…behind the glass by the light of the pale moon” (4). However, the narrator is not the only one faced with a visual challenge. As we turn the page to follow the narrator inside, we are met, not with a continuous block of text, but with four photographs, each featuring a set of intense, staring eyes that are tightly framed (fig. 1). The sudden emergence of these images is unsettling for several reasons. First, they jolt us from our familiar movement through linear text. They strip us of our ability to
visualize solely with our mind, and force us negotiate between our physical vision and the mental images we were just beginning to shape. Like the narrator, we too must readjust our vision by alternating between each strand of perception. However, what is most unnerving about these images is that they call on us to recognize our new position in relation to the text itself. With these eyes staring back at us, we are resolutely situated outside of the text which means that we can no longer sit passively and expect the narrator to carry us through this space. We are no longer those who can passively gaze and objectify. Instead, the animal eyes look to us with intense urgency, an urgency that we must remember as we look at the human eyes, which in contrast, are relatively calm. The primal anxieties in these animals’ eyes should not be seen as distant from our own, even if they may appear “other” here. Together, these eyes demand that we recognize our roles as readers who are not only able to visualize, but also able to physically see. Now that we have this opportunity to exercise our physical sight, we must ask ourselves, which mode of seeing are we going to prioritize?

With each form of visualization comes a different mode of thought and an element of choice. On the one hand, the pictures have the potential to elicit a passive response, one in which the reader takes each photo as an invitation to break from his or her efforts towards mental visualization. On the other hand, a reader can attempt to ignore these images and focus on sustaining his or her own vision. However, the structure of the text ultimately makes both of these responses unsustainable. At some junctures, Sebald introduces long sections of text that are free of images or even the visual relief of a paragraph break. In these instances, those who are relying on the pictures for guidance must actively revive their visualization skills and re-immerses themselves if they are to keep track of the characters’ incessant wanderings. Likewise, for those
readers focused on the verbal channel, the text features several pages that are dominated by a single image. Many of these images do not correspond precisely with the temporal progression of the text, but instead correspond to references made a few pages prior or those that have yet to appear at all. Such anachronisms disrupt the gradual development the mental image and thrust readers back to their position outside of the text. No matter which channel readers choose, soon enough they are all confronted by the novel’s challenge to the presumed division between verbal and visual literacy. The challenge opens up the possibility for a third approach to the text, one where the reader is actively switching between these two modes of vision, deciding which mode is most appropriate, and remaining alert to those moments where they may need to make a sudden shift. And so, with a text like *Austerlitz*, our level of curiosity with respect to how we see has bigger implications than simply determining our ability to comprehend the story line. It is an indicator of our willingness to uncover meaning for ourselves instead of accepting the story as it is presented by each channel alone. The book is a clear challenge to our passive understanding of reader participation and makes an appeal for readers to consider the responsibility that comes with being a recipient of another’s memories and history.

Ultimately, it seems very telling that the narrator’s memory of the Nocturama ends with the animals’ “strikingly large eyes” which carry the same “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*” (4-5, *emphasis mine*). For German philosopher Walter Benjamin, “penetrating the darkness around us” is entirely impossible without engaging the faculties of both “thinking” and “looking.” For him, the possibility of recovering marginalized histories from the darkness of forgetting depends entirely on the ability of present day witnesses to apprehend
the subtle traces of the past within their present situation. Throughout his oeuvre, Benjamin repeatedly frames these nuanced encounters with the past through a phenomenon that he calls the “dialectical image.” Identifying a precise definition for the dialectical image is difficult because it serves various purposes in Benjamin’s work. Throughout his work, the dialectical image is consistently understood to be a type of montage, a juxtapositional and momentary medium through which one witnesses the present encountering the past. However, it is sometimes described as a phenomenon that can be experienced by anyone, but recognized by few, and at other times it is presented as a tool or a sort of model for rewriting history in the future. While the “dialectical” component of this image has clearly defined roots in other Marxist theories of time, the description of this encounter as an “image” is unique to Benjamin’s brand of Marxism. Since Benjamin relied on ephemeral and metaphysical concepts to explain the changes he hoped to see in the course of material history, the use of the term “image” here is inundated with the question of presentation. Is it a material image, or simply mental realization? Does contact with the image necessitate seeing, or is the use of the term “image” simply meant to serve as a model for the writing and production of history? Where are we to situate the eye or the role of seeing in this theory of history and experience?

Since the act of “recognizing” or apprehending the dialectical image is vital to the idea of redeeming history, the driving question behind this thesis is how does the dialectical image manifest itself? While Benjamin states in the Arcades Project that “the place where one encounters [these images] is language,” his description in Theses on the Philosophy of History casts the dialectical image as a state of illumination that everyone should be vigilant in order to experience it (Arcades 462): “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it
‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’ (255). Anthony Auerbach is right to point out that “[d]espite the insistence of Benjamin’s claims, it is not at all clear whether such an image belongs to material reality or to virtual reality; whether it is something more like a picture or a perception” (Auerbach). I use the term “manifest” in my question because I believe it covers the various ways that the encounter with the dialectical image is described in Benjamin’s work, and it highlights the most curious tension within this theory: that between seeing physically and seeing mentally. To “manifest” is, on the one hand, to “show plainly,” but on the other hand, it means to “reveal.” It is the act of making something “evident to the eye or to the understanding.” The verb can also serve as a reflexive verb for supernatural beings (“Manifest, v.”, emphasis mine). Throughout this paper, we will see how this question is a complex one because there appear to be various stages of “manifestation” that go along with the dialectical image, and these manifestations can change depending on one’s relative position to the image and his or her place in the course of history.

On the one hand, the dialectical image is an experience, but it is an experience that is not entirely material, even though the elements that provoke the experience might be. For example, in Austerlitz, we will find that the image often manifests itself, or at least makes itself known, through physical surroundings. The backgrounds in which these characters find themselves spur their contact with the dialectical image, but this image does not necessarily take a physical form and impose itself on the space before the viewer. Instead, it lingers as a ghostly presence that they must recognize and seize upon. Another experiential aspect of the dialectical image that we will explore is its unique ability to endow our understanding of historical time with a greater sense of immediacy. Unlike the traditional models of history that force events into a contextless,
linear timeline, the dialectical image presents the unfolding of events in an episodic nature that mirrors the conscious experience of time. This compensates for the elements of time that can seem more distant and intangible, and it keeps Benjamin’s mystical theory anchored to material realm of human consciousness.

The material complexity of the dialectical image emerges when we begin to discuss it as a model for writing and producing history. While individuals might encounter the dialectical image on an ephemeral, experiential level, the image is ultimately arrested and disseminated through language. However, a deeper investigation of this facet of the dialectical image also displays a sense of immateriality. While the image comes into being through language, Benjamin wants to avoid planting the dialectical image into any dominant discourse. And so, even though the medium of the image is the written word, the manifestation is what the word can show. For example, while the method of Benjamin’s approach is ‘literary montage,” he asserts this montage “needn’t say anything” but “merely show” (460). If the historian cites anyone, it must be through the “art of citing without quotation marks” (458). And finally, “The events surrounding the historian” will not be illustrated through literal text but instead, they “will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink” (476). Remarks such as these reveal Benjamin’s intense distrust of the histories that are already “imprinted on our brains” (Sebald 71). Instead, he encourages us to look past that which is given substance and try to bring substance to that which is disappearing along the margins.

In photography, the photographic negative is a sheet of paper or roll of film that is sensitized to light. The negative absorbs light when exposed and captures the outline of the object being photographed. The image captured on the negative is a latent image, one that is
extremely susceptible to light and will not appear until the negative is developed. When the latent image is developed, the areas where the light hit the film will appear dark, while more substantial objects in the image remain translucent (fig. 2 and fig. 3). These voids in the negative act as a medium for the light that is used to create a positive on a sheet of photographic paper that, once developed, reveals the inverse of the negative. The negative can be used to create as many reproductions of the image as needed. Given the prevalence of photography in Benjamin’s oeuvre, I will contend in this thesis that the material aesthetics of the negative, those “relating to an opposite or inverse form,” provide a productive model for capturing and articulating the experience of the dialectical image for several reasons (“Negative, n.”). First, like the dialectical image, the negative exists across three temporalities: it harbors an image that has passed, and it possesses a latent image in the present that can either remain undeveloped or spur future reproductions. The negative holds more proximity to the original experience being captured, and most importantly, the negative presents a new way of seeing. It prompts us to reverse where we envision substance and absence, a skill that is necessary for experiencing and illustrating the dialectical image.

As I mentioned earlier, the shocking sensation we encounter in the opening pages of Austerlitz is produced by the sudden appearance of an imprinted image. However, it seems interesting that alongside these shocking imprints, Sebald’s text is describing something more akin to the process of a picture being taken, rather than a final product. Again, the animals and philosophers are said to all share a “fixed, inquiring gaze” that, like a light hitting a piece of film through an aperture, seeks “to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us” (5). However, if we look at the photographs, the manifestations of this allegedly shared gaze seem completely
different. The animals’ eyes are flooded with a light that contracts their pupils and plays a major role in creating their intensity. Conversely, the human stares, while equally captivating, are relaxed, and their irises are very dark. While the imprints of these stares look different, the shared element of their gaze can be apprehended through the underlying, uncanny sensation that we are expected to transfer the urgency of the primal encounter onto our experience of the human encounter. In other words, the shared element of their gaze is not something seen, but felt. Like a piece of film, it is as thought the human stare is growing darker because it has left itself open to receiving the sensation of anxiety that has been illuminated on the other photograph.

Looking at the “negative” from both a material and philosophical angle, the purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how the negative image is more than simply a metaphor for thinking about the dialectical image, but in fact, that having contact with the dialectical image is itself an act of “negative seeing.” As Austerlitz’s history teacher, André Hilary, suggests in the opening epigraph of this section, those who study history often concern themselves with the “performed images that are already imprinted on our brains…while the truth lies, elsewhere…somewhere as yet undiscovered” (71). If the truth of history does not lie in the “imprinted” images, those images that prevail in mainstream history, then it must lie in the opposite realm, in the negative. And so, my use of the phrase “negative seeing” in this paper refers to our ability to look past that which is given substance, be it a master narrative, a physical environment, an imprinted picture or word, and instead rely on our mind’s eye to help us locate that substance and meaning in the fading margins. This is especially important in those places where we may not consider looking for it or where we have been told it does not exist. Once we consider the dialectical image as a form of negative seeing, the text of Austerlitz becomes not only a document of the dialectical
image, but a medium for the very experience of the dialectical image. By situating the narrator as a marginal negative of Austerlitz, Sebald alters our understanding of positionality in the act of storytelling. Sebald’s constant relegation of the narrator to the sidelines creates an absence in the structure where we would expect to find a central narrator threading the disparate elements of this story together. This absence of a central narrator produces a space where entering into the text means entering into a sustained exercise of negative seeing. The result of Sebald’s negative aesthetics and narrative structure is a text that pulls readers away from the passive position of an outside bystander. By offering readers fragments and voids where they might usually find an organizing narrator, the text forces readers to start seeking substance and order beyond the text itself, much like Benjamin encourages audiences to fight political passivity by remaining actively alert to the traces of history that lie behind the present scene.

