

ANSELM KIEFER AND W. G. SEBALD:  
INTERSECTING APPROACHES  
TO GERMAN HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

The German artist Anselm Kiefer and German author W. G. Sebald are prominent and innovative figures in their individual fields whose works deal with many of the same themes, such as destruction, memory, and mourning. Their historical retellings are mediated by their own experiences of growing up in postwar Germany and hover between reality and fiction. Kiefer and Sebald are not the only German artist and author to address themes related to World War II and the Holocaust; however, their works share similar approaches to those themes that are not universally utilized by their peers. Despite this, there is no in-depth analysis of the similarities between the artist and author. This paper examines multiple works by Kiefer and Sebald in order to analyze shared approaches that are evident in Kiefer's artworks and Sebald's novels. Their works focus heavily on the archive, take advantage of the documentary aspect of photography, and feature the histories and responses of Holocaust survivors. By examining these similarities, insight is gained into a postwar mindset shared by both Kiefer and Sebald.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Following the fall of the Third Reich, German culture found itself in a state of flux. The Nazis had appropriated Germanic history and culture, to demonstrate the culmination of a master race destined to conquer the world. Art was commonly enlisted as a propaganda tool during this time. For example, the Nazi Party employed *Der Bamberger Reiter* (**fig 1**), a statue of a rider dating to around 1230, as the paragon of the German Man. Modern art, which Hitler disdained, was also exploited as a propaganda tool. Hitler much preferred realistic depictions as opposed to abstract and expressionist art, stating in a speech that: “works of art which cannot be understood in themselves but need some pretentious instruction book to justify their existence will never again find their way to the German people.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1937 the Nazi Party organized the Degenerate Art Exhibition. This exhibition displayed the types of art that should not be made by or enjoyed by good German citizens. Included in this exhibition were artists such as Paul Klee, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Max Ernst. Art was selected for this show not only on the basis of its form, but also on its content; for example art that was critical of German soldiers, or on the basis of the artist’s identity. Communist and Jewish artists were included in the exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Burns, “Degenerate art: Why Hitler hated modernism,” *BBC News* Nov. 6, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24819441>

After the fall of the Third Reich, these restrictive artistic standards regarding appropriate styles and themes disappeared. At the same time, Germany was in the midst of *Stunde Null* or the “zero hour.”<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to separate its recent past from its present, the Federal Republic of Germany, to a certain extent, ignored its heritage. Subjects relating to Germany’s cultural past such as Nordic folklore and mythology ceased to be taught at German universities.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that Germany was striving for a “cultural presence devoid of a past.”<sup>4</sup>

German artists were now allowed to paint what they pleased, but they were forced to navigate a new cultural landscape. Artists had to decide for themselves if they wanted to address German’s recent past in their works. German artist Anselm Kiefer and German author W. G. Sebald are two figures who chose to directly confront Germany’s past by addressing themes related to World War II and the Holocaust in their work. While they are not the only Germans to treat those topics, their works share approaches to these themes, which are not universally utilized in postwar German art. Kiefer and Sebald examine the past, but not always in a straightforward manner. This allows audiences the diversion of considering artistic approaches that might mitigate historical truths. This paper will go beyond simply identifying thematic similarities and examine the related strategies used by Kiefer and Sebald. It will probe how their works focus heavily on the archive, enlist the documentary aspect of photography, and feature the histories and

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> David Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2001), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz*, 13.

responses of Holocaust survivors. In this paper, direct comparisons will be made between Sebald's novels, specifically *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, and several of Kiefer's artworks, including *Occupations* (1969) and *The Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* (1975).

Anselm Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen in southern Germany in 1945, months before the end of World War II, and grew up in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Although he was far too young to remember the war or to take part in it himself, he was still forced to face the aftermath. Kiefer, though not Jewish, is known for works that address themes of World War II and the Holocaust, and starting with his first series, *Occupations* (1975), his work has caused controversy and often generated heated discussion. Kiefer believes that "Art cannot live on itself. It has to draw on a broader knowledge,"<sup>5</sup> and his works often include references to literature, mythology, and history related to German or Jewish culture. His dedication to exploring topics linked to his German identity is driven by the lasting impact that World War II has had on his life. When asked in 2016 if the trauma of the war and its aftermath still affects him, Kiefer said: "Every day, that war is with me."<sup>6</sup>

This sentiment is shared by German author W. G. Sebald. Like Kiefer, Sebald was born in southern Germany to a non-Jewish family during the final year of World War II. Despite his lack of direct experiences from that era, his work, like that of Kiefer, focuses strongly on themes about World War II and the Holocaust. While Kiefer and

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (Fort Worth, TX: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in Association with Prestel, 2005), 171.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Autin, "Revitalizing the Past," *Venice: Fort Lauderdale's Magazine*, Fall 2016, 96.

Sebald were too young to remember the events of the War, their earliest memories of their homeland would have been of Germany rebuilding itself from rubble. The effects of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust surrounded them, but in Germany the events themselves were hardly discussed and remained taboo topics well into their adulthoods. Sebald referred to this as a “conspiracy of silence” and it had a significant impact on his work and that of Kiefer.

Kiefer was born in the cellar of a hospital during a bombing. Because of intense bombardment in her hometown,<sup>7</sup> Sebald’s mother traveled while pregnant in order to give birth in a safer region of Germany.<sup>8</sup> As a child, Kiefer spent time playing with the rubble that could still be found in his hometown.<sup>9</sup> Sebald’s town survived the war unscathed; however, he was exposed to destruction throughout Germany. His first visit to Munich at age three provided a memory that remained with him throughout his life: “It seemed to me the natural condition of cities, houses between mountains of rubble.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the pervasiveness of ruins throughout Germany, this too was part of the conspiracy of silence. Sebald’s nonfiction essay, “Air War and Literature,” attempts to

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<sup>7</sup> Janne Sirén, “Forward” in *Anselm Kiefer: Beyond Landscape* (Buffalo: Albright Knox Art Gallery, 2014), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Cuomo, “A Conversation with W. G. Sebald,” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz. (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2007), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Gayford. "I like Vanished Things': Anselm Kiefer on Art, Alchemy and His Childhood." <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/09/meet-everyones-favourite-post-catastrophic-romantic-anselm-kiefer/>

<sup>10</sup> Eleanor Wachtel, “Ghost Hunter,” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2007), 161.



explain why the air raids and ensuing destruction did not play a large role in the literature of postwar Germany.<sup>11</sup> Sebald cites figures to try to convey the vast scale of destruction that air war brought to Germany: a million tons of bombs dropped by the Royal Air Force, 131 towns and cities bombed, 600,000 civilian victims, 3.5 million homes destroyed, and 7.5 million left homeless.<sup>12</sup>

This destruction became the new reality for most of Germany. Despite this, Alfred Döblin, a German author who was forced into exile during the period of Nazi rule, upon his return to Germany in 1945 wrote that people walked “down the street and past the dreadful ruins as if nothing had happened and...[as if] the town had always looked like that.”<sup>13</sup> This appearance of apathy lies at the root of the issue that captivated Sebald: why did the Germans ignore this major part of their new lives? Sebald argues that this was partially because the Germans were so focused on rebuilding a “new” Germany that they tried to change their perception of the ruins. Sebald writes that collections of before and after photos documenting the reconstruction following the war “make it look as if the image of total destruction was not the horrifying end of a collective aberration, but something more like the first stage of a brave new world.”<sup>14</sup> Sebald believed that this reconstruction required so much physical and mental effort to reshape not only the landscape but also the German culture and future that Germans were left with no time to

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<sup>11</sup> Originally given as a lecture in Zurich in 1997, “Air War and Literature” was later published as a part of Sebald’s book *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

<sup>12</sup> W. G. Sebald, “Air War and Literature,” in *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2013), 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

look back. They also may have felt that probing the past might constrict the growth of a new Germany.

