

## Geographies of Memory: Ruth Beckermann's Film Aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

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*Dedicated to the memory of Carla Jetschmann*

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.

—(Benjamin, *Illuminations* 266)

In the past two decades or so, the workings of cultural memory and its relationship to historical representation have obsessed not only producers of culture and art, but also politicians, journalists, and the general public. The centrality of memory for defining and preserving national narratives of identity and origin has been a prevalent focus in studies of the impact of the Holocaust and its meaning within German and Austrian culture. Much has been written about

the boom in memory projects and studies by scholars and authors such as Jay Winter, James Young, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Marianne Hirsch, Pierre Nora, Jan and Aleida Assmann, and countless others. These scholars have considered among other attributes the spatial qualities of remembrance and its representation in literature, memoirs, historical sites, and memorials. Portrayals of historical places as imagined spaces where memories emerge or disappear are often triggered in film and in narrative prose through geographical images and tropes that map the formation of identity over time and through space. At the same time, the loss of home and the physical displacement through atrocity, war, exile, and diaspora are recalled through the embodiment of experience in filmic renditions of individual lives. That is, the geography of remembering becomes located in the mediated images of those who are represented as diasporic figures in photographs and documentary films and embodied through the filmic rendition of places and faces.

In this essay I consider the dimensions of memory in *Ein flüchtiger Zug nach dem Orient* (A Fleeting Passage to the Orient; 1999) and in the recent videography *europamemoria* (2003) by the Austrian Jewish film maker and writer Ruth Beckermann. Whereas Beckermann's previous films explored the multiplicity of Jewish identities, her more recent work has turned to a more collective notion of diaspora as experienced by immigrants, exiles, and long-term residents of Europe whose origins lie elsewhere geographically. I consider Beckermann's conjuring of memory through places and faces in contrast to the prose of the late German writer W. G. Sebald in order to show how the experience of diaspora as portrayed through sites of remembrance and by faces is differently gendered.<sup>2</sup> That is, the transmission of cultural memory in both Beckermann's and Sebald's work diverges when the sites and faces portrayed are contextualized from within gendered notions of place.

Geographical metaphors and tropes abound in Beckermann's films. One need only recall that they all contain references to actual places or sensations of being in the world. Titles such as *Wien retour* (Return to Vienna; 1983), *Die papierene Brücke* (The Paper Bridge; 1987), *Jenseits des Krieges* (East of War; 1996), or *Ein flüchtiger Zug nach dem Orient* (A Fleeting Passage to the Orient; 1999) are cases in point. Beckermann's films conjure up geographies of memory

that go beyond the memorialization and commemoration of the dead and the victims of atrocity and war. Just as Beckermann draws from actual spaces to depict the spaces where a silenced or unspoken remembrance can be seen or heard, so too does Sebald depict sites that have become emblematic for a tradition already present in the work of early twentieth-century writers such as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and, of course, Walter Benjamin, whose work depicted the technological upheaval of the nineteenth century.

Specifically, I explore how the narratives by W. G. Sebald give us insight into how sites of memory are created and experienced in Beckermann's film. What are the spatial attributes of memory that transform isolated experiences and snatches of recollection into coherent geographies of memory? In what ways do Beckermann's images of the past take place within a context that is marked by gender rather than by a collective, often universalized trauma? Often sites of remembrance signify loss, leave-taking, or destruction. Benjamin's evocation of Jewish memory quoted at the beginning of this essay seems to define Beckermann's film aesthetic as a form of secularized redemption and resistance.<sup>3</sup> One of the most prevalent ways of conjuring up an alternative to the sense of upheaval and anxiety about the loss of memory—even when remembering is the obsession—is to portray this sense of displacement through sites that bear meaning linked to cultural upheaval and transformation, such as the railway station. However, at the same time that the railway station becomes emblematic of trauma and displacement, the depiction of those whose lives have been shaped by the experience of trauma and displacement goes beyond the structures of this allegorical place. I consider Beckermann's film aesthetic within the framework of Benjamin's notion of remembrance, to show how sites of memory emerge in film, but also in Sebald's prose. I will close with an analysis of Beckermann's *europamemoria* as an example of a face-to-face encounter that most closely resembles a moment of responding to the Other that the Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests can only emerge when others encounter one another through the lens of difference, rather than identification. The face-to-face encounter between the viewer and the mediated face of the object of the camera becomes, in Beckermann's work, the intangible space where remembrance is both evoked and saved.

## 1. Theorizing Sites of Remembrance

I propose that we consider film as a medium that relies on the power of places to evoke memory. This is particularly cogent when the sites emerge out of the melding of actual physical sites that take form through imagination or out of testimony, even as the locations of the past are no longer embodied in actual places. Therefore, my interest here is in the sites of remembrance that have no physical location, but that mark the intersection of the past and the present—so necessary to imagine a future. They are the sites that emerge in encounters between human beings, not unlike the commemoration of the dead in a religious service. I am interested in how memories are situated in film through connection to the dead, but also through gestures, sounds, and images that conjure up not what happened per se, but what could have happened and what may happen still.

There are a number of approaches to creating sites of memory in film as suggested in Beckermann's films, but also in narratives by writers such as Benjamin or Sebald who write about the experience of diaspora or the desire to create a semblance of home through memory. Their writing creates an imaginary geography of human encounters in which rememberers situate themselves vis-à-vis the past based on the experience of disrupted genealogies. Repressed past is revealed through the horrific landscape of displacement and atrocity that constitutes many of the cultures of memory in the twentieth century. Memory literally takes place through the encounter between individuals. As individuals tell their stories and as we hear their voices and see their faces, a space opens up between us in which the past takes form as a site that is both constructed from remnants and constantly in danger of being deconstructed and re-scattered like the debris piling up around Benjamin's allegorical angel of history.

