Among Mosaic Stars: Architectural Representations in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*

Wenxi Wu
Department of English
Fudan University, China

Abstract
In the present study, I focus on the architecture in W. G. Sebald’s 2001 novel *Austerlitz* and investigate how Sebald transforms the narrative of human construction into a kind of literary expression of his perspective on history and the nature of human existence. To explore this issue, I will juxtapose Sebald’s novel with Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*. By making a comparative investigation into the stylistic features and cultural significance of some prominent architecture in both works, I wish to suggest that Sebald, in his novel that manifests a profound degree of intertextuality with *The Arcades Project*, inherited Benjamin’s skepticism about the progressive evolution of human society.

Keywords

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When the eponymous hero of the German expatriate writer W. G. Sebald’s 2001 novel *Austerlitz*\(^1\) steps into the entrance hall of his childhood residence, Number 12 Šporkova, an exotic pattern on the floor comes into view: “the octofoil mosaic flower in shades of dove grey and snow white” (Sebald 213-14). Resembling the Islamic *girih* tiling, a symmetrical polygonal design that reflects abstruse mathematical knowledge that predated analogous Western understanding by 500 years (Lu and Steinhardt 2007), this star-shaped ornamentation noticed by Austerlitz in the aged building seems to communicate a sense of mystery and shrouded truth. Taking this stretch of ornate flooring as its starting point, the present essay focuses on the architecture in *Austerlitz*. In particular, it will discuss how Sebald uses the narrative of manmade structures and design to convey his perspective on history and the nature of human existence. To explore Sebald’s ideas, this essay will juxtapose *Austerlitz* with Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* (1940).\(^2\) Comparative investigation into the stylistic features and cultural significance of some prominent architecture in both works will suggest that Sebald inherited Benjamin’s skepticism about the progressive evolution of human society. On one level, Sebald models his protagonist on Benjamin when conducting his inquiry into how the structural edifices of high capitalism augured ill for the following century; on another, set in the postwar era toward the salvaging and reconstruction of historical wreckage, Sebald’s novel casts doubt on whether the illusory natures of human beings can ever truly permit coming to terms with the past.

This comparison is drawn in order to respond and contribute to the ongoing discussion of the ways in which Sebald reflects on Benjamin’s philosophical ideas in his novels, an issue that has sustained academic interest in the years since Sebald’s death in 2001.\(^3\) In addition, by focusing on architecture, this essay places itself in a dialogue with recent scholarship on Benjamin’s aesthetics of 19th century

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\(^2\) All citations are from Howard Eiland and Kevin McLanghin’s English translation, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999). See *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) for the original German version.

\(^3\) The view that Sebald is indebted to Benjamin is now widely acknowledged on account of shared themes of melancholia, written history, the art of remembering, and the nomadic experience, see for example Santner (2006), Dubow (2007), Kaufmann (2008), Duttlinger (2010), Pensky (2011), and Joldersma (2014). It is worth noting that the majority of existing research tends to concentrate on theoretical and philosophical discussions in general, from which the present essay will diverge, taking up instead more detailed analysis of actual architectural examples from the two works.
construction projects, which, it is argued, have critical resonance in Sebald’s literary rendition of historical facts. *Austerlitz* is narrated by an unnamed character (akin to Sebald himself), who records a number of disconnected encounters taking place in Europe during the 1960s and 1990s between himself and Jacques Austerlitz, a lecturer of art history. Austerlitz provides a digressive account of his life story, which unfolds back toward the beginning of the Holocaust, interlarded with his opinions on architecture, culture, and history. Sent on a children’s ferry from Prague to England in 1939 by his parents (who subsequently went missing) to ensure his safety, Austerlitz spent a bleak childhood with a foster family in Wales and suffered ambiguous symptoms of melancholia and wanderlust as an adult. Following an epiphanic night spent in a deserted waiting room at Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz embarks on an arduous search for his parents. Despite uncovering some revealing details in various archives, the novel does not provide definitive answers; instead, it ends uneventfully with both the narrator and Austerlitz parting ways and taking up their own separate journeys.

It is unclear whether Sebald intends to adumbrate Benjamin in his characterization of Austerlitz, who in fact, according to the narrator, is a reminder of Ludwig Wittgenstein for their similar facial expressions and their signature rucksacks. In some respects, however, Austerlitz is rightly a Benjamin reincarnated: “a kind of vagabond Walter Benjamin,” as James Chandler observes, “vaguely suicidal, laboring away at an unfinishable project” (253), which obviously refers to *The Arcades Project*. The product of an immense and ambitious research plan (or a voluminous collage of notes) on the bourgeois urban space of Paris in the 19th century, the *Project* occupied Benjamin from 1927 until his death in 1940 and was never completed. It is interesting that Austerlitz, who claims that for him “the world ended in the late nineteenth century” (Sebald 197), is also engaged in a research project on the architectural style of the capitalist era, which is reported to have largely exceeded its initial scope, “proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches” (44). In addition, the lives of Benjamin and Austerlitz

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5 Sebald’s narrator mentions that Austerlitz shares Wittgenstein’s “horror-stricken expressions” (55). Earlier in the novel, he also compares the eyes of certain nocturnal animals and intellectuals, one of which is Wittgenstein, whose eyes appear to be “fixed” and “inquiring” (3). The most striking similarity between the two, according to the narrator, however, is the rucksack, which is for Austerlitz “the only truly reliable thing in his life” (55) and for Wittgenstein, one of his dearest possessions that “went everywhere with him” (56).
intersected between the two World Wars of the 20th century, with both facing the same danger of exile, which arguably resulted in the death of Benjamin and, for Austerlitz, a lifetime of impulsive wandering. Austerlitz is displaced by “the forces of political violence,” which, as Eric Santner points out, were “the very forces that, of course, pushed Benjamin to suicide” (54).