As we will see throughout this paper, this question of form and the dialectical image depends on numerous claims throughout Benjamin’s works that do not always appear to corroborate each other at first. Thus, my approach will not focus on how Benjamin might prompt us to read Sebald differently—there is already a vast amount of literature purporting Benjamin’s influence on Sebald. Instead, I will use Sebald’s text to shine new light on the complex relationship that arises between aura and reproduction when discussed in the context of historical materialism. This thesis is divided into three sections. The first section examines how the mechanics of the dialectical image and its presence in Sebald’s work complicates the current understanding of Sebald as a melancholic writer of trauma by suggesting that history can be redeemed through storytelling. This notion of storytelling necessitates an in-depth investigation of the role that subjectivity plays in Benjamin’s most famous photographic concepts, aura and
reproduction. This discussion of Benjaminian subject formation through photography and my rationale for the “negative seeing” as a gateway to the dialectical image comprise the second section. In this second section, we will see that Benjamin used the material aesthetics of photography to shine light on metaphysical concepts that he believed would help us better understand our position in the material world and the responsibilities that come with it. It is my hope that my investigation of the material aesthetics of the negative can prompt a similar movement in logic, one where the material medium guides us to an immaterial phenomenon that sends us back to the material realm with a different understanding. My goal is to use the negative aesthetics of inversion in the negative to shine light on the immaterial, other “seeing” that takes place when reading: mental perception or seeing through the mind’s eye. Moving back to the material of the text, I will use Austerlitz to demonstrate how seeing art through the lens of the negative reorients our understanding of positionality in the narrator and reader relationship, thereby providing the reader with immediate access to the experience of the dialectical image.
SECTION I: DIALECTICAL IMAGE AND REDEMPTIVE STORYTELLING IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

The dialectical image is important because, unlike traditional models of history, it aligns more accurately with the human experience of time, thereby breaking people of the passivity that comes with more “naturalist” or contextless models of time. The goal of this section is to examine how the dialectical image operates so that we can begin to interrogate how the image might manifest itself. To understand how Benjamin’s approach to history differs from traditional historicism, we must first establish the variances between natural models of time and experiential of models time. While the natural movement of time is continuous and durational, we experience life through images of differentiated time. As psychologist William James suggests in “The Sense of Time,” we are incapable of perceiving durational time because conscious perception is sequential in nature. We can perceive succinct moments, as well as the beginning and the end of a duration block, “a rearward and forward-looking end” (245). According to him, “beyond a very few seconds our consciousness of duration ceases to be an immediate perception and becomes a construction moreless symbolic.” Consequently, “[t]o realize even an hour, we must count ‘now! now! now!’ indefinitely. Each ‘now’ is the feeling of a separate bit of time, and the exact sum of the bits never makes a clear impression on our mind” (James 246). This disparity between experiential time and natural time should be taken seriously when narrating history because these two models of time have opposing effects on human memory. Since we cannot apprehend the ongoing, continuous nature of time, we are less likely to remember a time period that is not distinguished by specific events. James states that the length of time we spend in a “retrospective” state depends “on the multitudinousness of the memories which time affords.
Many objects, events, changes, many subdivisions, immediately widen the view as we look back. Emptiness, monotony, familiarity, make it shrivel up” (248). In other words, because humans experience time as a series of events, we are more likely to remember specific events than we are ongoing conditions. The act of remembering the past through specific events aids the process of memory because it parallels the sequential model through which we experience time and stimulates our ability to remember other events within a series.

According to Benjamin, developing a model of history that parallels our experience of time is crucial to social advancement because our understanding of our own position in the course of history shapes our sense of responsibility to the future. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin opposes the reformed Marxism of the German Social Democratic Party, which argued that gradual “progress” towards a “classless society” could resolve all issues of socioeconomic inequity. As a revolutionary socialist, Benjamin believed that the event was the true locus of social change, and his essay argues that “[w]e must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with it as such” (“Theses” 257). His first problem with this ideology of “progress” is that “[t]he concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through homogenous, empty time” (261). In other words, framing history in the context of progress poses a threat to the future of history because it promotes an understanding of historical time that conforms to a contextless model of time rather than the human experience of time. When we look at history as a progression of events, those events that took place in the past seem so distant that they lose their relevancy to the present. And so, Benjamin fears that such a model of historical time will make people less responsive to the atrocities of the past and their obligations to the future. Should a forgotten piece of history
resurface in the present, those who look at history through the lens of progress are less likely to recognize their responsibility to keep this history from being forgotten again: “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). They see no need to address or document the hardships of the present because they view it as nothing more than an interstitial chapter in a never-ending movement towards social equality (262-3).

For Benjamin, any given moment carries messianic significance in the course of history because it is the only point in time where cycles of forgetting can be recognized and stopped. His second problem with traditional, progressive models of history is that they accelerate the process of forgetting the past by making present generations less aware of their role in the course of history. Traditional histories of civilization empathize with the victor: “whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (256). In other words, traditional histories only document the legacies of people who have been successful in advancing the course of present empires through expansion and capital. Any person or thing that poses an obstacle to the ongoing momentum of this “progress” is usually forgotten. Consequently, the histories that we inherit lose their truth and dimensionality over time. This “tradition of the oppressed teaches us that” we live in a “state of emergency” which is not “the exception, but the rule” (257). By isolating certain events within a larger time period, Benjamin believes that our narratives of history could be more akin to the human experience of time, and thus, prompt us to actively address our influence upon the future. If history, as Benjamin contends, “is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now[,]” then the only way to redeem history is
to halt the constant momentum of time and make people recognize the fact that they are living in an isolated, critical moment that is not merely a continuation of the past or a waiting room for the future (261).

While traditional historicism elevates one narrative by promoting one “eternal image of the past,” Benjamin’s materialist historical model, the dialectical image, puts two time periods in dialogue with one another by striving to “supply a unique experience with the past” (“Theses” 262). This juxtaposition of the past and the present highlights history’s cyclical nature. As Benjamin describes it in *The Arcades Project*, the dialectical image arises when

what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (*Arcades* 463)

When the dialectical image is encountered, it is supposed to spur present generations into action by insinuating that repressed events in history are at risk of repeating themselves and being overlooked again. Seeing the dialectical image forces one to recognize “the now” as a critical fulcrum for the future, one which lies between the redemption of history and the perils of forgetting. However, the catalyst behind this image fails if a person cannot register both “the then” and “the now” simultaneously. Rendering history through the unique temporality of dialectics is essential to the future of historical documentation.
For Engels, “dialectics” was a way of envisioning the material world as constantly in motion, “in which nothing remains what, where, and as it was, but everything moves, changes, comes into being, and passes away” (Socialism 69). For him,

Matter moves in an eternal cycle…But however often and pitilessly this cycle may be accomplished in time and space…be it even only for a short period, we are, nevertheless, assured that matter in all its changes remains eternally one and the same, that not one of its attributes may perish, and that that same iron necessity which compels the destruction of the highest early bloom of matter—the thinking spirit—also necessitates its rebirth at some other place, at some other time. (“Dialectics” 17).

Benjamin is not the first philosopher to talk about the event of “dialectics at a standstill.” While it is unclear what form or shape the dialectical image assumes, all theorists who have observed it note one common trait in this phenomenon: the experience of “dialectics at a standstill” stops time and breaks its linear flow by illuminating how the supposed “present” is pregnant with traces of the past and consequences for the future. Marx outlines the material persistence of the past well in his “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” where writes, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 5). Our present situation is a complete product of all that has occurred in the past. In his book Specters of Marx, Jacques Derrida frames how the inverse of this idea can also be true. Just as the present moment persists as a product of all that past, it is equally haunted by its obligations
to the future. In contemplating the future direction of Marxism, he insists that “no justice...seems possible or thinkable without responsibility...before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (xix). True responsibility lies “beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present.” In other words, the “present” moment for which we are responsible does not lie in a vacuum, but in “a moment that no longer belongs to time”—a moment of linked “modalized presents (past-present, actual present: ‘now,’ future present).” When the present moment becomes recognized as a site of all that has happened and all that has not happened yet, these converging layers of time obliterate the false boundaries we place on such time periods, thereby destabilizing each era’s materiality—the each moment no longer belongs to that time alone (Derrida xx). The dialectical image is an instant where all levels of time exist side by side, but also an instant where no time periods exist at all.

The concept of dialectics played a significant role in the intellectual development of W.G. Sebald, influencing not only his understanding of the experience of time, as I will later discuss, but also shaping his understanding of aesthetics, ethics, and the fate of history. Ben Hutchison contends that three tenets of the Frankfurt School influenced Sebald most heavily: the dialectical approach, the idea of affirmative culture, and historical pessimism. Hutchison suggests that Sebald was eager to find like-minded thinkers because his intellectual environment failed to provide him with any basis for connecting literature to social context. His professors instead drew “sharp distinctions between ‘culture and profanity, elevated letters and low brow word-smithery, educational hierarchies and mob taste’” (Sheppard, qtd. in Hutchison 269). In addition to these rigid perspectives on literary form, Sebald also encountered a great deal of social evasion. In an interview with the Paris Review, Sebald reflected upon his student years,
stating “All of my teachers had gotten jobs during the Brownshirt years and were therefore compromised, either...they had actually supported the regime or otherwise been silent...Everyone avoided...issues that ought to have been talked about...I found that insufficient” (Sebald, qtd. in Hutchison 270). Thus, “the Frankfurt School was important to Sebald because it insisted on literature's relationship to a contingent, historical context” in a time when “the post-war conspiracy of silence about the Nazi era...[was] everywhere, even at university” (Hutchison 269). Sebald once stated that he often wondered just “how murky and mendacious our understanding of literature would probably have remained if the writings of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School...had not been opening up other perspectives” (Sebald, qtd. in Hutchison 268).

The Frankfurt School’s foundational belief in dialectics provided Sebald with a dynamic framework for understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Building on the logic of dialectics, Sebald began using the term “ethico-aesthetic” to refer to his approach—he “always insisted that aesthetic problems were also ethical ones,” and that every work of art is at once “l’art pour l’art” as well as politically infused (Hutchison 270). According to Hutchison, this reliance on a dialectical approach emerges most noticeably in the deconstructive trajectory that Sebald narrators face in their relationships with history. As the narrator in Vertigo explains it, “The more images I gathered from the past...the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past happened this or that way” (Sebald, qtd. in Hutchison 278). The more these narrators search for a solidified sense of history, the more that history falls apart: “the more the narrator enquires into the lives of his protagonists, the less certain he becomes of getting anywhere” (Hutchison 278). Hutchison claims that this is the dialectical twist of Sebald’s literature in comparison to other modernists. In his work, “not only is the past lost, [but] it becomes increasingly lost the more one
tries to recapture it” (278). Finally, the logic of dialectics permeate Sebald’s approach to the fate of history. Like Benjamin, he sees humanity as both regressive and redemptive: “‘The most human existence is...at once and the same time, the most sublime and the most damned” (Sebald, qtd. in Hutchison 274). Sebald’s understanding “of history as a ‘negative dialectic’” where “liberal rationalism turns into irrationalism and negates itself” also lead him to identify closely with Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, to whom he refers repeatedly in his novels (272). However, unlike the Angel of History, who stands powerless before the winds of progress, Sebald displays much more agency in this battle against historical time. More akin to Benjamin’s role of the historical materialist, he uses his art to stop the flow of time and illustrate its collapsible, fragmentary nature.