Sebald also argued that the German people relied on their, “ability to forget what they do not want to know, to overlook what is before their eyes.”<sup>15</sup> Faced with so much destruction, death, and uncertainty, people simply carried on with their normal lives the best they could. Sebald cites the extreme example of a Frau Schrader who worked at movie theater and after a round of bombings in her town, began to clear rubble and body parts hoping to be able to reopen for the two o’clock matinee.

These are not memories easily forgotten by those who lived them. They are also memories that Sebald and Kiefer would not have had. While they lived through the aftermath, they were too young to have experienced in any meaningful way the horrors of the War itself. Despite this temporal distance, Sebald found himself haunted by these events, writing, “At the end of the war I was just one year old, so I can hardly have any impressions of that period of destruction based on personal experience. Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge.”<sup>16</sup>

In their works, Kiefer and Sebald address this shadow, bringing normally taboo topics out into the open. Sebald especially struggled to live in a society where the past was ignored. Attending university in Germany in the 1960s, he grappled with reconciling student protests and Nazi trials during this time with the silence from his professors

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71.

regarding these topics. He realized that while all of his professors had been members of the Nazi party they never addressed their complicity.

This was one of the reasons behind Sebald's move to England. After obtaining a position in the English department at the University of East Anglia he remained there as a faculty member for the rest of his life. Kiefer too, moved from Germany to France where he still lives today.<sup>17</sup> Although both Kiefer and Sebald live and work outside of Germany, their German identity is central to their work. They deal with many of the same themes such as destruction, memory, and mourning and create historical retellings that are mediated by their own experiences of growing up in postwar Germany.

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<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Sebald whose decision to move was based on cultural reasons, Kiefer moved after he married his second wife who was French.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ARCHIVE

Jacques Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, details the origins of the word archive, which stems from the Greek word *arkheion* meaning house of the *archons* or senior magistrates. These officials held the right to make and interpret the law and they stored official documents in their homes. The archons were responsible for both keeping safe and interpreting the documents.<sup>18</sup> Although it is common to understand an archive solely in terms of the documents it contains or the physical space in which it exists, Derrida makes clear that the act of interpreting an archive is equally essential to its definition. This interpretation begins when documents are cataloged and organized within the archive. Derrida argues further that fundamental to the archive is its potential for the future.

...the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come.<sup>19</sup>

Archives derive relevance when they are entered, consulted, and studied. Like every artist or author, both Kiefer and Sebald create objects that have been archived both in their primary forms as artworks and novels as well as through the

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<sup>18</sup>Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

articles and reviews that have been written about these works. In making these archivable works, Kiefer and Sebald add their voices to those who have recorded their memories and impressions of World War II and the Holocaust in hopes that their words and images will reach future generations. Beyond simply producing archivable works, both Kiefer and Sebald understand the importance of archives and their power to preserve and transmit knowledge. Like Derrida, Kiefer believes the interpretation of a work is vital, saying: “Paintings change in two ways. They change naturally, with time, and they change intellectually because the artist is only half of the process, the other half is the spectator and every spectator creates his own painting.”<sup>20</sup> This concept is evident in Kiefer’s use of the artist book as well as in Sebald’s treatment of archive as memory in *Austerlitz*.

### Kiefer and the Archive

It is not surprising that Kiefer and Sebald, faced with the conspiracy of silence within Germany, emphasized the archive as an approach to illuminate the events of World War II and the Holocaust. Kiefer places great importance on the written book, which he views as a “symbol of learning, of transmitting knowledge.” In speaking of the book, Kiefer emphasizes its permanence. He believes that all information, including oral histories, eventually ends up in book form, where material is preserved, eliminating the alternative variations that might exist if they continue to be passed down only orally. Now, instead of a multitude of stories with variations and perspectives, there is only one

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<sup>20</sup> Gayford, “I like Vanished Things, Anselm Kiefer on Art, Alchemy and His Childhood.”

unchangeable version.<sup>21</sup> It is still possible for different written versions of these histories to exist, for example, the multitude of flood myths that have been orally transmitted and later recorded.<sup>22</sup> Once these varying versions are recorded, their differences are preserved and the individual histories can be told without the variations of an oral history.

Throughout Kiefer's career, he has turned to book making. His books are mostly image based, although, as in many of his other works, lines of texts are featured among the images. While Kiefer creates a permanent, unchangeable work with these books, they, like all works of art, are still open to individual interpretation. Derrida and Kiefer consider this individual interpretation to be an integral part of the work. An example is Kiefer's *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* (1975), (**fig. 2-4**) one of his many works involving a destroyed landscape. The book consists of photographs taken by Kiefer in Buchen and depict landscapes ravaged by bombs. Some of these photographs capture the moment of the explosion, which Kiefer stages.<sup>23</sup> As well as staging destructions of the landscapes, Kiefer burns the photographs themselves. As the reader flips the pages, the photographs become more and more burnt until they are completely charred and illegible. The names of locations within Baden-Württemberg, where Buchen is situated, are written across multiple photographs.

The title, *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, references the burning of tissue to stop bleeding or infection—a type of healing through destruction. Michael

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<sup>21</sup> Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, 174

<sup>22</sup> Many cultures across Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and North and South America have their own versions of a flood myth.

<sup>23</sup> Kiefer himself staged the explosions photographed for the project.

Auping views the book with its blackened pages as a reminder of charred battlefields and Nazi book burnings. He emphasizes that Kiefer, in the title, indicates a specific place, Buchen, which was close to Kiefer's home and studio at the time the book was fashioned. During World War II, Buchen was also the location of an underground military site storing large amounts of chemicals. Auping views Kiefer's deliberate selection of this place as a symbolic way to repair and transform the chemical and war-infected landscape by fighting fire with fire. Kiefer said that he burnt the pages of *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* in order to "heal the imagery, to come to a raw stage, the *nigredo*."

About his other burnt landscape works, Kiefer himself said that in addition to referring to battlefields, they are metaphors of regeneration. This regeneration includes *nigredo*—a term in alchemy describing the stage in which the original substance is burnt to a blackened base and then reshaped into a new form. He views fire as the "glue of the cosmos" connecting heaven and earth.<sup>24</sup> Kiefer is highly interested in alchemy, and alchemical themes appear in many of his works. When considering alchemy, and specifically *nigredo*, within a context of postwar Germany, there is a clear connection between *nigredo* and cities such as Dresden and Hamburg. Both places were reduced to a blackened state through fire, but were completely rebuilt into modern cities.

While *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* can be interpreted, as Auping does, as a symbolic healing of the land, it can also be understood as the artist's engagement with a literal historical record of the shelling that took place in Germany during the war. Kiefer, who likely did not hear accurate eyewitness accounts due to the conspiracy of silence, staged his own explosions mediated by his distance from the

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<sup>24</sup> Auping, *Anselm Kiefer, Heaven and Earth*, 172.

events. By performing these bombings, Kiefer is inserting himself further into the archival process. In *Archive Fever* Derrida emphasizes the importance of every stage of the archival process writing: “the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”<sup>25</sup> In *Occupations* Kiefer is not only producing the archived event, but also deciding how to record and archive it.

Kiefer with *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, plays a role in almost every stage of the archival process. He first enacted the event that was recorded by staging explosions which he made permanent through photographs. He then curated a selection of these photographs to be archived and placed them in a book, a medium that Kiefer specifically views as a pedagogical tool.<sup>26</sup> Kiefer arranged his photographs and texts so as to create an easily accessible, thematically organized archive. The only step in the archival process that Kiefer is unable to control is that of interpretation. While Kiefer is able to tell his audience what the work means to him, he also presents his audience with a curated source they can examine on their own. With traces of the bombings in Germany lasting well into Kiefer’s lifetime, it seems likely that this work would have evoked memories in the population of either the shelling or of its aftermath. Whether the viewers of *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* interpret it as a symbolic healing

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” 17.

<sup>26</sup> “As a young student, we were told to read a book and then write about the book, also making illustrations that would summarize the book from our memory. It was a very typical way of teaching in Germany.” —Anselm Kiefer Michael Auping, *Heaven and Earth*, 174.



of Germany or a literal, historical destruction of the land, the work encourages them to think about Germany during World War II and connections between the past and the present and art and reality.