Admittedly, these are largely external similarities, and we are not shown the actual contents of Austerlitz’s project in the novel. Nonetheless, what makes the two works a substantively compelling pair, however different they are in form and approach, is the two writers’ shared meditation on the built environment as the epitome of cultural history. The connection on the idea of history can perhaps be most readily discerned in Sebald’s non-fiction work, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, which brings to mind Benjamin’s vision in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, where “the ineluctable decline in nature and *physis* becomes the allegorical representation of historical process” (Dubow 822). Both Benjamin and Sebald are concerned with how manmade catastrophes have rendered a naturalistic view of history untenable, since human history can no longer be studied in terms of mere temporal patterns; instead it necessitates interpretation through the disordered relics and decaying remains left by our political adversaries and by our own ambitions alike. As Santner argues, there is a view on “natural history” that Sebald shares with Benjamin, which asserts that in the face of historical destruction, we encounter a sense of “radical otherness in the ‘natural’ world,” which no longer evokes a natural order, but instead a kind of “mute ‘thingness’ of nature” (xv). Not only destruction, but construction too, is inscribed in our natural surroundings, acting as a mirror of the collective subconscious. And architecture, in both literary and physical manifestations, is undoubtedly vital to preserving and communicating important messages about the ideologies that once drove (and could continue to influence) human endeavor. Between *Austerlitz* and *The Arcades Project*, whose authors are both bent on exploring and questioning the meaning of architecture, there is a more profound degree of intertextuality.

**Deciphering the Mosaic Stars**

While the various encounters between both Sebald’s narrator and Austerlitz appear coincidental, it would be reductive to regard them as arbitrary. To illustrate the symbolism that governs the architectural images that Sebald has chosen, and to elucidate the aesthetic ideal that he inherits from Benjamin, it is first necessary to examine Austerlitz’s discovery of the *girih*-like floor decoration at Number 12
Despite his admission that his early childhood memories of Prague have been largely erased, when Austerlitz describes the hallway of his former home to the narrator, he uses a series of definite articles: “the cool air,” “the metal box,” and “the octofoil mosaic flower” (Sebald 213; emphasis added). This suggests that Austerlitz feels an unexpected sense of familiarity as his involuntary memory comes to revelation. In contrast to Sebald’s usual practice when forming compound words to describe the color grey (the dominant shade of the novel), which include “mouse-grey” (62, 293, 299), “ash-grey” (118), and “slate-grey” (318), the “dove grey” of the tiled pattern stands out as a rare tinge of hopefulness. Cast in the style of strapwork interlaced to a central point, it also appears to be a sign for Austerlitz, who, as if with the instinct of a dove that always perseveres with its homeward journey, finally returns after a straying absence of almost six decades.

If we extend the octagonal lines and angles by way of the girih art, we can visualize a grander picture encompassing more of such floral polygons that naturally link to one another, forming an infinite number of centers. This could be interpreted to mean that there is no one single center to the world, but “a thousand plateaus,” as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would term it.

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6 Sebald is known for adding images in his novels, including photographs, documents, maps, and even video screenshots. Some are true to the story, while others are random pieces. For a study of the role of images in Sebald’s work, see J. J. Long’s *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007).
This mysterious pattern can be found haunting the architectural elements of a number of Austerlitz’s other major trips, including railway stations, fortifications, and the Theresienstadt Ghetto, each of which adds to but never serves to complete Austerlitz’s search for memory. No material discovery is sufficient for him; when he tracks down his parents, his Freudian trail backward turns out to be “obviously of little use” for his anxiety attacks (322). Ultimately he continues his journey, obsessed with “rambling-collecting,” an open-ended act of repetition without boundaries or destinations, only endless meeting grounds, as if woven in the style of infinitely multiplying girih tiles.

Taking a microscopic perspective, the flooring at Number 12 Šporkova, in addition to its subdividing, self-generative shape, also features typical characteristics of mosaic art, offering different degrees of clarity based on the distance from which it is viewed. Zooming in toward one minuscule mosaic fleck, we gradually lose the clear-cut edges of the original floral pattern, but simultaneously move closer to a hidden realm. This recalls the scene when Austerlitz plays the cassette copy of the Theresienstadt film in slow motion, in which the human figures are “blurred” and “dissolved,” “hovering rather than walking” (348). And from the mosaic-like images on the screen (as shown in the photographs of the film clip, 346-47), there emerges “a kind of subterranean” (349) view on the world, faint but surprisingly true. To some extent, the pixelated version of the film that shatters the illusion of the dissimulated ghetto has the same effect as a mosaic, the very nature of which is to disintegrate the flowery shape of the ornate flooring into its component parts.

Seen from another angle, however, the mosaic’s pluralistic system of monads also functions as an integrative force, organizing into an image of union. This echoes Sebald’s creative aesthetics, which comprise an indistinct blend of diverse
literary styles and seemingly unconnected subject matters, and are precisely what distinguishes his work from other writings that deal with Holocaust postmemory. Emphasizing the fluid continuity achieved in these fragmented threads, Arthur Williams suggests that Sebald’s method is “a holistic approach” (99). In a similar vein, Mark McCulloh names it “a literary monism,” meaning that “everything belongs together somehow [and] is interrelated by some secret orderliness” (22). While McCulloh points out that divulging such “orderliness” is not the author’s responsibility, nor even within his or her grasp, the ideal outcome would certainly be that the random threads reveal their own logic. This artistic goal is more ambitiously articulated in The Arcades Project, in which Benjamin famously writes:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (460)

Although Benjamin did not live long enough to offer a final presentation of his Project, Theodor Adorno claims in “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin” (1950) that the writer was planning a work consisting “solely of quotations,” whose meaning would manifest itself “through a shock-like montage of the material” (239). Aimed at depicting what Benjamin calls the “phantasmagoria” of capitalist modernity, these quotations, culled and divided into different chapters known as “Convolutes,” were intended to function in the same manner as hundreds of mosaic tiles assembling to form a panoramic view.

