

## **The Politics of Space and Heterotopia in the Works of W. G. Sebald**

Richa Gupta  
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, India

### Abstract

This paper will attempt to read how history and space are informed and transformed by each other specifically in the prose narratives of the German writer, W. G. Sebald. In the course of reproducing history in a non-synoptic manner in these prose narratives, there are several ways in which space and history are connected with each other. This paper will explore these myriad relations and connections between space and history. Drawing from these links, the paper will go on to demonstrate how various incompatible elements of history and space are juxtaposed on one particular site creating a heterotopia. Sebald's innovative fiction is exceptional in its narrative technique, employment of sources and incorporation of the multiple points of views of the narrators along with their interlocutors. The specific mode of narration Sebald employs, this paper contends, treats neither space nor history as foundational categories but instead tries to posit a historico-geographical framework within which many volatile moments of heterotopia develop. The paper begins with an analysis of how history and its constituent, memory, are related to space and spatial encounters. Having established the nexus between these two categories, it goes on to examine how Sebald's narratives offer a critique of cartographic space and how identities are established through a politics of space. All these arguments culminate to demonstrate that these narratives are constituted by heterotopic moments due to the juxtapositions and multiplicities that arise from the historico-geographical scheme Sebald brings into play.

*Keywords:* history, space, heterotopia, W.G. Sebald, prose narrative

## Introduction: Space and Heterotopia

The work of W. G. Sebald marked a significant departure in the tradition of novel and fiction writing. His four major works, *The Emigrants* (1996), *The Rings of Saturn* (1999), *Vertigo* (2000) and *Austerlitz* (2001) – interspersed with grainy monochromatic photographs – rest between the form of documentary writing and pure fiction. Sebald (2011) himself referred to his form of writing as prose narrative and was inspired by 19th century German prose, which has “prosodic rhythms that are very pronounced, where prose is more important than... social background or plot in any manifest sense” (Sebald, 2011, 56). He strived to experiment with a representation of history – that is, an organisation of events in the past – which would counter the prevalent synoptic view of it. All four of his prose narratives abound in digression, meanderings and musings to portray a narration of history which is fragmented but not disjointed, which focusses not simply on a witness-based account of history but history in terms of “forensic phenomenology” which “took into account the very lacunae, the repressions and the partial amnesias that are the reality of lived life” (Self, 2010). His accounts of history are intricately webbed into diverse space – to landscapes and architecture and cognitive mappings and meanderings.

The idea of space as a determining factor in social and cultural relations and transactions has gained currency over the past few decades. With interventions from scholars and philosophers from various entry points, space is now seldom understood as a passive container inhabited by miscellaneous aspects of society and sociality. Space is not a homogeneous entity; it both constructs and is, of course, constructed. It is not a mere background upon which social and historical processes take place but it is actively involved in the processes of social existence (Soja, 1989). In evoking space Edward Soja refers to Henri Lefebvre’s *l’espace vécu* or “lived spaces”, that is, understanding space as “actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time, the habitus of social practices” (Soja, 1989, p.18). Soja goes on to theorize space in a kind of a triangle of social, physical and mental or psychological spaces, within which spatiality is socially produced and exists as both concrete spatialities and as a “set of relations between individuals and groups, an ‘embodiment’ and medium of social life itself” (Soja, 1989, p.18). Spatiality is produced by the interconnections and overlapping of social spaces consisting of social actions and relationships, physical space of material nature or actual human geography and mental space of cognition and representation which include “personal meaning and symbolic content of ‘mental maps’ and landscape imagery” (Soja, 1989, p.18).

With the changing notion of being and time, our understanding of space has been changing. The long glacial times of the 19th century is now a matter of past; ours is the epoch of spaces, writes Michel Foucault (1986). “We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are in a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (Foucault, 1986, p.23). Space in our era, according to Foucault, is defined by relations of proximity and relations among sites. We, thus, inhabit what are essentially sets of relations “that delineate sites which are irreducible to one another”. In distinction to these everyday spaces that we occupy, Foucault mentions the heterotopia – the sites or spaces that “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault, 1986, p.24). He notes several principles that characterize heterotopias. What emerges from these principles is the notion that heterotopias often function as sites upon which several varying and incompatible spaces are juxtaposed. He evokes the example of the Persian

gardens which can be perceived as a microcosm of different vegetation from across the world. It is only a small part of the world and yet it symbolizes the totality of the world. Using the example of the cemetery, he points out how the changing perception of death and after-life in the course to modernity has changed the geographical location of the cemetery from the heart of the city to the outer extensions of it. As people's faith in the after-life dwindled, the "atheistic" civilization started paying more attention to the remains of the dead on earth. The cemetery, thus, becomes that other space where "each family possesses its dark resting place". Heterotopias can also "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space" (like the brothels) or they may be spaces really created as attempts at perfect, meticulous spaces in contrast to the existing chaotic and disorderly spaces.