### Sebald and the Archive

Like Kiefer, Sebald produces works that can physically be stored in an archive, and archives themselves also make extensive appearances in his work. Sebald's final work, *Austerlitz*, revolves around the titular character's search through archives for traces of his parents.<sup>27</sup> In *Austerlitz*, an unnamed narrator who shares a number of biographical similarities with Sebald serves as a conduit for the life story of Jacques Austerlitz. Austerlitz was born in Czechoslovakia, but was sent away on a *Kindertransport* as a young child.<sup>28</sup> He grew up in Wales where he was raised by a Calvinist preacher and his wife, and for much of his life, had believed his name was Dafydd Elias. At age fifteen, when Austerlitz learns of his original name and hidden past, his foster mother has died and his foster father, sick in an asylum, is unable to give Austerlitz any information about his biological parents or his past.

Since his childhood, Austerlitz, who has no memories of his life before arriving in Wales, does not feel at home in his new life. He turns to photography and the study of architecture to fill the void left by the loss of his earliest memories. Austerlitz takes photographs throughout his daily life, using them as proxies for his missing memories.

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<sup>27</sup> *Austerlitz* was published in 2001, one month before Sebald's death in a car accident.

<sup>28</sup> Before the outbreak of World War II, *Kindertransports* helped to save thousands of predominantly Jewish children from countries such as Germany, Austria, and Poland by sending them by train to Great Britain.

Through photography, he finds he is able to document his life in a way that proves where he was and who he was with—eliminating the kind of uncertainty that enshrouded his past. These photographs, unlike Austerlitz's forgotten childhood, can be kept somewhere safe to aid in future recollections.

It is not only Austerlitz's childhood memories that have failed him, but also memories from his adult life that lack the permanence and trustworthiness that he finds in photographs. Austerlitz recounts the story of a day he spent taking pictures while wandering the empty streets of a suburb of Paris. Later, he explored a museum where he was the only visitor. On the train on his way home, Austerlitz suffered a fainting fit and upon recovering found that he had forgotten the events of that day. Having spent the day in relative isolation, and thus unable to rely on the memories of others, Austerlitz had only the photographs he had taken and his ticket from the museum to stand as witnesses to the day's events. Only after developing and looking through the photographs, was he able to remember where he had gone, what he had seen, and even how he had felt. Austerlitz's reliance on archival material to counteract the instability in his life caused by lost memories is a central theme of the novel.

Austerlitz's dependence on documents of the past has parallels in Sebald's own life. While Sebald himself did not suffer from a loss of his personal memories, he spent his childhood surrounded by those who refused to speak about World War II. Throughout his youth, instead of learning about World War II from those involved in the events, his knowledge came from archival sources. In high school, Sebald, along with his classmates, were shown documentary films about the Holocaust, but they were not

accompanied by a lecture or discussion.<sup>29</sup> Instead, he later wrote that after viewing these films he and his friends would go play football unsure of what to do with their new knowledge.<sup>30</sup> This took place in spite of, or perhaps due to, the fact that even if his teachers did not personally witness concentration camps or the survivors, they were alive during that time and would have learned of the Holocaust either while it was happening or shortly after the Allied powers freed the camps.<sup>31</sup> While the teachers may have felt discomfort and guilt due to their proximity to the events of the Holocaust, Sebald and his fellow students lacked that connection. Instead, their discomfort with and feelings of guilt about the Holocaust were spurred by the silence and shame of the preceding generations.

In addition to the silence of his teachers, Sebald also faced the silence of his parents. Sebald's father fought during World War II in the Polish campaign, but never spoke about this among his family. Despite his silence, photos of his time in the German army were preserved in family albums. Nonetheless, Sebald was unable to discuss this topic with his parents due to their roles in the war:

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<sup>29</sup> Immediately following World War II, the Allied powers began the process of Denazification. Part of the process involved modifying the German educational system. History and Civics were banned from schools until 1947 when a new history curriculum that appropriately taught the Holocaust was written. Since 1947, Holocaust education has remained an important part of the German curriculum.

<sup>30</sup> Cuomo, "A Conversation with W. G. Sebald, 105.

<sup>31</sup> The question of the complicity and guilt of German citizens regarding the Holocaust is one that is still debated. Some argue that the average German citizen knew little about the fate of German Jews; however, in the 2001 book, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, author Robert Gellately argues that German citizens were aware of what was taking place. He cites media reports about concentrations camps that were widely published throughout Germany leading up to and during World War II.

Though my father is still alive, at eighty five... it's the ones who have a conscience who die early, it grinds you down. The fascists supporters live forever. Or the passive resisters. That's what they all are now in their own minds. I always try to explain to my parents that there is no difference between passive resistance and passive collaboration—it's the same thing. But they cannot understand that.<sup>32</sup>

This attitude was not exclusive to Sebald's parents, but rather was part of the conspiracy of silence that still exists in Germany.<sup>33</sup> Since close relations who were directly involved in the war were poor verbal sources for Kiefer and Sebald, the artists understandably turned to archival sources such as Holocaust films and family photo albums to fill in the gaps.

Some in Germany were concerned about the effect of the conspiracy of silence on Germans. After World War II German philosopher and psychologist Karl Jaspers gave a series of lectures on the subject of German guilt. He addressed the moral, metaphysical, and collective culpability of the German people and emphasized their responsibilities. Jaspers encouraged Germans to talk with others about World War II, acknowledge their actions during the War, and make amends. He warned Germans of "Evasion, self dismay,

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<sup>32</sup>Carole Angier, "Who is W. G. Sebald," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2007), 66.

<sup>33</sup> Today Holocaust denial is illegal in Germany; however, guilt and also the denial of that guilt persist. German-American author Ursula Duba who along with writing about anti-Semitism and German-Jewish relations has spoken about the Holocaust in international schools in Germany and German schools in South Africa. At both types of schools Duba reported that the German students had significantly different reactions than the non-German students. Non-German students expressed sadness and posed questions regarding the stories of Holocaust survivors that she shared. German students did not ask stories and offered equivalencies like the genocide of Native Americans, remarking that "We didn't do it." Duba relates this inability to express sorrow for the Holocaust directly to the conspiracy of silence. Ursula Duba, "How do Young Germans Deal With the Legacy of the Holocaust and the Third Reich?"

suffered as in a dream.”<sup>34</sup> However, Jaspers’ advice was not followed by a majority of Germans who remained mute about the War. Kiefer’s works, produced decades after Jaspers began giving lectures on this topic, directly combat the conspiracy of silence begun by those who lived through the War.

With *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, Kiefer physically constructs a book that records his interpretation of a history that can be archived and recalled by future viewers. Although it is not an historically accurate album, its mimicry of actual events forces its audience to view this work within the context of Germany’s devastation, a topic that cannot be thoroughly discussed without taking into consideration the German crimes against humanity. Sebald also physically produces books, but goes further in *Austerlitz* by thematically focusing his book on the archive. Even more so than Kiefer, Sebald makes explicit the connection between Austerlitz’s loss of memory and ensuing reliance on the archive to his unstable past. Importantly, Sebald’s fictional character Austerlitz is Jewish, while Sebald and Kiefer are not. The conspiracy of silence regarding their German past is significantly different than Austerlitz’s unknown past. Nonetheless, one can see how a reliable, recorded history would appeal to two young Germans questioning their own and their country’s history.

By creating their archival documents for a public platform, Kiefer and Sebald encourage their audience to look more deeply into the events of the Holocaust and World War II. As well as completing the archival process by interpreting the works of Kiefer and Sebald, German audiences are encouraged to think about their actions during the

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<sup>34</sup> Anselm Kiefer, *Anselm Kiefer: Heroische Sinnbilder = Heroic Symbols* (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2008), 57.

War, as Jaspers prescribed. For those Germans who did not live through the War, these works still provide an opportunity to consider its events and work through the guilt that has been passed down from previous generations.