While a large number of critics have looked at Sebald through the context of a more revolutionary Marxist model, the majority of Sebald scholarship continues to approach his work through the lens of trauma. In this field, there appears to be a consensus among most of the scholars that Sebald’s works, as accounts of trauma, preclude any reading of time and history as possibly redemptive. On the one hand, many of the arguments in these analyses are founded on an understanding of redemption that is not necessarily reflective of Benjamin. At the same time, however, their varied conceptions Benjamin’s showcase how important it is to identify what form the dialectical image presumably takes. If trauma has the ability to render language empty, and Benjamin defines the dialectical image as a product of language, then where is such an avenue to historical redemption to be found? In his article on natural history, Mark Ilsemann refrains from categorizing Austerlitz as simply a traumatic testimony. He claims the novel “oscillates” between two states of psychological suffering that correspond to two different
models of history. First, trauma is linked to more constructed understandings of history where
the question of responsibility leads us to identify victims and perpetrators. Melancholia is linked
to more natural, contextless models of history where circumstances are dictated by forces outside
of our control. Austerlitz’s mindset is unique in the sense that it transitions from trauma to
melancholia. Consequently, the novel moves from active biographical history (traumatic) to
passive sociological history (melancholic) (302-3). This oscillation allows the radical forces of
natural history to infiltrate our constructions of history to the point that “modern society relapses
into pre-history” (304). It is this relapse into prehistory that renders language useless: “Released
into a fully mechanized world…the narrator’s language falls prey to the inescapable vortex of
externalization…for Sebald, language has become a collection of empty shells” (314).
Melancholy produces trauma by silencing any medium that could bear witness to it. Likewise,
Karin Bauer claims that “Austerlitz maintains the ‘language of silence’…not just through
‘strategies of avoidance or omission’ but also through signs of the inability to give voice to the
innermost suffering of victims” (Schlant, qtd. in Bauer 249). While I would agree trauma hinders
redemption by robbing words of their material power, I believe that the text of Austerlitz itself
allows the narrative to operate as a redemptive one precisely because it refuses to depend on
words alone. These critics’ anti-redemptive assumptions arise from a skewed understanding of
Benjamin but also from their hyper-focus on the content of the text as opposed to its structure.

In her analysis of the reversal of the flaneur image in Austerlitz, Bauer successfully
illustrates the failure of language in the novel, but she does so by presenting a limited view of
Benjaminian redemption and by discrediting the story’s narrator. Her overarching claim is that
Austerlitz’s failure to conform to the flaneur archetype undermines both enlightenment versions
of history as well as the modern counter-models like Benjamin’s. Unlike the standard flaneur, who explores the city center during the day to be seen, Austerlitz explores the city at night, and he is more interested in margins, be it the outskirts of a city or the footnotes of a textual body (236-7). The endless wanderings of his body and his mind indicate that “he learns about the past but gains no access to it” (249). Austerlitz’s “nomadic” mind causes the novel to “negate the redemptive quality of Benjamin’s thought” because even though Austerlitz can experience the sensation of “dialectics at a standstill,” he is not able to “arrest” these moments. Consequently, any experience that could be “a cessation of happening is not, as it is in Benjamin, a messianic cessation of happening, and Benjamin’s promise of this recuperation of the past remains unfulfilled” (247). Bauer believes that Austerlitz’s inability to stop time forecloses the novel’s potential to be redemptive because it proves that melancholia can outweighs the “utopian potential” of Benjamin’s modernity. However, the idea that Benjamin’s theses are ultimately utopian is difficult to support, which Bauer’s essay reveals on its own.

Where I take the most issue with Bauer’s claim is in her label of Benjamin’s history as both redeeming and emancipatory. It is true that Benjamin organizes history around an eventual day of redemption for which we all have “been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (“Theses” 254). However, Benjamin identifies this claim of the past as one that “cannot be settled cheaply.” I question the “utopian potential” for this vision of modernity because he qualifies our messianic power as a weak one. I believe that Benjamin is presenting us with the possibility of a redemptive future, but one that is highly unlikely to be fulfilled until everyone recognizes their responsibility to history. The main purpose of the essay is not to serve an idyllic image for the future, but rather, to operate as a warning against the other
direction that has a dominant pull on history’s future: that of forgetting and repressing. Furthermore, even if the movement of history does eventually culminate in this day of redemption, Benjamin gives no impression that historical materialist’s work is ever meant to stop. He writes that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (255, emphasis mine). Because the state of emergency is “not the exception but the rule,” each generation needs to be aware of its messianic potential. As previously noted, Marx’s supports this idea too: “The need for revolution will always arise for every generation: “the same leap in the open air of history is a dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution” (Marx 261). Ultimately, Benjamin’s theses do not suggest that that we are ever free from our obligation to history. While a “redeemed mankind” will one day have “its past become citable in all its moments,” there is nothing that guarantees this redemptive state will last forever.

Bauer steers clear of the redemptive potential in the narrative structure of the novel by discrediting it as nothing more than a product of the narrator’s German decent. She attributes Austerlitz’s inability to stop time the narrative’s reliance on the “anti-Semitic stereotype of the wandering Jew damned to an unproductive life of eternal movement and orality” (239). Given this potentially bias, she argues that the failure of language should take precedent over the story’s shared nature and any potentially productive vision of history that this act of sharing might entail: “Although Austerlitz tells his story to the narrator, the novel communicates the sense of the essential inexpressibility of the trauma of history” (245). Bauer does not address other aspects of the narrative structure that are essential to the logic of her character analysis. For example, she uses Benjamin’s logic that “writing implies permanence” to defend the idea that the
narrator is silencing Austerlitz’s act of storytelling (239n5). And yet, she speaks of Austerlitz’s experiences with history on a sensorial level, as if they belong wholly to him and not the narrator. The fact that Bauer is able to talk about Austerlitz’s experiences with a sense of immediacy only highlights the narrator’s strengths as a storyteller rather than a novelist.

Since Benjamin implies that the transfer of experience is the ultimate success of storytelling, then would not our ability as readers to perceive these experiences on a sensory level indicate that the narrator has done the story proper justice and combatted the silencing effects of printed text? Furthermore, even if the novel is a source of permanence, is this permanence of this medium not exactly what is needed to “arrest” the dialectical image? The ability to freeze the dialectical image and make it transferrable to a wider audience is probably the biggest asset that the narrator contributes to Austerlitz’s story. Clearly, if Austerlitz is incapable of arresting history, then it must be the narrator who has found a way to freeze these moments for us, and he has done so through the permanence of the written medium, not through the more centralized position that his heritage or that traditional novel structures may have given him. While Bauer does a brilliant job illustrating the numerous ways that Austerlitz parallels Benjamin, these similarities do not automatically designate Austerlitz as the character who is meant to redeem history and fulfill the promise of Benjamin’s theories. As Bauer acknowledges herself, Benjamin could not be the materialist he was hoping to see (240-241). Instead, the materialist is always forthcoming. The Judaic reverence for the past “does not imply…that for the Jews the future turned into heterogeneous empty time. For every second of time was the straight gate through which the messiah could enter” (“Theses” 264). Austerlitz’s desire to look seek out someone who can tell his story indicates that not all hope for redemption is lost, and that
the future does hold hope and meaning for him. The narrator enables Austerlitz to keep seeking his past with the assurance that he has done what he can to preserve his experiences for future record. The next question is, given the narrator’s ambiguous role as both Benjamin’s historical materialist, but also the dreaded novelist, can the dialectical image be experienced through the text he has produced? As Alfred Lutz poses it, “what kind of story, what kind of writing makes possible the transfer of experience from the storyteller to the listener?” (152).

While Alfred Lutz’s article also assumes a position against the possibility of redemption in Sebald’s works, his argument for the potential of “overcoming” the traumas of the past through storytelling is highly reminiscent of Benjamin’s own arguments on the powers of the historical materialist, thereby demonstrating how melancholia and trauma do not hinder the chance at redeeming history, and in fact, may play an integral role in the process of redemption (167). In “Holocaust Remembrance in W.G. Sebald’s Work,” Lutz claims that Sebald’s narrators break from the generalized form of commemoration perpetuated by public commemoration, and instead they create a new form of commemoration that reveals what public discourses have erased so that what has been lost can be revealed (138). One of the biggest avenues for this recovery is storytelling. Storytelling avoids the generalizations of public commemoration by allowing people to engage in shared memory but all the while prioritizing the experience of each the individual (151). Through their emphasis on storytelling, “Sebald’s hybrid texts endeavor to represent a collective past without erasing the individual victims that make the past ‘emphatically accessible’” (155). The importance of capturing the individual experience in the course of history is critical because “The grotesque deformities of our inner lives have their background and origin in the collective social history and can therefore speak about it” (155).
Benjamin believed that the individual experience was one of the strongest sources of political motivation which is why he emphasizes its importance in “The Storyteller.” Only by giving others a sense of immediacy to our personal experiences do we uncover a collective cause. It is the role of the storyteller, to “take what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others” and make “it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (87).

In his latest book, *What is a World?*, Pheng Cheah also notices a redemptive quality in storytelling given its reciprocal nature. He postures storytelling as a type of cultural exchange where “[t]he act of telling presupposes a corresponding commitment on the part of another subject to listen.” The result of such an exchange is that these “various acts of storytelling” have the potential to “create a large community characterized by reciprocal care in the spirit of communal self-help” (298). However, a successful transference of experience through storytelling requires a willingness of the part of the storyteller to release any notion of himself as a central subject. For Benjamin, “the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” and the more the “storyteller foregoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later” (91). The redemptive act of storytelling is one that allows space for the listener to insert themselves into the original experience and feel it in their own temporal state. Whether the novelist is capable of producing this effect is a subject of debate. Cheah contends that element of reciprocal exchange that storytelling provides is impossible to achieve in the novel form. He writes that the
novel is poor in wisdom because it is produced by the isolated individual of modernity…and disseminated in a form that fixes and limits its meaning. Because its narration and reception do not involve the sensory experience of other living beings, it cannot be a continuing experience. It does not contain a force akin to temporalization and hence cannot enter into living activity. (322, emphasis mine)

Essentially, Cheah is advancing Benjamin’s argument that the printed form detaches readers from the immediacy of the original experience in the narrative, a claim that I explore more in depth in the next section. While I agree with Cheah’s argument concerning the positive potential of storytelling, I do not think this is limited to the novel because, as Sebald demonstrates, once a narrator is able to empty himself of his own subjectivity, he creates a void for the reader to enter, a void where some sensory experiences are available, just not the act of listening as Cheah suggests. In Austerlitz, only Sebald’s narrator gets to listen to Austerlitz’s tale. This deferment in the narrative structure does involve the reader in a new type of seeing, one that is forced upon them by the story’s lack of a central subject.

Many who have written on W.G. Sebald claim that he is creating a textual temporality similar to the one Benjamin promotes through his creation of interruptions and irreducible conflicts in the texts. Laura Garcia Moreno claims that Sebald “spatializes time, and temporalizes space.” Sebald spatializes time by expanding its passage on the page. Moreno claims that Sebald uses an “aesthetics of delay” that is similar to Benjamin’s approach to history
in that it follows a non-linear, sporadic pattern, investigating that which would be overlooked by others. She claims that

the detours and ramifications, the congestions and irruptions of

Sebald’s prose give it a distinct density. But perhaps more

importantly, they indicate a resistance to the onward flow of time

and an urge to look back, not so much out of nostalgia, but out of a

passionate interest in what shuns the light of day. (372)

Mary Griffin Wilson also sees Sebald creating a new type of space within the text, one which moves “‘less by succession than by coexistence’” (51). For her, the photographs function in an indexical fashion thereby “creating a narrative that is constantly moving—leaping from one speaker, image, or time frame to the next” (74). This creates a space where these opposing facets are existing and persisting alongside each other. In their failure to cohere they keep the narrative moving forward (74). Finally, this dualistic sense of space is also central to Jessica Dubrow’s study of the dialectical image within Sebald’s work. The dialectic image loses its power if it is not standing as the extreme opposite of something. Its power comes from its shocking difference to the continuum of time, its inability to be collapsed into any system (8 and 17).