Let us recall a notion of memory as *Eingedenken*—insightful commemoration—most prevalent in the writing of Benjamin. *Eingedenken* is not so much cognitive or historical memory, but a memory of affective recognition, involving the senses of sight and insight. Approaching memory from this vantage point, we can turn

to other narratives useful for imagining how sites of memory are embodied not in concrete objects or stone, but through narratives of geography and of genealogy based not on continuity, but on leave-taking and of perpetual dislocation.

In his dialectical method of understanding how the past can be experienced not as “dead time” but as living memory, Benjamin calls for a perception of the past in which there is “the increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing” (*Arcades* 329). Thus, following Benjamin, intangible sites of memory draw attention to discrepancies in the way the past is perceived and represented in the nexus between subjective recollection and historical documentation. What prevents reality from reaching the higher grade of actuality that permits us insight into the workings of repression and oppression? The ability to see the discrepancies emerges through a “double perspective” in which what has been left out or left unsaid and what remains in the present are juxtaposed in a new light. This perspective allows sites to emerge in Beckermann’s films, for example, through the unadulterated spoken word and through disjunctures between what we hear and what we see. The recollection of a past time is juxtaposed with documentary footage from that time and does not evoke authentic experience, but rather contextualizes and situates the memory traces of a mediated experience. Black-and-white footage is enhanced through the work of memory and, correspondingly, the individual recollection is placed within the framework of history. As we know, neither one alone is sufficient to convey experience, but both together can evoke that dialectical image of the past that opens up the moment of resistance to the status quo in the present from which Benjamin writes.

The disjunction between what we hear and what we see enables us as viewers and as listeners to get a glimpse of how memory works. I am not referring to rote memory here, but rather to the remembrance that emerges when one has the presence of mind to notice the cracks in a story, the discrepancy between recorded history and the memories of an individual. The past is mediated not through coherent narration or chronology, but rather as a series of flashes—those strange juxtapositions that seem out of place, but

which sharpen our ability to see dialectical images.

Sites of remembrance distinguish themselves from sites of history through the discontinuity and interruption of the historical flow that they embody. Memories emerge at a site when a divide between the past and the present takes place. As Aleida Assmann has so vividly described, at a site of memory a certain history has ceased; it has been more or less abruptly interrupted (“Erinnerungsorte” 16). I would add that narrative prose and film can produce or represent not the site of memory *per se*, but the many-layered and often contradictory experiences associated with a site. The interrupted history manifests itself in ruins or in relics that appear to be foreign remains and therefore different from the surroundings and out of place.<sup>4</sup> The interrupted history is petrified in the remains and exists in the present as an aberration and as something that cannot be completely absorbed and thus completely forgotten. Repressed, yes, but forgotten, no. These remains are also often overlooked or unseen in the present unless their traces are noticed by someone, usually in a moment of sudden insight or involuntary recollection. Often sites of memory are places of trauma for which no conscious narrative exists; again Assmann: “The traumatic site stores the virulence of an experience as a past that does not rest and that refuses to recede into the distance” (19, my translation). Auschwitz is such a site, but it is also a place that holds a multiplicity of meanings depending on who encounters it and when. Visiting a site of memory does not mean that anyone can experience its trauma. There can be no identification between the experiences of the victims, of the visitors, or of the perpetrators even as a site becomes the placeholder of memory. Assmann warns us that the prevalence of sites of memory across Europe is not just a manifestation of modernity with its tendency for displacement and disruption, but a result of intentional violence and destruction: “It is decisive for this landscape of memory and its culture of remembrance that the transformation from a milieu (of memory) to a place of memory is not the result of a historical change in structure, but an intentional act of destruction . . .” (27). Thus these sites exist outside of a simple classification and absorption into the collective memory. They cannot become symbolic for one collective experience.

These sites of memory are often intangible, and they appear

often in Beckermann's films, not as actual physical spaces, but as flashes of recognition that take place in that crevice between historical documentation and subjective remembrance. Even as the location of the filming—a living room, the interior of a train passing through Vienna, a cold and sterile exhibit space, or a dream-like landscape—exist in reality, Beckermann's situating of memory in them creates other, more compelling spaces. Of her film *East of War* Beckermann writes: "Often I pictured historic oil paintings, giant paintings of battles, where horrible scenes took place over an immense area that was overrun by war. The film was to have a similar quality, a vastness that would reveal the traces of the geographical dimensions."<sup>5</sup>

## 2: Tracking Sites of Remembrance

Just as sites of atrocity seem to have an intangible quality to them, other sites that have become implicated in atrocity also carry multiple meanings for those who remember them. My concern here is to understand why particular physical locations have become emblematic of these intangible spaces of memory that are both imbued with the specific trauma of the Shoah, for example, and yet evoke other memories that are associated with other existential and historical traumas—namely the railway station. Recall the narrator's description in Sebald's *Austerlitz* of the *Salle des pas perdus* in the Antwerp central railroad station, where he first encounters Austerlitz, one of the many emigrants who traverse Sebald's narrative worlds: "The gleam of the gold and silver on the huge, half-obscured mirrors on the walls facing the windows was not yet entirely extinguished before a subterranean twilight filled the waiting room, where a few travelers sat far apart, silent and motionless" (6). The waiting room has a ghost-like quality to it, and the narrator becomes disoriented and yet sees sharply the afterlife of the colonialization and then deportation that still haunts the station:

Over the years, images of the interior of the Nocturama have become confused with my memories of the *Salle des pas perdus*, as it is called, in the Antwerp Centraal Station. If I try to conjure up a picture of that waiting room today, I immediately see the Nocturama, and if I think

of the Nocturama, the waiting room springs to mind, probably because when I left the zoo that afternoon I went straight into the station, or rather first stood in the square outside it for some time to look up at the façade of that fantastical building, which I had taken in only vaguely when I arrived in the morning. Now, however, I saw how far the station constructed under the patronage of King Leopold II exceeded its purely utilitarian function, and I marveled at the verdigris-covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and the native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky. (5-6)