As an avant-garde form of representation, Benjamin’s “literary montage” is more than a mode of expression, but rather, as Margaret Cohen remarks, “a philosophy of history . . . focusing on the discontinuities separating past and present, and emphasizing a utopian rather than progressive notion of historical transformation” (200). As previously mentioned, the intention of Benjamin’s Project is to probe into the question of how the past has resulted in the present, or more specifically, how the capitalist heyday planted the seeds for the fascist doomsday. Casting aside the usual chronological way of reporting, he limits his study to certain disrupted motifs of the modern metropolis,7 typically those that had

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7 Here I refer to the titles of the Convolutes in Benjamin’s Project such as “Arcades,” “Boredom,” “The Collector,” “Dream House” and so forth, which are comparable to “motifs” of Paris because they are mainly composed of quotations that Benjamin culls from various sources
once been influential but had, by Benjamin’s era, been left behind; the arcades, for example, were an “invention of industrial luxury” (Benjamin 15) in the first half of the 19th century, which had by Benjamin’s time become so commonplace as to be almost invisible. His preference for the material residue of events as testimony to history could be credited to the belief expressed in the Project’s 1939 exposé that the “History of Civilization” is based on “an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things” and “makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity’s life forms and creations” (14). Here, Benjamin conveys firstly that the facts of history are carried through surviving material features, which explains his emphasis on “showing” instead of “saying”; secondly, that the path of history must be expressed in a punctiform rather than linear manner.

Echoing Benjamin, when Austerlitz comments on our effort to restore the processes of past events, he cites his teacher André Hilary in terms of how our descriptive language has produced nothing but “feeble and useless cliché.” This kind of history is hardly trustworthy, he argues, because we are used to relying on the “preformed images already imprinted on our brains” (Sebald 101). The truth, however, is hidden elsewhere, in the material archive and institutional remnants, an obsession with which unites Benjamin and Austerlitz. Like Benjamin, the narrator in Austerlitz regards history as a collection of “countless places and objects [with] no power of memory.” Hence for him, the world is a system that “drain[s] itself” (31)—a paraphrase of Benjamin’s quotation of Nietzsche in the Project that “[t]he world . . . lives on itself: its excrements are its nourishment” (115), a recognition of the essential spontaneity and irregularity of historical progression. The Arcades Project emerged from Paris, lauded by Benjamin as “the capital of the 19th century” (3), which witnessed an elevated pace of the digestion, the excrement, and the impending oblivion of both the accomplishments and failures of the past. In the built environment of the modern city, while the “form” of the architecture remains, the “fact congealed in it” (14) is inevitably drained away. This reasoning explains Benjamin’s intention to arouse awareness of a spiritual world lost among the material refuse, in the same way that Sebald aims to recall an era that mankind seems to be in great haste to forget.

**Railway Stations and the Arcades**

Beneath the arcades, one of the most telling images of the modern metropolis for Benjamin, there was “a world in miniature” (Benjamin 31) that contained

and adds to his own fragmented thoughts.
diverse facets of bourgeois society. They evoke not only the city’s function of gathering, then distributing both commodities and the masses, but also the intersection of interior and exterior spaces in the urban environment. While the basis for the spatial politics of capitalism was marked by a strict demarcation between public and private realms, the emergence of the arcades became a challenge to, or moderation of, the concept of erecting such boundaries. Benjamin draws attention to the concept of “the interior” as “not just the universe of the private individual . . . also his étui,” and he notes that since Louis Philippe, the bourgeoisie “has shown a tendency to compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city” (20). As a locus of transition, the arcades symbolized an attempt to incorporate the private sphere into the commons, with streets turned into a “domestic interior” where “shops resemble closets” (422). In some sense, however, the merging of opposites implies mutual dissolution, which runs to the root of topographical confusion and the paradox of identity. Benjamin considers the interior to be “the asylum where art takes refuge” (19), and the street, with its glass roof and marble panels, was converted into a refuge for poets, artists, prostitutes, and most typically, the flâneurs.

When the arcades were established, the flâneur was perceived to be in a regular state of inebriation, ambling with no aim and practicing the “trade of not trading” (Buck-Morss 35). By Benjamin’s time, however, “the stream of humanity” in the arcades had lost its “gentleness and tranquility” owing to the acceleration of mass production (Benjamin 435). A “war on flânerie” (436) had expelled its practitioners and rendered the crowd a body in flux and an unsuitable place for loitering. In this context, the flâneur was compelled to constantly readjust his position each time novelty was exhausted by repetition. Regardless of their personal peculiarities, the passersby, whom Benjamin compares with the seven-fold apparition of an old man in Baudelaire’s “Les Sept Vieillards,” appeared to comprise mere duplications of particular, limited types. This phenomenon, which Benjamin interprets as being at the heart of flânerie, is compared to a “veil” that transforms the city into a “phantasmagoria” of what is “always the same” (21-22), blurring lines and erasing marks. The flâneur could apprehend neither “where I stand” nor “what I am” beneath the glass ceilings of the arcades.