## CHAPTER 3

### PHOTOGRAPHY

At the time of photography's invention in 1839 it was not considered an artistic medium. Instead, its commonly understood purpose was to make a life-like reproduction, whether that be in the form of portraits or documents of scientific specimens. By the late twentieth century when Kiefer and Sebald began working with photography, it was widely accepted as an art form; however, both Kiefer and Sebald still take advantage of the documentary connotations of photography to create works that function as both art and document. Sebald spoke of finding his father's photo album of the Polish campaign in 1939. His father never spoke to him about the war and this album offered insight into Sebald's father's actions during World War II.<sup>35</sup>

Photography has a particularly charged history in Germany. Photographs of concentration camps after liberation by the Allied troops were published in and outside of Germany. The reality of the camps was so heinous, that it could not be conveyed through words alone. These photographs provided indisputable evidence that the events of the Holocaust had indeed taken place. Photographer Margaret Bourke-White was present at the liberation of Buchenwald and wrote of her experience, "I kept telling myself that I would believe the indescribably horrible sight in the courtyard before me only when I had a chance to look at my own photographs."<sup>36</sup> She went on to write of the hundreds of

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<sup>35</sup> Eric Homberger, "Obituary: WG Sebald," *The Guardian*, (London), Dec. 17, 2001,

<sup>36</sup> Ben Cosgrove, "Behind the Picture: The Liberation of Buchenwald, April 1945," *Time*, October 10, 2013. <http://time.com/3638432/behind-the-picture-the-liberation-of-buchenwald-april-1945/>

German citizens who were forced by General Patton to walk through the Buchenwald and witness what had been happening in their backyard. Similarly German POWs were forced to watch films that documented the atrocities of the Holocaust. Photographs and films were understood as more powerful than words due to the assumption that they accurately and impartially depicted the unimaginable. Despite this assumption, photography and film are not inherently truthful. Photographs can be staged or edited to depict false scenes. Collections of photographs can also be curated in order to convey a specific truth. While photography, like any medium, is mediated, it still has an association with the idea of “truth.”

### Kiefer and Photography

*Occupations* (1975) (**fig. 5**) was published in *Interfunktionen*, a German conceptual art magazine, and was Kiefer’s first work to reach a wide audience. The photographs in *Occupations* were taken in 1969 and were also used in his earlier artist books *Heroic Symbols* (1969) (**fig. 6-7**) and *For Jean Genet* (1969).<sup>37</sup> These two works were not exhibited, and the 1975 publication of *Occupations* was the first time the photographs were presented to the German public. Publishing *Occupations* proved to be controversial. At the root of the controversy surrounding *Occupations* was Kiefer’s performance of the *Sieg Heil* salute. The photographic portraits in *Occupations*, which were taken in Kiefer’s studio and throughout Europe, show the artist wearing street clothes (not a Nazi uniform), giving the *Sieg Heil* salute, an action that was and still is

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<sup>37</sup> This practice of reusing elements and motifs from his older works is a common theme throughout Kiefer’s career. In 2010 Kiefer created a new *Occupations* installation using the original 1969 photographs.



illegal in Germany. The illegal nature of these representations in the photographs is contrasted by their commonplace presentation. The photographs are arranged and displayed as if part of a scrapbook documenting a summer vacation. Contributing to this sense is the offhand caption: “*Anselm Kiefer. Zwischen Sommer und Herbst 1969 habe ich die Schweiz, Frankreich und Italien besetzt. Ein paar Photos.*” (Anselm Kiefer. Between the summer and fall of 1969, I occupied Switzerland, France, and Italy. A few photos).

The German title for the work, *Besetzungen*, is taken from this caption and can be translated three different ways. The most common definition, and the translation given to the English title is a military occupation. *Besetzungen* can also mean a cast of characters and lastly, cathexis. While the connotation of a military occupation is immediately evident within *Occupations*, when the work is viewed with the other two definitions in mind, it is clear that they are also relevant to the work

Publishing *Occupations* was so controversial that it led to the shutdown of *Interfunktionen*. The magazine, which was one of the most important European postwar magazines, was taken over in 1974 by critic and art historian Benjamin Buchloh who believed in, “the political possibilities of the magazine as an alternative distribution form for conceptual art.”<sup>38</sup> After publishing *Occupations*, *Interfunktionen* was boycotted by advertisers and readers who found the photographs too provocative. Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers refused to allow *Interfunktionen* to publish one of his artist books, causing

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Weikop. “‘Occupations’: A Difficult Reception.” in *In Focus: Heroic Symbols 1969 by Anselm Kiefer*, ed. Christian Weikop (Tate Research Publication, 2016). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/difficult-reception-occupations>

the magazine to lose its funding for the next issue. There was further loss of revenue from dropped ads, alongside an outpouring of disapproval from curators, artists, and even the magazine's founding editor.<sup>39</sup>

Kiefer was not the only German artist to incorporate the *Sieg Heil* into his work. He was likely influenced by Joseph Beuys' 1964 performance *Kukei/Akopeenein/browncross/Fat corners/Model fat corners*, which took place at the Fluxus Festival of New Art at the Technical College Aachen. Like Kiefer's later photographs, Beuys work proved controversial. A photograph taken by student Heinrich Riebesehl captures a point in the performance after Beuys had been punched in the face by a student (**fig. 8**). Beuys continued the piece, giving the *Sieg Heil* while blood dripped down his face. Both Beuys's and Kiefer's works are meant to evoke thoughts and emotions from their viewers that may have been repressed. In speaking of the assault, Beuys stated: "I can imagine that our Happenings awaken emotional centres of which the man didn't have any control, any insight until now."<sup>40</sup> Beuys's performance, unlike Kiefer's, was intended to be unmediated. He performed directly for his audience, not for the camera. Although Kiefer was not physically attacked when he staged his *Sieg Heil*, the strong backlash against *Interfunktionen* demonstrates that his work, like that of Beuys's eleven years earlier, evoked strong reactions in his audience.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Abdullah, "Kiefer and Beuys: Cathexis and Catharsis," in *In Focus: Heroic Symbols 1969 by Anselm Kiefer*, ed. Christian Weikop (Tate Research Publication, 2016). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/kiefer-and-beuys>

With *Occupations*, Kiefer directly addressed the silence of previous generations regarding their actions during World War II. He confronted those who lived during the War with an image that they immediately recognized and identified. *Occupations* shocked the German public, who viewed it as a purely sensational artwork and labeled it Nazi Kitsch.<sup>41</sup> Part of the reason these works were so disliked by the German public was Kiefer's attitude of ambivalence towards the Nazi Party, made evident throughout the series in both his mien and the scrapbook format of the work with its fondly nostalgic connotations. The audience is unable to determine exactly how he felt about the Third Reich, in his mimicking of a Nazi supporter. Is his stance one of admiration or mockery or something in between?

For Kiefer, this ambivalence is the central theme of his work.<sup>42</sup> He approached this series with ambiguity in order to "reenact what they did just a bit in order to understand the madness."<sup>43</sup> This quote connects *Occupations* to the second and third meaning of *Besetzungen*, a cast of characters and cathexis. Kiefer, although he took photographs of himself, put on a persona. This required an investment of emotional energy to put himself in a mental state where he would be able to approach the photographs without holding onto his negative emotions toward the Third Reich. Kiefer succeeded at this effort, and throughout the process of taking the photographs, the artist admitted that he "very much felt the fascination that made it possible for the majority of

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1987), 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Germans to temporarily believe in it.”<sup>44</sup> His personal ambivalence in the portraits was necessary in order to try to understand the German people’s support of Hitler. If Kiefer had taken these portraits while holding onto his current feelings of guilt and animosity, it would have hindered his ability to make a connection with the previous generations. In 1975 when this work was published, many Germans who lived through the Third Reich were still alive. This work would have reminded them of their own performances of the *Sieg Heil*. Kiefer’s ambivalence allows that audience to project the personal motivations behind their salutes onto Kiefer himself.