I, too, believe that Sebald’s strongest link to Benjamin lies in the temporality his texts create. Like these authors, I believe that Sebald’s respect for the individual materials in the narrative are responsible for the unique temporality they create. However, I would also venture to say that the reader’s ability to experience Sebald’s non-linear temporality is highly dependent upon the way Sebald positions the subject in his text. In the next section, I will demonstrate how Benjamin’s theories on photography and storytelling both show a concern for the role
positionality plays in either distancing or involving the viewer in the experience of the work of art. Only by inverting the position of all that is considered “central” to the work of art can the novelist endow readers with a sense of immediacy to the original experience being represented.
Conversations involving Benjamin and photography are not new. As the author of “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin is often a central figure in discussions on photography, many of which focus on the theme of reproducibility and the destruction of “aura.” However, my approach is similar to Kathrin Yacavone’s fairly recent comparison of Benjamin’s and Roland Barthes’ different approaches to photography, in which she departs from the over-discussed theme of reproducibility in Benjamin and focuses instead on how Benjamin’s encounter with particular photos informed his sense of responsibility to the other. She contends that “foregrounding the theme of singularity” in Benjamin’s relationship to photography “helps to transcend the predominant and problematic equation of photography with reproducibility, and hence its presumed entirely ‘anti-auratic’ nature” (11). Art Historian Kaja Silverman has also noted the strange inconsistencies of Benjamin’s designation of reproduction as apolitical, so what makes Yacavone’s approach of “foregrounding singularity” helpful to discussions on Benjamin’s historical theories is that he places so much emphasis on the importance of the independent event, especially the event of encountering the dialectical image, that it seems impossible to consider these unique events as not having a quality of singularity, or aura themselves (Silverman 7).

My angle on Benjamin’s relationship to the negative should complicate other analyses that focus solely on reproducibility, partly because the negative possesses a completely different temporal nature from the positive reproduction. The negative is the first repetition of the original event or scene, a monad in its own right, so it carries more proximity to the original than the
positive print, but it can also be copied over and over again. It is at once the one and only original trace of the object, but also its source of reproduction. As Derrida writes of the specter, “it begins by coming back” (11). Since this paper aims to uncover the way Benjamin’s dialectical image can be shared, the theme of reproducibility is impossible to avoid. However, what I will also demonstrate is that one cannot adequately capture the complexity and skill that go into sharing the dialectical image if one neglects the parallels between aura and the singularity of the event in which the dialectical experience of time takes place.

Benjamin’s thoughts on photography and reproduction can be problematic when discussing his philosophies of history because for him, the ideas of “reproduction” and “repetition,” while similar in nature, hold vastly different consequences depending on context and subject matter. Throughout his three works that center most on this repetition and reproduction dichotomy, “The Work of Art,” “Theses,” and The Arcades Project, there is one priority that remains clear and consistent regardless of terminology. Benjamin is adamant that the goal of art should be providing every viewer with the same level of immediacy to the experience that inspired the work, regardless of accessibility or status. For example, in the context of history, “repetition” is something to be avoided because it distances present generations from the urgency of their time and their unique messianic potential. For Benjamin, “repetition” is the tool that elite historians use to create “an eternal image of the past” and perpetuate barbarism. While the idea that events repeat themselves is a fundamental to Benjamin’s theory, presenting events as merely repetitious strips away the weight of the past’s emergence in the “the now.” Presenting a single event as a point in a never-ending cycle is just as dangerous as situating it as a link in a progressive timeline. It decontextualizes time and keeps one from seeing the present recurrence
as an opportunity to break the cycle. The only way to successfully “blast open the continuum of history” is to remove any sense of causality and order between various events, even if their cyclical nature is the root of concern.

While the dialectical image reveals the “the then” and “the now” simultaneously, its subtle, juxtapositional nature is supposed to prevent one from seeing the present as a result of the past. If one were to provide an image of “the now” and insinuate that any part of it is a byproduct of “the then,” then the entire goal of isolating the present moment as a pivotal event would be in vain. If anything the goal is to see the past through the lens of the present. Allowing the events of the past to frame the present as a mere repetition allows the present moment to be swallowed into the “course of history” that the traditional historicism has already established. Benjamin expands upon this idea in *The Arcades Project* stating that for “the materialist historian, every epoch with which he occupies himself is only prehistory for the epoch he himself must live in.” If the materialist historian is going to demonstrate the crucial nature of the present moment, then

> there can be no appearance of repetition, since precisely those moments in the course of history which matter most to him, by virtue of their index as ‘fore-history,’ become moments of the present day and change their specific character according to the catastrophic or triumphant of the day (474).

If the materialist does not create some distance from the past, then people will see themselves as a part of a cycle that is bound to repeat itself regardless of their actions. Just as those expecting the positive results of progress do not act, those who see the catastrophes around them as belonging to another time will evade their responsibility to the future as well. The person who
articulates Benjamin’s history effectively “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary [, and instead,] grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (263). In emphasizing the uniqueness of this moment, one reconstructs history as an undecided course, thereby prompting present generations to take their role towards the future more seriously. However, the media at the historical materialist’s disposal each present a different set of limitations to communicating such a unique experience on a large scale.

In the context of art, “reproduction” has both positive and negative connotations for Benjamin, depending on the genre of the medium. These opposing viewpoints on duplication arise from the different postures Benjamin holds towards the idea of “aura” in visual art and literature. Benjamin uses the term “aura” in both essays to refer to the spiritual, cult value of the original, be it the original source of a visual representation, or the original subject of a story being relayed. Across these genres, Benjamin concerns himself with the mode of sharing that will provide viewers with the greatest sense of immediacy to the experience that is being represented and thereby the greatest sense of political consciousness. While the value placed in aura casts a negative shadow in the visual arts, it is the ultimate source of wisdom in literature. More specifically, in the visual arts, Benjamin posits reproduction as a positive antidote to the ostracizing effects of aura, and yet, in the realm of literature, he presents aura as a necessary catalyst that is being denied through reproduction. In literature, repetition has a dulling, distancing, and domineering effect just as it does in history. In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin purports that the printing press has deprived people of the transfer of experience that is inherent in verbal storytelling. While the storyteller “takes what he tells from experience” and “makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale,” the novelist lives in a time where
communication has been absorbed by the mass production tactics of capitalism, and thus, written narration is a completely dependent medium. Unlike the verbal storyteller, the novelist is mediated by the technology of the press, thereby reducing the affective element of storytelling to a mere transference of information. All the imaginative elements that arise from contact with the storyteller are depleted to the mere processing of given information (“Storyteller” 87-9). “The Work of Art,” on the other hand, argues that the aura of the “original” work, such as a painting that cannot be easily reproduced, is something that denies political consciousness to the masses through its rareness and inaccessibility. However, the technological reproduction of the photograph combats this inaccessible aura by bringing the work of art to the masses. Benjamin writes, “It might be stated that as a general formula the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition...in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced” (438). The result of this newly found accessibility is that it allows people to encounter new experiences that have the potential to change their perception. In works that maintain an aura “[e]ven in the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place” (437). However, “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different kind of social practice: politics” (441). The end result of this is a new mode of perception. While singular works invested with cult value pressure viewers into contemplating the specific meaning of the piece, photographic records “demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer, he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them” (441). The end goal of
destabilizing aura is allowing people to encounter new experiences that will challenge them to reconsider the way they see.

Much of the confusion surrounding Benjamin’s integrations of photographic technology into his theories stems from the fact that his approach is not entirely about literal images; however, it is not entirely a metaphor either. Just as we have seen in his approach to materialist history as a whole, Benjamin’s conception of photography hinges upon a blurring of the lines between material and immaterial, or more specifically, using material objects to cast a more substantive light on that which is perceived as immaterial. The photograph is a material object that confronts us with a new way of seeing material time and space. Cadava articulates this manipulation of time in his discussion of Siegfried Kracauer’s essay on photography:

“[Kracauer] argues that the significance of photography lies not with its ability to reproduce a given object, but rather with its ability to tear it away from itself.” In other words “what makes photography is not its capacity to present what is photographed but its character as a force of interruption” (Kracauer, qtd. in Cadava xxviii). For Benjamin, this “tearing away” translates into the extraction of the photograph from traditional notions of time. As he writes in the 1936 version of “The Work of Art,”

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what was albeit indistinctly, visible ‘anyway’: it reveals entirely new structural forms of the subject matter.

(Benjamin, qtd. in Cadava xxix).
With the frozen moment of a photograph, one is stripped from linear time, and presented with a moment that at once illustrates distance, as the object before the viewer is somewhere in the past, but also the immediate experience of interruption, a present experience where one is stripped out of the continuum of time. Ultimately, what ties Benjamin and Kracauer’s approaches together is their interest in how this radical change in one’s experience of temporality has the potential to change one’s understanding of his or her own position in that present moment, but also in the larger course of time. Cadava quotes Miriam Hansen on a statement regarding Kracauer that rings true for both him and Benjamin. The outlook of these two thinkers is one that questions how photography can “turn its material disposition” into “aesthetic and political practice…how it [can] enable new forms of experience and subjectivity” (qtd. in Cadava xxix).

This transformation of subjectivity vis-à-vis photography is the driving force that pushes Benjamin’s constant references to photography beyond the realm of metaphor and into that of social practice. Benjamin is not simply comparing photography to social practice, or posturing that society functions like the process of photography. Instead, what Benjamin’s theories are doing is grasping onto the aesthetic characteristics of the material object of the photograph, and then using these material properties to both interrogate and reconsider the hypothetically immaterial realm of perception with the end goal altering the material world through an upending social practice. In other words, he is using the parallels between the material realm of the object and immaterial realm of perception to achieve material social change. These effects hinge on the experience of time that occurs when one comes into contact with the photograph. The photographic image offers viewers a new mode of seeing time, one that is removed from traditional, continuous models by putting them into contact with an event that is at once in the
past and present. The present experience of encountering a past event, one that the medium has frozen in time, the photograph conflates the idea of eternity and the momentary event. However, how might the photograph direct viewers to considering their place in the future? Where in this model does one locate the possibility of a redemptive future that is so intrinsic to the experience of the dialectical image?

In his varied discussions of history, there are a couple of occasions where Benjamin uses the idea of a negative to frame the relationship between single events and larger historical narratives. Sometimes, he merely references the negative qualities of time, and sometimes, he references literal negative plates as a metaphor. For example, at one point in *The Arcades* Project, he writes “The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which imprinted by light on a photosensitive page. The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details” (Benjamin, qtd. in Silverman 8). At another point, he uses the concept of the negative/positive binary to frame his discussion of the dialectical nature of time. Like Sebald, he uses the aesthetic of the negative as a means for challenging those histories that are situated in the foreground, that are privileged with positive substance. He writes,

> It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various ‘fields’ of any epoch, such that on one side lies the ‘productive,’ ‘forward-looking,’ ‘lively,’ ‘positive’ part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent. The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off
against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision…a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis. [N1a,3].