The green film of forgetfulness and decay that covers the representation of the native as ornament and conquest oddly preserves the collective memory of a de-sensitized history. The narrator dissects the meticulous record of architectural meaning in the railway station by comparing it to the spaces of the Nocturama and describing not only its architectural attributes, but the conflation of its historical monumentalist meaning, in Nietzschean terms, and the Freudian trace memories that are retrieved through the displacement of the space of the Nocturama into the space of the railway station:

Like the creatures of the Nocturama, which included a strikingly large number of dwarf species—tiny fennec foxes, spring-hares, hamsters—the railway passengers seemed to me somehow miniaturized, whether because of the unusual height of the ceiling or because of the gathering dusk, and it was this, I suppose, which prompted the passing thought, nonsensical in itself, that they were the last members of a diminutive race which had perished or had been expelled from its homeland, and that because they alone survived, they wore the same sorrowful expression as the creatures in the zoo. (6)

The transgenus crossing of human and animal figures that pervades these and other passages in *Austerlitz* is further envisioned through the juxtaposition of human and animal eyes in the photographs interspersed throughout the text (4-5). The doubling of the swatches of owl and human eyes creates a space of encounter into which the reader as viewer and reader steps. The narrator's

movement through the Nocturama and through the railway station conjures up images of the past that have withstood the ravages of time. Indeed, the barmaid in the waiting room, whom the narrator and Austerlitz describe as “the goddess of time past” and whose peroxide-blond bird’s-nest hair completes the transgenus coupling, is herself “enthroned” in front of a “mighty clock” (8). Time is all but suspended, and the jerky, heavy movement of the clock’s tremendous hand is both awesome and menacing. The remnants of colonialization and the displacement of entrapped natives into caged animals and as those expelled from their homeland into railway passengers marks this scene. The uncanny traces of times gone by are both inscribed in the spatial ornaments of buildings and in the interior spaces of those buildings that have lost their function but “saved” their meaning. In the prose this space becomes one of those intangible spaces of remembrance and, at the same time, opens up the possibility of encounters across time, between humans, and across species.

The protagonist—or rather the rememberer—Austerlitz spends time in places in which time is seemingly suspended and where imaginary encounters with the dead take place. The photographs that appear in the text are themselves sites of memory—conduits to another way of seeing and not simply illustrations to enhance the visual impact of the text. As J. M. Coetzee remarks in a review of Sebald’s work, the photographs are “a kind of eye or node of linkage between the past and the present, enabling the living to see the dead and the dead to see the living, the survivors” (25). The snapshots lead us to other places of encounter: the railroad waiting room and the train itself. Trains are eerie creatures—they are both the vehicles of escape and wondrous journeys and ominous carriers of the deported and the doomed. (Claude Lanzmann’s famous shots of trains and tracks in his epic *Shoah*, for example, do not demonize trains per se, but rather call attention to their changed meaning in a cultural landscape imbued with the remnants of the Shoah.)

Why are trains and railroad stations recurring images that stand in for intangible sites of memory where, for an instant outside of time, the repressed past comes into view? The archival and, at the same time, haunting prose of Sebald’s works such as *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* bears a close resemblance to the memory work

that Beckermann's films beg us to do. Beckermann's films take us on many journeys by train in order to remind us that our perception is not only muddled by the passage of time and by selective memory, but also by the very technology that gets us from one place to another. What is so atavistic about the image of the railroad and the images from moving trains of cities or of travel along roads? As Beckermann herself has noted in an interview about her film *A Fleeting Passage to the Orient*, which traces the journey to Egypt of Elisabeth, the Empress of Austria, there is something fascinating and enigmatic about a person of Elisabeth's stature being on the move and traveling to "exotic" places in order to suspend the musty enclosures of traditions and of chronological time: "In the oriental bazaars and the loud streets, behind the 'bed fortresses' on the periphery of the cities, where the apocalyptic smokestacks rise out of the archaic, pottery-making huts, the present and the past are in a kaleidoscope-like state of siege" (*Ein flüchtiger Zug*).<sup>6</sup> In her statement about the film, Beckermann notes that Elisabeth's travel coincided with changes in technology—the acceleration of movement, the shrinkage of distances through the railroad, and, in contrast, the suspension of time through the photograph. On the other hand, the technology of film captures the experience of the rapidity of city life and the rise of the modern city. It both exposes and conceals how the very perception or way of seeing had been radically changed by technology and dwelling in cities. Even as the development of the railway runs along the lines of industrialization and speed associated with the overcoming of nature, often regarded as masculine, the stations themselves are often depicted in terms of female metaphors associated with womb-like structures of enclosure. This gendered signification of the site of the railway station and of the railroad has a long tradition that is worth exploring before we turn to Beckermann's own rendition of this site in her films.

