

Panel 31
Word and Image

Reading W. G. Sebald in the Era of Surplus Reality

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W. G. Sebald famously rejected the category of the novel, yet a closer look will reveal that his criticism of the novel is focused primarily on the constrictions imposed by conventions of novelistic writing, not least the expectation of characters and plotlines. This paper argues that Sebald's views on the crisis of the novel in post-war Germany can shed important light on the status of fiction today, that is, at a time when (too much) realism flourishes on various fronts, from reality TV to life writing, and from object-oriented philosophy valorizing the thing itself to autofiction and autotheory, that is, the writing and art practice based on the writer/artist's personal life. While the connection may seem far-fetched, I contend that Sebald's prose fiction offers thought-provoking reflections on questions of fictionality and representation, questions that contour the contemporary obsession with presenting unmediated reality.

This paper will use *The Emigrants* as an example. Ostensibly plotless, *The Emigrants* consists of four individuals' stories derived, according to the author, from true stories he had learned of from various sources. What is particularly noteworthy about *The Emigrants* is the combination of fact and fiction on both textual and visual levels. On the one hand, each story mixes episodes from Sebald's own life and things he knows of the person under discussion. On the other hand, the book includes scores of photographs Sebald either had collected himself or had a photographer reproduce for him from old photos. The reader would be tempted to take these images, all "real" (in the sense of "existing") *materially*, as evidence of the life of the person at the heart of the story. In actuality, however, they disrupt the "truthfulness" assumption since they are not *factually* photos of the person; they are images of random people in Sebald's photo collection. This practice may have violated the indexicality principle of photography, but I argue that Sebald is showing a different kind of truthfulness here: not so much authenticity with regard to the person's real life as truthfulness to the task of fiction. By grafting images of nameless others onto stories of ordinary people, all of whom are diasporic Jews living unassuming lives in the wake of the war, Sebald is writing stories not of specific individuals, but of a large group who might otherwise pass unnoticed. It is this kind of thoughtful use of fictionality that evidences the power of literary writing, marking a stark difference from contemporary writings eager to pursue literal rendering of reality.

In addition to reading Sebald's work against the backdrop of the contemporary turn to immediacy, the paper will also draw on Jacques Rancière's account of modern fiction to bring to light the problematic of novelistic truth.

Biography

Chun-yen Chen received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Cornell University and is presently a Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. Her fields of specialization include critical theory, media theory, contemporary Anglophone literature, and postcolonial studies. Her current research project concerns the turn to immediacy in literary, cultural, and philosophical spheres, that is, a valorization of unmediated experience in contemporary literary practices, cultural narratives, and critical thought.