This paper will attempt to tease out how Sebald's rendition of history is related to space. It will examine how the various elements that constitute history and space in the narratives are juxtaposed to form various heterotopic moments. This construction of a heterotopia which is never entirely stable or constant has the potential of re-reading and re-producing history in different ways and to better understand one's engagement with space as something which is not dead, fixed, undialectical or immobile (Foucault, 1980). In the process of juxtaposing certain incompatible elements of space and time, Sebald creates certain moments (and sites) which defy the foundations of both history and geography, and can only be understood when analysed through the critical category of heterotopia. This is mainly because synoptic history proves insufficient to portray the themes that preoccupy Sebald's work. The digressive history, that his prose narratives depict, engages with space and elements of space to open up the possibility of the conception of a more radical historico-geographical framework within which both history and space play critical roles to expose the sets of relations that define the life and time that has survived the brutal and bloody excesses of the twentieth century.

### Space and History

The landscape and spatial setting in the works of Sebald are usually spaces of dilapidation. In *The Rings of Saturn*, as the narrator walks through the county of Suffolk, he encounters various sites of destruction and devastation. He comes across run-down towns which once thrived as centres of trade or culture and almost-deserted countryside which once housed grand estates of the highest echelons of British society. The narrative reflects the narrator's movements and these movements evoke various memories, incidents and experiences from the past. In doing this, the narrator often blurs the lines between the objectivity of history and the subjectivity of memory. Sebald often draws out on memories, of the narrating subject or figures in history, to (re)present a particular episode in history. While narrating a short memoir of Stendhal (in *Vertigo*), who had participated in the transalpine march crossing the Great St Bernard Pass in the force of Napoleon in 1800, the narrator points out an aberration in the writer's recounting of the raid of the fortress of Bard. We learn that the position which Stendhal had claimed to be at, could not have afforded him the view that the writer reproduces in a sketch. Had Stendhal in fact been standing at the spot that he claimed for himself, he could not have been viewing the scene he reproduces in that precise way (Sebald, 2000, p. 7). Such discrepancies between memory and objective historical truth provide a scope of a retelling of history and question the apparent unbiased objectivity of history. The narrator goes on to mention how disappointed Stendhal had been when he realized that another memory of a scene of a town from the days of the war that he remembered was in fact an exact copy of a famous engraving. Stendhal, thus, advises "not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one's travels, since they will displace our memories completely" (Sebald, 2000, p. 8).

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald (2001) further complicates the difference between memory and history. The protagonist of this novel having suffered almost a kind of effacement of his early childhood memories, brought about both by his cruel displacement from his home and the denial and neglect of his past by his foster parents, goes through a traumatic yet gratifying (although never entirely fulfilling) journey. Austerlitz's desire to trace his past is triggered by a series of sporadic incidents which eventually lead him to seek out his deep buried memories. One such incident was a momentary flash of a memory from his childhood. One day in London, he found himself being led into the Liverpool Street station, to which he claimed to be always irresistibly drawn, by an impulse and disjointed thoughts. He started walking around and found himself in a part of the station which seemed to be abandoned and which, he suddenly remembered, was exactly the place where he was waiting to meet his new guardians half a century ago on his first arrival to London.

Disorientated by this sudden recollection, Austerlitz realizes how hard he had worked to keep his memories suppressed. Austerlitz's recollection of this incident, as is evident from his recounting of it to the narrator, is brought about by his spatial memory. Memories are as spatial as they are temporal. Austerlitz, as the narrator informs us, harboured a great fascination for grand architectural designs and had – what he described to the narrator as obsession with railway stations. He was studying the architectural history of Central Station in Antwerp the first time the narrator met him there. Introducing the readers to Austerlitz's fascination with history foreshadows the journeys of both protagonist and narrator. This incident at the station is followed by another revelation a year later at a bookstore where he hears on the radio two women talking about their experiences of their relocation to England on Kinder transport during the Second World War. It is at this moment that Austerlitz realizes his origin. In the past, all the hints and clues of his past afforded to him were his birth name (which was handed over to him written on a piece of paper much like an artefact of history), and fleeting, abstruse memories.