Elsewhere, such “phantasmagoria” bewilders Sebald’s narrator and hero in equal measure; both, if not strictly flâneurs, are engaged in continually peripatetic experiences. The narrator notes that in addition to his trips for the purpose of study, he sometimes travels for reasons “never entirely clear” to him (Sebald 1), and Austerlitz similarly seems to live almost exclusively out of his rucksack. While the
**flâneur**, as a conceptual antithesis to the crowd, always strolled amidst the pedestrian throng, Austerlitz gives the impression that he walks alone. He finds the people around him to be “flicker[ing] slightly at the edges” (75) and feels that they are “the dead . . . filling the twilight around [him] with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing” (188). The vague qualities that Austerlitz perceives in the lifeless body of the crowd may immediately bring us back to Benjamin’s idea of the “veil” spread under the arcades, as well as his allusion to the “infernal” appearance of the multi-apparitional character in Baudelaire’s “Les Sept Vieillards.”

Stepping into the railway station’s waiting room, where travelers find shelter much like **flâneurs** in the arcades, both the narrator and Austerlitz experience what Benjamin would describe as “the feeling of vertigo” (14). In Antwerp Central Station for instance, the narrator is plagued by a series of sudden indispositions. Likewise, in Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz, among other moments of disorientation, is seized by “something expressible,” a feeling of “dull bemusement,” and “a terrible weariness” (Sebald 194).

The association of these types of physical reactions with railway stations becomes highly pertinent to their architectural styles, when one considers their resemblance to those of the arcades. Some possess lofty vaulted ceilings and semicircular windows near the top (Antwerp Central and Lucerne Station); some feature tall columns forming numerous arches down each side (Liverpool Street Station); others take the form of a long passage covered by iron-latticed glass (Czech State Railway and Gare d’Austerlitz). Each of the railway stations in Sebald’s novel is a near-vacant immensity, half exposed to the world outside. The railway station functions not only as an urban space, but also as a connecting point between two districts, located in one or the other, or both, or neither, thus becoming a geographical “nonplace.” And Austerlitz, transported alone to a strange and alien country as a child, is in an analogous sense, an unrooted “nonperson.”

Significantly, the narrator in *Austerlitz* admits that he often confuses Antwerp Central Station with the nocturama, an artificial dark room that houses nocturnal animals in the daytime, which is much like the contrived interiors of the arcades, erected in the open air. With his eyes fixed on a raccoon “washing the same piece of apple over and over again” (2-3), the narrator envisages the animal’s desire to “escape the unreal world in which it had arrived . . . through no fault of its own” (3). This could also be the collective voice of the **flâneur**, whose easy pace through the arcades was disturbed by a decisive torrent of materialism that pressed down on him “through no fault of [his] own.” The narrator also discerns a shadow of “the same sorrowful expression as the creatures in the zoo” (6) in the men and women at the
railway station, as if they inhabit a nocturama designed for human beings, all subject to the same unwilled dislocation. Risible as this might sound, this flickering thought of the narrator is justifiable. In the geographical limbo between countries and identities, these motionless, seated passengers unable to recognize one another, like the arcades travelers “unable to break the magic circle of the type” (Benjamin 22), are consequently devoid of individuality and dissolved into sameness. Ahead of them lies only the next “nonplace,” of which Austerlitz contains many.

The skeptical view of the arcades and the railway stations is the hindsight that is in many respects closely related, if not essentially counter, to the initial prospect of the architects and the collective mind-set of that era. “Construction plays the role of the subconscious” (16), as Benjamin observes insightfully. Allusions to the two necessary conditions for the arcades’ development, namely “the boom in the textile trade” and “the beginning of iron construction,” also conjure their antecedents: capitalist plunder and the domination of Napoleonic rule. Pioneering a new system of architecture encouraged by the ruling class, the arcades were raised in the Empire style,8 which Benjamin terms “the style of revolutionary terrorism” (15).9 Antwerp Central Station in Austerlitz is a fin de siècle paradigm of railway architecture as well as a product of a colonial past. When speaking of the Station’s historical origin, Austerlitz states that this colossal building was raised on “the personal wish of King Leopold,” who demanded the establishment of magnificent public buildings to match the economic might of his dominion, which was itself realized through Belgian exploitation of labor and raw materials on the African continent (Sebald 9).

Aside from the basic plot of capitalist history, however, Benjamin and Sebald place preeminent emphasis on details. Benjamin notes that it was in the arcades that the first gas lights came into use. To illustrate the splendor of the scene, he cites the poetic lines of Edgar Allan Poe: “The rays of the gas lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over everything a fitful and garish luster” (285). Installed at the upper levels of the vaulted ceilings, the warm lamplight filled the passageways at night and seemed to

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8 The Empire style derived its name from the First French Empire of Napoleon I, prevailing from 1804 to 1814 and marked by excessive richness in both architectural form and interior decoration.

9 “Revolutionary terrorism” is a political term (not to be confused with the modern meaning of “terrorism”) usually adopted by those against revolution to refer to revolutionaries’ uses of military violence, typically during the French Revolution and various Communist revolutions associated with the Soviet Union. There is a sort of irony, therefore, in using the term to describe the Empire style, which epitomized Napoleon’s ironhanded reign that considered “the state an end in itself” (Benjamin 15).
have transcended everything inside it with a heavenly glow. This innovation ensured a steady and reliable source of illumination for the first time and is contrasted with the candlelight, which is deemed dubious and surreptitious, as if scheming for power. Moreover, the luxurious application of the glasswork was made possible by another technological breakthrough. While talking about the development of iron construction, Benjamin concurs with the architectural theorist Karl Boetticher that the revival of the Hellenistic style came about by virtue of technological innovation. Indeed, the earliest glass was used in churches so that natural light gave a celestial touch to the interior, which was also the purpose of its use in the construction of the arcades, where the glass provided light as well as symbolically connected the secular world of commodities to a higher, spiritual kingdom of the gods. At street level, the arcades used a large amount of glass for their showcases, which only intensified the paradoxical relationship between the viewing public and the merchandise they displayed, by being transparent and inviting, yet solid and cold. The audacious colonization of the arcades by the capitalists took ownership of these public spaces away from the masses.