Our present moment is a product of the past, but the dominant or “positive” understanding of the history thrives on the disappearance of the contrasting, marginalized, “negative” narratives of history. What Benjamin is doing is advocating for a type of vision that can only be understood through the aesthetics of the material negative. The “displacement of vision” taking place is one where the viewer must invert substance, invert meaning, so that the margins can be given weight as well. As Benjamin describes it in “Theses,” “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). For history to be redeemed, we have to encounter time from a new perspective in such a way that the both negative past and positive present take on a new form. While Benjamin is not discussing a literal, photographic negative here, his emphasis on the need for a “displacement of the angle of vision” shines new light on the circumstances under which one might be able to “see” the dialectical image. Not only does the photographic negative have a closer proximity to the original event, the original moment in which time was frozen, but it also carries a three-way temporality that is paramount to the
experience of the dialectical image. It carries an image of the past into the present, while also carrying the promise of a future positive print to be developed.

While not many scholars have analyzed Sebald’s text through the metaphor of a photographic negative, there are several scholars who have noticed references to the developmental process of photography throughout *Austerlitz* and have organized the structure of their readings around these references. For example, in his essay “Stations, Dark Rooms and False Worlds,” David Darby contends that the train stations in *Austerlitz* serve as pseudo-darkrooms where personal and national history collide to catalyze “particular processes of memory” (167). As he sees it, the novel is organized around three types of images: indexes and archives, which are material, and then immaterial hallucinations or narrated pictures that appear as a type of ekphrasis. These images are usually encountered in the space of the train station, which according to Darby, are always described in a fashion similar to a developmental darkroom. Darby and I both see Austerlitz’s experience in these places as mirroring the developmental phase of photography, but we diverge on the model of history that Sebald presents. Throughout this thesis, I have used the metaphor of the photographic negative to categorize these hallucinations as experiences of the dialectical image, which, like a negative, flash a ghostly image that soon recedes back into darkness. Darby contends otherwise, stating that these images present themselves to Austerlitz too gradually: “However much [of Sebald’s] writing plays on Benjamin, Sebald’s photographic imagination of memory relies on an analogy that is fundamentally different from that informing Benjamin’s. Benjamin focuses again and again on the suddenness of an image’s appearance on the photosensitive recording surface of memory” (171). In contrast, he contends that the experience is more reflective of Marianne
Hirsch’s concept of post-memory in that the darkroom metaphor accommodates “an infinitely extendable interval between…the initial, remembered and forgotten experience, and…the formation or recall of its secondary image on paper in the developing bath” Ultimately, he feels that “the images that present themselves to Austerlitz stand…only at the beginning of his thought and memory work. Beyond them lie other journeys and other images, lost, found, and decipherable in many cases only with painful uncertainty” (172). However, even though these images do tend to arise gradually, there is still an instantaneous, fleeting element to Austerlitz’s described encounters with them, a characteristic that Darby even identifies himself. For example, when Austerlitz photographs the large mirror at the Antwerp Station, Darby states “[i]t is as though Austerlitz is attempting to capture images just at the moment of the disappearance of their last traces from old fashioned photographic plates” (168, emphasis mine). He also writes that throughout the novel, seeing appears to be “subject to an entropic process at the end of which lies darkness, the impenetrable blackness of memory. The Centraal Station and Nocturama are places where…painstaking attempts to fix images in memory prove to be in vain, as the images fade to black in the very moment of their appearance” (168, emphasis mine). Similarly to the many analyses that categorize Sebald’s work as trauma literature, what we see in Darby’s analysis is again, an assumption that one must successfully recognize the dialectical image to experience it at all. However, this is not necessarily the case.

As Benjamin makes clear in “Theses,” recognition is a key step to advancing towards the redemption of history, but this inability to recognize the image does not prevent it from emerging. Its appearance is beyond one’s control. One’s ability to recognize the dialectical image highly affects the yield of such an experience, but does not prevent that experience from
occurring. As previously stated, Benjamin does not frame the encounter with the dialectical image as one that is instantaneously redemptive. The image is, instead, a first step that initiates the historical materialist and galvanizes him or her for a battle against forgetting that they may never cease fighting. What Darby and many other trauma scholars fail to acknowledge that this gradual manifestation could be a direct result of Austerlitz’s confessed desire to avoid those experiences which might force him to encounter the dialectical image. At one point, he tells the narrator how much he used to neglect his memories, stating, “As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go not further than that…I did not read newspapers because, as I know now, I feared unwelcome revelations” (Sebald 140). Overall, whether Austerlitz has recognized the dialectical image and felt its urgency is unclear. For example, the second half of Darby’s essay illustrates how Austerlitz is a mirror image of Benjamin himself. He writes in konvolutes that “resist systemization and regulation,” and his approach to writing echoes Benjamin’s to the point that you would think “Austerlitz had quietly decided to continue to work on Benjamin’s arcades projects” (175). Austerlitz’s reluctance to encounter the dialectical image while still adopting Benjamin’s intellectual approach complicates the question of who is playing the role of Benjamin’s historical materialist in the novel. Is it Austerlitz, the character who is more likely to have encountered the image directly, or is it the unnamed narrator who gives shape to the visions that Austerlitz could not? Is it possible that Austerlitz’s encounter with the dialectical image is not the one that is initiating the redemption of history but rather the narrator’s second hand, distant encounter with these images? One can start to address these questions by looking at this shared narrative role through the lens of the negative trace.
One of the few essays that looks at *Austerlitz* through the angle of the photographic negative is Anneleen Masschelein’s work on the idea of “negative indexicality.” In this essay she considers the “negative” on the literal level of the photographic negative, but also on a psychoanalytic level. In doing so, she shows us how this concept of the negative can also occur on a textual level. She compares *Austerlitz* to a favorite text of Benjamin’s, André Breton’s *Nadja*, and uses both novels to illustrate how interplays between photographic and textual channels in a novel can be self-canceling. On the photographic level, Masschelein, like many other readers of Sebald, focuses on the imprinted image, but her essay is unique in that it shines light on the negative qualities that such images bare.

Masschelein’s idea begins with the common understanding of a photograph as an index or a document of a physical object. Masschelein’s argument relies heavily on Rosalind Krauss’ semiotic take on the photographic index which states that while photographs are indexes of physical reality, they create a “paradox of reality constituted as sign—or presence turned into absence, into representation, into speaking into writing” (Krauss, qtd. in Masschelein 365). In this sense, every photograph is a negative of substance by taking a physical object and turning it into a flat sign. Masschelein agrees with Krauss but asserts that in the context of *Nadja* and *Austerlitz*, the presence the text alongside these photographs complicates this idea of the semiotic index as the absence of materiality. While the indexical qualities of the photograph flatten the object into a sign, such signs are constantly interacting with the text, which can either re-substantiate or further flatten the object. In the same sense, the image can either substantiate or undermine the reality of the text. This is why Masschelein labels this phenomenon a “negative indexicality”: in these texts “the interaction between words and image” force our “contiguity and
contact [to] negotiate between absence and materiality” all because these failures of the photographic and textual signs to completely affirm or undermine the physical world. The major crux of Masschelein’s argument for both *Nadja* and *Austerlitz* is the idea that in both novels, subject and object are constituted through what they are, but through what they are not. Because they are defined or substantiated by what is not there, they are “negative indexes” or indexes that point to the materiality of absence. While imprints are merely traces of material substance, negatives act as material indexes of absence.

In her reading of *Austerlitz*, Masschelein claims that the visual and textual channels of the novel continually undermine and substantiate each other’s symbolic functions as well as each other’s claims to reality. There is a “negative” interplay between text and image as each channel seems to call attention to the unreality of the other. The photos, which are supposed to substitute the narrative for us, instead highlight the narrative’s fictional nature, its absence from reality and real events. These photographs “resist an interpretation of the book as testimony” because “[n]o matter how chilling and haunting its content may be, we know that Austerlitz is a fictional character and that its photographs are a collage” (379). Nevertheless, because the photographs are presented in a documentary and indexical nature, they challenge the presumed unreality of the fictional narrative (382). She observes a similar move in the subject formation of these author’s characters.

While Masschelein uses two different avenues for describing negative indexicality in *Nadja* and *Austerlitz*, her focus on the idea of subject formation as a negative indexicality in *Nadja* is actually quite helpful in understanding the negative properties of *Austerlitz* as well. In the case of *Nadja*, she claims that subjectivity is negative in the sense that who the narrator is, is
defined, rather, by what he is not. Comparing the atmospheres of *Nadja* and *Austerlitz*, Masschelein states that both texts are prime examples of Benjamin’s concept of “profane illumination” in that they both produce a shocking and “sublime experience of the ordinary” (Masschelein 362). They produce this experience by positing substance in the environment and its objects rather than the subject. Benjamin focused on this aspect in his own reading of *Nadja*, highlighting the role of profane illumination in subject formation as well as setting. First, he notes how Breton’s descriptions of Nadja never touch her but instead “[reveal] her negatively by showing the things surrounding her in a new light.” Essentially, life is brought to the character through the lifeless objects.

In *Austerlitz*, the role of profane illumination in subject formation is clear through the very narrative structure of the novel, an aspect that Masschelein tends to overlook. Throughout the novel, our presumed subject, Austerlitz, is formed in negation to the narrator, and the narrator is only substantiated through his contact with us, the readers. We know very little about the narrator apart from the fact that he is giving life to Austerlitz and his story. Seeing the redemptive qualities in Austerlitz requires readers to switch their thinking about positionality and ask who may be the one actually encountering the dialectical image, and who may be the person fixing it long enough to redeem history. To find the redemption in Austerlitz might require us to look at the whole story through a lens of negotiation, or what Benjamin might call “dialectical optics.” We must briefly look away from the experience of the text’s central subject, Austerlitz, and look towards the marginal subject, our narrator, who does not take on substantial form and who fades in and out of sight.
As we have seen thus far, the reproductive aspect of photography is crucial to spreading moments of political consciousness across the masses. However, we have also gathered that the dialectical image is not so much about the reproduction of image as it is about bringing the person into a singular experience that is unique to a particular moment. The task of reconciling this tension between the political potential of technological reproducibility and the threat of political indifference through repetition is where the properties of the photographic negative become useful. Like the encounter of the photograph, the negative creates a unique momentary experience, but it is one that is made all the more fleeting due to its fragile visual properties. One must be quick to apprehend the image it provides, but most importantly, one must be able to alter their understanding of substance and absence to see this image. Just as a printed photograph gives the viewer a moment to experience time apart from its continuous duration, the visual experience of the negative also alters one’s understanding of one’s place in time. However, it prompts even further introspection into one’s understanding of subjectivity and sets up a better understanding of the dialectical image in two ways. First, it creates visual discomfort by forcing viewers to reconsider how and where to allocate their focus, thereby forcing readers to engage in immaterial visualization at the exact moment of encountering the image, a skill that is so intrinsic to the dialectical image. It also constantly alludes to futurity, reproducibility and sharing. Since the sensitive aspects of this visual experience, especially its fleeting nature, could not be reproduced by simply printing the image, Sebald recreates this experience through the other medium at his disposal: language. Sebald’s photos are at once giving distance as archives, but they are also giving immediacy through the experience of interruption, creating a moment that can only occur at that moment in the text. And yet, his text is doing something also: it is
prompting us to engage our abilities of perception despite the substance that is in front of us, prompting not only a struggle of visualization but also providing each viewer with a unique experience depending on his or her ability to activate these perspectival skills that are so essential to the historical materialist.
Section III: Writing in “Invisible Ink”—Negative Textuality as a Means for Seeing and Rewriting History