Sometime during or shortly before World War I, in the second volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust wrote a haunting, almost prophetic description of the experience of travel that accentuates this contradiction at the highly gendered space of the railroad station. This passage expresses the work of memory at a place where time is suspended and the gap between the past and the present suddenly disappears in the flash of recognition that an era has come

to an end, but that the unfinished business of the past will continue to enter the present:

Unhappily those marvelous places which are railway stations, from which one sets out for a remote destination, are tragic places also, for if in them the miracle is accomplished whereby scenes which hitherto have had no existence save in our minds are to become the scene among which we shall be living, for that very reason we must, as we emerge from the waiting-room, abandon any thought of finding our self once again within the familiar walls which, but a moment ago, were still enclosing us. We must lay aside all hope of going home to sleep in our own bed, once we have made up our mind to penetrate into the pestiferous cavern through which we may have access to the mystery, into one of those vast glass-roofed sheds, like that of Saint Lazare into which I must go to find the train for Balbec, and which extended over the rent bowels of the city one of those bleak and boundless skies, heavy with an accumulation of dramatic menaces, like certain skies painted with an almost Parisian modernity by Mantegna or Veronese, beneath which could be accomplished only some solemn and tremendous act, such as a departure by train or Elevation of the cross. (Proust 490)

More telling than the passage of time, however, is the metaphysical quality of the space formed by the railway station. An invention of the nineteenth century, the railway represents the uncanny sensation of being at home, enclosed, and of entering the unknown, the world just beyond the cavernous openings. Thus, the domestic scene of warmth and safety is in contrast with the more masculine notion of an outer world of endless space for conquest, even as the conquest is colored by anxiety. In more graphic language, the station, like the waiting room in Sebald's description, becomes simultaneously a vagina penetrated, a womb that expels its contents, and the bowels that release waste. The station is both a passage out of hell and into hell, from life into death, and back again. The monumental structures that embody the remnants of a colonial past at a moment of disruption are at the same time depicted in gendered terms of anatomy and sensation.

Benjamin, who was an avid translator of Proust and who most

probably knew this passage, would write sometime between 1927 and his death in 1940, most probably in Parisian exile, another view of the railroad station that is no less allegorical, mythic, or memorable (Sebald will also borrow Proust's image of the mythic quality of railroad stations in *Austerlitz*):

The Gare Saint-Lazare: a puffing, wheezing princess with the stare of a clock. "For our type of man," says Jacques de Lacretelle, "train stations are truly factories of dreams" ("Le Reveur parisien," *Nouvelle Revue française*, 1927). To be sure: today, in the age of automobiles and airplane, it is only faint, atavistic terrors which still lurk within the blackened sheds; and that stale comedy of farewell and reunion, carried on before a background of Pullman cars, turns the railway platform into a provincial stage. Once again we see performed the timeworn Greek melodrama: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes at the station. Through the mountains of luggage surrounding the figure of the nymph looms the steep and rocky path, the crypt into which she sinks when the Hermaic conductor with the signal disk, watching for the moist eye of Orpheus, gives the sign for departure. Scar of departure, which zigzags, like the crack on a Greek vase, across the painted bodies of the gods. (*Arcades* 405-06)

The scene of departure is mythologized in terms of gender relations. The railroad is transformed into a "wheezing princess." The ominous presence of time, feminized, reminds the male, "our type of man," of the folly of his insistence on looking back. The terror here described is nothing less than the loss of control over the return of the feminine and the eternal loss of Eurydice, an embodiment of the muse.

How might this snapshot of the moment in history when the railway station became the emblematic site of displacement and of anxiety that so marked modernity be pictured in an age where the railroad seems quaint in light of air travel? Do contemporary memories of this moment in time collectivize the modern experience of those who traverse the interior of the railway station, such as the immigrants, the deportees, the idle travelers, and those with places to go—in essence a repeat of the Greek tragedy, the tragedy of loss? Or, even more poignantly, the forsaken, who, like Jesus on the

cross implied by Proust's conjuring of the "Elevation of the cross," are a sign of utter abandonment? No matter how much Benjamin's elegiac image persuades us to recall Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the desire to stop time or to imagine eternity and to experience a moment of bliss before time and the cruelty of fellow human beings intervenes; the loss is based on the desire to remember the past. Yet the banality of the scene is exactly what we are drawn to. We want to believe that this is a scene that can be repeated, that can be imprinted in our memory and stored for the subsequent period of overcoming loss. We want to believe that despite the terror of no return, the scars will heal, even as running one's fingers across them will remind one of the injury.

### 3: Beckermann's Mode of Memory

Beckermann's films both depict and imagine sites of memory by framing human faces within a constellation not unlike Sebald's narrative figures whose subjective lives are encapsulated in architectural spaces. What are the actual techniques by which a space for remembering is created and brings insight, be it elegiac, nostalgic, or melancholic? As Elfriede Jelinek once wrote, one of the beauties of Beckermann's films is that they include these moments, too, even as they have an irony that cuts through the sentimentalization or romanticization of the past. We may recall from scenes in *The Paper Bridge* the emphasis on loss, on sorrow, and on the inability to bring closure to the grieving process, even as nostalgia takes the form of a longing for a time seemingly less fraught with tragedy, atrocity, and hardship. As Renate Posthofen comments in her essay "Ruth Beckermann: Re-Activating Memory," the journey to Beckermann's father's hometown in the film is both a "quest for a virtual and spiritual home, and the recovery of her cultural and historical roots" (270). Beckermann's films have created sites of memory that may appear melancholic or nostalgic at first glance, but the images also insist that we as viewers question the underlying and sometimes repressive causes for memories that haunt some and not others.

Beckermann's films and her videographic installation *europa-memoria* practice a geography of memory consisting of sites of

memory that are intangible, yet capable of being perceived through insight. They are preserved as images, as flashes, and as jolts in a dialectical interplay of sound and vision, and above all in the depiction of the world through the windows of railway cars and face-to-face encounters.