This abrupt eruption of a memory eventually translates into a historical account of a devastating period in the history of twentieth century. An event or a thing at a point in space, as David Harvey (2004) points out, cannot be explained by what exists only at that point; it depends on many other things going on around. "A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present and future concentrate and congeal at certain point to define the nature of the point" (p. 274). Memories, which Harvey calls a relational temporal concept, and – drawing from Walter Benjamin – refers to as a potentiality that can "flash up" uncontrollably at times of crises to reveal new possibilities. They defy the kind of fixed narrative that history tries to impose on space. The spatio-temporality of the resurfaced lost memory of Austerlitz sets him on a journey of recovery of his past. However, recovering the past cannot be an easy task. Apart from coming to terms with the trauma that he, along with a whole generation of people, had been subjected to, unearthing the history that was lost to him, through all the instabilities of the past, would also have to face the challenges of building his story without concrete documented "evidence". While the episode of Jewish genocide has been brought to the knowledge of the world from various sources, to uncover his particular past and story, Austerlitz would have to rely on his own disjointed memories, memories of others (like his parents' friend, Vera) and snippets of information he gathers in this journey of his. His story cannot be mapped in history; all he could do was to follow the faint, and often absent, trails that history and space had left.

In stark contrast to Austerlitz's story, is the segment ('Il Ritorno in Patria') in *Vertigo* about the narrator's return to his childhood home after an interlude of thirty years. The conflicting feelings of the narrator between the memories of his homeland and his present response to this

journey of his return are conveyed through a seamless movement from his recounting of his memories, his conversations about the past with Lukas Ambrose and his current reliving of the spaces where he once dwelt, and through which he once travelled, as a child. In his “complicated” and “contradictory” explanation to Lukas for the reason of his return, he mentions how hard he tried to make sense of many incidents and feelings from his childhood in the remote provincial backwaters of W. Now, that he was here, things were getting only more convoluted. “The more images I gathered from the past”, he writes, “the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling” (Sebald, 2000, p. 212). Unlike Austerlitz who had to excavate his past through joining loose, sometimes invisible, threads, the narrator in ‘Il Ritorno in Patria’ wrestles with his memories which perhaps concur with “historical facts” and yet leave him distraught and think of his past as absurd.

The revisiting of their pasts by Austerlitz and by the narrator in *Vertigo*, as inquirers investigating contingent historical facts to understand the “truths” of their existence in the history that their modes of thinking has afforded them, is not simply a journey of self-realization. Sebald’s narrative exercise seems to be an amalgamation of the Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical modes of understanding and writing history<sup>1</sup>. Austerlitz’s attempt is, in effect, an attempt to create a counter-memory that Foucault’s genealogical method which consists of “multiple crosscurrents of circumstances and often discontinuous events in which conflicts, impositions, new problems and networks of practices and values form instable assemblages of identity and authority” (Scott, 2014, p. 167). The protagonist tries to trace the formation of his self as a subject starting at the specific site of his childhood. However, his exploration is also archaeological since his very attempt to unravel his own story (from a tumultuous time in Europe where perhaps many had similar stories) rejects the idea of a transcendental subject. Clearly, his focus is on “uncovering unconscious structures of thought” (Gutting, 2014, p. 15) and to understand what were, or are, the restrictions imposed on his conscious thinking by various historical and political contingencies. The incongruence of the memories of the narrator in *Vertigo* similarly complicates the kind of history which overlooks the various constraints that a discursive formation of the specific time period dictate.

By questioning the very forms of cognitive authority, Sebald’s narrative continuously attempts to topple historical discourses that ignore alternate possibilities. Both archaeological and genealogical explorations of history in the texts are consistently undertaken through the various spatial encounters of the narrators and characters in the prose narratives. Foucault’s projects of archaeology and genealogy remain incomplete by focussing only on the restraints of time. The relevance of space in discursive formation becomes prominent in Sebald’s texts; almost all memories, incidents, events are interfaced with spatial references and experiences. Foucault himself (on some coaxing) comments that “the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 70).