Throughout the novel Austerlitz, Sebald is successful in not only arresting the experience of the dialectical image, but also in recreating this experience of the dialectical image in a way that is accessible to readers on an immediate level. Sebald creates this arrest and reproduction by endowing his text with negative qualities. Like an encounter with the dialectical image, the manifestation of these negative qualities and the experiences they produce create varying experiences to characters inside the text and readers outside of the text. Two of the most prevalent manifestations of the negative lie in what Sebald called a “periscopic” narrative structure and in the self-negating juxtapositions of image alongside text. However, I will also demonstrate how negative qualities play a role in setting up the scenes where characters encounter the dialectical image. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Sebald attributes his understanding of “periscopic” form to Thomas Bernhard. What appealed to Sebald most about the periscopic approach was the fact it allowed Bernhard’s work to remain uncompromising because he “only tells you in books what he has heard from others” (Silverblatt 83). Another way of understanding this, as Alfred Lutz points out, would be to return to Benjamin’s idea of the “perfect narrative” as “layers of various retelling” (Benjamin, qtd. in Lutz 147). It is a narrative form where the central narrator constantly defers his own thoughts to the stories and ideas he has heard from others. This technique is pervasive throughout Austerlitz: not only does our narrator constantly cite books that he has read, but he also moves subtly between various layers other characters’ anecdotes (26-7 and 296-298) The most extreme case of this occurs when Austerlitz is reunited with his childhood nanny, Vera, who in telling Austerlitz his parents’ story, causes the
narrative to be filtered through three, sometimes even four, layers of separate accounts:
“nonetheless, said Vera, Austerlitz continued, Maximillian did not in any way believe…From
time to time, so Vera recollected, said Austerlitz, Maximillian would tell the tale” (167). With
the novel’s reliance on repetitive attribution, or the transference of the narrative from Austerlitz
to our unnamed narrator, the narrative is delivered by a narrator who might be considered as the
negative medium through which the positive of Austerlitz’s story is projected, but also the source
that captures the immediacy of his experiences. The narrator forces us to constantly reconsider
his position and our own in this novel because he shifts from foreground to background of the
plot. He is both an absent vessel, leaving himself open to the impressions of Austerlitz’s
anecdotes, but also an active generator, producing the language necessary to recreate the
experience.

Like a negative image on a piece of film, the narrator’s constant movement from the
center of the story to the margins creates a void where a traditional novel would place a clear,
central narrator ordering the logic of the story’s separate strands. This void creates an inversion
of the exterior positionality of the audience and suddenly places the reader at the center of the
text. While Benjamin’s “Storyteller” presents the traditional novel as a medium for information
through a definitive narrator, Austerlitz’s inversion of reader-narrator positions makes the novel a
medium for experience. Like an encounter with the storyteller, Sebald’s work “keeps [the] story
free from explanation as it reproduces it.” Instead of having “the psychological connection of
events” forced upon us, we are now responsible for uncovering and orienting ourselves to the
material and immaterial properties of the text (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 89). In this way, Sebald
reproduces the dialectical image in the purest way possible. He submerges his readers into a
sustained exercise of having to recognize and prioritize all the substantial and insubstantial images that the text contains. In doing so, he reproduces the unique experience of being “singled out by history” and gives this experience immediate exhibition value in the “now” space of every reader.

While the Nocturama scene at the beginning of the novel prompts readers to reconsider their placement in relation to the text, there is a period of time following this incident where Sebald casts the narrator as the central subject of the text. The narrator situates himself outside of and apart from Austerlitz, and everything readers learn about Austerlitz for the first thirty pages is filtered through the narrator’s perception of him, making clear his centrality as a source of information. For example, while the narrator transcribes direct speech from Austerlitz, there are also times when he paraphrases for him: “Austerlitz spoke at length about the marks of pain which, as he said he well knew, trace countless fine lines through history” (14). While he never uses quotation marks, he is careful to denote who is speaking every couple of lines: “Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Austerlitz began, in response to my question” (9 and 7-13). And finally, there is no narrative being transcribed from Austerlitz at this point in the novel. The speech transcribed from Austerlitz at first is just a collection of informational fragments. In these early parts of the book, the narrator is feeding us information from outside of Austerlitz, building a narrative around the way that Austerlitz speaks and organizes his thoughts. He is shaping Austerlitz’s outside image instead of using his narrative as a vessel for Austerlitz’s own voice. He comments,

> From the first, I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of
whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life. (13)

From this quote, we can see why Austerlitz might not be fit for the task of reproducing his own dialectical experiences. Apart from his inability to write, even if Austerlitz brings information to light in a gradual manner, but the dialectical image emerges in a flash, then it might not be possible for him to bring others into his experience through writing. However, it is also in this moment that we learn about his impressionable storytelling capacities, and the dynamics of the narrator’s central subjectivity undergoes a subtle shift.

After commenting on Austerlitz’s aptitude for speech, the narrator shares one recollection that illustrates not only Austerlitz’s ability to transfer experiences through storytelling, but also starts to situate the narrator as the “negative” for Austerlitz’s narrative.

I shall never forget how he concluded his comments on the manufacture of the tall waiting-room mirrors by wondering…

combien des ouvriers périrent, lors de la manufacture de tels miroirs, de malignes et funestes affectations à la suite de l’inhalation de vapeurs de mercure et de cyanide (13).

Roughly translated, the Austerlitz’s question is “how many workers perished, during the manufacture of mirrors like these, from malignant and fatal appropriations as a result of the inhalation of mercury and cyanide fumes.” This quote represents a shift in the narrative for two reasons. One, the term “I shall never forget” suggests that Austerlitz’s mode of storytelling has
made a strong impression on the narrator. After this point, anything Austerlitz says appears to leave an imprint on the narrator once they depart from one another. For example, just a few pages later, the narrator states again “These remarks, made by Austerlitz as he was leaving, were still in my mind the next morning” (19). At the end of the story, when he and Austerlitz part for the final time he recalls, “I for my part could not get the story of the cemetery in Alderney Street with which Austerlitz had taken his leave of me out of my head.” The immense influence these stories leave upon the narrator become clear in his decision to set out and tour the Breendonk fortress, not once, but twice. The impression left by Austerlitz is so strong that now the narrator’s personal actions are being framed through his influence. Coincidentally, it is there that we experience our first encounter with the dialectical image. When the narrator goes to Breendonk, he is not only experiencing this “historical metaphysic” for himself—he is becoming a medium for the display of this phenomenon that Austerlitz himself cannot aptly describe in text.

This subverted fact about the mirror makers also advances the idea that Austerlitz and the narrator’s shared narrative can best be understood through photographic aesthetics. Substances like mercury and cyanide were not only used in making mirrors, but these harmful substances were also common tools in early photography. In the age of the daguerreotype, mercury was used to develop a latent image on an exposed plate, and later, potassium cyanide was the preferred solution for fixing images in the collodion plate process (Peres 61-63 and 107). When the narrator first enters the train station, the fluctuation of light and dark create a space that is reminiscent of a photographic plate in transition. “The gleam of the gold and silver on the huge, half-obliterated mirrors on the wall facing the windows was not yet entirely extinguished before a subterranean twilight filled the waiting room” (6). In contrast, the allusion to the later stages of
developing and fixing present this moment of influence as a defining moment. Here, Austerlitz’s storytelling is so effective that it has brought our narrator into a shared experience of the mirror makers’ experiences of death. The active, interpretive side of our narrator has died so that he may become a medium through which Austerlitz’s experiences can be shown, and also, through which readers can start viewing the verbal and visual materials of the novel differently. The narrator’s sensitization as a medium for others’ stories first becomes clear at Breendonk, where we first see him citing others’ stories to describe his own experience.

The narrator’s visit to Fort Breendonk serves as an example of how the dialectical image comes into being and how the process of documenting such an experience begins. It provides readers with a sense of the mode of perception that is necessary for experiencing the image, and then presents the dialectical image to the reader through text. When the narrator visits the former Nazi prison camp, Sebald displays not only the difficulties of visualization in the face of physical substance, but he also demonstrates how the narrator’s first instinct for arresting the dialectical image is to rely on language, a skill that Austerlitz does not possess. From the onset of his visit, the narrator expresses the difficulties of negotiating between his expectations of the fort and its physical reality. He states, “I still had an image in my head of a star shaped bastion with wall towering above a precise geometrical ground plan,” but this vision is repeatedly challenged by the fort’s low walls. He attempts to put into context with other visual forms and shapes he knows, but this attempt to root the vision outside of his present moment ends in vain: “I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization…the longer I looked at it, the more often it forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become” (20-1). This inability to visualize the space as it once was continues to challenge our
narrator inside the fort, where he finds himself unable to envision the general history of the fort, the “trudgery performed day after day, year after year, at Breendonk and all the other main and branch camps” (23). While the narrator is not apathetic to this history, this idea of the mass suffering as a repeated event decontextualizes the moment for him and makes it harder for him connect to it. Just as James and Benjamin suggest, the idea of suffering as an everyday routine at the fort makes it difficult for the narrator to recognize his position and makes it difficult for him to see his present moment as one with messianic potential. It is only when the narrator shifts the focus of his visual attention in the present that he is able to imagine and experience the space’s traces of the past.

The narrator’s decision to start looking at the marginal, minute elements of the space help him to better understand the past while walking through the fort, and it also helps him, in the present moment of writing from memory, to remember the strange experience that he experienced there. In the middle of his description of the fort, the narrator takes a break from describing his struggle to visualize the fort’s larger order and structure, and he reflects instead on “how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on” (24). Upon returning to his description, he starts recounting the marginal, minute elements of the space, such as the mattresses in the fortress. With this, he begins to remember the spectral sensations he experienced, such as “the air growing thinner” and the “weight above him heavier.” He remembers that childhood memories suddenly started to emerge that not only split the present moment for him, but resulted in a complete distortion of his vision. A “nauseating smell of soft soap rose” from one of the fort’s casemates, oscillates the narrator between a
physical and verbal realms to the point of illness: “this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*” (25). With “black striations…[quivering] before [his] eyes,” he recalls that he “had to rest [his] forehead against the wall, which was gritty…and seemed…to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat” (25-6). With this triumvirate of physical disorientation, spatial personification, and a flash of language, we can see that presence of the past is slowly becoming less intangible, and instead, becoming a living and active force, one that even has the capacity to speak. It is at this moment that the dialectical image arises, both for the narrator in the fort, and for the reader in the text.

As the narrator attempts to transcribe his understanding of his nausea’s onset in the fort, his personal past suddenly becomes lost in his knowledge of collective history. He begins to explain,

> It was not that as the nausea rose in me I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry’s description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and of the tortures he himself suffered in Breendonk. (26)

However, the moment he departs from his personal narrative into those of others, his voice disappears, and the text immerses us into a near hypnotic strand of references and citations that keep us from identifying a central speaker. The narrator’s voice is lost, but interestingly, his experience is not. In the midst of this long strand of historical references, we receive visual
shocks in the form text, first in the presence of italicized French, and then in a stream of AAAAAAs, where the narrator’s reflection on Breendonk abruptly stops (26-7).

For the narrator, the encounter with dialectical image stems, first, from reorienting his vision from center to margin, from foreground to background. At the fort, this visual switch is from the larger structure to marginal objects. At the moment of writing, this switch arises when he abandons the task of rebuilding the space in his mind to, instead, briefly give voice underlying sensation that his act of memory is producing. In other words, it begins with a willingness to abandon the substance that vies for our attention and using that mental energy to entertain what may possibly lie elsewhere. In changing his visual focus at the time and his mental perception in the present, the narrator’s newfound awareness of the margins put him into a polyvocal understanding of his surroundings that split his experience of the fort at the time, but also change his textual form in the present moment of reflection. The narrator’s ability to recall these individual accounts moves his own experience to the margin, thereby turning his personal account into a medium for the experiences of others, including those outside the text (26-27).