This issue is not, however, about the commodities per se, since there is little sight of trading and almost no time for desire in Sebald’s railway stations. A sense of marginality is nonetheless imposed upon their occupants through the influences of the architecture or the intentions behind it. Designed by Louis Delacenserie, Antwerp Central Station was built in an eclectic style that seems to echo Sebald’s own characteristic approach to writing. Austerlitz discovers a “marble stairway in the foyer and the steel and glass roof spanning the platforms,” reflecting the three most important modern architectural elements applied to the arcades. Meanwhile, similar to the arcades’ tribute to the neoclassical style, Delacenserie’s design attempts to find sympathetic bonds with ancient deities by absorbing the architectural features of Rome’s Pantheon as well as some Byzantine and Moorish themes, so that the passengers “are seized by a sense of being beyond the profane, in a cathedral consecrated to international traffic and trade” (Sebald 12).

Austerlitz considers eclecticism to be “laughable” (12), along with its goal of eliciting an emotional reaction; it only causes him to shudder at the false sense of security brought about by social transformation. On the one hand, members of the ruling class were unable to betray their faith; on the other, they had to offer a

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10 While eclecticism is not, strictly speaking, categorized as an established style of architecture, it is a mixed form that combines various elements from historical styles while claiming a certain distance from any of them. In a similar fashion, Sebald’s work is characterized by the combination of different genres such as fiction, documentary, photography, and prose, which constitutes his unique literary style.
suitably remarkable environment to house the thriving hive of capitalism, the all-conquering momentum of which had come to define their era. The solution was to come up with something in between these conflicting impulses, and it can be discerned in the sculptures of the ancient Roman gods that stand sentinel around the upper walls of the dome. The gods of traditional religion had been superseded by what might be termed “the capitalist gods,” which in Austerlitz’s opinion are “the deities of the nineteenth century: mining, industry, transport, trade and capital” (13). They moved to a tune set by the clock, one of the finest mechanical designs of the time, with all passengers required to submit to its relentless rhythm. Just as the glass roof and gas lamps of the arcades lit up the goods for sale as opposed to the glories of divinity, for Austerlitz, the unorthodox architecture of Antwerp Central Station, far from inspiring faith or harmony, is merely a showcase for capitalist triumph.

**Fortifications versus Barricades**

Shortly thereafter, Sebald’s characters discuss the architecture of fortifications at length, with their attention lingering in particular over that of Saarlouis and Antwerp, further expounding how “our mightiest projects” have “most obviously betray[ed] the degree of our insecurity” (16-17). Interestingly, the barricades, another type of defensive work, which played a critical role on the streets of Paris during the revolutionary years,\(^1\) are one of the central subjects in Benjamin’s *Project*. However, these two architectural phenomena, although both used for self-defense during wartime, stand in direct contrast with regard to their respective forms and effects; as such, they are to a certain extent the embodiments of two antithetical ideologies.

Resting in a bistro in Antwerp Glove Market, Austerlitz expresses to the narrator, with no less vigor than his views on the railway station, the irrationality associated with the historical construction of fortifications built by architects such as Pietro Paolo Floriani, Michele Sanmicheli, and Henrik Rysensteen. Amazed at the architects’ formidable talent for “geometric, trigonometric and logistical calculation” and “inflated excesses of the professional vocabulary” that produced star-shaped ground plans perfectly cut from the Golden Section, Austerlitz finds it

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\(^1\) The revolutionary years in the history of France usually refer to the period between the start of the French Revolution in 1789 and the end of the Paris Commune in 1871. During this time, the barricades were built during a number of critical insurrections and were of particular strategic significance in the July Revolution of 1830, the February Revolution, and the June Days Uprising of 1848, among others.
even more surprising that a surfeit of intellectual persistence could evolve into a “fundamentally wrong-headed idea” (17-19). Here, Sebald inserts a map of 17th century Saarlouis, which shows a city enclosed by layers of garrisoned bastions designed by the French military engineer Vauban (18). The plan presents a well-ordered dodecagon with radiative lines indicating its ongoing expansion as if ready to devour the adjacent spaces. The radius of the extended area took in more than half of the entire city and was used for building bulwarks to extend the range of cannon fire; this left the actual space used by civilians untouched, essentially shutting the inhabitants deeper inside the fortress. Even for the layman, comments Austerlitz, this pattern is “an emblem both of absolute power and of the ingenuity the engineers put to the service of that power” (19). This impervious enclosure, with only two roads leading from the center, makes the city appear at once safe and isolated. The map shows no other city neighboring Saarlouis, only a vast wilderness, much like a single giant star deserted at sea, or a colossal birdcage built from the inside.