In these photographs, Kiefer does not appear hesitant. He is committed to his role—standing tall and looking straight ahead with his arm extended out in front of him. These photographs, however, do not look like those taken during the Third Reich. The photographs from the Nazi era most often record crowds of Germans at rallies and men in uniforms. At times the context is even somewhat theatrical, showing orderly lines of soldiers standing at attention and situating the figures amidst streaming flags, accompanied by other regalia. By contrast, in Kiefer’s photographs he is always alone. Often, he is dwarfed by his surroundings rather than appearing powerful or dominant within them. In some photographs, such as the ones taken in Montpellier (**fig. 5-6**) Kiefer’s salute is mirrored by other elements in the photo. Even in the shots where the salute is mirrored by a statue or rows of trees, Kiefer is a small figure overshadowed by his surroundings. Although Kiefer’s photographs lack the crowds and military theatrics,

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<sup>44</sup> Brad Finger and Christiane Weidemann, *50 Contemporary Artists You Should Know* (Munich: Frestel, 2011), 23.

with its teasing evocation of Germany's shameful near-past, his *Sieg Heil* still managed to have a provocative impact on his audience.

Part of the response for this may relate to the medium of the work. Whether Kiefer's performance is mocking or sincere, the photographs show that he went to public places and engaged in an outlawed activity. Kiefer enacted, recorded and published images of the forbidden Nazi salute thirty years after the end of World War II. Despite this length of time, the horrific events associated with Nazism, although rarely spoken about, were still fresh in the culture. Kiefer made paintings of people, often himself, giving the *Sieg Heil* (**fig. 9**), but they lack the impact of his photographs. Mediation via painting mitigates the power of breaking a fraught taboo. Paintings are more likely to be viewed as an imagined construct. While veracity in photography is always questionable, Kiefer invokes its association as a documentation of an actual event. His photographs make it explicit that Kiefer himself performed this action, opening himself up to the history and mania of the Third Reich.

### Sebald and Photography

Photography interested Sebald and he used it deliberately in his works. It's uncertain when Sebald's fascination with photography began, but his family albums certainly left a strong impression on his childhood memories. As well as being struck by his father's album documenting the Polish campaign, Sebald recalled that going through family albums that were not related to World War II to be a problematic process. Albums that he found completely harmless as a child were viewed much differently after he began

to learn about the history of the Third Reich. He was unable to separate his relatives' societal roles during World War II from their prewar photographs in the albums.<sup>45</sup>

Flipping through the pages of *Austerlitz*, the photographs may not seem to have been chosen with much care. They are all black and white and most are of poor quality; however, this was a deliberate choice for Sebald who believed that when compared to texts, photographs are “documents of findings, something secondary.”<sup>46</sup> While Kiefer relies on photography to both tell his story and confirm its veracity, Sebald's narratives can be told without through text alone. The photographs do not perfectly illustrate or accompany the text. The imprecise connection between text and image in *Austerlitz* lends credibility to the assertion that the photographs included in the book were ones taken by the fictional Austerlitz. Austerlitz did not take the shots, which were stored in a shoebox and later handed over to the narrator, with the intent to illustrate his life story to a third party. While at times the photographs do perfectly illustrate the text, Austerlitz was simply attempting to create an external archive of memories that he could easily reference. Although Sebald calls photographs a secondary material and wants them to lack clarity, he also calls them true documents stating, “People let themselves be convinced by a photograph.”<sup>47</sup> This contradiction between the authority of photographs

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<sup>45</sup> Christian Scholz, “‘But the Written Word is Not a True Document’: A Conversation with W. G. Sebald on Literature and Photography,” in *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W. G. Sebald*, ed. Luise Patt (Los Angeles: The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 106.

<sup>46</sup> Scholz, “But the Written Word is Not a True Document,” 106.

<sup>47</sup> Carol Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 166.

and their lack of clarity and potential for counterfeit can lead to confusion and irritation in the reader who is forced to decide for himself or herself what is true and what is not.

The use of this contradiction to destabilize his reader was likely something developed by Sebald's reading of photographic theory. As Deane Blackler has determined from studying the author's personal library, Sebald was familiar with photographic theory and read authors such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes.<sup>48</sup> From Sebald's annotations of various scholarly works, it is clear that Sebald was considering how theoretical concepts would enhance his works and how he could utilize photography to impact his reader. In Sebald's annotated copy of Clive Scott's *The Spoken Image* several underlined sections relate to both the reading experience created by Sebald and some of the themes apparent in *Austerlitz*. One of these marked sections speaks to the common method of storing photographs in shoeboxes, "surrendering to chance encounters with prints which [the viewer] must shape into narratives—not narratives of external time, but narratives of inner duration, memory, resurrected illusion; in short, narratives of the narrator (*temps du récit*)."<sup>49</sup>

With *Austerlitz*, Sebald has created a type of shoebox for his reader. While the photographs were deliberately chosen by Sebald, they are dispersed at seemingly random intervals throughout the work, like ones stored in a shoebox. They are reproduced in different formats and sometimes fill the page completely. *Austerlitz*, which has sentences that may span pages, is intended to draw the reader into the story. At times it can seem as

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<sup>48</sup> Deane Blackler, *Reading W. G. Sebald* (Rochester: Camden House, 2008), 139.

<sup>49</sup> Clive Scott, "Sebald's Photographic Annotations," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (Oxford: Legenda, 2011), 228.

if Austerlitz is recounting his life's tale directly to the reader. As each chance encounter with a photograph disrupts the rhythm of the text and forces the reader to pause, the photographs both illustrate the story Sebald is writing and entice the reader into a possibility of a new narrative.

Another quote, reproduced from John Berger's *A Seventh*, reads, "All photographs are a form of transport and an expression of absence."<sup>50</sup> All of the photographs fit within the narrative of Austerlitz's life, but they call for the reader to imagine the circumstances in which they were taken. They are, for both the reader and Austerlitz, a form of transport. The reader is transported into Austerlitz's life and Austerlitz is transported into a new reality that he is creating and curating through photography. For both the reader and Austerlitz there is a feeling of absence. In deciphering how the photograph fits into the text, the reader realizes that he or she was not there when the photograph was taken and that the reader is unable to fully enter Austerlitz's life. For Austerlitz, the photographs serve as a reminder of the world and memories he is constructing to counteract his forgotten past.

An example of this can be seen in a grouping of four photographs included in *Austerlitz* (**fig. 9**). The photographs are from Austerlitz's earliest experiments with photography when he focused on: "the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things."<sup>51</sup> During this phase, he took hundreds of photographs, none of which featured human subjects. The photographs reproduced in *Austerlitz* are taken so close to their subject, that all context is removed. The reader sees a group of blurry leaves, but not the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 230

<sup>51</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Munich: C. Hanser, 2001), 93.



tree or branch on which they grow; tiles on a roof, but not the shape of the roof or the structure it covers. Since they are presented decontextualized, the reader is able to imagine both their greater contexts as well as Sebald's motivations for taking them.

Samuel Pane describes these photographs as Austerlitz's "attempts to impose the perception of order on nature."<sup>52</sup> He reduces larger, more complex subjects to simplified, highly contrasted photos focused on form. These shots are easily contained and unassuming, providing a direct contrast with the overwhelming emotions caused by Sebald's uncertain past. Pane views the taking of hundreds of these photographs as Austerlitz's attempt to: "reinforce the blockage in his memory even as he compulsively returns to the site of that incomplete memory."<sup>53</sup> By creating replacement memories Austerlitz is able to hold at bay his fears regarding his past. While this second assertion by Pane could be made on the basis of the text alone, the inclusion of these images allows a closer look into Austerlitz's subconscious mind than is enabled by the text alone.