### Space and Cartographies of Narratives

The four prose narratives of W. G. Sebald, distinct as they are in their scheme of narrative, have a shared feature of the travelling narrator who reminisces, muses, recollects, investigates and recounts. These acts of the narrator, more often than not, work towards evoking various moments in history and all such evocations are a result of a phenomenological response to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Scott points out in his definition of “genealogy” that in Foucault’s view the concepts of “archaeology” and “genealogy” are not mutually exclusive; “in their different emphases, they can be mutually supportive as well as interwoven”.

space. The kind of history that Sebald seeks to write and narrate is one without a specific origin, or a middle, beginning and end. His critique of history ensues from a narrative which ‘maps’ space. Sebald’s narrators, ambulating and wandering through the course of the narratives, perform a cognitive and emotional mapping of the spaces they traverse, all the while recovering and recounting snippets from history through association. These associations are at times contiguous, sometimes overlapping and at times absolutely disparate. The narrators’ acts of recounting and recovering history seem to offer a critique of a synoptic view of history through what Macfarlane (2007) calls “story maps”, which are “forms of spatial expressions that embody our personal experiences of the environment and contribute to creating a deep understanding of places” (p. 142), places which are constituted by and consist of various historical moments. Sebald’s narrators attempt to unpack the palimpsest of the historico-geographical points through a narrative which abandons scientific incisiveness in favour of imaginative associations, emotive experiences, creative conjectures and parallels. In an interview, Sebald once remarked that a walker’s response to his surroundings is a phenomenological one unlike a scientist’s, whose is objective and incisive.

The world, or space, for Sebald and his narrators is “hidden as an indefinite multiplicity of reciprocal relations”<sup>2</sup> which the narrator as a subject undertakes to unravel through his movements and mapping. Sebald’s rendition of history seems to be pitted between a spatial expression through experience, narrative, imagination and perspective, and a functionalist grid map which trains the imagination to perceive and think in so-called “scientific” ways that purport to be objective (Macfarlane, 2007). The history, which emerges from such functionalist (and supposedly objective), grid maps reflect de Certeau’s remark on the function of maps which have become an authority on ‘place’ where there are sets of rules and plans, streets and architecture, and points of interest, effacing the idea “space” which is the tour, the narrative, the context and the human perspective<sup>3</sup>. Doreen Massey further elaborates on this. Maps, she writes, integrate time and space; “they produce a cartography which gives the story of the origin of the cosmos of the one producing/creating the map” (Massey, 2005, p. 107). Maps, which aim at stabilization or calibrating one’s bearings in a universe, is the practice of a “hegemonic cognitive mapping” (Massey, 2005, p. 109).

The movement of Sebald’s narrators, however, from one geographical location to another cannot be reproduced on such a map; the narrators’ movement in space are intrinsically bound to their response to places and the resultant evocation of history. While maps, a “hegemonic cognitive” mechanism, aim at stabilization or calibrating one’s bearings in a universe, these narratives persistently disorient the readers. The narrators too often seem to lose their own bearings both temporally and spatially. Such narratives reflect the attempt of situationist cartographers to disrupt the sense of coherence and totality that maps tend to offer. They attempt to “disorient, defamiliarize – to provoke a view from an unaccustomed angle” (Massey, 2005, p. 109) in an attempt to lay bare the incoherencies and fragmentations of the spatial. The spatial, thus, becomes an “arena of possibilities”. Such a cartography runs parallel to the archaeological exercise to reinterpret and rethink historical discourses to explore the possible multiplicities of both space and history.

Such possibilities open up the scope of alternatives to writing and representing history through these narratives which seem to be packed with the potential to interrogate space. Sebald’s narrative technique portrays the same event from different spatial locations and portrays different associative events from the same spatial location. The narrators’ subjective presence

<sup>2</sup> Sartre qtd in Gaál-Szabó, P. (2012). “Building is Dwelling”.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd in Ng-Chan, T. “Mapping out Patience: Cartography, Cinema and W.G. Sebald”.

at a particular space at a particular point of time is often haunted by the presence of other figures from the past or even characters of fiction. Their recounting of events at a certain spatio-temporal location are juxtaposed by events from another time at the same place or at another location at the same time or by similar incidents they had encountered in a different location, creating kaleidoscopic moments. At times, they travel back to the same places and bring forth different experiences and narratives. In the ‘All’estero’ section in *Vertigo*, the narrator, having felt an eerie sense of being stalked, flees Verona which he was visiting to study the works of the renaissance artist, Pisanello. Seven years later, he writes, “I finally yielded to a need I had felt for some time to repeat the journey from Vienna via Venice to Verona, in order to probe my somewhat imprecise recollections of those fraught and hazardous days and perhaps record some of them” (Sebald, 2001, p. 81). During this trip he investigated a series of murders that took place around the last time he had visited Verona. Sebald’s narrator often gives a slightly altered version while narrating a specific event – whether a specific event in history or a personal encounter – from different spatial locations.