In contrast, the barricade comprised a system that is comparable to a galaxy of stars, with each revolving on an independent axis and thus forming a powerful, generative force as a group. Following their impressive deployment on the battlefields of the Belgian Revolution, which took place prior to the building of Fortress Antwerp, barricade fighting became the heart of the French proletariat’s resistance movement in the 19th century. In his Project, Benjamin shows considerable sympathy with the revolutionary spirit as manifested by the tactical construction projects of the proletarian revolutionaries and insurgents, referred to by Marx as “barricade commanders” (Benjamin 358). To build a barricade in the street did not require more than the materials that could be found near at hand, such as ropes, metal, sandbags, timber, or even the wrecks of omnibuses. Given proper coordination, these ordinary materials could form the basis for launching military raids. Benjamin quotes Gaétan Niépovié’s description of a barricade being built:

At the entrance to a narrow street, an omnibus lies with its four wheels in the air. A pile of crates, which had served perhaps to hold oranges, rises to the right and to the left, and behind them, between the rims of the wheels and the openings, small fires are blazing, continually emitting small blue clouds of smoke. (141)

The construction methods, which Carl Douglas describes as governed by the “tectonics of a rubbish heap” (31), were evidently crude, but the scene of combat
was filled with audacious subversions and transgressions upon the established order. The omnibus was overturned; the empty crates were stacked up to obstruct the thoroughfare; and unremitting flames erupted from unnoticeable corners. During the July Revolution of 1830, as Benjamin records from the exhibition catalogue in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, “[t]he 4,054 barricades of the ‘Three Glorious Days’ were made from . . . 8,125,000 paving stones” (139). These small-scale urban constructions involved no esoteric theories of architectural design or orders imposed by any ruler’s monopolistic control over violence. Instead, they came about as a result of the participatory efforts and consensus of the masses. Any master plan for the barricades’ construction could only be signed “anonymous.”

Although major utilization of the barricades in warfare scenarios lasted only for a brief moment in history, Benjamin lauds their remarkable efficacy and underscores two important qualities, namely their unpredictability and mobility. Lying in ambush behind heaped rubble and scattered around the erratic edges of the streets, the barricade soldiers could prevent their enemies from adopting any coordinated tactics. “Nothing has changed on the surface,” observes Benjamin, again citing Gaëtan Niépovié, “but there is something unusual in the air” (140). Indeed, much of the preparatory work was conducted in secret, disregarding and nullifying hierarchical partitions of the urban space. The barricade soldiers essentially merged themselves into the city and became part of “a strategic landscape” (Douglas 38). The amorphous and nomadic nature of the barricades offers some explanation as to why Benjamin and Gaëtan Niépovié choose to term the study of these uprisings as “physiology” (Benjamin 140), a branch of biology that deals with living organisms. The analogy can be understood through the idea of cooperation between equal parts, which is the core of both barricade fighting and organic functions. Making references to Engels, Benjamin observes that from behind these pseudo-impoverished defenses, “[a] handful of insurgents . . . hold an entire regiment at bay” (131) and that they “produced more of a moral than a material effect” (123). This “moral” reflects a dynamic and liberal view of humanity that places maximum value on collective initiatives.

As a counter-example, the moral of the large-scale fortifications (if one is to be identified) is summarized by Austerlitz as “a tendency towards paranoid

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12 See also Carl Douglas’s account: “In July 1830 there were over 4,000 barricades; in June 1848 there were as many as 6,000” (31).

13 The word originates in the title of Gaëtan Niépovié’s book, Etudes physiologiques sur les grandes métropoles de l’Europe occidentale: Paris (1840). In Benjamin’s 1939 exposé, there is a similar word “physiognomy” (23) that Benjamin uses to refer to the topography of the central districts in Paris.
elaboration” (Sebald 19). Those in charge of the major fortifications tended to carry the building process far beyond rational limits, unquestioningly adding further fortifications to the old, unstable defensive walls. Far from making the city indestructible, however, the Saarlouis fortification and Fortress Antwerp, where Austerlitz and the narrator are placed, both proved to be stark failures when challenged.

Austerlitz then shifts to depicting the history of Fortress Antwerp from an initial citadel built in 1832 to its outmost ring, Fort Breendonk, which was built just before the beginning of the First World War but turned out to be “completely useless” after only “a few months” (23). According to Austerlitz, during the course of the eight preceding decades, the fortification’s architects and commander had all followed “the same old logic” of continuously enlarging its enceintes, which were exceeding “thirty miles long” (22), regardless of their stark disadvantages and the potential shortage of men to defend them. This practice pushed the city further toward a defensive stance, and as the war proceeded, the quality and quantity of military development within the fortified area quickly became a pale shadow of that deployed by its invaders. Eventually, they had no choice but to adopt a passive posture, effectively waiting until recourses were entirely depleted. Subsequently, the effort expended became increasingly unsustainable each time the ramparts were drawn out, sometimes at a huge price due to the necessary demolition of existing establishments. Founded on the dilapidation of other structures, the fortress itself faced a similar fate, causing Austerlitz to ironically remark that some of the oversized buildings were “designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (24).

When the narrator visits Fort Breendonk the following day after reading about it by chance in a newspaper article, he considers the site not to be the historical relics of human civilization but “a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence” (26). The siege-works, initially set up to protect Antwerp from the Germans in 1940, were ultimately overrun and transformed into a prisoner processing site and penal camp. The similarities in layout between Fortress Antwerp and Theresienstadt concentration camp in Terezín, where Austerlitz believes his mother was tortured during the Second World War, do not therefore seem coincidental. “And whenever I think of the museum in Terezín now . . . I see the framed ground-plan of the star-shaped fortifications” (280), he states, suggesting that the demise of an empire begins ineluctably with the collapse of the building that embodies its very highest power. The octagon-shaped floor plan of Theresienstadt that Sebald presents in the novel (328-29) may thus be viewed as
portending the meltdown of National Socialism, or perhaps merely its replacement with a more gentle surrogate.