With the narrative structure of this moment, it is as though the narrator is training us to see differently as well. By lulling our minds into a labyrinth of paraphrase, the narrator switches what we foreground ourselves. The subtle flow of the narrative from one speaker to another creates a space where readers inevitably get lost, where it becomes easier to simply receive the text than to try and establish our position in it. Once the text has successfully lulled readers into passivity, it thrusts them out of this comfortable position with visual shocks, fragments that are so different from the rest of the text that the reader has no choice but to take notice. It is in this way that Sebald produces the dialectical image on the image of language. By submersing readers
into a stream of collective narratives, Sebald trains readers to stop rationalizing the text, to stop assessing the precise words and syntax on the imprinted page, and start focusing on the sensations that such textual presentation creates.

After the visit to Breendonk, the narrator is able to detect more personal elements of Austerlitz that start providing the reader with a narrative of Austerlitz beyond the random facts he dispels. He writes that around this time, Austerlitz began sharing personal anecdotes, “in curious contrast to his usual rigorous objectivity” (31). This newly found ability to capture Austerlitz on a more individual level is the last step before his narrative becomes a full negative medium for Austerlitz’s. After he departs from Austerlitz, our narrator begins suffering vision problems, and after suffering from this brief impairment, it appears that seeing the world through negative eyes becomes second nature to him. The narrator’s vision problems begin when “all [his] right eye could see was a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below” (35). At one point, he recalls that, turning his gaze from a printed page to a framed photograph only to find “the figures and landscapes familiar to [him] in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching” (35). Not only does this vision disorient the narrator’s understanding of substance and form like a negative, but ultimately, the narrator even comes to embody the negative himself when he sees a doctor for treatment. The doctor identifies the issue as a “central serous chorioretinopathy,” or a leakage of fluid behind from the light-sensitive, retinal layer of the eye, to the back part of the eye responsible for sending sight information to the brain. When his optometrist addresses the issue, his first step is “a procedure called a fluorescing angiography” which entails “introducing [a] contrast medium into the bloodstream” and “taking a series of photographs of [the] eyes, or rather…of the back of
the eye through the iris, the pupil, and the vitreous humor” (38). Essentially, the end result is an x-ray or negative of the inside of the eye (Fig. 4). When the narrator writes about the procedure, he states, “I once again see the little points of light that shot into my widely opened eyes each time he pressed the shutter release” (38).

After this procedure, the narrator’s perception changes, not only literally, but also in the way he presents the material in the rest of the novel moving forward. Like a roll of exposed film harboring a latent image, the narrator finds himself sensitive to light. While resting in a dark corner, he spends some time observing the dominant focal point of the scene, a gregarious group of men, when he is suddenly distracted by something in his periphery, “a solitary figure on the edge of the agitated crowd, a figure who could only be Austerlitz” (39). It is during this encounter that Austerlitz begins to tell the narrator his life’s story, and from that point forward, in a similar fashion to a negative, the narrator removes himself completely from the center of the image, however, he does not necessarily put Austerlitz in his place. While one could say that the narrator is providing a medium for a light that will eventually present a positive, fixed image of Austerlitz’s story, given the text’s repeated disavow of the imprint, this reading seems unlikely. Even though Austerlitz’s storytelling resembles the gradual process of a development bath, a process which fascinates him deeply, he does not often describe himself with any sense of embodiment or substance, but instead, as one who “has no place in reality, as if [he] were not there at all” (77 and 185). In search of a sense of substance and meaning, Austerlitz finds that text and other “imprints” always disappoint, or fail to yield answers. He recalls his childhood stating,
I never shook off the feeling that something very obvious, very manifest in itself was hidden from me…I felt as if an invisible twin brother were walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow, so to speak. And I suspected that some meaning relating to myself lay behind the Bible stories I was given to read…a meaning quite different from the sense of the printed words as I ran my index finger along the lines (55).

As I mentioned in the introduction, the idea that truth lies somewhere beyond that which is given substance appears in the history lessons of Austerlitz’s favorite teacher, André Hilary in his skepticism of the “performed images that are already imprinted on our brains.” Given this distrust of master narratives and that which has already been imprinted, Sebald’s narrator presents every dialectical image after his eye procedure with a juxtaposition of words and images that cancel the meaning found in one another. Even though he presents the images as archival evidence of Austerlitz’s experiences, the text captioning the images does not always line up. Rather than explain the printed images on the page, the text in these moments tend to negate the printed image by conjuring a different vision. What we will see in the next two encounters with the dialectical image is a sense of confusion similar to that caused by the language in the Breendonk scene, but one that is further complicated by the incorporation of literal images, images that are constantly vying for our physical vision, as the text is prompting us to generate another vision. With the void created by the absence of a central subject, this presentation removes any sense of organizing rationale from the printed material on the page. As a result, readers are placed in a negative position to the material text itself. While they must pay close
attention to the words and images before them, but they must also be metacognitive and alert to the revolutionary action that is taking place on the level of the text as a whole.

When the narrator describes Austerlitz’s first encounter with the dialectical image at Liverpool Station, he provides the reader with one image of the physical space, in addition to a cacophony of images, both printed and conjured by the words of Austerlitz himself (fig. 5). Despite the fact that readers have a picture showing them how the train station actually looks, the images produced by the text force the reader to look beyond that which is given substance and concentrate on apprehending the images they are being asked to conjure. The experience is identical to the challenge Austerlitz undergoes himself, thereby creating a transfer of his encounter with dialectical image, first from storyteller to narrator, and then from the narrator to us. For example, just before Austerlitz encounters a dialectical image in an abandoned waiting room of the train station where he was dropped off by the kindertransport, the tension between positive imprint and negative inversion come to dominate the scene. Austerlitz begins his account by sharing a brief overview of the Liverpool Station’s history. In this description, the text presents images of the rise and fall of numerous structures in the area where the train station now stands, from the wide range of marshes that preceded its foundations, to Bedlam Asylum, and the overflow of a churchyard cemetery (128-30). Interspersed in these descriptions are two full-page images, one of which is a map which offers a bird’s eye view of the area (fig. 6). On the page beside this empirical image is a description of those who were forcibly removed from the area so the station could be built: “before work on the construction of the two northeast terminals began, these poverty-stricken quarters were forcibly cleared and vast quantities of soil…were dug up and removed” making the area a no man’s land (132). This juxtaposition
perfectly demonstrates the type of perception that goes into experiencing the dialectical image. One must ignore the empirical, distant image of the map to truly apprehend the experiences of history’s victims.

Having gone through this experience of vision ourselves, it becomes easy to immerse ourselves into the difficulty of the vision Austerlitz has in the waiting room. As he stands in a room that is transitioning from old ruins to new construction, he is overcome with a vision of “two middle-aged women dressed in the style of the thirties,” a thin man in a suit, his adoptive parents, and “the boy they had come to meet,” himself (137). However, through the room’s parallels to a photographic negative, one can see that sustaining this vision is a struggle. Whereas before we saw the dialectical image appearing as a result of the narrator’s decision to reorient his vision, to look at his surroundings from a negative point of view, here Sebald sets the scene for the dialectical image by endowing the scene with negative aesthetics. By this, I mean he paints the scene through varying movements of light and dark that shift both Austerlitz’s and the reader’s sense of foreground and background. In the room, numerous rays of light emerge, only to be quickly overcome by darkness. Austerlitz then remembers a curious sensation, where upon staring upwards, he “felt as if the room were expanding, going on forever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe” (134-135). The first half of the description recalls the nature of a negative plate that can be replicated many times over while the second half mirrors the visual effects of a the negative itself being moved beneath a light, dimensional in one cast, flat in the next. Ultimately, there appears to be a distinct difference between the encounters of the dialectical image that Austerlitz experiences and those that the narrator experiences. While
Austerlitz is keenly aware of the split-present he is experiencing, he has no ability to arrest it, and so, whereas Sebald uses the narrator’s encounter to illustrate the sense of shock that comes from an encounter with the dialectical image, he uses Austerlitz’s encounters with the same phenomenon to illustrate the fleeting sensitivity of such moments and emphasize the overwhelming sense of loss that is at stake. Just like a negative, which can either be a source of reproduction and distribution or a sensitive site of distortion and loss, the dialectical image is easily over-writeable if not handled properly at the moment of encounter.

In another encounter with the dialectical image, this technique of challenging the reader’s perception through text and image negation also plays a major role in shaping our understanding of Austerlitz’s experiences at the Bibliothèque Nationale. However, in this section, the text not only challenges the images we see, but eventually it comes to overwrite one of these images by evoking the fleeting dimensionality of the photographic negative. Before this overwriting, however, the dialectical image has already come and gone one time. As Austerlitz enters the library, the text serves as a clear negation of the photographs, whose precise and simple linearity offers no visual grounding for the tedious, labyrinth-like journey through the library that Austerlitz describes (277-286 and Fig. 7, 8, and 9). Nevertheless, the images of each library grow progressively larger throughout Austerlitz’s account of the Bibliothèque Nationale, until eventually, the text is completely displaced by a two-page photograph of the library at Theresienstadt, the same image that Austerlitz encounters in a journal at the Bibliothèque Nationale (fig. 9). While the linear grid of the library at Theresienstadt seems disjointed with Austerlitz’s winding, circuitous narrative, it provides two things the image of Bibliothèque Nationale is lacking: a sense of shock and the intense number of individual stories that make up
the past. When Austerlitz sees the image he states that he could not help but feel as though that his “true place of work should have been there” all along and that it was my own fault that I had not taken it up” (283-6). In the English edition of the novel, the phrase “it was my own fault” is the last remark before the image drives out all text. This image shows the effect that institutions like the Bibliothèque Nationale have upon our collective memory. It shows us visually all of the stories that such institutions, in their magnitude of records, push to the margins and render obsolete, even though they do not cover this history themselves. For those who struggle through a negative lens on their own, here the text is presenting a negative vision for us. Despite the many words that fill the Bibliothèque Nationale, for a brief moment, an image of a space relegated to the margins, takes center stage. The movement from text to image, and overwhelmingly back to text demonstrates how written canonical histories are slowly erasing accounts of individual experiences, just as the text does for us in the following pages.

Before Austerlitz becomes aware of dialectical image lying in his current surroundings, the narrator again frames the scene by making a special note of Austerlitz’s acute attention to light and darkness, particularly darkness. Austerlitz remembers that “[a]n inky wall of storm clouds was building up above the city as it sank into shadow, and soon no more could be distinguished of its towers, palaces, and monuments than the spectral white dome of the Sacré-Cœur” (287). Here we have a negative image counteracting the many positive imprints we have seen thus far, an image where the darkness of the clouds frames the redemptive image of the white dome. It is after seeing this view that Austerlitz encounters the dialectical image. He learns from a friend that the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he currently stands, was built on the grounds of an old warehouse where the Nazis used to store and distribute items that they had
stolen from the Jews. We receive this information once we have departed from the prints of larger, structural images. Again, the narrator triggers the dialectical image, not through a large space, but through the image of individual objects that belonged to those who are now gone (288-9). The printed images that surround this moment offer no preparation for having to visualize these individual objects, thereby forcing readers, once again, to activate their capacities for visualization with no resource other than the text.