The figure of Austerlitz is absent from all but three of the photographs in the book. With these three pieces Sebald provides his reader with ostensible proof of a real Austerlitz; however, none of the photographs allow the viewer to know what Austerlitz looks like. The first one is of him as a child (**fig. 10**) and offers little hint as to his appearance later in life. The second is a team photo and Austerlitz is not singled out. The final is of a reflection and is not clear enough to provide the reader with a definitive

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<sup>52</sup> Samuel Pane, "Trauma Obscura: Photographic Media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," *Mosaic: a journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* (38:1) March 2005: 37-54. [https://literature.proquest.com/searchFullrec.do?id=R03518899&area=abell&forward=critref\\_fr&queryId=3062501293338&trailId=163EB27D688](https://literature.proquest.com/searchFullrec.do?id=R03518899&area=abell&forward=critref_fr&queryId=3062501293338&trailId=163EB27D688)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

image. It seems strange that the character constantly takes photographs, but has so few of himself. If he is attempting to substitute photographs for memories, one would think that he would want memories in which he is present as the subject, not just the photographer. This may speak to Austerlitz's uncertain self-identity. In front of a camera he may be unsure of how to present himself or feel uncomfortable with what the camera might reveal. While Sebald's photographic evidence may not provide his readers with a clear likeness of Austerlitz, the images do allow readers to draw conclusions regarding Austerlitz's personality. They illustrate the story while encouraging the reader to digress from and think more deeply about Sebald's prose.

In *Occupations* and *Austerlitz*, photography is intended to prove that specific events took place. *Occupations*, like photographs of liberated concentration camps, confronts its audience with documentation of an illegal activity. While the photographs operate as art, they also serve as a record of Kiefer's experimentation and fascination with fascism, to borrow from Sontag's characterization. Kiefer's decontextualized *Sieg Heil* is the focal point of the work and this forced his audience to consider what the salute meant thirty years after World War II. Sebald's photographs are less confrontational. Unlike *Occupations*, written words compose the bulk of *Austerlitz*. While the photographs contribute to the implied veracity of the novel and reveal parts of Austerlitz's life that were left out of Sebald's prose, the reader ultimately decides how deeply to delve into the photographs and what meaning they might have. The same option is not given to Kiefer's audience that is immediately and forcibly struck by Kiefer's controversial photographs.

Both Kiefer and Sebald use photography in a way that mimics Sebald's early experiences with his family's photo albums. Just as Sebald flipped through his father's album only to find photographs of soldiers and the destruction they caused, the photographs of *Occupations* and *Austerlitz* are at odds with their packaging. In *Occupations* a scrapbook that should hold lighthearted vacation memories is instead filled with tributes to the Third Reich and reminders that fascism still exists. At first glance, the photographs of *Austerlitz* appear to be a part of Austerlitz's hobby. Photography is hardly an uncommon hobby, and many people use photography to document their lives. However, after learning more about Austerlitz, it is apparent that these photos are not intended to simply document important moments in Austerlitz's life. Instead they are a sign of the disruption in Austerlitz's life caused by World War II.

*Occupations* and *Austerlitz* demonstrate that traces of fascism and its effects can be found in seemingly innocuous forms. These signs of fascism are both blatant, as seen in the work of Kiefer, and subtle as seen in photographs of *Austerlitz*. Through photography, Kiefer and Sebald are able to manipulate situations and narratives that bring to light issues that may be difficult to discuss. Photography with its implication of veracity enables this discussion, making it relevant in a way that other media do not.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE HOLOCAUST

The subject of Holocaust remembrance and education is a complex field. Educators balance facts and statistics with firsthand accounts, giving names and faces to some of the estimated five to six millions Jews who were killed by the Nazis regime between 1933 and 1945. In the years immediately following the Holocaust, there was little discussion of this tragedy both in and out of Germany. Survivors often hid their past and it was not uncommon for them to have the tattooed numbers on their arms removed.<sup>54</sup> This began to change with the 1961 televised trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi lieutenant colonel in charge of transporting Jews to concentration and death camps. Eichmann, instead of being tried for general “crimes against humanity” that took place during the War, was charged with the murder of 6 million Jews. In his prosecution, Gideon Hausner, the Israeli Attorney General used the verbal testimony of tens of thousands of survivors as supporting evidence. This encouraged survivors to share their stories while linking Holocaust remembrance to the testimony of survivors and pursuit of justice.<sup>55</sup> To this day, the testimony of Holocaust survivors is seen as the ultimate form of education about this event. Organizations such as the USC Shoah Foundation which preserves over 55,000 video testimonies from survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust, have made it

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<sup>54</sup> Tim Cole, “The Holocaust Industry?”: Reflections on a History of the Critique of Holocaust Representations,” in *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust*, ed. Konrad Kwiet and Jürgen Matthäus (Westport, Praeger, 2004), 39.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

their mission to promote a testimony-based education.<sup>56</sup> This is an approach shared by Kiefer and Sebald who both reference survivors in their works that are focused on the Holocaust.

### Kiefer and the Holocaust

Kiefer believes that Jewish history is inseparable from German history arguing,

It is all one thing. I cannot imagine German culture without Judaism. Everything that makes German philosophy and poetry interesting to the world is a combination of Germany and Judaism. One thing is that Germans committed the immense crime of killing Jews. The other is that they amputated themselves. They took half of German culture and killed it.<sup>57</sup>

Influenced by this belief, Kiefer makes works that are inspired by the Kabbalah and the Hebrew Bible. Kiefer also references more recent Jewish history including his series of works—“Margarete” and “Shulamite”—based on Paul Celan’s 1948 poem, “Death Fugue.” Celan, a Romanian Jew, was sent to a work camp during World War II.

Although he survived, his parents, who were sent to internment camps, were not as lucky.

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<sup>56</sup> Documentary films have also played a large role in Holocaust education. In 1985 the French documentary film *Shoah* was released. The nine-and-a-half-hour film consisted of interviews with both victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust as well as footage of death camps. The film was shown throughout Europe and The United States and is still seen as one of the foremost Holocaust documentaries.

<sup>57</sup> Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, 174.

Celan, who unsuccessfully attempted to convince his parents into going into hiding with him, felt deeply guilty for both his separation from his parents and their deaths.<sup>58</sup>

Celan's poem is an artistic retelling of what are likely not only his experiences and emotions, but also those of other Jewish victims of the Holocaust. While Celan was banished to a work camp during World War II, the poem references time spent in a death camp. "Death Fugue" has become a part of German school curricula and was read in the Bundestag to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1988.<sup>59</sup>

Black milk of dawn we drink it at dusk  
we drink it at noon and at daybreak we drink it at night  
we drink it and drink it  
we are digging a grave in the air there's room for us all  
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when it darkens to Germany your golden hair margarete  
he writes it and steps outside and the stars all aglisten he whistles for his hounds  
he whistles for his Jews he has them dig a grave in the earth  
he commands us to play for the dance

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night  
we drink you at daybreak and noon we drink you at dusk  
we drink and we drink  
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when it darkens to Germany your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamite we are digging a grave in the air there's room for us all

He shouts cut deeper in the earth to some to some the rest of you sing and play  
he reaches for the iron in his belt he heaves it his eyes are blue  
make your spades cut deeper the rest of you play for the dance

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<sup>58</sup> Rafael López-Pedraza, *Anselm Kiefer: The Psychology of "After the Catastrophe"* (New York: George Braziller, 1996), 64

<sup>59</sup> Nan Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer: Works on paper in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc. 1999), 88.

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night  
we drink you at noon and at daybreak we drink you at dusk  
we drink and we drink  
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamite he plays with the serpents

He shouts play death more sweetly death is a master from Germany  
he shouts play the violins darker you'll rise as smoke in the air  
then you'll have a grave in the clouds there's room for you all

Black milk of dawn we drink you at night  
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany  
we drink you at dusk and at daybreak we drink and we drink you  
death is a master from Germany his eye is blue  
he shoots you with bullets of lead his aim is true  
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
he sets his hounds on us he gives us a grave in the air  
he plays with the serpents and dreams death is a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamite<sup>60</sup>

In this poem, Margarete, the first of the repeated names, alludes to Gretchen, a character from Goethe's 19th century novel *Faust*. In *Faust*, Gretchen is held as an example of ideal German womanhood. Shulamite refers to the beloved Shulamite from the *Song of Solomon*, an important Jewish text. By using figures from a classic German and classic Jewish text, Celan creates two figures who, by their names, are recognizably German and Jewish. Through his repetition of the lines, "your golden hair Margarete, your ashen hair Shulamith," Celan symbolizes the ethnic differences at the root of the Holocaust. While

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Celan, "Death Fugue," trans. Joachim Neugroschel, *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 4, 1981.