**The Reconstructed Library and Haussmannized Paris**

In their respective works, *The Arcades Project* and *Austerlitz*, both Benjamin and Sebald exhibit a strong distrust of state power. This is perceived as a form of oppression culpable for the destruction of the barricades under George-Eugène Haussmann’s 1853-1870 renovation of Paris as well as for the unwieldy edifice of the new *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. The reconstruction of the centuries-old library in Paris was ordered by former French President François Mitterrand in 1988 and was completed in 1996, and it serves as a compelling link between Benjamin and Sebald’s protagonist. While Benjamin selected many of his quoted passages at the *Bibliothèque nationale*, Austerlitz tells the narrator that he used to study Maxime Du Camp’s masterpiece *Paris*¹⁴ in the old library (Sebald 400). When he visits the new structure in search of his father’s archives, however, he is instantly disquieted by the monolithic architecture that “seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy” (398). Curiously, in Benjamin’s critique of Haussmannization, we find a similar aversion to the formidable city plan and condemnation of Haussmann’s “hatred of the rootless urban population” (23). Has Paris, then, been afflicted by recurrences of “the same old logic” (Sebald 22) once again?

From a contemporary perspective, Haussmann’s renovation, which included widening streets, paving boulevards, raising grand buildings, and upgrading the drainage system, undeniably made a sea change in the main districts of Paris; Benjamin nonetheless perceived a conspiracy behind this reform. Taking Haussmannization as part of the imperialist scheme of Napoleon III, Benjamin argues that it was for the purpose of suppressing the proletarian insurgence that Haussmann, the self-entitled “demolition artist,” ordered a clearance of all barricades, making their reappearance “impossible for all time” (23). Various measures were enforced under Haussmann’s authority; streets were paved with wood in place of cement or stone slabs, for example, “in order to deprive the Revolution of building materials” (121). As intended, it became extremely difficult to set up barricades on Haussmann’s new streets, which were broad and smooth as opposed to the previously narrow and stony alleyways. In addition, several large

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¹⁴ The full title of this six-volume work on the daily experience of Paris is *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions, sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIX siècle* (1869-75); it also appears in some of Benjamin’s quotations.
arteries “connect[ed] the barracks in straight lines with the workers’ districts” (23), with the two longest intersecting the city center and respectively running north-to-south and east-to-west. These considerably increased the mobility of government troops, enabling them to arrive promptly at any part of Paris in the event of revolt.

Many of the newly built roads were boulevards, which constituted multiple ringed patterns around the capital. Somewhat ironically, the etymology of the word “boulevard” has its origins in the Dutch “bolwerk,” equivalent to “bulwark” or “bastion” in English, which are the very things that Haussmann’s boulevards were designed to eradicate. It is important to note that, as argued by Patrice de Moncan, strategic value was by no means the principal or even an essential constituent of Haussmann’s overall renovation project, which was more focused on improvements of traffic, lighting, hygiene, and other urban infrastructure, the benefits of which transcended class (34). Nevertheless, the majority of the critics cited by Benjamin still adopted an equivocal attitude toward the changes and were unwilling to commit to endorsing them. This widespread dissatisfaction, which continued for several decades following Haussmannization, is explained by Eric Prieto as the natural consequence of a position that “[e]very new development—even those that hold out the promise of a bold new future—is bound to bring about regret for what is lost” (4).

It is accurate to observe that the renovations caused considerable loss with the boulevards themselves being a case in point; they “wip[ed] out, along their way, almost all the courtyard and gardens” (Benjamin 146), resulting in what Le Corbusier described, according to Benjamin, “a desert in the very center of Paris” (125; emphasis in original). In a similar vein to Fortress Antwerp, the construction of Haussmann’s boulevards indiscriminately overrode all obstacles in their path, resulting in what were by 19th century standards, astronomical human and financial costs. As Paris was transformed from a conurbation of smaller towns into a cohesive, modern city, the consequential upsurge in housing costs forced the proletariat and impoverished Parisians outside the urban area; the sudden influx of commodities and wealth rendered them as unwelcome as the flâneurs. The idyllic landscapes of the boulevards outlined an impossible situation for any revolutionaries that might have wished to break out from the lower tiers of society,

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15 Benjamin cites Auguste Blanqui on the cost of lives and money: “The Haussmanization [sic] of Paris and the provinces is one of the great plagues of the Second Empire. No one will ever know how many thousands of unfortunates have lost their lives as a consequence of deprivations occasioned by these senseless constructions. The devouring of so many millions is one [of] the principal causes of the present distress” (144).
serving to suppress and mute any aspiring “barricade commanders.” Aimed at “walling-in a massive eternity,” Haussmann’s project, as Benjamin maintains, was “a wholly appropriate representation of the absolute governing principles of the Empire,” which betrayed a “fundamental hatred of all individuality” (122). And this seemingly hyperbolic point of view in fact gave voice to the opinions of many 19th century Parisians who deplored the loss of their old city, now rendered a distant object of nostalgia.

Sebald’s Austerlitz deplores the loss of the old Bibliothèque nationale. The new library, named after former President Mitterrand, now rises on an “increasingly dilapidated area on the left bank of the Seine” (Sebald 385) with the old library in Richelieu emptied and consigned to oblivion. According to Austerlitz, the library’s new location is remote, “a desolate no-man’s-land” on “the windswept river bank” (386). After climbing up a long and steep stairway, one arrives at an esplanade the size of nine football pitches, paved with wood and surrounded by four towers at each corner. The aerial photography of the new library offered by Sebald (388) conveys an overwhelming sensation created by vast rectangular walkways that stretch for several hundred meters, which Austerlitz compares to “the deck of the Berengaria or one of the other ocean-going giants” (387). These broad, even thoroughfares efficiently connect the entrances to each building, like an emulation of Haussmann’s Paris streets in miniature. Also similar to the main routes that run north-to-south and east-to-west through Paris, the wide spaces between the buildings create a visual effect that magnifies the architecture and appear to symbolize a higher degree of communication that converges upon the library center—the location of what is perhaps the most nonsensical part of the whole project. Circumscribed by these walkways is a lower courtyard, which features exotic trees and animals transplanted from afar, thus forming an “indoor boulevard” populated by birds and squirrels trapped and ready for sacrifice.