Similarly, his account of his immediate spatial location changes with his various forms of associations, experiences and conjectures. What these narratives try to be doing is positing the possibility of the coexistence of different temporalities. Such a coexistence both yields and depends on the dimension of space which – as Massey characterises it – is a dynamic simultaneous multiplicity. Space, along with the possible coexistence of multiple temporalities, makes possible for a heterogeneity of practices and processes – “an ongoing product of interconnections” (Massey, 2005, p. 107). This space of dynamic simultaneity, writes Massey, exists in a flux between that which is constantly disconnected by new arrivals and that which is being determined with by the construction of the new relations. “It is always being made, and always, in a sense, unfinished” (Massey, 2005, p. 107).

The narrators’ movement, it must be mentioned, are not restricted to physical spaces alone. In recounting events and narratives, his location at times shift from real, physical spaces, to imaginative and fictive ones, to the realm of dreams and visions. The various elements that the narrative juxtaposes appear as if they are in a kind of “contradictory emplacement”<sup>4</sup>. When the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*, in his tour, reaches Dunwich Heath, overlooking the North Sea, he comments on the history of that “melancholy region”, the effect of maritime climate on this region and of the rapid deforestation on earth and goes on to comment on the receding forests of the Amazon basin, forest fires and combustion as a hidden principle behind every artefact created which exists through historical and industrial progression. As he walks around with his train of thoughts, he suddenly finds himself lost in a labyrinthine woods. Struck with a feeling of panic, he struggles to find his way out. He then recounts a dream regarding the same labyrinthine path that he has months after this encounter. Throughout this narrative the difference between the narrator’s two separate spatio-temporal locations – the one taking a walk in the county of Suffolk and the other recollecting, remembering and recounting that particular walk – keep getting blurred. The various invasions of the narrator from his present location are hardly noticeable as incursions from a different point in time and space. What seems to be happening in the narrative is a juxtaposition of varying elements and sites which apparently lack a “common ground on which the meeting of these objects is possible” (Foucault, 1970, p. xvi). Sebald, thus, puts forward the potential to imagine a dynamic geography which could make scope for what Gillian Rose calls “paradoxical spaces”. This is a geography “which is as multiple and contradictory and different as the subjectivity imagining it... which overcomes the distinction between mind and body”, refuses to “distinguish between real and

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<sup>4</sup> The third principle of heterotopia from “Of Other Spaces”.



metaphorical space” or to “separate experience and emotion from the interpretation of places” (Rose, 1993, p. 155).

Sebald’s texts abound in (what seem to be) disparate and elaborate interconnections, aimless and unpremeditated ambulations, and juxtapositions of different temporalities and spaces which are physical, cognitive and imaginative. Such connections, movements and juxtapositions actively bring together the temporal of the “pasts” and “histories” with “elsewheres” and “geographies” through the spatial of “memories” and “contexts” (Massey, 2005). In explaining Dasein’s relation to the specific spatiality of beings encountered in the environment, Dreyfus (1991) explains Heidegger’s employment of the word *Entfernung*. “The literal translation of *Entfernung* is “remoteness” or “distance”, but Heidegger uses the word with a hyphen which, given the negative sense of *ent*, would literally mean the abolishing of distance. He uses it this way to mean the establishing and overcoming of distance, that is, the opening up of a space in which things can be near and far... Dasein brings things close in the sense of bringing them within the range of its concern, so that they can be experienced as near to or remote from a particular Dasein.” (p. 80) This is exactly the spatial frame defined by the processes of relational space-time (that Harvey (2004) has elaborated on) which is constituted of interconnections, contexts and relations.

