Panel 31
Word and Image

**Reading Photography: The Construction of Narrative Memory in
W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief***
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In the age of mechanical reproduction the photograph may not be surrounded by an aura in Walter Benjamin's sense, but it still retains some of its halo: the halo of the photograph is not bound to its uniqueness, but to the uniqueness of the context it is placed into. Combining documentary value and fictional potential, it is the ideal device for literary projects seated in-between. By comparing W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief,* this paper explores the photograph as a narrative device which is connected to personal memory as well as history. The depiction of historic trauma and the (re)construction of a "post-traumatic" identity are facilitated by the interplay of text and photograph. In *Austerlitz*, the protagonist uses (found) photographs to reconstruct a forgotten past. For Cole's narrator, the photographs (taken by the author) reconstruct memory as well as identity in a postcolonial travelogue. The impact of Colonialism and Nazism are observed in their aftermath, linking personal to collective trauma. This positions photography as a medium of story as well as history. This paper will argue that rather than confirming a documentary narrative, the inserted photographs question the idea of authenticity. Both authors lean into the photographic inexhaustibility of "speculation and fantasy" (Susan Sontag) to tie a fictional memory to a historic past of universal meaning. These projects boldly ask: how important is historic accuracy, and can fiction, with the help of the photograph, grasp at a deeper truth?

Biography

Sina Pousset is a published writer of fiction and non-fiction. She is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at Nanyang Technological University. Sina has a MA in Art Theory from the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, Germany (2013) and a MSt in Modern Languages from the University of Oxford (2014). Her academic research focuses on the intersection of image and text.