All these ostentatious complexities of the new library correspond to what Benjamin regards as the overriding 19th century tendency “to ennoble technological necessities through spurious artistic ends” (24). Much as the doom of large fortresses was spelt out in their unwieldy maintenance requirements, the administrative operations of the new Bibliothèque nationale were tortuous. To gain access to the reading room, Austerlitz must complete an onerous series of procedures, as if “on a business of an extremely dubious nature” (Sebald 390), yet the library’s staff members are found to be indifferent to what substantially concerns readers, such as the convenience and comfort of the reading room. The prodigious immensity of the new library, for Austerlitz, is “both in its outer
appearance and inner constitution unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings, and runs counter . . . to the requirements of any true reader” (386). Hence he suspects that very few of the previous library’s loyal readers would be willing to visit the new complex; this recalls Benjamin’s prediction that Parisians would leave their city because “[t]he centralization, the megalomania [of Haussmannization], created an artificial city, in which the Parisian (and this is the crucial point) no longer feels at home” (Benjamin 129).

But when Austerlitz meets the librarian, Henri Lemoine, he realizes that what is more disturbing than the new library’s architectural and operational totalitarianism is its willful disregard for history and evocation of “the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past” (Sebald 398). As stated by Lemoine, the declining area chosen for the site of the new library had previously been a warehouse used by the German military for storing possessions looted from the Jewish people in Paris, who were interned in the Drancy camp. While an enormous number of these items were subsequently transported to Germany, the largest and most valuable objects were left behind. According to Lemoine, few people now know their whereabouts, but he asserts that “the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President’s Grande Bibliothèque” (403). These are the last words that Austerlitz reports from the librarian, and if the great library is truly a buried depot of historical artifacts, or a “library without memory” (Modlinger 349), then it would undoubtedly have to deal with more trying situations than upsetting its readers. While over a century has passed since the time of Haussmann, in the eyes of Austerlitz at least, events have only followed the same path. In Benjamin’s words, “[e]verything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present” (15).

Under the influence of surrealism, Benjamin holds Auguste Blanqui’s L’éternité par les astres (Eternity via the Stars) in high esteem. Blanqui, a barricade fighter, wrote this text during his imprisonment in the Fort of Taureau, and Benjamin praises it for having “complete[d] the century’s constellation of phantasmagorias with one last, cosmic phantasmagoria” (25). In other words, instead of identifying an exit from these circumstances, Blanqui used a cosmological model to delineate, in the most dream-like manner possible, the darkest vision of the society that had assailed him and beaten him down. His understanding of the cosmos was based on the idea that since the universe only comprises a limited number of “simple bodies,” the diverse shapes that they take by combining with one another will eventually reach a finite number. As a
consequence, repetitions would have to be made in order to fill up the empty space. Considering repetition to be an immanent feature of the cosmos, Blanqui did not accept the idea of historical progress, arguing instead that “[w]hat we call ‘progress’ is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it” (qtd. in Benjamin 26). Unlike the fatalist, however, Blanqui believed in the eternal nature of being, asserting that “[w]hat I write at this moment in a cell of the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall write throughout all eternity” (25-26).

This practically willful conviction, which one may take as an unyielding wish of the dying Blanqui, is also found, tinged with a sense of helpless resignation, in Austerlitz’s meditation on Lucas van Valckenborch’s painting, View of Antwerp with the Frozen Schelde:

Looking at the river now, thinking of that painting and its tiny figures, said Austerlitz, I feel as if the moment depicted by Lucas van Valckenborch had never come to an end, as if the canary-yellow lady had only just fallen over or swooned, as if the black velvet hood had only this moment dropped away from her head, as if the little accident, which no doubt goes unnoticed by most viewers, were always happening over and over again, and nothing and no one could ever remedy it. (Sebald 16)

The weak moments of civilization resurface under a new guise but always in a familiar pattern; this may go to the root of Austerlitz’s melancholia. Through his study of architectural history, he finds his contemporary world overshadowed by a hideous past. The words of Maxime Du Camp, which Benjamin quotes at the beginning of his 1939 exposé—“History is like Janus; it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it sees the same things” (14)—may serve to summarize Austerlitz’s deep anxiety about his time. Benjamin understood that Blanqui’s last words were addressed explicitly “to the errant negotiators between old and new who are at the heart of these phantasmagorias” (26). Likewise, in the world of Austerlitz (or Sebald), the executives of the ruling elite remain “errant” amidst such phantasmagorical surroundings, indulged in a reverie plotted to make the past the past, which will hardly liberate us, but bring us down to the same debris and let the dead fill our twilight.
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**About the Author**

Wenxi Wu (吳文曦) is currently an MA student of English Literature at Fudan University, China. She is interested in post-WWII literature, studies in globalization, and literature of the *fin de siècle*. She has published “Jamesian *Oedipus*: Henry James’s *The Beast in the Jungle,*” in *Journal of Language and Literature Studies* 《語文學刊》 (Mar. 2014): 66-72.

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