### Space and Identity

Sebald’s narratives, thus, open up the possibilities of both history and space. In defining space, various thinkers have described it as a moment frozen in time. Many have tried describing space as a dimension in opposition to time or that which lacks temporality. Time, it may be said, is effortlessly perceived as abstract, as something inherent and as a product of human experience, while space is accepted as that which is material, an extension which is a given – time as something internal in opposition to space, which is external. Often space has been understood as a set of relations within a closed and interlocked system<sup>5</sup>. This closure, explains Massey (2005), “robs the ‘spatial’ of one of its potentially disruptive characteristics – its juxtaposition, its happenstance arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other, of previously unconnected narratives/temporalities; its openness and its condition of always being made” (p. 39). Through his narratives, Sebald explores the conditions of possibilities of this “always-being-made” aspect of both history and space. This also offers the possibility of wrenching apart of temporalities and narratives. The “disruptive” characteristic of space can dislocate established forms of knowledge and “truth”. Austerlitz’s constructed erasure of his past, for instance, collapses when his spatial encounters incite the resurfacing of his buried memories. The spatial juxtaposition of Sebald’s narratives tend towards an openness of space, opposing a synchronic totality. In these spatial configurations, unconnected narratives are brought together in context, creating a spatial frame of an indeterminate zone consisting of various temporalities, micronarratives and fictive possibilities which constantly seem to be working towards an accommodation, even if it is a volatile one. These juxtapositions are not simply a random “mixing together” of various elements to highlight their possible contemporaneity or even a “rebellion against the over-rationalization of closed structures” (Massey, 2005, p. 112). Instead, they work towards a spatial configuration of the coexistence of multiple, complex trajectories which may result in an open-ended space-time to offer a re-presentation of both history and geography. Such a configuration exceeds the limitations of dialectical resolutions and perpetually try to escape the boundaries set for them by diverse contingencies.

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<sup>5</sup> Space as a set of relations of interlocked system is understood and explained as such most significantly by Structuralists. See Massey (For Space), p. 39.

Like the juxtapositions of what might seem to be random events and situations of space and time, the movements of the narrators through various settings are not simply aimless ambulations of the flaneurs' limited phenomenological response to their immediate milieu either<sup>6</sup>. Sebald is not unaware of his privilege to travel and navigate. "To travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy", wrote bell hooks<sup>7</sup> upon which Derek Gregory (1994) comments that the "freedom to move, to read, to write...is a situated freedom, a 'cosmopolitanism', that is gendered, classed and ironically located" (p. 13). Gregory also points out that Western space has been conceived in the image of a masculine, phallogocentric power that has been more concerned with rationality and space rather than the rationalization of space. "Space itself is represented as the physical embodiment of (masculine) rationality whose structures are to be superimposed over 'non space'" (Gregory, 1994, p. 130). Lefebvre (1979) comments on how space functions by assigning appropriated places to social relations based on gender, age, the specified organization of the family, and to the "relations of production in the division of labour and its organization" (p. 186). The narrator, in questioning the authenticity of his own account and casting doubts in his role as a narrator, through and in his very movements (from real and physical spaces to metaphorical and cognitive spaces) which lead to his task of recounting and narrating, is making a choice not to obscure his subjective position but to consciously incorporate it in his narrative.

The two texts in which Sebald deals with the narratives of both German (in *The Emigrants*) and non-German (in *Austerlitz*) Jews, the narrators are extremely conscious of their own identity and position (of a non-Jewish German) in relating the tales of the Jewish subjects. Stuart Taberner (2005) questions whether it is possible for a German author to commemorate Jewish lives without indulging in a kind of melancholia to address the guilt of the narrator whose forbears were directly involved in the persecution of the Jews. The 1990s, Taberner writes, witnessed a controversial debate in German literature regarding addressing the question of German Jews by non-Jewish German writers. Writers like Matthias Altenburg commented that this was best left to Jewish writers themselves. To this, some Jewish writers took issue, claiming that this was an easy way out for German writers, to both absolve themselves of and to not entirely come to terms with the anti-Semitism that gained force in German lands. Sebald himself resonated a similar anxiety when he mentioned in an interview that a German writer cannot simply go ahead and say, now I write about Jews again (Taberner, 2005, p. 185). Sebald's narrators are careful in keeping their voices distinct from those of the Jewish characters. Katharina Hall comments on lack of resolution in narratives of *The Emigrants* and the use of documentary and imaginative materials in the narratives<sup>8</sup>. The tension that ensues from this technique, according to her, is highly productive as it "keeps open – the wounds of a traumatic history and refuses narrative closure" (Taberner, 2005, p. 186).

This open-endedness of the narrative runs parallel to the openness of space that has been pointed at earlier. The simultaneous multiplicity of trajectories could not be clearer than at the end of *Austerlitz* when the eponymous protagonist and the narrator part ways – the former moves on in an attempt to retrieve what he can of his lost past while the latter revisits the Breendonk Fort (which had once served as a Nazi internment and torture camp) which he had visited earlier right after meeting Austerlitz, bringing about a circular end to his own narrative. Taberner points out that if "Austerlitz's dilemma is that he has too *little* evidence of the past, the narrator's is that he has *too much*" (p. 190), the evidence of the spatial evidence ghettos,

<sup>6</sup> There have been significant criticisms of the figure of the flaneur, most importantly by feminists. See Elizabeth Wilson's "The Invisible Flaneur" and so on.