At first glance, *Return to Vienna* and *East of War* seem to have very little in common. The first is a documentary film that employs documentary footage, collages, oral interviews, and voiceovers, and traces the biography of Franz West (Franz Weintraub), a Jew and a communist, whose life story also serves as a microcosm of the socio-political developments in Vienna from the 1920s to the present. It is organized around a now typical structure in films about survivors of the Shoah and emigrants: assimilated childhoods, family genealogies broken through National Socialist deportation and murder of Jews, survival, and remembrance. Past and present are frequently juxtaposed, as are exterior and interior spaces that represent the exclusion and return of West. The second film, made in 1996, contains no documentary footage and features approximately three weeks worth of shooting chance interviews with visitors to the controversial exhibit of Wehrmacht photos in a Viennese exhibition hall. Made over ten years apart and under very different circumstances and with different technical means, the two films nevertheless share a common strand that Beckermann weaves again and again into her films: a siting/sighting of memory and placing it squarely on an imaginary map of real places—Vienna, Leopoldstadt, and the Eastern front, particularly Poland. By juxtaposing images with the sound of a narrative and by creating a montage that defies chronology even as it creates a coherent narrative, the camera work and the editing situate memories in the here and now but allow the viewer to see the memories unfolding even as they appear to be unseen by the figures the viewers see in the films. The naming of the locations of lives, of the stations of a life and of the moment of trauma, but also of the forgetting of the trauma, is not removed to a universal place of human experience, but rather made specific and concrete. Each recollection is attached to a place, to a specific time, and thus becomes itself a place suspended in time.

In *East of War* the gestures we see reveal the real intensity of the words we hear when nine out of ten of the former Wehrmacht

soldiers avert their eyes at a similar point in their narration, or when the one or two who feel remorse wring their hands. Over and over the protagonists say “I saw,” but what did they see and why can’t they remember exactly what they saw? Without seeing what they may have seen (except as unreadable and out-of-focus shadows of the photo exhibition itself), we as viewers are left with a discomfort that Dagmar Lorenz notes in her article on the film and that Ruth Beckermann herself has referred to in her notes on the filmmaking process. That discomfort becomes a site of remembrance that fills one with the horror that something took place (and is taking place), and that even fifty years later its audible description does not stop it from happening again.

Even as the documentary footage in other films by Beckermann shows us that buildings crumble, that monumental power is preserved and lost, or that a landscape can appear nondescript and common, a voice recalls otherwise. The geography of memory furthermore creates a genealogical map that recalls the individuality of each life, each experience, Jewish or otherwise. In *Return to Vienna* we listen to Franz Weintraub alias Frank West speak about the stations of his life as a Jew in Vienna and as a devout and increasingly leftist supporter of the workers’ movement before the Second World War. The film ends with his narrative of the loss. He plays a tape for the filmmakers that he recorded in solitude the night before. He remembers the family members, the many brothers and sisters of his mother, who were deported, killed by the Nazis, or disappeared without a trace. He names their dwellings and recalls their places of work, their homes, and their characteristics. It is an homage and a confirmation of the family ties that survive despite distance and despite destruction. The disembodied voice and the mediation of the memory through the tape recorder at once preserve the most intimate detail of the telling and allow this story to enter the public sphere of collective memory without violating Weintraub’s own private sphere of grief. That is, his sorrow is not absorbed into a collectivized history of the Shoah as much as it creates a realization that empathy does not mean identification. We can empathize with Weintraub, but we will never know the pain of his loss.

The late French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote in *Time and the Other* of the face-to-face encounter between the

"I" and the Other, that is, an encounter between human beings that is predicated neither on identification nor on an understanding of the Other by "walking in one's shoes," as it were (18); rather, it is formed on the understanding that "I" can never be like the Other even as "I" bear responsibility for the well-being of another human being precisely because another human being is different from and not like me. The camera work in Beckermann's films does much of the work of encounter associated with Levinas' notion of the face-to-face encounter without identification. Weintraub is seen, but his space is not violated. We, as viewers, may empathize with his plight, but we are neither like him nor able to imagine being in his place.

In a very different and perhaps deliberately contrapuntal face-to-face encounter with the former Wehrmacht soldiers, the camera zeroes in on that difference in order to expose their lack of understanding and their lack of taking responsibility for the Other. In a colder and more sterile light the close-ups of the faces spare no one. They are exposed even as they retreat into the comfort of their own internal versions of the past. The former Wehrmacht soldiers implicate themselves through their words, which they themselves do not hear as much as they mouth. They name the geography of Nazi devastation as though they were describing the stations of their own suffering. Rarely do they acknowledge their complicity; rarely do they step out of their comfortable role of witness in order to atone, and thus take responsibility for the other. Beckermann's insistence on locating the stations of their lives is a practice that is most persuasive in creating sites of memory that are not concrete, yet become placeholders for experience. Like chance encounters on a street that forever change a familiar landscape, a site of remembrance opens up precisely because we as viewers know that something is out of place. The disjuncture between the remembered names "Lehmburg" and the corrective of the English subtitle that restores the Polish name Lvov suggests the cognitive dissonance that is present at these filmic sites of memory. The spaces, even in name, represent radically different horizons of experience. These places exist in name, but they have changed radically, even as they may be preserved in memory.

For Beckermann as for many documentary filmmakers who portray the remembrance of the Shoah and the extreme sense and real experience of displacement in the twentieth and now the twen-

tieth-first century, the panning of landscape from a train window is standard. *Return to Vienna* begins and ends with views of the city from a moving railroad car. Yet this depiction of movement has a long history dating back to the first fascination with the relation between trains and film. It is, of course, no coincidence that film and trains often appear as inseparable. Historically, the first successful operation of the train coincided with the invention of photography. We know that war and photography also became inseparable through the images of battlefields and the aftermath of fighting in the Crimean and then the American Civil War. With the advent of film in the late nineteenth century, most notably with the Lumiere brothers' legendary showing of short films in the Grand Café in Paris in 1895, the train became the mechanism by which to create the sensation of movement. Their clips included one of an approaching locomotive. In fact, film as we know it today would not be conceivable without the ability to emulate the rapid succession of images that pass by within the frame of a train window.