The text ultimately confirms itself as the site of the dialectical image by canceling out the specific imprint of the library courtyard from several pages before (fig. 8). Before leaving the site, Austerlitz recalls that “[t]he light faded away down on the empty promenades. The tree tops of the pine grove, which from this high vantage point had resembled moss-covered ground, now formed a regular black rectangle” (289-90). This textual description creates an opposing view to the positive image of this scene printed on a previous page. Darkness flattens the once dimensional view, a gradual loss that is emphasized by the movement of the description from the treetops’ three dimensionality, to their appearance as flat ground, and ending with a minimalist, black shape (289-90). Here, the narrator has succeeded in using the visual aesthetics of the negative to demonstrate the fragility of this moment. The history underlying the present moment reveals itself, but only for a brief time. Like a failed negative, it produces the image for a brief time, but instead of reproducing memory for future generations, it becomes overwhelmed by darkness.

In his first visit to Breendonk, our narrator’s recollection of the different accounts of torture that he has read leads him to share one account in particular of an artist named Gastone Novelli, who after being liberated from Dachau, fled to South America in hopes of leaving “so-
called civilized beings” behind. Upon returning home, Novelli found himself returning to the vowel heavy language of the native tribes, and ended up creating pictures of speech, in particular the letter A. On page twenty-seven, the narrator describes Novelli’s fixation in depth, and even provides us with a visual parody of Novelli’s artwork. He recalls that Novelli’s main object, depicted again and again in different forms and compositions was the letter A, which he traced on the colored ground…in the ranks of scarcely legible ciphers crowding closely together and above one another, always the same and yet never repeating themselves, rising and falling in waves like a long drawn-out scream.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

As I stated at the beginning of this section, it is after this block of text that the narrator’s record of his encounter with the dialectical image is abruptly cut off. It is difficult to look at this block of text and not be reminded of the study room at Theresienstadt, with countless individual traumas lying in identical cubes side-by-side, equally compelling visually, but all on the verge of being forgotten. In both of these images, I am reminded of Benjamin’s suggestion that repetition dulls our response to history, but successful reproduction revives it. With the narrator’s attempt to replicate Novelli’s work in the text, we are reminded of the narrator’s biggest strength: his ability to use language in a way that conjures images and provides a sense of immediacy to the original experience. When we think of the meaning that the letter “A” holds for this novel, the
most obvious connection is that of Austerlitz. However, there is another word beginning with A that has just as strong a presence throughout this story: aura.

Novelli’s work creates an intersection of aura and reproduction by using the unique hand-touched medium to produce one image over and over. In a way, our narrator also brings aura and reproduction together, but he has done something that Benjamin’s “Work of Art” presents as an impossibility. By using the visual aesthetics of the negative to frame the way we see the experience of the dialectical image, Sebald’s narrator has reproduced the aura of the momentary encounter with the dialectical image, and he has made this experience accessible to every reader. He has made something universally accessible “always the same,” and yet maintained the immediacy of an event that will “never repeat itself.” Instead of the reader witnessing Austerlitz’s experience from a distance, the narrator uses language to train our eye so we might be able to apprehend this visual experience as well. By assuming the position of “A”usterlitz’s negative, the narrator is able to take the immediacy of the original experience and replicate the “A”ura of such an experience over and over again, ultimately fulfilling the material historicist’s complicated task of rewriting history “in invisible ink” (Benjamin, Arcades 476).
"Artistic observation...can attain almost mystical depth. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Light and Shade form very individual questions which depend upon no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self"—Paul Valéry

Towards the end of “The Storyteller” Benjamin quotes Paul Valéry on the nature of artistic observation to suggest how the world of print has changed the nature of storytelling. He claims that while Valéry’s image invokes the soul, eye, and hand, the role of the hand no longer fulfills the life giving role of gesture that it once did in oral storytelling. Instead, it has assumed a “more modest role” in the world of production, where “the place it filled in storytelling lies waste” (108). However, if we reconsider Valéry’s description of artistic observation through the lens of photography and Austerlitz, I think we will find that there is more hope for the future of storytelling than Benjamin’s lament of the printing press would suggest. Valéry states that in the process of artistic observation is one where “light and shade form very individual questions which depend upon no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self” (qtd. in “Storyteller” 107-8, emphsasis mine). By situating the unnamed narrator as a negative to Austerlitz’s verbal storytelling, Sebald successfully rids this written narrative of any central influence that might separate the viewer from the original experience of the dialectical image. With no overarching order to the materials of the text, the reader is forced to deal with the tension between material and immaterial vision that is so essential to the experience of the dialectical image. While the
narrator asserts control over the narrative at the beginning of the novel, there is no question that
by the end of the novel, as he continues to cede his narrative space to the stories of others, he has
embraced his role as a historical materialist. Instead of relying on dominant narratives of history
to inform his understanding of the present, he waits intently for “those very individual questions”
that lie outside of the realms of “knowledge” and “practice” to reveal themselves, just as a roll of
sensitized film waits fully prepared for the aperture to open. In this way, our narrator captures
and absorbs the experiences of those on the margins like a roll of film, and in reproducing them,
“evokes them in his own inner self.” Just like the retinal veins in a fluorescing angiography, the
historical materialist must take each flash as it comes, and offer his vision as a medium for
whatever constellation emerges. Ultimately, the dialectical image is not about capturing the
material image in front of us, but instead rendering ‘visible’ those images which Austerlitz states
he can feel “somewhere behind his eyes,” those images that “are overwhelmingly immediate”
and are “forcing their way out” of us (139).

Fig 3. Ibid., *Negative Rendering by me*
and in this eternal dusk, which was full of a muffled babble of voices, a quiet scraping and trampling of feet, innumerable people passed in great tides, disembarking from the trains or boarding them, coming together, moving apart, and being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir. Whenever I got out at Liverpool Street Station on my way back to the East End, said Austerlitz, I would stay there at least a couple of hours, sitting on a bench with other passengers who were already tired in

the early morning, or standing somewhere, leaning on a handrail and feeling that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which, as I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time. I knew that on the site where the station stood marshy meadows had once extended to the city walls, meadows which froze over for months on end in the cold winters of the so-called Little Ice Age, and that Londoners used to strap bone runners under their shoes, skating there as the people of Antwerp skated on the Scheldt, sometimes going on until midnight in the flickering light of the bonfires burning here and there on the ice in heavy braziers. Later on, the marshes were progressively drained, elm trees were planted, market gardens, fish ponds, and white sandy paths were laid out to make a place where the citizens could walk in their leisure time, and soon pavilions and country houses were being built all the way out to Forest Park and Arden. Until the seventeenth century, Austerlitz continued, the priory of the order of St. Mary of Bethlehem stood on the site of the present main station concourse and the Great Eastern Hotel. It had been founded by a certain Simon FitzMary in gratitude for his miraculous rescue from the hands of the Saracens when he was on a crusade, so that the pious brothers and sisters could pray henceforward for the salvation of the founder’s soul and the souls of his ancestors, his descendants, and all those related to him. The hospital for the insane and other destitute persons which has gone down in history under the name of Bedlam also belonged to the priory outside Bishopsgate. Whenever I was in the station, said Austerlitz, I kept almost obsessively trying to imagine—through the ever-changing maze of walls—the location in that huge space of the rooms where the asylum inmates

einem immer verwinkelten werdenden Gewirr fauli-ger Gassen und Häuser, zusammengebacken aus Balken, Lehmklumpen und jedem sonst verfügbaren Material für die niedrigsten Bewohner von London. Um 1860 und 1870 herum, vor Beginn der Bauarbeiten an
den beiden nordöstlichen Bahnhöfen, wurden diese Elendsquartiere gewaltsam geräumt und ungeheure Erdmassen, mitsamt den in ihnen Begraben, aufge- wählt und verschoben, damit die Eisenbahntrassen, die auf den von den Ingenieuren angefertigten Plänen sich ausnahmen wie Muskel- und Nervenstränge in ei-nem anatomischen Atlas, herangeführt werden konnten bis an den Rand der City. Bald war das Vorfeld von Bishopsgate bloß noch ein einziger graubrauner Morast, ein Niemandsland, in dem sich keine Seele mehr regte. Der Wellbrookbach, die Wassergräben und Teiche, die Sumpfhühner, Schneepfen und Fischreiber, die Hühner und Maulbeerbäume, der Hirschgarten Paul Pinars, die Kopfschmerzen von Bedlam und die Hungersleiter von Angel Alley, aus der Peter Street, aus dem Sweet Apple Court und dem Swan Yard waren verschwunden, und verschwunden sind jetzt auch die nach Aermillionen zählenden Scharen, die tagein und tagaus, während eines ganzen Jahrhunderts durch die Bahnhöfe von Broadgate und Liverpool Street zogen. Für mich aber, sagte Austerlitz, war es zu jener Zeit, als kehrten die Toten aus ihrer Abwesenheit

then walk along the wind-swept riverbank towards the hideous, outsie building, the monumental dimensions of which were evidently inspired by the late President’s wish to perpetuate his memory whilst, perhaps because it had to serve this purpose, it was so conceived that it is, as I realized on my first visit, said Austerlitz, both in its outer appearance and inner constitution unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings, and runs counter, on principle, one might say, to the requirements of any true reader. If you approach the new Bibliothèque Nationale from the place Valhubert you find yourself at the foot of a flight of steps which, made out of countless grooved hardwood boards and measuring three hundred by a hundred and fifty meters, surrounds the entire complex on the two sides facing the street like the lower story of a ziggurat. Once you have climbed the steps, at least four dozen in number and as closely set as they are steep, a venture not entirely without its dangers even for younger visitors, said Austerlitz, you are standing on an esplanade which positively overwhelms the eye, built of the same grooved wood as the steps, and extending over an area about the size of nine football pitches between the four corner towers of the library which thrust their way twenty-two floors up into the air. You might think, especially on days when the wind drives rain over this totally exposed platform, as it quite often does, said Austerlitz, that by some mistake you had found your way to the deck of the Belemorgan or one of the other ocean-going giants, and you would be not in the least surprised if, to the sound of a wailing foghorn, the horizon of the city of Paris suddenly began rising and falling against the gauge of the towers as

the great steamer pounded onwards through mountainous waves, or if one of the tiny figures, having unwisely ventured on deck, were swept over the rail by a gust of wind and carried far out into the wastes of the Atlantic waters. The four glazed towers themselves, named in a manner reminiscent of a futuristic novel La tour des lois, La tour des temps, La tour des nombres and La tour des lettres, make a positively Babylonian impression on anyone who looks up at their façades and wonders about the still largely empty space behind their closed blinds. When I first stood on the promenade deck of the new Bibliothèque Nationale, said Austerlitz, it took me a little while to find the place where the visitor is carried down on a conveyor belt to what appears to be a basement storey but, in reality, is the ground floor. This downwards journey, when you have just laboriously ascended to the plateau, struck me as an utter absurdity, something that must have been devised—I can think of no other explanation, said Austerlitz—on purpose to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers, especially as it ends in front of a sliding door of makeshift appearance which had a chain across it on the day of my first visit, and where you have to let yourself be searched by semi-uniformed security men. The floor of the large hall which you then enter is laid with rust-red carpet, on which a few low seats are placed far apart, backless upholstered benches and small chairs like folding stools where visitors to the library can perch only in such a way that their knees are almost level with their heads, so that my first thought at the sight of them, said Austerlitz, was that the people whom I saw crouching so close to the ground, some

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