<sup>7</sup> Qtd in Gregory, Derek. Geographical imaginations, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination".

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Taberner.

concentration camps and mass graves all across Europe being constant reminders of the actions of his countrymen – a congealing of various elements from the past and present towards a projected future. One cannot escape the burdens of their past. The “situated freedom” of the narrator turns on its head when the narrator tries to come to terms with his own historical trajectory; his freedom of movement becomes marked with anxiety and turmoil. But such distress and agitation are not meant to run parallel with, or in any way reflect, the trauma of the Jewish survivors and figures in the narratives.

With the opening up of history and space, Sebald’s narrator successfully avoids collapsing his narrative with the one whose tale he relates. “We cannot understand the shifting terrain”, writes Harvey, “upon which political subjectivities are formed and political actions occur without thinking about what happens in relational terms” (2004, p. 276). Sebald’s political subjectivity in addressing the problematic question of identification with Jews dispels “a ‘normalization’ of relations between Germans and Jews which serves primarily to allow non-Jewish Germans to feel comfortable” (Taberner, 2005, p. 190). In the course of the narratives, the narrators often bring into question and doubt their respective versions of events as evident from the episode of Vienna (in *Vertigo*) cited earlier. The narrators’ historical and spatial positionality are often brought into question. The narrator’s remark on the Waterloo Panorama in *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, is not simply a metaphor for a temporal aerial view of history but also the geographical location from which history is both written and read. The “place” from which history (and knowledge) is being perceived, represented and (re)produced is interrogated. His criticism is of the synoptic and, at the same time, incomplete view and understanding of history that the spatio-temporality of the moment, in its perception of singular, non-simultaneous and non-contiguous trajectories, is prone to offer.

“Places” must be understood as spatio-temporal events, which are a “moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space” (Massey, 2005, p.131). What emerges out of a particular moment in space can never be accepted as conclusive since that very moment in space-time is always under production, a perpetual part of various processes. The idea of “place”, must therefore act as a challenge to the negotiations of the “here” and “now”. And Sebald’s narratives challenge, expose and unpack the power-knowledge nexus that this spatio-temporality is uncritically associated with.

### **Conclusion: The Politics of Space**

Through such a technique of narration Sebald seems to refuse to hold on to any foundational categories – either of history or space. This directly echoes Samuel Beckett’s insistence on the need to consider ourselves as inhabiting an indeterminate zone without access to any fundamental certainties and his rejection of all facile conceptions of place (Prieto, 2012). Maurice Blanchot (1995) too, in his essay, “The Conquest of Space”, urges the need to sever the affective bonds that tie people to places. Discussing Yuri Gagarin’s flight to space, he remarks that rationalism and science have resulted in the loss of a common ground on which we have traditionally stood. This is a condition that one should embrace and push to its logical conclusion. This severing of the bond between the people and place will make possible a new spatial science – one that will reframe the old ways of understanding human spatial existence as local subsets of universal laws (Prieto, 2012, p. 82). Blanchot claims that “truth is nomadic” (1995, p. 271). Truth cannot be determined by spatial or historical fixities. Neither space nor history can be conclusively determined or be perceived as a stabilization.

The juxtaposition and coequality of multiple trajectories – the dynamic simultaneity of space –

can also make scope for the chance of space. Massey (2005) explains this chance within the “constant formation of spatial configurations, those complex mixtures of pre-planned spatiality and happenstance positions-in-relation-to-each-other” (p. 116). The happenstance of juxtaposition, she writes, offers the possibility of surprise (which, she criticizes, Certeau claimed is eliminated by spatialization) through the impossibility of closure, the indeterminacy that is resulted, the unpredictability and the unforeseen and the possibilities of alterity. The instability and the potential of the spatial, according to her, make all space a little accidental, and all having an element of heterotopia. This, however, makes an over-generalization of heterotopias. The kind of innovative spatiality Massey’s work offers does indeed reflect the idea of heterotopia very closely. While it is true that any given moment in space-time has the potential to translate into a heterotopia, Foucault’s conceptualization of it is characterized by its transformative promise.