The recurring image of panoramas filmed through train windows in Beckermann's films is therefore itself a part of a larger tradition. The particular application of this well-worn technique has its roots in the more static textual images of railway stations and of the desire to freeze time through close-up images of faces. Even as the viewer becomes the subject looking out at the rush of history, so too do the gazes of the subjects in Beckermann's films remind us that we, too, are situated in particular histories. Thus the clash of movement and speed with the pause and suspension of time produced by the close-ups is made possible through the formalization of space. This formalization of space creates those intangible sites of memory that make encounters between one and the Other possible where the physical encounter is not.

*A Fleeting Passage to the Orient* opens with a shot of blurred landscape. The scene is filtered through the reflecting glass of a train window we can discern in the flickering movement. The film already sets the stage for an investigation of the meaning of space for portraying not only the passage of time, but the work of memory. The scene dissolves into a frame within a frame. We are now situated within a train compartment, and the blurred panorama becomes secondary as the focus rests on a still-life containing the accoutre-

ments of the act of remembering, but also the specific traditions of the Viennese coffeehouse, already prevalent in, for example, Beckermann's *Homemad(e)* (2001). We see two hands, a writing utensil, paper, a photo of the Empress Elisabeth, and a half-obscured photo of a horse. The female voiceover sets the stage for this traveling film, a retrospective search for the identity of the elusive Elisabeth, whose memory has become iconic and myth-like.<sup>7</sup> The voiceover also sets the stage by revealing the intention of the film to travel through time into the past, just as the journey to a foreign land and to the distant shores of the unknown signifies the Orientalist image of the Other. As viewers we travel through the landscape, across the Mediterranean Sea, and into port. We then become female flâneurs, and our gaze is directed toward the typical scenes associated with the Orient. The trope of seeing without being seen and of the returned gaze are accentuated through the shots of windows, passageways, and countenances.

The voiceover reveals the purpose of the exercise—to emulate Elisabeth's gaze as she moved through the city of Cairo. Just as Elisabeth, who refused to be photographed after age 31, will herself become a retouched image, so Beckermann's film seeks out the well-worn images of the Orient, as though the descriptions from Elisabeth's journals were themselves timeless. Just as Elisabeth, in her drive toward freedom from the social mores of her time, "danced out of time," this film is an experiment in defying the passage of time.

Yet, the underlying irony of the voiceover reminds us that we are making assumptions about the landscapes in the so-called Orient that are themselves only reflections of nineteenth-century fantasies. Beckermann emulates the gaze of the imperialist, the colonist, and the Western traveler in a strange land to question the exoticization of the Other. Just as Elisabeth became exoticized because of her affront to the codes of femininity and matrimony in the nineteenth century, so do the figures in the bazaars, on the street, and in the advertising billboards depicted in the film become displaced. The journey continues with a long pan (later to be used on the DVD for the *europamemoria* videography) of the outskirts of the city. High-rises in various stages of construction appear devoid of human life except for scattered remnants of the past as the colonists might have

imagined Egypt: huts with palm trees.

The clash of old and new is not so much a clash as a dialectic image in which the past and the future form the present. Elisabeth's act of liberation through travel is re-romanticized through the camera lens in order to capture the contradictory notions of travel. One travels to tell a story, to change roles, to flee from boredom, to escape death, to encounter others, or to seek freedom. We hear Elisabeth's story—her marriage at an early age, her child-bearing years, her role as a figurehead in the monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and we see female figures going about their business in downtown Cairo. The remembrance of a life becomes a treatise on the blurring of the demarcations between public and private and seems to suggest that gender differences in the so-called West and East reflect not so much cultural differences as similarities. The public spaces are predominantly populated by male figures, while the interior spaces are occupied by female figures. Even the female figures pictured in the billboards or as dolls are confined to the role of representation, not agency. A detailed and meticulous filming of an Egyptian bride preparing for her wedding also depicts an image of beauty and of convention that is broken only by the voiceover that questions this very notion of normalcy.

Beckermann's film considers the notion of beauty and Elisabeth's obsession with it. As in the case of Helen of Troy, however, beauty here is far from a means of liberation, but rather a burden. Elisabeth captures the hearts of present-day followers because of her mysterious beauty, and Beckermann's essay on the similar fate of Romy Schneider, who played Sissi in the 1955 film by the same name, further deconstructs the complicity of media like photography and film to perpetuate harmful images ("Elisabeth—Sissi—Romy Schneider"). We learn that she was obsessed with beauty and that she sought it out in the faces of the women on her travels in Egypt. The images that Beckermann portrays reveal the symbolic gestures that associate beauty with secrecy. The veil and the fan that Elisabeth uses to hide her face register the masking of female beauty as much as they represent projections of cultural difference. Yet Beckermann embarks on her own search for beauty in the faces of women she encounters. As a case in point, recall that the film begins with a shot of a female figure in a train compartment engaged in

reading and studying photographs. This same film ends with quick shots of women silently framed in their spaces of work. The first scene in the film depicts the encounter between the filmmaker, portrayed through partial views of her body (her hands) on a moving train, and the photographic image of her subject, Elisabeth, spread on the fold-out table in front of her, also partially obscured. The encounter continues throughout the film, and the exoticism that the photos exude and that continually marks the portrayal of female figures in the film appears intentional; it will be undermined by other scenes in which places associated with the "Orient" (the bazaar, the men in cafés, the women in veils) are contrasted with the long shot of an endless array of half-built, partially deserted modern apartment buildings interspersed with remnants of more traditional dwellings. The billboards in Arabic and the patches of color that flit by are signs of a time in the Orient that has become petrified in cultural memory but has been displaced by so-called modernization. Through the lens the modernization becomes desolate in comparison to the slower-paced imagination of rural life. Yet this is undermined again by the cut of the deserted lakeside resort at Qarun Lake, reminiscent of Italian scenes from *Death in Venice*. The camera pans across the peeling paint on the scattered chairs on the patio overlooking the stone formations down to the lake and the native children walking along the shore with a ragged umbrella. The scene of a deserted resort patio above an idyllic periphery re-images the colonial encounter and accentuates the simultaneous search for a place out of time yet imbued with the remnants of times gone by. In this scene, a resort at the lake, one is struck by the parallels to the initial scene. One's gaze lands on three boys who seem to mimic the ghosts of the earlier travelers who made their way gingerly along the craggy shoreline, shielding themselves from the blinding sun with an umbrella. The scene connotes the remembrance of an earlier time and the hope that the remnants of the colonial period will be re-appropriated by the "natives." The remnants of colonial power that transformed landscape into leiscscape befit only an ambiguous elegy, a strange homage to Elisabeth, who both represented European wealth and advancement yet questioned it, by engaging in the very practice that dehumanized native women and men through photography and exoticism. It is almost as if the film is not sure