Margarete's hair is described as the "ideal," Aryan blonde, Shulamite's is not described simply as the stereotypical dark-haired Jewish woman, but as ashen, an obvious reference to the cremation of Jews in death camps.

Each of the works in Kiefer's Margarete and Shulamite series is titled after and focused on one of these two characters. Without the titles of the works explicitly mentioning Margarete or Shulamite painted across the canvases, Kiefer's reference to Celan's poem would not be immediately apparent. Providing these titles then allows Kiefer's audience to view his works within the direct context of the poem. While not every viewer would understand the reference, it would be familiar to many Germans.

Kiefer's Margarete paintings, such as *Your Golden Hair, Margarete* (1981) (**fig. 14**) and *Margarete* (1981) (**fig. 15**) typically depict a field of golden wheat. In *Your Golden Hair, Margarete*, the field is blurred and stretched as if seen from a moving train. Streaks of black paint cover the field and trace the path of the train through the painting. This black paint also appears in *Margarete* where Kiefer uses it to depict a dark, scorched field. Kiefer incorporates actual straw, adding texture and a materiality linked to the depicted fields and to Margarete's straw blonde hair. This straw is more clearly seen in *Margarete* where Kiefer uses it to form the stalks of grain rising out of the blackened field that has been burnt or perhaps covered with ashes from a nearby crematorium.

Kiefer typically creates nonfigural representations of Shulamite, but in *Your Ashen Hair, Shulamith* (1981) (**fig. 16**) he paints her as naked with long dark hair that covers her face and reaches her to feet. In Jewish culture, mourning a close relative involves not cutting one's hair during the seven-day shivah, and the extraordinary length



of Shulamite's hair may well reflect her endless mourning.<sup>61</sup> The black paint of Shulamite's hair is mirrored in the dark earth of Kiefer's Margarete paintings. The black provides a contrast to the brightly colored straw and ensures that Shulamite and Margarete are considered together. It is not only in the Margarete paintings that traces of Shulamite appear. In *Shulamith* (1983), Kiefer adds the straw of his Margarete paintings to the piece. Like German and Jewish history and Celan's repeated pairing of Margarete and Shulamite, Kiefer's paintings never completely isolate one of the titular figures. Traces of the other occur in works about each.

Without the mention of Margarete or Shulamite, Kiefer's works, with their streaked black paint and destroyed fields, would still convey a sense of grief and loss. Kiefer did feel grief and loss about the Holocaust; however, as someone who is not Jewish and did not live through the event, he is unable to feel the same anguish and bereavement that Celan experienced. Kiefer focused his series on Margarete and Shulamite, two figures that are an important part of Celan's poem. He chose to illustrate these narratives more abstractly instead of creating depictions of Jewish prisoners being forced to dig their own graves or play instruments. Kiefer seems to understand his limitations, referencing Celan's poem in a way that did not depict any situations or emotions that he could not claim.

Through his paintings, Kiefer provides his own interpretation of an event that has already been artistically mediated by Celan. Celan's poem and Kiefer's response to it do not attempt to convey a comprehensive documentation of the Holocaust, but instead work

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<sup>61</sup> Andrea Lauterwein, *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 100.

to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. His landscapes in particular have resonated with viewers, as critic Paul Taylor calls them unreal and nightmarish, “paintings of apocalypse and redemption.”<sup>62</sup> Even without the mention of Margarete or Shulamite, Kiefer’s works with their streaked black paint and destroyed fields would still convey a sense of sorrow and loss. By referencing a poem well known to Germans that powerfully conveys the emotions of a Holocaust survivor, Kiefer bridges the gap between these distinct experiences. His paintings are clearly a mediated experience, as the audience responds to the visual power of the painting and the associated well-known poetic source. By expressing his grief about the Holocaust, Kiefer provides his German audience with an opportunity to address their guilt and pain. Both Kiefer and this audience have to decide for themselves how to deal with these lingering feelings and how to make amends.

#### Sebald and the Holocaust

Among Sebald’s works, *Austerlitz* is considered by critics to be his only work that can be considered a true novel.<sup>63</sup> While based on an experience that many shared, the emigration of thousands of predominantly Jewish children to Great Britain via *Kindertransport*, the character of Austerlitz was not based on one specific person. This gave Sebald the freedom to construct Austerlitz’s forgotten past and uncertain present.

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<sup>62</sup> Paul Taylor, “Painter of the Apocalypse,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 1988, 51.

<sup>63</sup> J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald—Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 149.

Although Austerlitz is a fictitious character, Sebald carefully researched his novel ensuring that Austerlitz's past and his search for his parents was close to reality.

This dedication to truth operates throughout Sebald's oeuvre. Sebald's 1992 novel, *The Emigrants*, deals with many of the same themes as *Austerlitz*, such as displacement and loss, but instead of being inspired by a shared experience each character is based on a single individual. *The Emigrants* tells the discrete stories of several Jews who lived during World War II. It is not always immediately apparent in the narratives that each character is Jewish, but by the end it is clear that these figures are emigrants due to their religious and ethnic identities. As in *Austerlitz* these stories are told by a narrator who is biographically similar to Sebald. Each of the four characters is based on someone that Sebald had personally met at some point in his life.

One of these characters is Paul Bereyter, the narrator's favorite childhood teacher. A quarter Jewish, he was unable to teach during the Third Reich, even though "he was German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land in the foothills of the Alps, and even to that miserable place S as well."<sup>64</sup> As the narrator tells us, Bereyter thus left for France to teach, but finding himself out of place there, returned to Germany where he joined the Wehrmacht. Considered too Jewish to teach, he was not too Jewish to fight for Germany in the War. After the war ended, Bereyter was able to return to the same town where he had taught before the War and began teaching again. The narrator knew nothing of Bereyter's past while he was his student. It was only after reading Bereyter's obituary

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<sup>64</sup> W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1996), 57.

after his suicide that the narrator learned of Bereyter's teaching ban in the years leading up to World War II.

Ultimately Bereyter is also based on one of Sebald's beloved childhood teachers. Like the narrator, Sebald returned to his childhood home with questions about his teacher's past and life after the War. Having a limited view as his student, Sebald spoke to others in his town in order to gain a fuller picture of his teacher's life. From this, he created the character Paul Bereyter—a man who felt fully German, but who had to come to terms with the Jewish identity that was forced upon him. After the War, Bereyter had to reconcile his German identity and active role in World War II with his Jewish-ness and role as a victim. In telling Bereyter's history, the narrator is also telling the story of his journey to try to understand Bereyter's conflicting identities and its consequences.

Sebald is not writing with the intent to create a history, but nevertheless he does not stray far from fact. This has not pleased some readers who view this approach as not always successful. Max Aurach, one of the four characters in *The Emigrants*, is based on the painter Frank Auerbach.<sup>65</sup> Auerbach was unhappy with Sebald's representation believing, "the story totally misunderstood the relation of the artist's personality and biography to the creation of art, and it was totally lacking in humour."<sup>66</sup> Sebald's mother has also read his works and was not happy to discover that she could recognize members of the town in which she still lives.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In the English translation the character's name was changed to Max Ferber.

<sup>66</sup> Markus Hesselmann, "Berlin Yet to Salute Native Artist," *Der Tagesspiegel*, Feb. 2, 2016. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/weltspiegel/in-english/frank-auerbach-berlin-yet-to-salute-native-artist/12922648.html>

<sup>67</sup> Angier, "Who is W. G. Sebald," 68.