Foucault (1986), in “Of Other Spaces”, describes heterotopic spaces through a set of relations giving the readers hints of the political and social dynamics that operate within such spaces. What interests Foucault is that heterotopias (and utopias<sup>9</sup>) are sites that “simultaneously represent, contest and invert” the sets of relations of the society or civilization that they constitute. While describing heterotopia, Foucault begins with categorizing such spaces as crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation. Crisis heterotopias, existing in what is believed to be primitive societies, are places that are reserved for certain group of people believed to be in a state of crisis. The crisis heterotopias have been replaced by places of detention, rehabilitation and curability – called the heterotopias of deviation – for those who do not comply with social codes and standards of behaviour, morality or even health. The function of heterotopias does not stay constant according to Foucault. It can change as the society within which the particular heterotopia is placed changes. Foucault attempts to create a metaphor like the heterotopia for certain spaces which are, at once, “mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live”. Heterotopias function as distinct alternatives to our diurnal lived spaces. David Harvey (2000), even while dismissing the concept of heterotopia as inadequate, describes it as a potential alternative which “might be explored and can take the shape and from where a critique of existing norms and processes can most effectively be mounted” (p. 184). While Sebald’s narratives strive towards an opening up of space and history, heterotopias are those momentary events with subtle yet definite boundaries. These boundaries are, of course, permeable and unstable. The limits of heterotopias are in a constant flux of crystallization and disintegration. Foucault explains, “heterotopias begin to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with traditional time”. Heterotopia comes into play as and when Sebald juxtaposes various elements which seem to lack a common site. Such a juxtaposition produces a kind of volatile space – the heterotopia – which has the potential to function as a counter-site which can “simultaneously represent, contest and invert” the set of relations which inform history writing and narration as well as an order of space. Heterotopias consist of juxtapositions and simultaneity which can offer a critical awareness. This is exactly what Sebald’s narratives exemplify<sup>10</sup>. Heterotopia becomes that tool of discourse for Sebald through which his narrators challenge the nexus of space and history,

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<sup>9</sup> Utopias, much as heterotopias, function to neutralize or invert the very set of relations that they seem to reflect. Yet they are essentially non-existent places- only ideas that cannot be realized in lived spaces.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Knight in his doctoral thesis, *Real Places and Impossible Spaces*, posits that Sebald’s narratives are a critique of heterotopia because of their inadequacy of representing the unique “unimaginability” of the spaces and sites of the Holocaust. While this is a significant and credible claim to make, Knight seems to be holding on to a rather narrow definition of a heterotopia and applying it specifically to representations of those spaces that are geographically linked (or in contrast) to the Holocaust. My focus, on the other hand, is to examine and stretch the possibility of the transformative potential of heterotopias. Knight professes that Sebald critiques heterotopias. My claim, however, is that Sebald employs heterotopia to critique certain, apparently unquestionable, manifestations of space and history.

power and knowledge. Edward Soja calls for the need of a significant restructuring of critical social thought, “a recomposition which enables us to see more clearly the long-hidden instrumentality of human geographies, in particular the encompassing of spatialization of social life that have been associated with the historical development” of society (Soja, 1989, p. 24). Sebald’s mode of narration challenges the notion of a dead, fixed, undialectical, and immobile space. His narratives put forward the idea that space should be seen as a “product of interrelation...always under construction” (Massey, 2005).

Spatiality in the novels is defined as a dynamic process which is essential to an alternative representation of history. In the course of challenging both the physical spatial limits and the history that this location usually produces, a mechanism of heterotopia comes into play. It is in these volatile moments in space-time in the narratives that we can read recalcitrance and resistance. Sebald’s narratives, in contesting the notions of space and history, create volatile moments of discursive heterotopias. These moments are a “collision of future and past”; a point in space where the past, present and future come together (Stuart, 2002, p. 45). These moments of collision create illusions of freedom. They perform as counter-sites which are “simultaneously mythic and real contestations” (Foucault, 1986). If a particular kind of mix of order and chance is integral to spatial (re)configuration in an open space-time (as Massey calls for), heterotopias are those moments which are “disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to but also opposite one another) to hang together” (Foucault, 1970, p. 48). Sebald’s narratives and (re)presentation of history thus cease to be simply narratives or histories but dynamic processes constituted by various heterotopic spatio-historical moments which make scope for knowledge to be “analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a source of power and disseminates the effects of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 69).

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**Corresponding author:** Richa Gupta  
**Contact email:** rcha.gupta@gmail.com