how to create the dialectic and changing relations between East and West, between male and female, between the colonized and the colonizer, except to say that these are all signals that are multi-faceted and incomplete.

The filmic gaze would like to linger and savor the beauty and the seemingly timeless encounters in this out-of-the-way space and in the frenetic public spaces but knows, too, that it is a temporary outsider, able to gawk because the former colonized have learned to be exhibitionist to their own advantage. The closing scenes of women's faces expose a measure of "East meets West" in progress—women in changing Islamic societies who are de-exoticized for the so-called Western viewer in a mix of "modern" and "traditional" clothing, and framed in workplaces and in spaces that are of their own creation.

We are offered different landscapes, each with its own iconic mode of representation: the urban bustle of the market place, the remnants of colonial power in the European spaces, and the nomadic emptiness of the desert. The interaction between buyers and sellers at the market emphasizes the interaction between subjects and objects. The camera both objectifies and attempts to de-objectify. Elisabeth, herself exotic, seeks solace among those she exoticizes. She then becomes the object of nostalgia, and Beckermann's image of Egypt is itself like a fairy tale when it becomes a play with the notion of nostalgia. And yet the film disallows a nostalgic pull toward the lost Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose demise Elisabeth supposedly recognized. Her desire to "bring the desert light into the dark salons of Europe" will become a model for Beckermann's *europamemoria*. The figures in Beckermann's installation long for a different light, the light of their childhood.

I am reminded again of Benjamin's plea for "Eingedenken," for a type of commemoration that is based on recognition of loss as much as it inspires a spark of hope. It requires the work of memory; a commitment to recalling the moments of resistance in the past that were snuffed out and yet imprinted as memory traces in the repressed spaces of history. By recalling these moments, Beckermann's films are an excellent medium to show what is invisible to the naked eye yet "heard" as an echo or "seen" through intuition or "felt" in a slight gesture on-screen. This gesture is not only prevalent in those

of Beckermann's films that explore the void between the victim and the perpetrator, but also in her more recent *europamemoria*. By staging 25 eight-minute video portraits of people from around the world whose fates have brought them to Europe as immigrants, refugees, and travelers, the intangible space of memory becomes the "in-between space" between the frontal shots of faces and the invisible (inter)viewer. The encounters with the faces of those portrayed through their own stories resemble the emblematic meaning of the railway station as the actual and metaphorical embodiment of the experience of displacement, the search for home, and the sensation of "un-homeness" through arrival and departure. It is the creation of these in-between spaces that makes the face-to-face encounters possible as a response to the Other without incorporating her identity into one's own.

This videographic installation, which had its premiere in Graz, consisted of 25 brightly-colored booths in which visitors watched an eight-minute video of people whose lives were marked by immigration, displacement, expulsion, war, or atrocity. For Beckermann the excerpts of longer interviews edited for the installation represent Europe's multiple memories which work against the master narrative of monolithic, national notions of identity and cultural memory. Each story is a small window into a life that is itself shaped by historical events, yet constructed by individual memories. It is an attempt on Beckermann's part to create new narratives by establishing those intangible sites of memory that are now recorded and saved, as it were, from being consolidated into a collectivized version of European identity. The viewers encounter the Other in that limbo mediated by the video and do not identify with the Other, but rather recognize his or her difference. Thus the videographs break down notions of unified European identity and cultural memory by introducing a series of individual narratives through the creation of intangible sites of remembrance.

For the making of her installation, Beckermann intentionally sought out Europeans whose personal histories crisscross long-established and contested European borders in order to question the validity of nation-based narratives for the formation of cultural memory. Here cultural memory is multi-layered, divergent, and in flux. First we have the face-to-face confrontation. As viewers we are

spectators of the physiognomy of actual faces and of the geographical, political, and cultural rifts by which they are marked. The marks are intangible and seemingly invisible, yet present as traces, flashes of gesture and movement that jolt the viewer out of any form of coherent, cohesive sense of identity and story. What we hear is crucial for determining what we see. The voices carry with them the images of spatial displacement and of temporal disruption that Michel Foucault calls counter-memory. In the space of eight-minute segments, we hear genealogies of entire family, ethnic, religious, and social groups whose narratives are not based on chronology or the epic models of heroic lives. Rather they expose the difficult work of memory and its constant shifting spaces. Beckermann notes that her particular style evoked this art of remembrance, but that each interview might have taken on a different tone if it had happened a day earlier or later; that is, the emerging spaces of remembrance are triggered by the name of a place, the placement of the camera, or a glimpse of a swatch of background devoid of recognizable identifiers of location, in order to relocate the narrators into a space of remembrance that is Europe. They are brought into focus in individual booths that isolate them from one another at the same time that the viewer is left to reconfigure the map of European cultural history.