Sebald's includes factual details at every level of his work. In *The Emigrants*, Sebald briefly mentions a family named the Wallersteins. Despite the small role the Wallersteins played within his work, a reader, Lore Ostwald, wrote to Sebald, "There is no doubt in my mind that the Mrs. Wallerstein you mention is my late aunt Dorothy Wallerstein (born 1888). There is more that I could tell you about the Wallersteins—but perhaps you already know?" They were indeed the same Wallersteins and this correspondence led to a friendship that provided Sebald with information he used while writing *Austerlitz*. Before meeting Lore Ostwald and her husband, Martin, whose mother was sent to Theresienstadt, Sebald had planned that Austerlitz's mother would be sent to Theresienstadt.<sup>68</sup>

Kiefer and Sebald, as non-Jews, struggled to come to come to terms with the Holocaust. Their works draw heavily on the testimonies of survivors, while they explore the impact that the Holocaust has had on their own lives. Kiefer and Sebald could have chosen to create works that more broadly reference the Holocaust instead of focusing on individual remembrances and responses; however, as non-Jewish Germans their reactions would not have resonated like those of Holocaust survivors. Sebald's works, with their Sebald-esque narrators, show perhaps more explicitly his personal probe and struggle with the subject. Kiefer, by referencing a well known poem instead of lesser known survivor testimonies, makes his works more immediately accessible. Despite their

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<sup>68</sup> Coincidentally, in the process of researching Theresienstadt, Sebald specifically researched a woman named Henriette Gottschalk. While Martin's mother was in Theresienstadt, she was able to smuggle out a letter to her son who later shared it with Sebald. In this letter, she mentions becoming close friends with Henriette Gottschalk. André Aciman, "W. G. Sebald and the Emigrants: How a friendship with two elderly Jewish refugees inspired the German novelist," *The New Yorker*, Aug. 25. 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/w-g-sebald-and-the-emigrants>

different approaches to the topic, both Kiefer and Sebald encourage their audiences to consider and mourn the Holocaust, helping to ensure that the voices of survivors are not forgotten.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Today Kiefer remains a prolific artist, but sadly Sebald died in a car crash in 2001, the same year that *Austerlitz* was published. We are unable to definitively state that Sebald, like Kiefer, would have continued to explore themes related to his German identity and the Third Reich in future works, but it seems likely. While left without the possibility of new works from Sebald, his writings continue to engage and provoke readers and literary critics alike. The same holds true for Kiefer. Although he is currently producing and exhibiting new pieces, *Occupations*, one of his earliest artworks, continues to be examined and analyzed through new frameworks.

This paper was only able to focus on a select number of Kiefer's and Sebald's works. The art discussed in the paper, like all of Kiefer's and Sebald's pieces, are complex and nuanced. This paper has only analyzed specific aspects of each work and much more could be written. Through the analysis and comparison of the art of Kiefer and Sebald, it is apparent that artist and author share related approaches to addressing Germany's past. Kiefer and Sebald exhibit a similar postwar mindset shaped by their childhoods spent in a rapidly redeveloping Germany.

As for future study, a more extensive analysis of their works should yield more examples of their complementariness. As well, additional research could include other German artists with similar viewpoints. A comparison with artists who address themes related to World War II, perhaps less explicitly, could still help to determine if the postwar mindset of Kiefer and Sebald is a result of their environment, or if it is a result of

a unique sensibility. German artists who chose to accept the conspiracy of silence may address these themes completely differently if they chose to address them at all.

Kiefer and Sebald both promoted the discussion of taboo and uncomfortable topics. As a result, Kiefer and Sebald became more well-known after being exposed to an international audience—Kiefer at the Venice Biennale in 1980 and Sebald with the English translation of *The Emigrants* in 1996. Kiefer, whose work provoked more controversy in Germany than Sebald's, remains far more popular outside of Germany. At a 2015 retrospective exhibited in France, Kiefer remarked that Germany was still not ready to host a retrospective saying simply that: "They don't like me."<sup>69</sup> The receptions of Kiefer and Sebald, and especially the differing reactions of German and international audiences, is another subject in need of deeper research.

Kiefer and Sebald addressed themes that remain relevant to this day. Fascism did not end with the fall of the Third Reich and Holocaust denial persists. There are new generations of children growing up in the rubble of bombed cities. A thorough study of the effects of World War II and the Holocaust on the artistic practices of those in Kiefer's and Sebald's generation has the potential to provide points of reference that can be used today and across cultures, offering us a greater understanding of how trauma is processed and embodied in art.

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<sup>69</sup> Doreen Carvajal, "Anselm Kiefer and His Hallmarks Have a Moment," *The New York Times* (30 December, 2015).



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APPENDIX A

FIGURES



Figure 1: *Der Bamberger Reiter*, ca. 1230.



Figure 2: Anselm Kiefer, *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, 1975. Photograph, oil, charcoal, and burlap



Figure 3: Anselm Kiefer, *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, 1975.  
Photograph oil, charcoal, and burlap



Figure 4: Anselm Kiefer, *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, 1975.  
Photograph, oil, charcoal, and burlap



Figure 5: Anselm Kiefer, *Occupations*, 1975. Photograph on paper.



Figure 6: Anselm Kiefer, *Heroic Symbols*, 1969. Photograph on paper.



Figure 7: Anselm Kiefer, *Heroic Symbols*, 1969. Photograph on paper..



Figure 8: Heinrich Riebesehl, *Joseph Beuys at his performance of Kukei/akopee-nein/Browncross/Fat corners/Model fat corners*, 1964. Photograph.





Figure 9: Anselm Kiefer, *Untitled (Heroic Symbols)*, ca. 1969. Water, gouache, and charcoal on paper

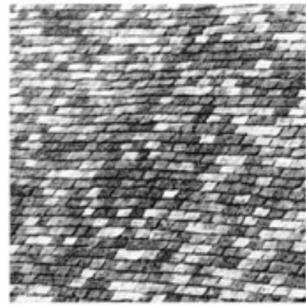
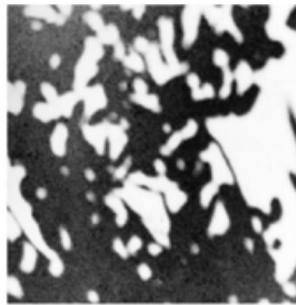


Figure 10: Austerlitz's experimental photography, *Austerlitz*, page 93.





Figure 11: Austerlitz as a child, *Austerlitz*, page 200.



Figure 12: Austerlitz and his rugby team, *Austerlitz*, page 92.



Figure 13: Austerlitz reflected in a storefront, *Austerlitz*, page 213.



Figure 14: Anselm Kiefer, *Your Golden Hair, Margarete*, 1981. Oil, emulsion, and straw on canvas.



Figure 15: Anselm Kiefer, *Margarete*, 1981. Oil, emulsion, and straw on canvas.

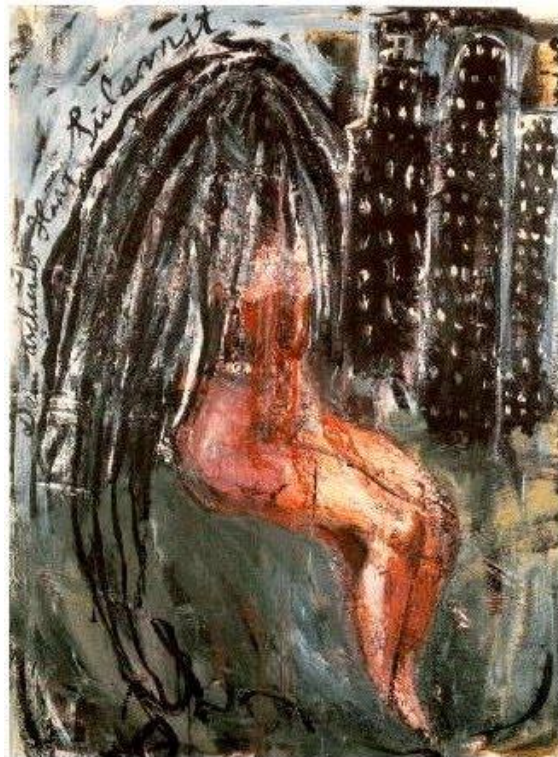


Figure 16: Anselm Kiefer, *Your Ashen Hair, Shulamith*, 1981. Oil on canvas.