The face-to-face encounter takes place and creates space. What are the sites of remembrance but the faces themselves as they become the physiognomy of rupture, of displacement, and of the reformation of belonging in a place that is at the very least disappearing. Their place of origin is often reconstituted in memory in contrast to its actual state. For example, one man remembers the flowers along a main street in Mozambique and visits the place years later to see that those flowers have long been trampled. The stories are about leave-taking, but they are highly stylized. The stories become emblematic in the way that Sebald's emigrants are emblematic composites: they lose their individuality as part of an installation, but regain it over and over as we learn to associate them with one individual journey or experience.

*europamemoria* is about migration, a migration that takes place along the fissures of man-made atrocity, the Shoah, failed Communism, colonialism, and fascism. Beckermann's interviews, unedited

segments, create space for subjective memories that do not fit in order to expose the fiction of a coherent narrative: "These 25 people are not narrating history, they are relating their own reminiscences" (*europamemoria* 17). Beckermann distinguishes the collective form of history from the subjective form of memory. History becomes the backdrop, but it is also interwoven in the fabric of individual lives. We have a history of revolution, expulsion, deportation, displacement, from the deportation of the Jews to the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans. World-wide strife gets translated into the displacement of millions through the story of a few individuals, many of whom find their way to Europe. What these voices have in common is the experience of migration, of pain and loss of childhood, of landscape, and of home. As Beckermann puts it:

Usually it has something to do with landscape, with light and sun, with childhood, with everything that is missing where one happens to be at present. Yet that is where other spaces ("Räume") open up, spiritual territories. One obtains something new, new acquaintances, another culture. However, to do so one has to leave one's tribe, one's people, because one can also live among one's compatriots in a foreign city and build up a ghetto there. To leave that behind requires courage. (*europamemoria* 30).

#### 4. Epilogue: Siting Remembrance in the Jewish Diaspora

Just as the imaginary spaces of encounter in Beckermann's films and videographic installation open up new spaces for speaking memories, so too does the primacy of place and place names in her films signify the creation of intangible sites of remembrance. The technique of creating a narrative of geography in order to trace sites of remembrance and show how they emerge, how they get submergered, and how they are reenacted in narrative and in naming is perhaps particular to Jewish tradition and culture or, at the very least, particular to the memories of a broken, disrupted genealogy. Jonathan Safran Foer writes of Jewish memory in his book *Everything Is Illuminated*:

## JEWS HAVE SIX SENSES

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing . . . memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is not less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks—when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain—that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?*  
(198-99)

The "it" is as much an object of memory as it is the subject of remembrance. The experience of the pin-prick itself is a metaphor for the repetition of the experience in a memory that is not necessarily firsthand, but utterly felt. It is also a reminder that the major dilemma of Jewish memory is how to translate the collective memory of ritual and myth into an individual memory while at the same time translating the individual remembrances into collective forms (Krochmalnik 130). "It" occurs when one cannot rely on historical memory or monumentalized versions of the past to find one's way home. The passage of time is not measured by the clock but by the ability to reenact the experiences of ancestors as though they were in the here and now. As Benjamin put it so beautifully, "for every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (*Illuminations* 266). Beckermann's ability to capture the layers of experience at the same (but different) locations, and to embody lost places in the narration of genealogy, allows the viewer to experience a site of memory and perhaps bear a moment of recognition.

There is no one Jewish experience as such, but a heterogeneity of experiences that is accentuated by juxtaposing the individual memories within a larger cultural and narrative context. Even as we turn to archival resources and to firsthand narratives, we can

benefit by reading literary accounts, by watching other films that have struggled to portray lived experience to those with very little inkling of that experience. When a scene becomes emblematic—be it the Jewish cemetery, or the leave-taking at the railway station, or the family portrait that is all that remains after the deportation and the killing—it may be time to ask if the symbols only produce the expected response. What we should be questioning is the ease with which we assume we know what they mean.

### Notes

1 This essay is adapted from my talk of October 10, 2002, at the University of Illinois, Chicago. My thanks to Dagmar Lorenz and her colleagues there for the invitation to speak at “The Flashbacks Project: Chicago and Vienna. Two Cities in Dialogue.” I also gave versions of this essay as talks at the 2001 Modern Austrian Culture and Literature Association conference, at Rice University in April 2001, and at Georgetown University for a conference on Cultural Memory organized by Friederike Eigler in May 2001.

2 My work on Sebald’s writing has been greatly enhanced by discussions of *Austerlitz* at the 2004 annual meeting of the Northeast Working Group for Literature and History in New York on March 5 and 6. See also Remmler, “‘On the Natural History of Destruction’ and Cultural Memory, W.G. Sebald.”

3 The moment of salvation is not religiously marked, however, but imagined as a face-to-face encounter that demands a response toward the Other based on “in-difference,” not identification. This, of course, is one of the central premises in the work of the late French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

4 Ruins, as Harrison argues in *The Dominion of the Dead*, are uncanny because they turn “meaning into matter” (3). The coherence of our surroundings embodied in the built environment and in architecture, for example, returns to its fragmentary, pre-narrative state: matter without the anchor of meaning.

5 “Oft hatte ich historische Ölbilder vor Augen, riesige Schlachtengemälde, wo sich schreckliche Szenen, verteilt über ein immenses Gebiet, das mit Krieg überzogen wurde, ereignen. Der Film mußte eine ähnliche Qualität bekommen, eine Weite, welche die geographischen Dimensionen spürbar werden läßt” (Beckermann, *Jenseits* 19)

6 “In den orientalischen Basaren und den lärmenden Straßen, hinter den Bettenburgen an den Peripherien der Großstädte, wo apokalyptische Rauchsäulen aus den archaischen Töpferwerkstätten aufsteigen, belagern sich Gegenwart und Vergangenheit kaleidoskopartig.”

7 For biographical information on the Empress Elisabeth, see Hamann.

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